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The New Story

It's all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story, the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it, is no longer effective. Yet we have not learned the new story. Our traditional story of the universe sustained us for a long period of time. It shaped our emotional attitudes, provided us with life purposes, and energized action. It consecrated suffering and integrated knowledge. We awoke in the morning and knew where we were. We could answer the questions of our children. We could identify crime, punish transgressors. Everything was taken care of because the story was there. It did not necessarily make people good, nor did it take away the pains and stupidities of life or make for unfailing warmth in human association. It did provide a context in which life could function in a meaningful manner.

Presently this traditional story is dysfunctional in its larger social dimensions, even though some believe it firmly and act according to its guidance. Aware of the dysfunctional aspects of the traditional program, some persons have moved on into different, often new-age, orientations, which have consistently proved ineffective in dealing with our present life situation. Even with advanced science and technology, with superb techniques in manufacturing and commerce, in communications and computation, our secular society remains without satisfactory meaning or the social discipline needed for a life leading to emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual fulfillment. Because of this lack of satisfaction many persons are returning to a religious fundamentalism. But that, too, can be seen as inadequate to supply the values for sustaining our needed social discipline.

A radical reassessment of the human situation is needed, especially concerning those basic values that give to life some satisfactory meaning. We need something that will supply in our times what was supplied formerly by our traditional religious story. If we are to achieve this purpose, we must begin where everything begins in human affairs—with the basic story, our narrative of how things came to be, how they came to be as they are, and how the future can be given some satisfying direction. We need a story that will educate us, a story that will heal, guide, and discipline us.

Western society did have, in its traditional story of the universe, an agreed-upon functioning story up until somewhere around the fourteenth century. This religion-based story originated in a revelatory experience some three thousand years ago. According to this story, the original harmony of the universe was broken by a primordial human fault, and that necessitated formation of a believing redemptive community that would take shape through the course of time. Human history was moving infallibly toward its fulfillment in the peace of a reconstituted paradise.

This religious story was integrated with the Ptolemaic account of the universe and how it functioned, an abiding universe that

endlessly renewed itself and its living forms through the seasonal sequence of time. The introduction of irreversible historical time onto this abiding cosmological scene is precisely the contribution of the Western religious tradition. However severe the turbulent moments of history through the late classical and early medieval periods, these at least took place within a secure natural world and within a fixed context of interpretation. Whatever the problems were, they were not problems concerning the basic human or spiritual values that were at stake. Those were clear.

The confusion and insecurity that we presently experience originated, to a large extent, in the fourteenth century when Europe experienced the plague known as the Black Death. Without making this event a simplistic explanation of all later history, we can say that it was a transition period. Even more, it was a central traumatic moment in Western history. It is estimated that this plague, which reached Europe in 1347, had by 1349 killed off perhaps one-third of the population. Almost half of the people of Florence died within a three-month period. Throughout the later fourteenth century there was a population decline in the whole of Europe. In London the last of the great plagues was in 1665.

In response to the plague and to other social disturbances of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, two directions of development can be identified—one toward a religious redemption out of the tragic world, the other toward greater control of the physical world to escape its pain and to increase its utility to human society. From these two tendencies the two dominant cultural communities of recent centuries were formed: the believing religious community and the secular community with its new scientific knowledge and its industrial powers of exploiting the natural world.

Since the people of these centuries had no knowledge of germs and thus no explanation of the plague, other than divine judgment on a wicked world, the answers most generally sought were in the moral and spiritual order, frequently outside the orthodox teachings of the church. The believing community in its various sectarian

expressions had recourse to supernatural forces, to the spirit world, to the renewal of esoteric traditions, and sometimes to pre-Christian beliefs and rituals that had been neglected in their deeper dynamics since the coming of Christianity. Even within traditional Christianity there was an intensification of the faith experience, an effort to activate supernatural forces with special powers of intervention in the phenomenal world now viewed as threatening to the human community. The sense of human depravity increased. The need for an outpouring of influences from the higher luminous world was intensified. Faith dominated the religious experience. Redemption mystique became the overwhelming form of Christian experience.

