

# **Becoming One with the Universe**

By

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The Earth is 8,000 miles across, which is about a billion times bigger than a human being, and a human being is about a billion times bigger than a single atom. So, each of us is like an imperceptible atom upon the Earth. From our relative perspective the world really is a “big place,” which, given all its unknowns, due to our ability to perceive only our immediate microscopic reality, can make it a scary place too. From almost our beginning, humans have attempted to conquer this fear by creating stories to explain the world and what it’s all about. Some of us looked to nature and other animals to find our Way. Some followed the ways of the ancestors who came before us. And some imagined the world must have been fashioned by gods and sought to discover and follow their ways. Throughout our history, finding our way in the world has been an attempt to boil something so incomprehensibly large into a few simple truths everyone can easily grasp and live by.

Judaism and Christianity have Ten Commandments. Islam has Five Pillars. Buddhism has Four Noble Truths and an Eightfold Path, and even us Unitarian Universalists have our Seven Principles. But it’s not only through religion we seek illusive answers to help explain everything about a world that’s a billion times bigger than we are. Making meaning, some suggest, may be the very thing that defines and drives our species. When asked why we should go to the moon, for example, Neil Armstrong once said, “It’s in the nature of [our] deep inner soul. We’re required to do these things just as *salmon* swim upstream.” We want to know what it’s all about, how it works, why it’s even here, and why we’re here.

That’s why our bookstores are filled with manuals for dummies and idiot’s guides, and bestselling titles like, *The Four Agreements*, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, *Twelve Rules for Life*, *The Five Love Languages*, and *52 Small Changes*, promising, just *One Year to a Happier, Healthier You*. If only it were that easy, finding one religion, one path, or one book that boils everything down to just a few easy steps. Then we wouldn’t have to fear losing our way in the world, in the vast sea of uncertainty that lies beyond the shores of the tiny microcosm our fictions wrap us in like a child’s security blanket.

But even if it were that simple to explain our world, that pale blue dot a billion times larger than any of us, we’d still not have explained much at all. For if, on a clear night, we look into the evening sky to peak into the Milky Way, we’re lucky to see only about 8,000 of its 100,000 billion stars, about 0.00000008 percent. And if we could somehow leave the dot and travel through our galaxy, going at the speed of light, 180,000 miles per second, it would take a hundred-thousand-years to cross. At the same speed, it would take another 2.5 million years to reach our closet galactic neighbor, Andromeda. In addition to the Milky Way and Andromeda, our small corner of the Universe, known as Laniakea, is a supercluster of approximately 100,000 other galaxies, each with billions or trillions of stars. And there are an estimated 10 million other superclusters in the known Universe alone, and the known

Universe, which is 28 billion light years across, meaning that's how long it would take to cross traveling at the speed of light, is itself but a dot, less than an atom, compared to all that remains. To comprehend how long 28 billion years is; if you began counting to a billion right now, you'll be 31 years older by the time you finish. 28 billion years is twice as old as physicists say the entire Universe is.

In short, the Universe is huge! It's so big, so full of mystery, of unknowns, of dark matter, and dark energy, that the idea it can all be boiled down to a handful of commands, steps, habits, or principles, seems absurd. While most religions can provide us a false sense of security, through a false sense of certainty, no religion has ever come close to disclosing the meaning of our world, let alone the entire Universe. That's why I prefer mysticism to populist religions, because it helps us accept, embrace, even thrive on the mystery of it all. And, rather than adopting a provincial or tribal view of everything, which claims our way is the only way, mysticism encourages us to transcend the limitations of our ways, our senses, and our beliefs, to connect with and commune with all that is. That's why mystics are inspired by nature and other creatures, because its goal is to become one with all that is, and to stop pretending all that is is what's in our immediate vicinity, and that we've already managed to discover all the good ideas.

