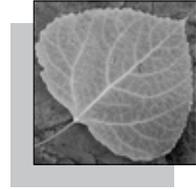


INTRODUCTION



*There is a communion with God,
and a communion with earth,
and a communion with God through earth.*

– PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

As splendid and awe inspiring as some of the world's great cathedrals, mosques and temples are, they were often built with the aim of transporting people to a different place – to a world beyond the physical world. There is nothing wrong with this. The buildings are celebrations of the spirit, creative abilities, profound teachings and visionary ideas. Nonetheless, they can be seen to miss an essential element of spirituality that is not only about a vertical transcendence to sacred and divine realms, but also a horizontal embracing of the divine in all.

Early indigenous cultures, such as the Native Americans and Australian Aborigines, all had strong roots in Nature based forms of spirituality, and many of them have kept this element as a central part of their beliefs and practices. For them, the divine is often experienced and revered as an all-pervading sacred mystery and power, continually revealing

itself and present in the seasons and other workings of Nature (I use the word *sacred* here in reference to the more eastern understanding of the divine/God in all things and the precious gift of life itself). Their understanding of life often helps them to live at one with and respect the natural world without damaging its delicate balance.

Native American culture, along with other indigenous traditions, call our universe's Creator, *the Great Spirit*. Daoist spirituality, which has roots in shamanistic practices and a belief in an interactive world of departed ancestors and spirits, teaches about *the all-pervading Dao*, which can be seen as an ever-present important energy that is particularly found in the workings of the natural world. An understanding of God in its universal form is embedded in Christian teachings about the Cosmic Christ, in the writings and poetry of Christian mystics, such as Hildegard of Bingen and Francis of Assisi, and in Paul's letter to the Romans, where he declares that God's invisible qualities, eternal power and divine nature can be clearly seen in the things that have been made (1:20). For spirituality is not an escape to somewhere else, but in the daily play of bountiful life dwelling within and around us, and in our interactions with other people and species.

As with all great teachings, there is a need to reflect on what they imply in order to discover their deeper meaning. Although we might have to work hard to find mention of the divinity of Nature in the four canonical Gospels, former Archbishop William Temple noticed how Jesus saw a close relationship between God and the natural world:

Jesus taught men to see the operation of God in the regular and the normal – in the rising of the sun and the falling of the rain and the growth of the plants.

This cosmic and Nature based realm of spirituality is also found in sacred Hindu images of dancing Shiva (Shiva-Nataraj), where he is depicted dancing in the heart of all creation. The holy book of the Sikh tradition, the Guru Granth Sahib, tells us to, “Rejoice in the Lord who dwells in nature.” Although various traditions and teachings have been reminding us about cosmic and omnipresence spheres of divinity for hundreds of years, it is only recently that we have come to possess clear scientific evidence and knowledge about life’s incredible journey, from its spectacular start to our current point in the universe’s history.

In the past, it seems that practically all cultures had their creation stories, which gave meaning, purpose and direction to people’s lives, and invariably united communities in shared beliefs. Early indigenous people grasped their deep relationship with an interrelated spirit world by drawing upon their ancient stories, symbolism and metaphors that had profound life affirming meaning and helped them to relate to the natural world and cosmos. Their everyday lives and beliefs were intimately intertwined with the universe and the world of Nature, which were often celebrated in shared rituals and gave their communities spiritual purpose. Although occasionally this was sadly not always extended outside of their supportive communities. A down side to small tribal communities is that a mentality of *us* and *them* can still persist.

Yet without their stories and shared rituals they would not have known who they were or how to interact with the world around them, as the stories gave them identity and helped them to understand where they stood in the greater scheme of things. The lay monk Wayne Teasdale also reminded of this:

Native Americans know that all beings are part of the web of life, and we have responsibilities to this great web of interconnection. Native cultures are keenly aware that nature, the earth, the Great Spirit, and the spirit guides have taught them everything they know. It is all a gift from the divine realm through the mediation of these more familiar spirit guides who inhabit all worlds.

Yet in the light of contemporary science, many of the ancient stories of indigenous cultures have lost much of their power and relevance to the age in which we now live. Our understanding of how stars, galaxies and organic life came into being no longer matches a lot of their contents, though some writers, such as Ellen Bernstein, have revisited the Bible's account of creation and have beautifully highlighted its deep ecological message. But for many, these early accounts of creation are no longer a part of their lives. Partly because of this, as well as mass urbanisation, many of us have lost our connection with Earth and the sacred element of life that early indigenous cultures recognized. Contemporary materialistic life has drawn many away from having an intimate relationship with a divinity and spirit world that is present in both the seen and unseen. Having no shared story at all that we truly treasure

has been seen by authors and teachers, such as the late modern day prophet of eco-spirituality Thomas Berry (who referred to himself as a geologist, rather than a theologian), as a contributory factor to why many are finding postmodern life to be so empty, meaningless and lacking spiritual direction. A contemporary teaching has been recognized by teachers such as Berry to be needed for humankind to reconnect with its roots and the age old quest for discovering the purpose of life, why we are here, where we are going and our unique place in a spiritual universe.

But unlike ancient creation myths – as Joel Primack and Nancy Ellen Abrams point out in their excellent book *View from the Centre of the Universe* – this has to be a contemporary factual and flexible account that is not bound to just one tradition. It needs to be a part of an ongoing search for truth, based on new insights and discoveries, which will help us to build harmonious communities where everyone feels valued and is able to use their abilities, and express their creativity in fertile and supportive environments.

On the whole, contemporary western societies have lost something essential by no longer possessing shared beliefs and teachings, and not realising that they can often help us to awaken to a significant relationship with Earth. When we have nothing to bring us together and find a deep sense of belonging, we often clog-up our lives with material products we do not necessarily need and cannot supply us with lasting happiness. We often immerse ourselves in pursuits that lead us away from connecting healthily with others, and finding an authentic spirituality that profoundly enriches us.

A simple remedy is to reconnect with the creative and dynamic universe in which we live – to rediscover our roots and our ultimate spiritual heritage. Rabbi Michael Lerner writes about this in *Spirit Matters*:

We are the heirs of the long evolution of Spirit. Each of us is the latest unfolding of the event of Creation. Our bodies are composed of the material that was shaped in the Big Bang. And, so, too, our spirit. The loving goodness of the universe breathes us and breathes through us, giving us life and consciousness, and the capacity to recognize and love others.

In a talk given at a seminar on meditation, celebrating the life and teachings of John Main, the Benedictine monk, Father Laurence Freeman, mentioned how he ran Back to Basics courses for troubled teenagers suffering from depression and low self-esteem, where they would spend time in the countryside learning how to do without many of the things they had come to see as so important in their lives, such as fashion items, mobile phones and other electrical and often expensive, yet ultimately expendable, gadgets. He mentioned how they would often complain at first, but by the end of the course they found a different set of values that gave them a deeper and more lasting sense of happiness, as well as confidence in themselves. They found themselves becoming more contented when their lives were simplified and began to appreciate the true beauty of Nature and being able to relate authentically to others on less superficial levels.