Such excessive emphasis on redemption, to the neglect of the revelatory import of the natural world, had from the beginning been one of the possibilities in Christian development. The creed itself is overbalanced in favor of redemption. Thus the integrity of the Christian story is affected. Creation becomes increasingly less important. This response, with its emphasis on redemptive spirituality, continued through the religious upheavals of the sixteenth century and on through the Puritanism and Jansenism of the seventeenth century. This attitude was further strengthened by the shock of the Enlightenment and Revolution periods of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The American version of the ancient Christian story has functioned well in its institutional efficiency and in its moral efficacy, but it is no longer the story of the earth. Nor is it the integral story of the human community. It is a sectarian story. At its center there is an intensive preoccupation with the personality of the Savior, with the interior spiritual life of the faithful, and with the salvific community. The difficulty is that we came to accept this situation as the normal, even the desirable, thing.

The other response to the Black Death was the reaction that led eventually to the scientific secular community of our times. That reaction sought to remedy earthly terror not by supernatural or

religious powers, but by understanding and controlling the earth process. Although those working in that trend were at first committed to the esoteric wisdom traditions and to Platonic idealism, they did emphasize the need for empirical examination of the phenomenal world and its expression in quantitative terms. Scientific inquiry became the controlling human preoccupation, pushed by obscure forces in the unconscious depths of Western culture. The telescope and microscope were invented. Calculus, the supreme instrument of modern science, was discovered. A scientific priesthood came to govern the thought life of our society. We looked at the earth in its physical reality and projected new theories of how it functioned. The celestial bodies were scrutinized more intently, the phenomenon of light was examined, new ways of understanding energy evolved. New sciences emerged. The *Novum Organum* of Francis Bacon appeared in 1620, the *Principia* of Isaac Newton in 1687, the *Scienza Nuova* of Giambattista Vico in 1725.

All of these led to an awareness that the human mind was advancing. This in turn led to the Enlightenment period of the eighteenth century and to the sense of absolute progress of the human mind as expressed by Condorcet in his 1793 volume entitled *Historical Survey of the Progress of the Human Mind*. In the nineteenth century the doctrines of social development appear with Fourier, Saint-Simon, and August Comte. Karl Marx brought this movement to its most realistic expression in his 1848 *Manifesto*.

While these changes in the mode of human perception and of social structure were taking place, evidence was appearing in the realms of geology and paleontology indicating that there was a time sequence in the very formation of the earth and of all lifeforms upon the earth. The earth was not the eternal, fixed, abiding reality that it had been thought to be. It suddenly dawned upon Western consciousness that earlier lifeforms were of a simpler nature than later lifeforms, that the later forms were derived from the earlier forms. The complex of life manifestations had not existed from the beginning by some external divine creative act setting all things

in their place. The earth in all its parts, especially in its lifeforms, was in a state of continuing transformation.

Discovery of this life sequence, with an explanation of how it came about, found expression in Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859. After Darwin, the physicists in their study of light and radiation came almost simultaneously to an understanding of the infra-atomic world and the entire galactic system. Insight into both the microphase and macrophase of the phenomenal world was obtained, and the great unity of the universe became apparent both in its spatial expansion and its time sequence.

Just at that moment, however, a sudden shift in the mode of consciousness took place. The scientists suddenly became aware that the opaqueness of matter had dissolved. Science was ultimately not the objective grasping of some reality extrinsic to ourselves. It was rather a moment of subjective communion in which the human was seen as that being in whom the universe in its evolutionary dimension became conscious of itself.

Thus a new creation story had evolved in the secular scientific community, equivalent in our times to the creation stories of antiquity. This creation story differs from the traditional Eurasian creation stories much more than those traditional stories differ one from another. This new creation story seems destined to become the universal story taught to every child who receives formal education in its modern form anywhere in the world.

The redemptive believing community, first dazzled by this new vision of developmental time, then frustrated by an inability to cope with the new data, lapsed unenthusiastically into its traditional attitudes. In recent centuries, indeed, the believing community has not been concerned with any cosmology, ancient or modern, for the believing community has its real values concentrated in the Savior, the human person, the believing church, and a postearthly paradisal beatitude.