So, rather than recoiling from the unknown, by separating from the world, calling it an unholy, fallen, sinful place, or, but an illusion and delusion we must not desire or cling to, the mystic bounds into the world, seeking to imitate her ways and by uniting with her. This is why mystics like Meister Eckhart said, "Every creature is a word of God and a book about God,"<sup>1</sup> and why Hildegard of Bingen said, "This Word manifests itself in every creature,"<sup>2</sup> and why Mechtild of Magdeburg said, "The truly wise person kneels at the feet of all creatures,"<sup>3</sup> and why Evelyn Underhill said, "The Uncreated light manifests Itself through created things."<sup>4</sup> So the mystic falls in love with the world, seeking to discover the divine hidden within everyone and everything, the world in a grain of sand, heaven in a wildflower, infinity in your hand, and Eternity in an hour. "O forests and woods, seeded by the hand of the Beloved," Saint John of the Cross said in search of, "That one burning in my heart... O green meadows, framed with flowers, did he pass through you?"<sup>5</sup>

But, again, the mystic knows the hoop of our world is still too small, beautiful and profound as it is; and that, to truly become one with all that is, one must also transcend the boundaries of our pale blue dot. This is what Rumi understood when he said, "I am all orders of being, the circling galaxy, the evolutionary intelligence, the lift, and the falling away,"<sup>6</sup> and what Eckhart was getting at when he said, "...in the innermost and deepest aspect of the soul God creates the whole cosmos." It's what the father of Religious Humanism, once a minister of

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<sup>1</sup> Fox, Matthew, *Original Blessing*, Bear & Company, Santa Fe, NM, 1983, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 69.

<sup>4</sup> Underhill, Evelyn, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, Dover Publications, New York, NY, 1930, 12<sup>th</sup> edition, 2002, p. 191.

<sup>5</sup> deNicolas, Antonio T., *St. John of the Cross: Alchemist of the Soul*, Paragon House, New York, NY, 1989, p. 117f.

<sup>6</sup> Barks, Coleman, *The Essential Rumi*, Quality Paper Back Book Club, Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1998, p.276.

our very church, and a mystic, John Dietrich meant when he said, “Stones and trees and [people] and stars—all are made of the same thing...”<sup>7</sup> which isn’t unlike what another of our former beloved ministers and mystics, Rev. Dr. Bill Houff, meant when he said, “I define a mystic as a person who is serious about coming into harmony with the cosmic whole.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, such Union, according to Evelyn Underhill, “is the true goal of the mystic quest...”<sup>9</sup> the total annihilation or reabsorption of the individual soul into the infinite.”<sup>10</sup>

Mystics have long grasped what today’s physicists call quantum entanglement, that a small particle at one end of the Universe instantly, faster than lightspeed, may influence another particle at the opposite end, a phenomenon Einstein called, “spooky action at a distance.” Our blue pearl of a planet may be far less than a particle in the vast Cosmos, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t part of the whole, that it isn’t one with the Universe. It may be, on a quantum level, it really is possible to hold infinity in the palm of our hand, yet today our species continues to miss this truth, and is in a profound spiritual crisis because of it. Our greatest problems—racism, sexism, poverty, hunger, epidemics, income inequality, xenophobia, the global refugee crisis, epidemics, war, environmental degradation, and, of course, global warming, can all be traced back to our species’ failure to grasp what theologian Matthew Fox understands, that “everyone is born a mystic who experiences the unity of all things...”<sup>11</sup>

What he means by this is that we’re all born in an undifferentiated state, meaning we can’t tell the difference between ourselves and anyone or anything else. In his book, *Escape from Freedom*, Erich Fromm says, “A few months elapse after birth before the child even recognizes another person as such and is able to react with a smile, and it is a year before the child ceases to confuse itself with the universe.”<sup>12</sup> While this process of differentiation is key to our consciousness, consciousness itself can move us toward a state of differentiated oneness, to the rediscovery of our connection to the Universe and all our relations. Again, as Fromm put it, “The social history of [humanity] started with [its emergence] from a state of oneness with the natural world to an awareness of [itself] as an entity separate from surrounding nature and [mankind].”<sup>13</sup> In short, as a species, we have largely lost our sense of relatedness to our environment. Thus, “The deepest need of [humanity],” Fromm continues, “is the need to overcome [our] separateness, to leave the prison of [our] aloneness.”<sup>14</sup>

Some seek to overcome this sense of aloneness artificially, by clustering together in groups that cling to rigid ideologies, often at the expense of outsiders and everything else. They come to mistake their small worldview for the world itself, the whole world, and nothing but the world. But these psychological security blankets, these immature attempts at understanding

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<sup>7</sup> Dietrich, John H., *What if the World Went Humanist? Ten Pulpit Addresses by John H. Dietrich*, The HUUmanists Association, Hamden, CT., 2010, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Houff, *ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>9</sup> Underhill, *ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Fox, Matthew, *A New Reformation*, Inner Traditions, Bear & Company, Rochester, VT, 2006, Thesis #7

