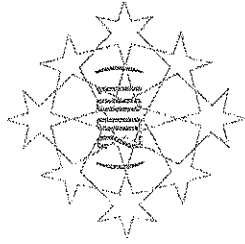


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FROM THE SACRED UNIVERSE CHAPTER 13 (2009)

The World of Wonder



WHAT DO you see? What do you see when you look up at the sky at night at the blazing stars against the midnight heavens? What do you see when the dawn breaks over the eastern horizon? What are your thoughts in the fading days of summer as the birds depart on their southward journey, or in the autumn when the leaves turn brown and are blown away? What are your thoughts when you look out over the ocean in the evening? What do you see?

Many earlier peoples saw in these natural phenomena a world beyond ephemeral appearance, an abiding world, a world imaged forth in the wonders of the sun and clouds by day and the stars and planets by night, a world that enfolded the human in some profound manner. This other world was guardian, teacher, healer—the source from which humans were born, nourished, protected, guided, and the destiny to which we returned.

Above all, this world provided the psychic power we humans needed in our moments of crisis. Together with the visible world and the cosmic world, the human world formed a meaningful threefold community of existence. This was most clearly expressed in Confucian thought, where the human was seen as part of a triad with Heaven and Earth. This cosmic world consisted of powers that were dealt with

as persons in relationship with the human world. Rituals were established whereby humans could communicate with one another and with the earthly and cosmological powers. Together these formed a single integral community—a universe.

Humans positioned themselves at the center of this universe. Because humans have understood that the universe is centered everywhere, this personal centering could occur anywhere. For example, the native peoples of North America offered the sacred pipe to the powers of the four directions to establish themselves in a sacred space where they entered into a conscious presence with these powers. They would consult the powers for guidance in the hunt, strength in wartime, healing in time of illness, support in decision making. We see this awareness of a relationship between the human and the powers of the universe expressed in other cultures as well. In India, China, Greece, Egypt, and Rome, pillars were established to delineate a sacred center, which provided a point of reference for human affairs and bound Heaven and Earth together.

There were other rituals whereby human communities validated themselves by seasonal acknowledgement of the various powers of the universe. This is still evident with the Iroquois autumn thanksgiving ceremony, where the sun, the Earth, the winds, the waters, the trees, and the animals each in turn received expressions of personal gratitude for those gifts that made life possible. Clearly, these peoples see something different from what we see.

We have lost our connection to this other deeper reality of things. Consequently, we now find ourselves on a devastated continent where nothing is holy, nothing is sacred. We no longer have a world of inherent value, no world of wonder, no untouched, unspoiled, unused world. We think we have understood everything. But we have not. We have *used* everything. By “developing” the planet, we have been reducing Earth to a new type of barrenness. Scientists are telling us that we are in the midst of the sixth extinction period in Earth’s history. No such extinction of living forms has occurred since the extinction of the dinosaurs some sixty-five million years ago.

There is now a single issue before us: survival. Not merely physical survival, but survival in a world of fulfillment, survival in a living world, where the violets bloom in the springtime, where the stars shine down in all their mystery, survival in a world of meaning. All other issues dwindle in significance—whether in law, governance, religion, education, economics, medicine, science, or the arts. These are all in disarray because we told ourselves: We know! We understand! We see! In reality what we see, as did our ancestors on this land, is a continent available for exploitation.

When we first arrived on this continent some four centuries ago, we also saw a land where we could escape the monarchical governments of Europe and their world of royalty and subservience. Here before us was a land of abundance, a land where we could own property to use as we wished. As we became free from being ruled over, we became rulers over everything else. We saw the white pine forests of New England, trees six feet in diameter, as forests ready to be transformed into lumber. We saw meadowland for cultivation and rivers full of countless fish. We saw a continent awaiting exploitation by the chosen people of the world.

When we first arrived as settlers, we saw ourselves as the most religious of peoples, as the most free in our political traditions, the most learned in our universities, the most competent in our technologies, and most prepared to exploit every economic advantage. We saw ourselves as a divine blessing for this continent. In reality, we were a predator people on an innocent continent.

When we think of America's sense of "manifest destiny," we might wish that some sage advice regarding our true role had been given to those Europeans who first arrived on these shores. We might wish that some guidance in becoming a life-enhancing species had been offered during these past four centuries. When we first arrived on the shores of this continent, we had a unique opportunity to adjust ourselves and the entire course of Western civilization to a more integral presence to this continent.

Instead, we followed the advice of the Enlightenment philosophers, who urged the control of nature: Francis Bacon (1561-1626),

who saw human labor as the only way to give value to the land; Rene Descartes (1596-1650); and John Locke (1632-1704), who promoted the separation of the conscious self from the world of matter. In 1776, when we proclaimed our Declaration of Independence, we took the advice of Adam Smith's (1723-1790) *Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, a book of enormous influence in the world of economics from then until now. Our political independence provided an ideal context for economic dominance over the natural world.

As heirs to the biblical tradition, we believed that the planet belonged to us. We never understood that this continent had its own laws that needed to be obeyed and its own revelatory experience that needed to be understood. We have only recently considered the great community of life here. We still do not feel that we should obey the primordial laws governing this continent, that we should revere every living creature—from the lowliest insect to the great eagle in the sky. We fail to recognize our obligation to bow before the majesty of the mountains and rivers, the forests, the grasslands, the deserts, the coastlands.

The indigenous peoples of this continent tried to teach us the value of the land, but unfortunately we could not understand them, blinded as we were by our dream of manifest destiny. Instead we were scandalized, because they insisted on living simply rather than working industriously. We desired to teach them our ways, never thinking that they could teach us theirs. Although we constantly depended on the peoples living here to guide us in establishing our settlements, we never saw ourselves as entering into a sacred land, a sacred space. We never experienced this land as they did—as a living presence not primarily to be used but to be revered and communed with.