There is, however, a surviving cosmology in which the redemption story takes place and which to some extent still plays a role in the Christian story. According to this story the cosmos, and every

being in the cosmos, reflects the divine exemplar considered by Plato as the Agathon, the Good; by Plotinus as the One; by the Christian as God. All things are beautiful by this beauty. The supremely beautiful is the integrity and harmony of the total cosmic order, as Saint Thomas insists upon repeatedly.

The human mind ascends to the contemplation of the divine by rising through the various grades of being, from the physical forms of existence in the earth, with its mountains and seas, to the various forms of living things, and so to the human mode of consciousness, then to the soul, and from the inner life of the soul to God. This sequence, portrayed first in the *Symposium* of Plato, is presented in all its sublime qualities in the soliloquy of Augustine as he meditated with his mother by the window just prior to her death. So Bonaventure could write on the reduction of all the arts and sciences to theology, for all eventually depend upon the divine reference. So, too, the journey of Dante through the various spheres of reality up to the divine vision in itself. Initiation into the basic human and Christian values was initiation into this cosmology. Christian spirituality was built up in this manner. The mysteries of Christianity were integral with this cosmology.

The difficulty with this cosmology is that it presents the world simply as an ordered complex of beings that are ontologically related as an image of the divine. It does not present the world as a continuing process of emergence in which there is an inner organic bond of descent of each reality from an earlier reality.

Yet in their functional roles neither this traditional cosmology nor the new scientific cosmology has been of serious religious concern because of the shift in the Western religious tradition from a dominant creation mystique to a dominant redemption mystique. This Christian redemptive mystique is little concerned with the natural world. The essential thing is redemption out of the world through a personal savior relationship that transcends all such concerns. Even the earlier mystical experiences of ascending to the divine through the realms of created perfection are diminished.

Presently this excessive redemptive emphasis is played out. It

cannot effectively dynamize activity in time because it is an inadequate story of time. The redemption story has grown apart not only from the historical story, but also from the earth story. Consequently an isolated spiritual power has eventuated that is being victimized by entropy.

If this is the impasse of the believing redemption community of America, the impasse of the secular scientific community, committed to a developmental universe, is the commitment to the realm of the physical to the exclusion of the spiritual. This has been the tough, the realistic, position. The Darwinian principle of natural selection involves no psychic or conscious purpose, but is instead a struggle for earthly survival that gives to the world its variety of form and function. Because this story presents the universe as a random sequence of physical and biological interactions with no inherent meaning, the society supported by this vision has no adequate way of identifying any spiritual or moral values.

We must not think that these two communities have no regard for each other. Extensive courtesies are extended; cooperation is offered. Persons in the scientific professions as well as in modern industrial and commercial pursuits have extensive regard for the religious dimension of life. Many are themselves religious personalities. Those in the religious community have their own esteem for scientific, technological, and commercial activities. Training in the professions takes place in religious schools and even dominates the curriculum. So what's the fuss about? The answer is that surface agreement is not depth communion or the basis of sound cosmic-earth-human values. The antagonisms are deeper than they appear. An integral story has not emerged, and no community can exist without a unifying story. This is precisely why the communication between these two is so unsatisfying. No sustaining values have emerged. Our social problems are not resolved. The earth continues to disintegrate under the plundering assault of humans.

Both traditions are trivialized. The human venture remains stuck in its impasse. Children who begin their earth studies or life studies

do not experience any numinous aspect of these subjects. The excitement of existence is diminished. If this fascination, this entrance-ment, with life is not evoked, the children will not have the psychic energies needed to sustain the sorrows inherent in the human condition. They might never discover their true place in the vast world of time and space. Teaching children about the natural world should be treated as one of the most important events in their lives. Children need a story that will bring personal meaning together with the grandeur and meaning of the universe. The secular school as presently constituted cannot provide the mystique that should be associated with this story. Nor can the religious-oriented school that has only superficially adopted this new story of the universe evoke this experience in the child.