<sup>12</sup> Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, An Avon Library Book, New York, NY, 1941, 1965, p. 42

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>14</sup> Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, Bantam Books, New York, NY, 1956, 1953, p. 8.

the world, Fromm says, “stand in the way of the development of [our] reason and [our] critical capacities.”<sup>15</sup> For Fromm, by identifying so narrowly with one’s particular group, as a Christian, or an American, or a Conservative, or a Seahawks fan, or what have you, and not as human beings, one fails to become a “free, self-determining, [complete] individual.” Today a lot of people are asking why a lot of other people can so consistently vote against their own best interests? Fromm says its because, “[One] may suffer from hunger or suppression, but [one] does not suffer from the worst of all pains—complete aloneness and doubt.”<sup>16</sup>

It’s a tragic paradox, the very thing that drives us to the stars, like salmon, the desire to overcome “the prison of our aloneness,” by finding our place in the Universe, and becoming one with it, is the very thing that pushes so many to isolate, and segregate, and build walls that can be seen from space to protect themselves from others. But if, like young Siddhartha, we dare venture beyond the walls that at once protect and imprison us, to seek enlightenment and become a Buddha, then let’s think bigger than we can even imagine, bigger than our zip code, bigger than our town, bigger than our country, bigger than the particle of space dust we call a planet, and look deep beyond the Milky Way, beyond Andromeda, beyond Laneakia, the supercluster of 100,000 galaxies that is our small corner of the known Universe, and beyond even its 28-billion-light-year expanse that is itself but a particle compared to the entire Universe, to find our Way.

I won’t futilely attempt to list all its ways, which are endless, and there for you to discover on your own. I will only point out some of those I’ve grasped while pondering its wonder. The first is one I’ve already touched upon, *the Way of the Universe is Mystery*. Einstein said, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. [One] to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead.”<sup>17</sup> Einstein, who famously equated matter with energy,  $E=mc^2$ , eventually concluded energy is all there is, that, in his words, “There is no place in this new kind of physics for both the field and matter, for the field is the only reality.”<sup>18</sup> Today’s physicists tell us the entire Universe is more than 95 percent dark energy and dark matter, and that if we could see our own bodies on a quantum level, we would appear as void as intergalactic space, that we are mostly not here. “Mystery within mystery,” the *Tao te Ching* says, “is the gateway to all understanding.”<sup>19</sup> We begin in darkness, dwell in darkness, die in darkness. Darkness is the nature of our Universe, and it is why we must become mystics, comfortable living in the mist, in the mystery, in the doubt and uncertainty. “When I speak of darkness,” St. John of the Cross said, “I mean the absence of knowledge... [You must] learn to be at home in this darkness.”<sup>20</sup>

A second *Way of the Universe is to Embrace*, for the Universe is always expanding, always opening its arms. This is one of its great mysteries, the paradox that the Universe is all there

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<sup>15</sup> Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, ibid, p. 51.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Einstein, Albert in *Living Philosophies* Simon and Schuster, New York 1931.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>19</sup> #1

<sup>20</sup> De Nicolas, Antonio T., *St. John of the Cross: Alchemist of the Soul*, (Paragon House, New York, NY, 1989), p. 41.

is, that nothing exists beyond its boundaries, yet it's getting bigger, expanding into nothing. Thus, if we want to live in accord with the Universe, we too must keep expanding. As individuals, we imitate the Universe when we continually open our minds and hearts to new ideas, and new ways, and new possibilities, and to others with other ways. As a society, we imitate the Universe by opening our borders to those seeking refuge, and our systems and opportunities to those who have been left out. In his book, *The Awakened Heart*, Gerald May says the Hebrew word for salvation, *Yeshuah*, connotes "space and the freedom and security which is gained by the removal of constriction."<sup>21</sup> That's the way of the Universe too, liberation, freedom, opening, forever widening our circles of inclusion.

It is also the *Way of the Universe to recycle, reuse, and recreate*. Though it continues to expand, there is nothing in the Universe today that wasn't here when it began as a tiny singularity, a small seed, smaller than the smallest particle, 13.7 billion years ago. Everything in the Universe changes form, but energy, which Einstein says is all there is, cannot be destroyed. Today, with each inhalation, we take in almost a quadrillion of the atoms, more than a thousand-trillion, that's 10 followed by 24 zeros, that were formed at the beginning of everything; and with each exhalation, we give a quadrillion back. As Deepak Chopra says "You have a million atoms right now that have been in the body of every single being that has existed since the dawn of creation. In just the last three weeks a quadrillion-atoms have gone through your body and they have gone through the body of every other living species on this planet."<sup>22</sup> The Universe doesn't waste its precious resources, and neither should we.

