

Running Head: A New Story Based on an Integral Ecology

What the World Needs Now Is A New Story Based On An *Integral Ecology* James D. Trifone Ph.D.

I recently attended a week-long conference "*Earth Honoring Faith: Journey of the Universe*" hosted at the Ghost Ranch in Abiquiú, New Mexico. The conference focused on developing a new worldview that embraces the wisdom from both science and religion to better understand how to re-connect humanity with Nature. Its theme stemmed from the inspirational book and Emmy award-winning documentary *Journey of the Universe* [JOTU] co-written by cosmologist Brian Thomas Swimme along with Mary Evelyn Tucker. In addition Tucker and her husband were executive producers of JOTU. The film weaves together the insights gleaned from modern science with the enduring wisdom from the world's religions to view Cosmic and Earth evolution as a profound process of creativity, connection and interdependence. The film instills a deep sense of belonging and participation that invites us to embrace a more meaningful understanding of our place and role in the story of the universe. JOTU tells a story situating humanity as one of millions of interdependent species borne within the womb of the Cosmos. All matter can be traced to the prodigious energies used to forge every known element either within the fusion furnaces of stars during their "lives" or when they have reached the end of their billion-year lifespan culminating with a billowing fireworks-like display of kaleidoscopic plume of gas and dust in the wake of a supernova explosion. Therefore, as Carl Sagan iterated decades ago, we are all "*star stuff*" and, as such, kindred spirits with all of creation.

Religious leaders, environmental and social activists, as well as educators attended the conference whose presenters' task was to weave together scientific findings and religious wisdom to (1) *emphasize that we are one human family connected to each other and all there is and*; (2) *engender a discussion of*

A New Story Based on an Integral Ecology
constructively responding to the ecological, political, social, economic and educational crises we currently face as a global family. Towards this end, the presentations featured a cadre of eminent religious and scientific scholars, including Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim co-founders and co-directors with of Yale's Forum on Religion and Ecology. They are both on the faculty of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, as well as Yale Divinity School and the Department of Religious Studies. Tucker specializes in Asian religions while Grim specializes in Native American religions. Other presenters included William Brown who is the William Marcellus McPheeters Professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary; Reverend Betty Holley, who is Professor of Environmental Ethics & African American Religious Studies at Payne Seminary; Julianne Lutz Warren who is an ecological thinker, creative writer, and author of a biography of Aldo Leopold; and Larry Rasmussen, who is Reinhold Niebuhr Professor Emeritus at Union Theological Seminary and author of the award-winning volume *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key*. Rasmussen has also served as the organizer of Ghost Ranch's decade-long project on Earth-Honoring Faith.

Following a viewing of JOTU Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim facilitated a lively discussion focusing on how the film provides a framework for stimulating the creation of a New Story. This was further emphasized later in the week after viewing several interviews on the JOTU companion video series, *Conversations*, which underscored the importance of understanding the "Big History" approach, ecological economics and indigenous ways of knowing to fully appreciate what needs to be considered in creating a New Story. Reverend Betty Holley provided the audience with inspirational biblical scriptures, poetry and songs as a means for developing ecological consciousness while Biblical scholar,

William Brown's presentation¹, drew insights from the famous song in Ecclesiastes "A Time For Everything"². Brown stated that the verses' opposite pairings (e.g. a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot...) reminded him of a pendulum swinging from one extreme to the other. What this brought to mind was the dialectic between *extinction* and the opposing process of *emergence* or re-birth. Nonetheless, in the aftermath of each mass-extinction, like the Phoenix arising from the ashes, life not only persisted but also flourished in abundance and diversity.

Scientists now concur that we have reached the end of the Cenozoic geological period, during which time the Earth witnessed the adaptive radiation of thousands of mammalian species including our own only a few hundred thousand years ago. A study, recently published in the prestigious peer-reviewed journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, confirms what many scientists have believed for some time.- "...The resulting biological annihilation obviously will have serious ecological, economic and social consequences. Humanity will eventually pay a very high price for the decimation of the only assemblage of life that we know of in the universe." (Ceballos, G; Ehrlich,P.; and Dirzo, R. 2017, paragraph 18). We are now immersed in a new epoch characterized by "*biological annihilation*" of wildlife that the Earth has not experienced since the last mass extinction millions of years ago. There have been five mass extinctions of life on Earth over the course of the past 3.6 billion years, all of which can be attributed to natural processes. However, unlike mass extinctions of past eons, this new one is due to overpopulation and overconsumption, as well as the intervention in natural processes of a single species-*Homo sapiens*.

A New Story Based on an Integral Ecology

Therefore scientists are in agreement that Earth has entered into what is now called the Anthropocene epoch [the prefix “Anthro” refers to human]. The Anthropocene is so named because the planet’s landscape, air and water systems are being transfigured and negatively impacted while its plant and animal inhabitants were decimated due to the human predilection to survive at the expense of everything else. Nonetheless, as the geological record has revealed, the Earth is resilient and has survived past mass extinctions and therefore will survive and thrive with or without us. Thus, there is hope in recognizing the creative, renewing and fecund nature of our planet wherein the emergence of new species will continue to evolve and replace extinct species for ages to come. However, if we want to continue journeying with Mother Earth we need to recognize that this *emergence-extinction* dialectic is neither pendulum-like nor cyclical. Rather this dialectic depicts the spiraling and evolving of "time and place" creating new contexts. We need to acknowledge that we live in what author, Duane Elgin, refers to as a “*living universe*” in his book by the same name (Elgin, 2009). It is a difference between viewing it as a dead and static state of "being" and recognizing it as a living and dynamic state of "becoming". Henceforth, rather than viewing ourselves as human "beings" it appears more accurate to perceive ourselves as human "*becomings*" who have reached a critical juncture, or what Malcolm Gladwell refers to as a “tipping point” in our evolution. Whether our species continues the journey depends on whether or not we choose to consciously make changes in how we view ourselves and interact with the landscape, air, water and myriad species that Mother Nature has spun on her loom into one grand tapestry that we perceive as the “*web of life*”.

