

More Than Seasonal Change

By Christine Loughlin, OP

As the cross-quarter day passed, so too did the morning chorus of resident songbirds. No more nesting, no more fledglings. You can still note the distinctive hop of lingering robins and glimpse the white stripes in the fanned tail of mocking birds in flight. The cat bird whines and the Carolina wren chants from flaming sumac. Slender leaf goldenrod stands tall in a sweeping mat of deep red Virginia creeper as if the meadow lay down a royal cloak for the four-legged ones hustling to gather acorn and hickory nuts for the hunger ahead.

The fruiting season abides in color, deep and plush. Boxes of produce arriving from the farm these late summer weeks are packed with veggies rich in taste and texture. Purple eggplant, forest green peppers, crimson tomatoes, bright yellow squash. Beauty abounds in plenty. Autumn builds confidence. We know that winter will come but in the seed of abundance spring is certain. Upon this seasonal sweep we have built our cultural stories and constructed our institutions. Rebirth arrives in familiar form.

Yet in the flow of this summer's current we are awash in startling images and information. On public television and at the cinema pictures confirm the great glaciers are disappearing. More snow is melting on the high peaks around the world than is accumulating. Sea levels are rising, the great ocean conveyor belt is in jeopardy. Change in precipitation effects agricultural patterns. Extreme weather events impact human health and the health of ecosystems.

As we see images and hear reports, our understanding of reality begins to change. World is the cultural construction that constitutes the values and meanings that shapes our society. Earth, in her array of diverse physical environments, is the home that sustains our existence. Slowly the perceptual shift that entered human consciousness in 1969 sinks deeper. In relating his experience astronaut Rusty Schweickart revealed, "You think about what you are experiencing and why. It's not a special thing for you. You know very well at that moment, and it comes through to you so powerfully, that when you see Earth from space that you're the sensing element for 'man'...you are up here as the sensing element, that point out on the end, a feeling that you have a responsibility with this thing called life. When you come back there's a difference in that relationship between you and the planet and you and all those other forms of life on that planet. It is a difference that is so precious."

That "sensing element" has grown into "an inconvenient truth." (Al Gore) Our attitudes and values that flow from our perceptions have begun to change. Collectively we awaken to one living system of water and wind, land and bio mass. The word "one" erupts in new meaning, beyond all previous perceptions guided by language. To this point in time our cultural thought patterns and actions seemed ordained from 'eternity.' Now we grasp that our notions and understanding of how things came to be and what matters are dependent on initial conditions. Originating stories begin from what the eye can see.

The worldview that marks our western way in the world today was born in the classical period of human history. The understanding that the human is primary, the earth is derivative has allowed our destructive behavior toward other forms of life. In the 'sensing' shift we recognize that earth is primary, and the human is derivative. The great spiritual discipline of our time is to end our human separation from other life forms and live into that "precious" relationship the sensing human on the edge felt.

Cultural historian, Thomas Berry, informs us with great clarity that the four institutions that hold a people's origin story in place are education, church, government and law. In a deterministic

worldview when we caught a glimpse of a small truth we claimed it as the “truth.” We built our educational institutions to uphold it, celebrated the wonder of it in ritual, assembled the body politic accordingly and established laws to protect it.

We are at a turning point in the human story. It is easier to make a radical shift in our thinking than it is in our institutions. As planetary systems break down, we think we can repair and replace them like we do a machine. Slowly people of the northern and the southern hemispheres ‘get a feel’ for the one living organism that is our common home. Gradually the alternative institutions begin to emerge that sustain and support the breakthrough in our human consciousness.

Once a picture of Earth from space was available, a powerful shift in our understanding of reality took hold. We came to recognize that we live in a cosmogenesis, a Universe ever emerging through catastrophic transformations marked by destruction and creativity. Our home planet folds into that order through its marvelous capacities to self-govern, self-heal, self-educate. It is this unfolding Story that gives cause for alternative institutions shaping our way.

“That feeling for the responsibility called life and the difference in the relationship between you and all those other life forms... has begun to reshape our cultural coding. Once again we will become peoples of the rivers and the plains, the coastal basins and lakes region. Care of farmland and forest will become as natural as care of loved ones. This will not be a return to a time past. We have sensed our deep connection with all life forms and recognize that we emerge from one originating source. Our living and informed choices become the daily bread, the sustenance that nourishes life’s ever creating mode of being. The great sacrifice must be our willingness to let go the forms and the ways of being human that hinder our relationship to all that is so precious.

At Crystal Spring programming is the tactic by which we participate with the network of peoples to build the alternative structures that support all life. As fall unfolds, we surrender our energy to a greater longing of what seeks to bear fruit.

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