



# Contemplating Earth

COLLEEN O'SULLIVAN describes a spirituality in which we grow in consciousness of Divine energy at work around us.

**T**he 21st century is a dangerous time in which to live. We face violence and the threat of violence at every moment and can identify multiple problems at both the macro and micro levels of existence, at home and around the world.

But what is the deepest problem facing us today? Duane Elgin suggests: "The most urgent challenge facing humanity is not climate change, or species extinction, or unsustainable population growth; rather, it is how we understand the Universe and our intimate relationship within it. Our deepest choices for the future emerge from this core understanding."

We have known this truth consciously and unconsciously for many years. Plato, as Elgin recalls, said: "The Universe is a single, loving creature that contains all living creatures within it."

## Divine Within Creation

In *The Universal Christ*, Richard Rohr describes the divine presence in that universe: "I . . . suggest that the first incarnation was the moment described in Genesis 1, when

God joined in unity with the physical universe and became the light inside of everything."

It follows, then, that everything visible and invisible is the outpouring of God. Jesus, in John's Gospel, states that he is the light of the world. In those words the second incarnation, Jesus, validates the first, creation.

Scientific truth and spiritual truth are two sides of the same coin. One does not contradict the other but heightens the universality of truth. As we come to understand the immensity of the universe and its living action, this knowledge invites us to a deeper understanding of the immensity and powerful presence of the divine within creation. The fact that it is believed, for instance, that black holes are seedbeds for universes, reveals the creative unfolding of the divine. This divine energy propelling life forward is still at work.

Jesus is the second incarnation, the human experience of God, the imagination of God, to whom we relate through our own lived experience.

How do we bring these two facets of the divine together? Rohr says: "A merely personal God becomes tribal

and sentimental, and a merely universal God never leaves the realm of abstract theory and philosophical principles. But when we learn to put them together Jesus and Christ gives us a God who is both personal and universal. The Christ mystery anoints all physical matter from the beginning.”

### Oneness of Creation

The mystics from all religious traditions have realised these truths because their experiential encounters have given them direct experience of the oneness of creation. Each mystic has had a different way of describing their experience from the “oneing” of Julian of Norwich, to the “true self versus the false self” of Merton, to the Hindu woman mystic Lalla, whose poetry speaks of the contemplative way:

*Learning the scriptures is easy;  
but living them, that's hard.  
Far easier to read words on a page  
than to seek the living heart of things.  
Fumbling through the fog of study,  
stumbling, I lost my last words.  
— And my vision cleared.  
Oh the sight that met me then!*

Merton's powerful understanding of his place in creation and creation's existence in and with the divine at Pollonnaruwa led him to write that he was “knocked over with a rush of relief and thankfulness at the *obvious* clarity of the figures . . . jerked clean out of the habitual half tied vision of things.” And: “I don't know when in my life I ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination.”

### Spirituality Evolving

An authentic spirituality for this century must be based on an understanding of the presence of God, visible and invisible in all of creation. This is a contemplative worldview that is evolving even now. It is a spirituality of interconnectedness, compassion, of union held together at every level by the allurements of love.

Every action at every level of life affects each aspect of existence. At the quantum level quanta can communicate instantly with quanta at the other side of the universe. What does this say to us of God's ability to communicate Godself to us, of grace the self-communication of God? This place of receptivity is no cheap grace, as Bonhoeffer said. It is a difficult place but it is the place of transformation and change.

### Appreciating Our Connectedness

A spirituality of interconnectedness is a contemplative spirituality. It is a spirituality which invites us to stillness and silence. It is a spirituality of letting go and of receiving. It is a spirituality that recognises the living nature of the universe and that we are part of it. Such a spirituality invites us to listen, to awareness and to love. It is where the two incarnations meet and are one.

Merton understood that the call to contemplation is for everyone. This is one aspect of the new understanding which holds the heart of each tradition sacred. The invitation individually and as a whole is to a different consciousness

than that which created our problems. We human beings are not separate from creation with a right to abuse it for our own needs. We are not stewards with the power to decide life and death. That false self has to disappear so that the true self of love can emerge, the power urging creation forward. This compassionate, contemplative understanding becomes the foundation for our response to life.

### Slowly Learning

As Ivan Grainger writes: “Feeling compassion in the midst of trauma, feeling *anything* in the midst of trauma, can be excruciating at first and requires immense courage—but it is the way of life, to keep life flowing within us and within the world. Preventing the heart from shutting down is just the first step. Our compassion must be engaged. It must be active. The energy of compassion naturally wants to act, to move through us and reach out into the world in order to help, to heal, and to protect the vulnerable. As more and more people light up with this compassion and offer their hands in genuine service, that doorway to violence and cruelty is again closed.”

**An authentic spirituality for this century . . . is a spirituality of interconnectedness, compassion, of union held together at every level by the allurements of love.**

And Christine Valters Paintner says: “When we recognise ourselves as a part of the Earth community, as the scriptures and mystics have encouraged us to do for centuries, then we begin to see the profound mystery at work in the depths of our own souls as the same sacred mystery at work in the natural world.”

The contemplative conversation that is our heart journey invites us to a spirituality which overflows into action—action that arises from our contemplative understanding of oneness with all.

Mary Oliver puts it this way:

*. . . grant me, in your mercy,  
a little more time. Love for the Earth  
and love for you are having such a long  
conversation in my heart. Who knows what  
will finally happen or where I will be sent,  
yet already I have given a great many things  
away, expecting to be told to pack nothing,  
except the prayers which, with this thirst,  
I am slowly learning.*

Let us keep slowly learning the way of interconnectedness. 🌿

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