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*The New Story is the story of creation as told through both our telescopes and microscopes, as well as our advancing understanding of how evolution has brought us along this far. It is also, then, the story of our place in the universe, and it brings with it nothing short of a radical transformation in human self-understanding. (See IC #12 on "The New Story: Life From a Planetary Perspective" for a more detailed treatment.)*

*Theologian Thomas Berry has emerged as a key teller of this tale, and Sister Miriam Theresa MacGillis is one of his foremost interpreters. Through her workshops and lectures (over 500 of them so far), she helps people to understand and embody this new understanding of what it means to be human. Miriam is the director of Genesis Farm, a center for education in earth stewardship, sponsored by the Dominican Congregation in affiliation with Global Education Associates. For information on her workshop schedule, write to Genesis Farm, Box 622, Blairstown, NJ 07825.*

**Alan:** *What is the heart of the "New Story"?*

**Miriam:** We are now in a position, based on our scientific explorations, to understand the origin and process out of which the universe has emerged, and with it the solar system, planet Earth, all of life, and the human as well. For the first time all peoples of the Earth can understand this origin story, and it places everyone – their history, their significance, and their roles – in a whole new light.

The most significant part of this scientific story is that the universe has emerged not only in its *physical* dimension, but also in its inner, psychic, *spiritual* dimension. It is an *integrated* evolutionary process. When we reflect on that, we can begin to understand our place in that process – which is to be that being in whom the Earth has acquired a *self-reflective consciousness*. That changes all the definitions that we have about ourselves and our nature.

Any school child learning contemporary science and Earth studies has this information available. If we can understand that our life and human history is as much a part of the unfolding of the universe as is the natural world, then we can see that all peoples, cultures, religious traditions, and ethnic diversities have also been part of the same process, and have therefore played a significant role in it. The Earth desperately needs the sum total of all that wisdom in order to go forward into the next stage of evolution.

**Alan:** *We're now in the process of telling ourselves this New Story, and teaching it to our children. How can we begin to live it? How can it become manifested in our lives?*

**Miriam:** I think at every level of our humanness, in the whole inner psychic structure out of which we define our sense of person and individuality. We're beginning to realize now that the *self* is an expression of this deeper Earth self, and the even deeper Universe self – that

there are no separations. The *whole* is my whole self. Psychically, the sense of unity – *true* unity – with the inner dimension of the universe then becomes an incredibly beautiful and enticing mystery to enter into. And in terms of our emotional life, the feelings of communion, union with the whole, or oneness are no longer just the idealistic notions of poetic insight. They are empirically founded, because we know that in our very *genes* we are connected to the whole.

Physically, it's the same idea. When we begin to identify with the whole physical being of the planet, then we can see the necessity of enhancing and conserving the integrity of the whole natural world – because it's the functioning of this part of the planet that makes it possible for humans even to exist. Without air, water, soil, vegetation, there's no human life. I mean, the Earth literally is our body.

**Alan:** *Doesn't living this New Story amount to a thoroughgoing revolution in religious life?*

**Miriam:** More of a transformation, because in a revolution one party just changes places with another party. A transformation brings everybody forward.

**Alan:** *How does a transformation relate to history? What part of the past comes with us?*

**Miriam:** I think we carry the *entire* past. We're not cutting ourselves off from the past, as though the past were wrong and we're making an enormous corrective that disconnects us from it. The past has made it possible to have these kinds of insights.

The major shift we're making now is in our concept of time and space. In the old cosmologies, time was cyclical, and the universe fixed and static. But in this new context, the universe is a constantly emerging process. Time itself is *development*. Therefore, everything in the past has been essential to open up the possibilities for what is yet to develop – like the tree in the acorn. The acorn has to go through all the states of its process to bring forth a tree, and the tree is very different from the acorn. But you can't have one without the other.

**Alan:** *That leads us to some interesting questions about the relation of a people to their traditions. How will this affect Catholics and Buddhists and those of other faiths?*

**Miriam:** I believe it will deepen and re-enliven their connections. I find myself more deeply committed to my tradition than ever before. The difference is that the meanings *within* the meanings have changed. In other words, the forms which held meanings in the past have been opened up to much *deeper* meanings – so the forms have to adapt and change.