The time has come to reinterpret the 18th century Enlightenment values of *life, liberty and pursuit of happiness* through the lens of inter-connectedness or what Vietnamese and Buddhist poet, Thich Nhat Hanh, refers to as “inter-being”

A New Story Based on an Integral Ecology

[i.e. to interdependently exist with others]. In another presentation³, William Brown provided deep insight into the nature of the relevance of biblical verses in verses from both Genesis and Job regarding the relationship of between “awe”, “wonder” and “wisdom”. What the world needs today is to experience “*wonder*” within the sacred natural world we call home. As Brown discussed, wonder or awe literally takes one’s breath away. In awe’s wake one’s breath is restored through the process of inspiration. Since the etymological roots can be traced to the word “spirit”, being awe-struck leaves us transformed and able to see things anew that as a consequence. One could argue that awe leaves us *re-spirited* and thus, enlightened to perceive what before had only been overlooked or unseen. Therefore, what the world needs now is a new story filled with *wonder* along with the *wisdom* that emerges when taking time to observe and appreciate the natural beauty and elegance in the form and structure of our environs. Humans need to finally recognize and acknowledge that *we are entangled in an interdependent “web of life”*. Moreover, it behooves us to begin behaving like a “family” member rather than a stranger to our global inhabitants, as well as resolve to fully participate as trusted guardians rather than plunderers of our planet and Her resources.

The new crises created during the human age of modernity require now, more than ever, a New Story of interdependence and spirituality that spawns new forms of social, spiritual and environmental activism based on: (1) *embracing ecological integrity*; (2) *fostering social, economic and restorative justice and democracy*; (3) *non-violence and Peace*; (4) *valuing, respecting and honoring the spiritual connection between humans and the Earth*; (5) *integrating science and ethics*; (6) *viewing the universe as a “living”, creative and evolving system*; (7) *activating human energy for ecological and social change*; (8) *acknowledging humans as “trustees” rather than stewards of the earth*; (9) *embracing a*

A New Story Based on an Integral Ecology

*broadened ethics among humans and non-humans; and (10) espousing an integral ecology whose values include: (1) reverence for the earth community; (2) respect for humans and all species; (3) restraint in use of natural resources; (4) retribution of technology and aid; and (5) responsibility for the future of life and restoration of ecosystems.*⁴

The Earth Charter began as a United Nations initiative, but was carried forward and completed by a global civil society initiative in the last decade of the 20th century. The Charter provides an ethical framework requisite to creating what has been referred to by many as a *just, sustainable and peaceful global society for the 21st century* and, as such, can serve as a primer on writing a New Story.

The Preamble of the Earth Charter begins with a sobering notion:

*“We stand at a critical moment in Earth’s history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.”*⁵

Pope Francis proposes in his recent Encyclical that we embrace an *integral ecology* as a new paradigm of justice; an ecology that respects the human, social and the environmental aspects of our world. Pope Francis stated:

*“We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.”*⁶

The inherent wisdom in this papal document is thus aligned with those espoused by others, most notably His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Therefore, the religious and scientific communities are united in their appeal to usher in a new accord that promotes embracing an integral ecology founded on interconnectedness and

A New Story Based on an Integral Ecology
inter-dependence of the Earth community. JOTU's message is that we are all "star stuff" and therefore, interrelated and interdependent. We, as interdependent members of a global community, are ALL on the same journey as *One* with the Universe. Therefore, in order to connect the message inherent in JOTU with both the Earth Charter and the Encyclical we, as a global society, need to adopt a new set of global-centric values that speak to the entire *Earth community*. It is a shift in mindset from focusing on the needs, desires and wants of the "self" to those of "Self". Getting there will require being open to dialogue and therefore listening to each other and co-evolving new values that support the Earth Charter's guiding principles for nature, human rights, economic justice and a culture of peace.

¹Notes from Dr. William Brown's presentation on "Apocalyptic Wonder".

² Ecclesiastes Chapter 3 Verses 1-8, New International Version

³Notes from William Brown's presentation "Cosmic Wonder"

⁴John Grim and ME Tucker, *Ecology and Religion*. Washington DC: Island Press, 2014.

⁵The Earth Charter, (Paragraph 1) <http://earthcharter.org/discover/the-earth-charter/>

⁶ Encyclical Letter Laudato Si of the Holy Father Francis On Care For Our Common Home: Chapter 4: *Integral Ecology* (Paragraph 139) http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

References

Ceballos, G; Ehrlich, P.; and Dirzo, R. (2017). *Biological annihilation via the ongoing sixth mass extinction signaled by vertebrate population losses and declines* Published online before print July 10, 2017, doi:10.1073/pnas.1704949114PNAS July 10, 2017

Elgin, D. (2009). *The Living Universe: Where are we? Who are we? Where are we going?* Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc. San Francisco

Grim, J and Tucker, ME, *Ecology and Religion*. Washington DC: Island Press, 2014.

Swimme, B.T. and Tucker, ME, *Journey of the Universe*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

Dr. James Trifone is the Academic Director for The Graduate Institute's Master of Arts in Learning and Thinking Degree Program in Bethany, CT. learn.edu