

HARMONY, SCIENCE AND SPIRITUALITY

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IT IS A SERIOUS UNDERSTATEMENT TO SAY THAT INTERESTING THINGS HAPPENED in the USA in the early Sixties. One of the things that happened was a recurrence of people saying how important it is that the world is integral and interconnected. This was remarkable at the time. Martin Luther King actually said in 1963 that the main thing he wanted to say is that all of life is interconnected. He took his cue from St. Paul's statement that, 'And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it.'¹ Inspired by this passage, he wrote in his famous letter from Birmingham Jail' that

I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial 'outside agitator' idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider.²

The idea of interrelatedness is becoming more commonplace, but it comes as a surprise in a world where some have lost that sense of integrity and interconnection. James Lovelock explored interrelatedness in his tremendously important book, *Gaia*, which was published in 1979, although originating in an idea that he had in 1964, a year after King wrote his 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail'. In one passage Lovelock writes,

As society became more urbanized, the proportion of information flow from the biosphere to the pool of knowledge which constitutes the wisdom of the city, decreased. Soon city wisdom became almost entirely centered on the problems of human relationships, in contrast to the wisdom of any natural

tribal group, where relationships with the rest of the animate and inanimate world are still given due place.³

This is a really interesting idea in the conversation about science and spirituality. There is an information flow, Lovelock is saying, from the world - the whole world - into the human community that has made itself into cities. This starts in the Bible narrative with the first murderer, Cain, who killed his brother, Abel.⁴ Cain is the first person to build a city. The first thing he does after God confronts him with the murder of his brother is to go and build a city, and from there the Bible poses a question about the origin and nature of urban existence. One conclusion is that in an urban environment we become more centred on ourselves rather than each other, and the information flow coming in from the world does not sufficiently inform us.

But, we could change this in very practical, easy ways: for example by connecting to local farming communities and farmers markets, buying food which is lovingly produced and more than just a commodity. We could even have a conversation with the people producing the food. When I moved to Virginia, I started work in a dairy that was owned by the university. I became a farmer for that time. We did not own our own farm, and we lived in the town, but the farm workers all gathered each morning at the dairy farm, and we worked together during the day and then went home in the evening. It was remarkable to me that they had conversations about the weather patterns, talking about them with careful observations, like, 'Oh, I noticed, Frank, the storm started over your place last night, and then it moved'. This kind of rich information is available to urbanites like me if we would invite these conversations, and also simply pay attention. So, that's a simple thing, and there are many other ways we could do this. In recent times we have become accustomed to images of the Earth from space, but it is a mistake to equate the world with the Earth. The world is not the Earth. The Earth is within the world, if we think of the world as the 'Cosmos'. The Earth is not only within the sky, but the sky contains the Earth. In ancient models of the world the stars were living, animate beings who were deeply interconnected with each other.

The world looks very different to us now. We know that, physically, we are located far out on one of the arms of the Milky Way. But, as we learn more and more about the cosmos, about the world, we take on the ideas of scientists that the universe acts kind of like a machine. We have to ask what happens to machines? They break down: they don't maintain themselves. So, with a machine model of the universe, we have the idea that the whole universe is breaking down, moving towards entropy, a kind of dead state. Also, although the universe is vast and

beautiful it's not alive, it's not conscious, it's not integral. And we've removed God. It's just too hard to maintain the idea of a God that had been developed in the old model of the universe, with the Earth in the centre and God in Heaven, up there.

Yet, current science is proposing radical new ideas, such as quantum entanglement. If we take on a new, scientific vision of the Cosmos, combined with that which is true in the ancient idea of the world, and start to think about dark matter, entanglement, consciousness and love, we discover a world that is both reanimated and far vaster than the ancient world. It is a place where God can be seen. In such a world we may find God anew. Marcus Borg made this point in his beautiful book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*.⁵ Marcus was raised as a Lutheran, and he recounts how when he got into university, he ceased believing. Even though he was a doctoral student studying the New Testament, he ceased believing in Christ or in God or in the Trinity, because fundamentally, the idea of Jesus that he had been taught as a child was no longer adequate to the problems he faced in his life - it hadn't been updated to accommodate an adult who struggles in his life in the new expanded universe.

In the new universe of such concepts as Gaia and entanglement, the world is re-animated. We see the whole world as living, so the God of that world is also something that you and I might stand in front of and ask how can we encounter and receive information from God, not just speak to God. This is what I understand that Lovelock is talking about: the information coming into the city, coming from farms, from the planets, from the vast reaches of space, from the universe, and from God. The question I leave you with is, how can we have spiritual practices that will allow us to receive the information that this loving world, the whole loving world, animated by God, is always willing to give us?

NOTES

¹ Corinthians 12.26.

² Martin Luther King, 'Letter from Birmingham Jail' by Martin Luther King Jr., August 1963, https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Letter_Birmingham_Jail.pdf [accessed 30 March 2019].

³ James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1979), p. 126.

⁴ Genesis 4.1-18.

⁵ Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (London: Harper Collins, 1994).