I think these meanings can be inferred within the forms if the priesthood or the liturgical ministers have the vision. But without that vision, they're just going to translate them in the old ways – and then they may become problematic.

**Alan:** *If they don't have the vision, how can they get it?*

**Miriam:** That's the power of the new cosmology and the New Story – it's coming at us from all different directions. A theologian like Thomas Berry is telling it on the one hand, and a scientist like James Lovelock is telling it on the other.

Thomas Berry interprets this vision in the broadest context, in a way that is very available to people in the religious communities as well as the scientific communities. He says that if we continue to tell our religious stories without this new scientific understanding, then we are trivializing the religious tradition. And similarly, if the scientific community continues to tell the story of the universe only in its material terms – without this inner/psychic/spiritual dimension – then we are trivializing science. Neither one alone can awaken the vision of our children, and their hopes for the future.

So the story's available. It's out there in many, many ways. The challenge to all of us is to translate it – to translate it into the workplace, our homes, our music, our employment practices, our agricultural systems, and our economy. It needs that kind of translation.

**Alan:** *What elements of continuity are there with older understandings of the Christian tradition, for example?*

**Miriam:** Well, in the Judaic tradition there is the Exodus event. That was a historic event, and it meant what it meant. It was a true experience for those people of their ongoing salvation and vision in history. Christians, however, look back on that event and say that it was a *pre-figuration* of the great Exodus that the Christ took in passing through life, death and resurrection – that you can't even have the Christ without the first Exodus. The Exodus holds the possibility of the paschal mystery of Christ – but they're *connected*.

There's a sense now in which the form of the paschal mystery of Christ was *also* a pre-figuration of the passage that the human species must go through – the process of life, death and resurrection, which is essential to becoming willing to die to our fears, our ignorance, our prejudices, our sense of exclusiveness, our sense of having the whole truth. And there's no deliverance, no possibility for transformation unless we see that this is an ongoing process, an everyday occurrence.

**Alan:** *There's no passing the cup.*

**Miriam:** Right. I want to use the Biblical words *dying to self*, dying to very old concepts or *illusions* about ourselves, in order to recover the deep divine nature implicit in the Christ event, which was implicit in the Exodus event. It's all one piece. We are connected to the divine. We carry this incredible mystery. That's the light that is carried through the whole process.

**Alan:** *Thomas Berry, in his essay on "The Dream of the Earth," writes that in this time of crisis we need to seek guidance from our genetic coding, from the Earth itself, and from the universe. How do we seek this guidance?*

**Miriam:** By awakening our inner consciousness. Every atom of every cell in our body – every single thread of DNA – carries the entire psychic memory of the universe. And we can have access to that through inner modes of consciousness – through dream, myth, symbol, prayer, meditation, or other altered states of consciousness. *That's* where we're going to find the energy and insight and psychic strength to break out of our present state of addiction.

He also says that if we continue to educate and to communicate through the existing cultural coding – which is simply a rehash of the old illusions that we are separate from the Earth, that the Earth is a big material backdrop for us to exploit and redesign – then we're just spending a fortune teaching our kids how to kill themselves. That inner process is very important.

But Thomas also says that the key thing about being in touch with that inner, psychic place of the spirit is to learn the skills and tools to function in the natural world. Our scientific knowledge is a disaster in terms of the natural world, and our Western spirituality has transcended it – so we *don't know* how to behave there. He says that we are, in fact, in a state of autism. That's the real challenge of our schools and learning centers and parenting: how do we develop those skills? Right now, we're pretty illiterate.

**Alan:** *Some people are trying to address that condition by creating new – or reviving old – rituals and shamanic forms to try to reconnect with the Earth and with the other life on the planet. How do you feel about that? How does it relate to the more traditional faith communities?*

**Miriam:** The shaman goes into the inner world and brings back power and healing – and that is a potential that all humans have. It's *integral* to who we are as humans, to be able to enter the world of spirit and become a blessing for life. In the past it was seen as the role of a particular caste, or a particular kind of personality, or a particular appointed person from the community. But I think it is a potential of the full human person.