René Descartes taught us that there was no living principle in the singing of the wood thrush or the loping gait of the wolf or the mother bear cuddling her young. There was no living principle in the peregrine falcon as it soared through the vast spaces of the heavens. There was nothing to be communed with, nothing to be revered. The honeybee was only a mechanism that gathered nectar in the flower and transformed it into honey for the sustenance of the hive and the maple tree

only a means of delivering sap. In the words of a renowned scientist: "For all our imagination, fecundity, and power, we are no more than communities of bacteria, modular manifestations of the nucleated cell."

In order to counter reductionistic and mechanistic views of the universe such as this, we need to recover our vision, our ability to see. In the opening paragraph of *The Human Phenomenon*, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) tells us: "One could say that the whole of life lies in seeing. That is probably why the history of the living world can be reduced to the elaboration of ever more perfect eyes. . . . See or perish. This is the situation imposed on every element of the universe by the mysterious gift of existence."² We need to begin to see the whole of this land. To see this continent, we might imagine ourselves in the great central valley that lies between the Appalachian Mountains to the east and the Rocky Mountains to the west. Here we would be amazed at the vast Mississippi River, which flows down through this valley and then on into the immense gulf that borders the southern shores of this continent. This massive flow of water, including its tributary the Missouri, flowing in from the northwest, constitutes one of the greatest river systems on the planet, draining almost the entire continent, from New York and the Appalachian Mountains in the east to Montana and the Rocky Mountains in the west.

This region includes the Great Plains, the tall grasslands that extend from Indiana to the Mississippi River, to the short grasslands that begin across the river and extend to the mountains. This is a territory to be honored in some special manner. The region to the west of the river has what are among the deepest and most fertile soils on the planet. Soils that elsewhere are only inches in depth here are several feet deep, soils formed of the debris washed down from the mountains over the long centuries. A large human population depends on this region. Such precious soil is a gift to be carefully tended. This center of commercial wheat, and later corn production, began in New York in the early nineteenth century and extended westward until now it can be located in those Kansas fields of grain that extend beyond the horizon.

When we stand in the Mississippi basin, we can turn westward and experience the mystery, adventure, and promise of this continent; we

can turn eastward and feel its history, political dominance, and commercial concerns. Westward are the soaring redwoods, the sequoia, the Douglas fir, the lodgepole pine; eastward are the oaks, the beech, the sycamore, the maple, the spruce, the tulip poplar, the hemlock. Together, these bear witness to the wonder of the continent and the all-encompassing sea.

We might also go to the desert, or high in the mountains, or to the seashores, where we might really see, perhaps for the first time, the dawn appear in the eastern sky—its first faint purple glow spreading over the horizon, then the slow emergence of the great golden sphere. In the evening, we might see the flaming sunset in the west. We might see the stars come down from the distant heavens and present themselves almost within reach of our arms if we stood on tiptoe.

So too, we might begin to view the change of the seasons: the springtime awakening of the land as the daisies bloom in the meadows and the dogwood tree puts forth its frail white blossoms. We might experience the terrifying moments when summer storms break over the horizon and lightning streaks across the sky, the moments when darkness envelops us in the deep woodlands, or when we experience the world about us as a vast array of powers asserting themselves. When we view all this, we might begin to imagine our way into the future.

Concerning this future we might make two observations. First, the planet Earth is a onetime project. There is no real second chance. Much can be healed because the planet has extensive, albeit limited, powers of recovery. The North American continent will never again be what it once was. The manner in which we have devastated the continent has never before occurred. In prior extinctions, the land itself remained capable of transformations, but these are now much more difficult to effect. Second, we have so intruded ourselves and debilitated the continent in its primordial powers that it can no longer proceed simply on its own. We must be involved in the future of the continent in some comprehensive manner.

It is clear that there will be little development of life here in the future if we do not protect and foster the living forms of this

continent. To do this, a change must occur deep in our souls. We need our technologies, but this is beyond technology. Our technologies have betrayed us. This is a numinous venture, a work of the wilderness. We need a transformation such as the conservationist Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) experienced when he saw the dying fire in the eyes of a wolf he had shot. From that time on, he began to see the devastation that we were bringing upon this continent. We need to awaken, as did Leopold, to the wilderness itself as a source of a new vitality for its own existence. For it is the wild that is creative. As we are told by Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), "In Wildness is the preservation of the world."³ The communion that comes through these experiences of the wild, where we sense something present and daunting, stunning in its beauty, is beyond comprehension in its reality, but it points to the holy, the sacred.

The universe is the supreme manifestation of the sacred. This notion is fundamental to establishing a cosmos, an intelligible manner of understanding the universe or even any part of the universe. That is why the story of the origin of things was experienced as a supremely nourishing principle, as a primordial maternal principle, or as the Great Mother, in the earliest phases of human consciousness. Some of the indigenous peoples of this country experience it as the Corn Mother or as Spider Woman. Those who revere the Corn Mother place an ear of corn with the infant in the cradle to provide for the soothing and security the infant needs to feel deep in its being. From the moment the infant emerges from the warmth and security of the womb into the chill and changing world of life, the ear of corn is a sacred presence, a blessing.

We must remember that it is not only the human world that is held securely in this sacred enfoldment but the entire planet. We need this security, this presence throughout our lives. The sacred is that which evokes the depths of wonder. We may know some things, but really we know only the shadow of things. We go to the sea at night and stand along the shore. We listen to the urgent roll of the waves reaching ever higher until they reach their limits and can go no farther, then return

to an inward peace until the moon calls again for their presence on these shores.

So it is with a fulfilling vision that we may attain—for a brief moment. Then it is gone, only to return again in the deepening awareness of a presence that holds all things together.