The tragedy of this situation is that schooling now fulfills a role in our society that is similar to the role of initiation ceremonies in earlier tribal societies. In those societies the essential mystery communicated to the youthful initiates was the story of the universe in its awesome and numinous aspects. The capacity for communing with and absorbing into their own beings these deeper powers of the natural world was bestowed on them. The pathos in our own situation is that our secular society does not see the numinous quality or the deeper psychic powers associated with its own story, while the religious society rejects the story because it is presented only in its physical aspect. The remedy for this is to establish a deeper understanding of the spiritual dynamics of the universe as revealed through our own empirical insight into the mysteries of its functioning.

In this late twentieth century that can now be done with a clarity never before available to us. Empirical inquiry into the universe reveals that from its beginning in the galactic system to its earthly expression in human consciousness the universe carries within itself a psychic-spiritual as well as a physical-material dimension. Otherwise human consciousness emerges out of nowhere. The human is seen as an addendum or an intrusion and thus finds no real place

in the story of the universe. In reality the human activates the most profound dimension of the universe itself, its capacity to reflect on and celebrate itself in conscious self-awareness.

So far, however, spiritually oriented personalities have been pleased because the mechanistic orientation of the scientific world enables them to assume an aloof spiritual attitude that disdains any concern for the natural world. Scientists, on the other hand, are pleased since that attitude leaves them free to structure their world of quantitative measurements without the problem of spiritual values associated with human consciousness. Thus both scientists and believers remain disengaged from any profound understanding of the earth process itself. To remedy this situation, we need simply to reflect on the story itself.

The story of the universe is the story of the emergence of a galactic system in which each new level of expression emerges through the urgency of self-transcendence. Hydrogen in the presence of some millions of degrees of heat emerges into helium. After the stars take shape as oceans of fire in the heavens, they go through a sequence of transformations. Some eventually explode into the stardust out of which the solar system and the earth take shape. Earth gives unique expression of itself in its rock and crystalline structures and in the variety and splendor of living forms, until humans appear as the moment in which the unfolding universe becomes conscious of itself. The human emerges not only as an earthling, but also as a worldling. We bear the universe in our beings as the universe bears us in its being. The two have a total presence to each other and to that deeper mystery out of which both the universe and ourselves have emerged.

If this integral vision is something new both to the scientist and to the believer, both are gradually becoming aware of this view of the real and its human meaning. It might be considered a new revelatory experience. Because we are moving into a new mythic age, it is little wonder that a kind of mutation is taking place in the entire earth-human order. A new paradigm of what it is to be

human emerges. This is what is so exciting, yet so painful and so disrupting. One aspect of this change involves the shift in earth-human relations, for we now in large measure determine the earth process that once determined us. In a more integral way we could say that the earth that controlled itself directly in the former period now to an extensive degree controls itself through us.

In this new context the question appears as to where the values are, how they are determined, how they are transmitted. Whereas formerly values consisted in the perfection of the earthly image reflecting an external Logos in a world of fixed natures, values are now determined by the human sensitivity in responding to the creative urgencies of a developing world. The scientist in the depths of the unconscious is drawn by the mystical attraction of communion with the emerging creative process. This would not be possible unless it were a call of subject to subject, if it were not an effort at total self-realization on the part of the scientists. As scientists, their taste for the real is what gives to their work its admirable quality. Their wish is to experience the real in its tangible, opaque, material aspect and to respond to that by establishing an interaction with the world that will advance the total process. If the demand for objectivity and the quantitative aspect of the real has led scientists to neglect subjectivity and the qualitative aspect of the real, this has been until now a condition for fulfilling their historical task. The most notable single development within science in recent years, however, has been a growing awareness of the integral physical-psychic dimension of reality.

The believing redemption community is awakening only slowly to this new context of understanding. There is a fear, a distrust, even a profound aversion, to the natural world and all its processes. It would be difficult to find a theological seminary in this country that has an adequate program on creation as it is experienced in these times. The theological curriculum is dominated by a long list of courses on redemption and how it functions in aiding humans to transcend the world, all based on biblical texts. Such a situation

cannot long endure, however, since a new sense of the earth and its revelatory import is arising in the believing community. The earth will not be ignored, nor will it long endure being despised, neglected, or mistreated. The dynamics of creation are demanding attention once more in a form unknown for centuries to the orthodox Christian.