It follows from this that it is also the *Way of the Universe to unify*. As mentioned, through the necessary process of differentiation we find ourselves feeling separate from others, to the point of feeling alone and, sometimes, superior to others. But, as the very word implies, the *Universe* is one, and, as part of it, we are one with it. The trick is recognizing this is so. As a species we've ignored our cosmic connection by inventing anthropocentric stories to convince us we are separate from the rest of the Universe, from nature, from other creatures, and from other people who don't look, act, or think like us. But the very word, *human*, means "earth," just as other words, like *Pueblo*, and *Adam*, refer to both "earth" and "people." From a broader, cosmic perspective, humans are *humus*, drops of earth, and the earth is but a drop of Universe. It is through this realization of our relatedness to all things and all beings, and our responsibility toward them, that, as semi-conscious beings, the Universe itself is becoming aware of its own interdependent nature. As mythologist Joseph Campbell said, "if [we] think of ourselves as coming out of the Earth, rather than having been thrown in here from somewhere else, you see that we are the Earth, we are the consciousness of the Earth. These are the eyes of the Earth. And this is the voice of the Earth."<sup>23</sup>

It also seems to me the *Way of the Universe is happiness*. True, there is a lot of chaos and destruction in the Universe too, but in the wake of such, cosmic forces always work to reestablish equilibrium. It is the gravitational push and pull of objects in space that holds

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<sup>21</sup> See Michael Schut, ed., *Simpler Living, Compassionate Life*, The Morehouse Group, Denver, CO, 1999, 2001, p.42.

<sup>22</sup> [www.resurgence.org/2005/chopra231.htm](http://www.resurgence.org/2005/chopra231.htm) (March 5, 2006)

<sup>23</sup> Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, *ibid.*, p.32.

everything, including our own solar system, in place. Some think of happiness as a state of joy, but I consider joy to be a type of elation, and exaggerated state that feels great, but isn't one we can stay in long, anymore than we should remain sad or depressed. The root of *happiness*, rather, is the same as the root of *happening*, from an Old English word meaning, "chance occurrence." So being happy means being content with what's happening, being okay with the way things are. Our faces smile and cry when we're glad or sad, and relax again after these feelings have passed, but happiness is our default state, the state our bodies and souls want to return to, a state of harmony and contentment with what is. Thus, by my definition, the Universe is a happy place, and the Way of the Universe to be happy.

Finally, perhaps most importantly, I would say the *Way of the Universe is love*. As cosmologist Brian Swimme explains, "At [the] cosmic scale, the basic dynamism of the universe is the attraction each galaxy has for every other galaxy. Nothing in all science has been established and studied with greater attention and detail than this primary attraction of each part of the universe for every other part."<sup>24</sup> He goes on to say that, "if we are going to think about love in its cosmic dimension, we must start with the universe as a whole. We must begin with the attraction that permeates the entire macrostructure. I'm speaking precisely of the basic binding energy found everywhere in reality."<sup>25</sup> In other words, Swimme is saying love is what holds it all together. Thus, as others have suggested long ago, if we want to be in accord with the Universe, we must love one another.

The Way of the Universe is Mystery. The way of the Universe is to embrace. The way of the Universe is recycling, reusing, and recreating. The Way of the Universe is to unify. The Way of the Universe is happiness. The Way of the Universe is love. If you want to be one with the Universe, these are ways to put into practice. As I said, there are many other ways too, countless others for you to discover and consider. And this we must do, for our nearsighted stories have brought our world to the brink of destruction, and our species to a turning point in which we must expand our thinking or get out of the game. "If the way of Western civilization and Western religion was once the way of election and differentiation from others and from the earth," the late Thomas Berry wrote, "the way now is the way of intimate communion with the larger human community and with the universe itself."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Swimme, Brian, *The Universe is a Green Dragon*, Bear & Company, Santa Fe, NM, 1984, p. 43.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* p. 45.

<sup>26</sup> Berry, Thomas, *The Dream of the Earth*, Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, CA, 1988, p. 137.