But also in the past, the shaman, entering into the inner life of the natural world, did so in a kind of limited form. It was an animistic world, and so the power was the power of nature. Later on, the shaman entered into the world of the goddess, and then the shaman became the priest who entered into the world of the transcendent deities. Now, we can't focus on one to the exclusion of the others. One of my worries about the return to shamanism in the natural world is that it can make the human the enemy. The sense of transcendence then becomes all wrong, because what we have to do is incorporate *all* of it.

In other words, it's a process of *recovering*. The divine Father-God and the Mother-God and the animal spirits are *all* images of the divine – none of them exhausts the possibility of the divine. When you take one out and exclude all the others, that's where you have the danger. The shaman of today has to be comfortable in the *whole*, recovering the sense of the divine as it has been manifested in all of the images of the whole Earth story. We can't exclude *anything*.

**Alan:** *Do you see the shaman, by whatever name, regaining a place within the existing faith communities?*

**Miriam:** I think the whole faith community has to understand that *each person* is the shaman. We have to stop waiting for one special person to do it for us.

**Alan:** *What approach do you take in trying to teach people about this new way of thinking and living? How do you help them learn how to embody it, to get it at more than just the intellectual level?*

**Miriam:** First, I'm not teaching it, because I'm learning it. The workshops invite people into the learning process. I contribute a way of telling the story that makes it easier for people to grasp, and then I invite them – whatever tradition they come from – to reflect on the precious uniqueness of that tradition. The unique understanding of that tradition is absolutely critical to the unfolding of the universe, and the acquiring of the wisdom that we need. The diversity of the traditions is as important as the diversity in a forest.

So it may be a rash thing to cut yourself out of your tradition, simply because you have new insights or ways of looking at things. Because you *are* the tradition. Judaism, for example, doesn't exist in some abstract form. There are only Jews. And the Jew is the person who has a deep sense of connection to the divine as a presence in history that is always calling forth deeper levels of human potential. Why cut off from that?

**Alan:** *Do you use any ceremonies or rituals in your workshops to help people feel the New Story more deeply?*

**Miriam:** I like to do rituals with the four elements of fire, air, earth, and water – because that's the basis of all sacramental systems, the stuff of existence.

But one of the rituals I love to end the workshop with is the Evolutionary Walk. We take a very long piece of rope and make this enormous spiral in the room. That rope is the time frame of the universe; it equals 15 billion years. Then we measure off the major events that have happened – the formation of the solar system, the creation of the biosphere, the emergence of single-celled organisms, up to the whole evolution of the human, and then the very, very short time frame of human history – and we light candles to mark these significant events. Then people *walk* that process, and try to experience it in their being.

At the beginning of the spiral is a candle which represents the divine, the creator. People light their candles from that, and then walk that spiral. It's a very moving experience to see how long the beginnings are, and how rapid life and the emergence of life all happens. Human life is at the very end, and when people come out of the spiral, they call out their names: "The Universe has become Mary!" "The Universe has become James!"

**Alan:** *Are these rituals at all in conflict with your Catholic tradition?*

**Miriam:** No, because they're not formal liturgical acts. What's happened in the Christian tradition is that there's been a lack of creativity in *other* dimensions of prayer and ritual. It has always been possible to explore those, and that's what families and communities traditionally did. Doing a ritual that connects us with the natural world is just another variation on that.

**Alan:** *What other things can people do in their own lives to strengthen that sense of the sacredness of the Earth and begin to – again this word – embody that understanding?*

**Miriam:** Our spirituality has to be extremely practical. We have to start right where we live – in our home, in our backyard, in our neighborhood, in our region. If *those* things are sick, or if what we're doing in our household is contributing to the sickness, then our spirituality is not efficacious.

If we can go about *reminding* ourselves around the table, before going to bed, in prayers together, or in moments of gift-giving, then we can go into these deeper aspects of life. We have to just turn the television off and *do* these things in our homes.

We also have to open up the kitchen cabinets, look at the labels and see what we're putting into our bodies and pouring down our drains. I think it's as close as what kind of clothes we're wearing. It's as close as looking at the recycling policy in our neighborhood.

And we have to be active voices at the policymaking level. We have to get to know our township officials, find out who's on the planning board, understand development and zoning policies.

