



MERCY
GLOBAL
PRESENCE

Out of Wonder

Nellie McLaughlin rsm

Memories echo the enduring moments of life. I remember the first time I prepared onions for Irish stew. It was my first year in secondary school and we were learning to cook, by the book, as it were. That attempt ended in tears, as has every single one since then. Onions are bulbous root vegetables with many protective layers. Peeling one's way to the silky white core is a tearful process. However, the memory of tears soon evaporates in the aroma and flavour of the resultant meal. I like to think of an onion as an image of the universe. The awesome story of the universe has its roots in the flaring forth moment of the original fireball over thirteen billion years ago. Stars, rocks, water, plants, insects, birds, animals and humans sing the memory of the great cosmos simply by being as they are. My ancestral memory courses through my veins, crystallises my bones and broadens my smile while guiding my every movement. We have so many layers to unravel in order to get in touch with our deepest roots, not merely millions of years but billions!

Like the onion, our story is multi-layered, a series of intertwining stories creating our cosmic identity. The story of stars and galaxies, the story of Earth in all its life forms and the human story are one. This is the magnificent outpouring of divine creativity embracing the radical unity of all life. All species are different but not separate in the wonder of creation. Getting in touch with this oneness can be painful as we try to prise fixed mind-sets. It hurts to expand our story to include all of life, non-human as well as human, and it certainly pains us to acknowledge that we are not alone as the epitome of God's creative genius. We feel the muscle stretch in loosening the memories of almost fourteen billion years. What a painful but invigorating jolt from the restricting confines of so-called recorded history. The thirteen billion year story is recorded in the rocks, the stars, in the soil, in water and in the fibre of every being.

Like the onion shedding its tightly fitting layers, we too are challenged to be more open to the gradual unfolding of the story of life within the great cosmic weaving. The unique flavour of the onion is not lost in the mix; rather it contributes its own particular flavour to the whole and enhances it. As we expand our identity as humans to embrace every other life form, each a unique manifestation of divine art, what will emerge? An overwhelming sense of the oneness of all life will transform us. Our uniqueness and the uniqueness of every being will merge, opening us to the wonder of life and who we are as species among species in the community we call the universe.

The story of the universe is our origin story as it is presently unfolding through the combined wisdom of generations in the community of life and with ever more powerful telescopes and microscopes. Today, with our advancing technologies, we are no less astonished as we realise that the more we know the more there is to know. May we never cease to live out of wonder into delight.

In that awesome moment when the stars were born and galaxies formed, the energy to direct the expansion of the Universe ever since was holding all of us potentially in deep space. May we delight in the abundance of life and richness emanating from the original fireball some five billion year ago, a time before rocks and water, forests and grass, a time before colour and fragrance, a world without birdsong, the buzz of insects or the vital presence of plants, flowers, animals and people. All that changed about 4.5 billion years ago with the birth of the Earth within the Solar System. The Earth, a privileged planet, slowed and cooled sufficiently to form an atmosphere, rock structure and oceans. Gradually and mysteriously, the earliest life forms emerged within the oceans and earth danced into life. May the wisdom that inspired our ancestors of old to align their lives with the Sun and rhythms of Earth enable us to experience the radiance of harmony and delight in the oneness of all life.

The Earth is alive! May we never cease to wonder and to celebrate. Our ancient forebears - the early hominids - lived in the trees. When did we come down from the trees? What did it feel like to stand and stare, away from the forest canopies? Standing upright was a defining moment as we trace the emergence of the modern human. The human is the being in whom the Universe becomes self-consciously aware. Discovering fire, making tools, hunting and gathering, the emergence of language, song, dance, art and ritual characterise our early journeying. Our ancestors moved from the open spaces to settle in larger, more settled communities. River valleys, endowed with fertile soil and abundant water, were most popular and here great civilisations took shape: the Middle East, North Africa, China and India. What a rich tapestry was to emerge in terms of cultural, social, economic, political and religious life from the relentless flow of early settlements to the Neanderthals and indigenous peoples of the world. What were some of the gains and some of the losses over the millennia in terms of the total community of life?

The changing relations between the human and the natural world was a process accelerated by the Industrial Revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. What are some of the changes being asked of us in light of the awesome story of the Universe? What shifts of mind-set and behaviour do we need to make? One of the implications of the growing alienation between the human and natural world has been the dominant stance of the human and how we are upsetting the balance of nature, for example: biodiversity, water, soil, deforestation, waste management, global warming and climate change.

My passionate plea is to reconnect more deeply with the natural world and find our rightful place within it. This calls for a new humility in our lives. How might we live in a more mutually enhancing and sustaining way? The challenge is to shift from being *apart from* to being *part of* the community of all creation; this is our context. Draw on the collective wisdom of all creation, especially for three guiding principles of the universe: diversity, interiority and interconnectedness, and the Earth as an alive, self-regulating and self-sustaining organism.

I write from my own perspective as a Christian in the conviction that the universe story transcends all religions, nationalities, cultures and traditions. The universe is all embracing; all belong in that great curvature of space and time. I am not a scientist, therefore, I tell the scientific story of the Universe in lay terms as well as from a more Irish and feminine perspective.

In so doing, I am keen to weave patterns of wisdom and enchantment from various ages and characters, circles of hope and delight in the magnificence of life, patterns of resources in the face of aggression and destruction to the very fabric of existence and cushions of comfort amid mounting losses in the community of life. I am aware of the incredible beauty, the chaos and turmoil, the lack of repetition, the continual revelation of God and the need to stop and stare, to name and proclaim. There is passion and excitement around active participation in the unfolding adventure of life and wholeness. There is also a profound sense of responsibility. By being mindful of Earth's abundant resources, which are finite, may we take to heart the need to walk lightly and in harmony. My hope is that the sharing of my experience and insights will lead those who engage with them to an extraordinary sense of the mystery of life and relationship. This in turn will lead to a profound transformation in terms of spirituality, lifestyle, work, leisure and a vibrant sense of place in the wonder of the Earth and the Universe.

Extract from the Introduction to *Out of Wonder: The Evolving Story of the Universe* (2016)