**Alan:** *And this is all an integral part of our spirituality?*

**Miriam:** Oh, absolutely! We've been tremendously passive about taking part in those decisions, basically because we're running around crazy, working just to survive – or to get what we *think* we need to survive.

**Alan:** *Many people are simply afraid when even a little bit of real meaning is brought into their lives. We become frightened by what we're going to find if we dig more deeply. How can we make it easier to deal with the depth of feeling called up when we begin to look at these issues?*

**Miriam:** I think love is the only way we can empower each other. We do hold onto what makes us secure – the way we've defined ourselves, the images we hold of ourselves or that others hold of us. Letting go of some of that is very painful and very frightening, especially when we've existed so long in this culture with these images of our value being dependent on our material wealth or our accomplishments. But *who cares?* I mean that literally – *who* really does care?

**Alan:** *Each of us believes that other people care.*

**Miriam:** Exactly. We've been culturally programmed to believe that we are not of worth in just our true *self*. So we've got to be compassionate and understanding of the fact that for people who have struggled to so-called "make it," it's going to be pretty scary to hear, "You know, you really *don't* have to make it. Who are you underneath all that?"

We're talking about the deeper things that are stirring, that we're being called to. And I don't think anything can help in that process except love and acceptance and tolerance and understanding and support. We *have* to be loving, and not judgmental.

**Alan:** *We need to avoid making people who are less aware of these things into the enemy.*

**Miriam:** That's critical – there *is* no enemy. We all know what it's like to live in illusion. We all know what it's like to be frightened or threatened. And we all know how we behave when we're like that.

**Alan:** *Do you see a movement, as well as a basis now, for more community among people of different faiths?*

**Miriam:** Oh yes, definitely. We have to stick together, because our entire economic system is based on exploiting the Earth; and once we really realize that the Earth cannot sustain it, we're going to experience some severe corrections. We have to reach out and support each other, and rethink our sense of privatized wealth.

**Alan:** *Are you hopeful that we can accomplish the kind of changes you describe?*

**Miriam:** It's critical to *commit* ourselves to being hopeful – though not necessarily optimistic or rosy – and not to expect to see the results of our actions. The change that we're talking about has to come out of our own inner freedom, our own sense of what is true and right, and our love for the future – our love for life. We're so conditioned to quick results that we can get discouraged and give up. People need to see that there is no change so small that it doesn't matter. These things take time – but one thing builds on another, and a little act becomes a platform for something else to happen.

So hope is an act of the will. It's a conscious choice to do what sometimes doesn't seem to make any sense.

**Alan:** *It sounds similar to faith.*

**Miriam:** Yes. Yes.

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## In The Beginning Was The Dream

*A pivotal thinker in the emergence of a spirituality of the Earth, Thomas Berry is a challenging (and rewarding) writer. He is a lifelong student of cultural history, and his work integrates the broad sweep of that history in a very powerful way.*

*The following short excerpts are from his most recent book, The Dream of the Earth. Excerpting his writing, we discovered, is difficult: each sentence seems to build on all the preceding ones, in a mirror of the biological evolutionary process. For the complete hologram hinted at by these shards, we highly recommend the book.*

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"We need to go to the earth, as the source whence we came, and ask for its guidance, for the earth carries the psychic structure as well as the physical form of every living being upon the planet

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"Our genetic coding determines not only our identities at birth; its guidance continues also in every cell of our bodies... We need only to listen to what we are being told through the very structure and functioning of our being."

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"The human is less a being on the earth or in the universe than a dimension of the earth and indeed of the universe itself...Ultimately our guidance on any significant issue must emerge from this comprehensive source."

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"What enabled the formless energies to emerge into such a fantastic variety of expression in shape, color, scent, feeling, thought, and imagination?"

"[O]nly out of imaginative power does any grand creative work take shape. Since imagination functions most freely in dream vision, we tend to associate creativity also with dream experience. In this context we might say: In the beginning was the dream. Through the dream all things were made, and without the dream nothing was made that has been made."

From *The Dream of the Earth*, © 1988 by Thomas Berry. Reprinted by permission of Sierra Club Books, 730 Polk St., San Francisco, CA 94109.