It is clear that the primordial intention of the universe is to produce variety in all things, from atomic structures to the living world of plant and animal forms, to the appearance of humans, where individuals differ from one another more extensively than in any other realm of known reality. This difference can be seen not only in individuals; but also in social structures and in historical periods of our development. But here, also, the difficulty in the human order, for there is no absolute model for the individual. Personal realization involves a unique creative effort in response to all those interior and exterior forces that enter into individual life. So, too, with each historical age and each cultural form, there is need to create a reality for which, again, there is no adequate model. This is precisely the American difficulty, a difficulty for which there is no complete answer, but only a striving toward. At each moment we must simply be what we are, opening onto a larger life.

Interior articulation of its own reality is the immediate responsibility of every being. Every being has its own interior, its self, its mystery, its numinous aspect. To deprive any being of this sacred quality is to disrupt the larger order of the universe. Reverence will be total or it will not be at all. The universe does not come to us in pieces any more than a human individual stands before us with some part of its being. Preservation of this feeling for reality in its depths has been considerably upset in these past two centuries of scientific analysis and technological manipulation of the earth and its energies. During this period, the human mind lived in the narrowest bonds that it has ever experienced. The vast mythic, visionary, symbolic world with its all-pervasive numinous qualities was lost. Because of this loss, we made our terrifying assault upon

the earth with an irrationality that is stunning in enormity, while we were being assured that this was the way to a better, more humane, more reasonable world.

Such treatment of the external physical world, deprived of its subjectivity, could not long avoid also encompassing the human. Thus we have the most vast paradox of all—ourselves as free, intelligent, numinous beings negating those very interior qualities by our own objective reasoning processes and subserving our own rationalizations. Yet, finally, a reversal has begun, and the reality and value of the interior subjective numinous aspect of the entire cosmic order is being appreciated as the basic condition in which the story makes any sense at all.

Here we come to the further realization that the universe is coherent within itself throughout the total extent of space and the entire sequence of its time development. This web of relationships throughout the universe is what first impinges on our waking consciousness. It is this deepening association within the universe that enables life to emerge into being. The living form is more individuated, with greater subjectivity and more intensive identity within itself and with its environment. All these factors are multiplied on a new scale of magnitude in the realm of consciousness. There a supreme mode of communion exists within the individual, with the human community, within the earth-human complex. Increased capacity for personal identity is inseparable from this capacity for mutual presence. Together this distance and this intimacy establish the basic norms of being, of life, of value. It is the mission of our present and all future generations to develop this capacity for mutual presence on new and more comprehensive levels.

In transmitting values through the sequence of generations, we no longer have the initiation techniques whereby the vision and values of earlier generations were transmitted to succeeding generations. Yet there is an abiding need to assist succeeding generations to fulfill their proper role in the ongoing adventure of the earth process. In the human realm education must supply what instinct

supplies in the prehuman realm. There is need for a program to aid the young to identify themselves in the comprehensive dimensions of space and time. This was easier in the world of the *Timaeus*, where the earth was seen as an image of the eternal Logos. In such a world Saint Thomas could compose his masterful presentation of Christian thought, and the place and role of the human within that context. This could then be summarized in catechetical form and taught to succeeding generations.

Now a new way of understanding values is required. We are returning to a more traditional context of story as our source of understanding and value. It is somewhat fascinating to realize that the final achievement of our scientific inquiry into the structure and functioning of the universe as evolutionary process is much closer to the narrative mode of explanation given in the Bible than it is to the later, more philosophical mode of Christian explanation provided in our theologies.

It is of utmost importance that succeeding generations become aware of the larger story outlined here and the numinous, sacred values that have been present in an expanding sequence over this entire time of the world's existence. Within this context all our human affairs—all professions, occupations, and activities—have their meaning precisely insofar as they enhance this emerging world of subjective intercommunion within the total range of reality. Within this context the scientific community and the religious community have a common basis. The limitations of the redemption rhetoric and the scientific rhetoric can be seen, and a new, more integral language of being and value can emerge.

Within this story a structure of knowledge can be established, with its human significance, from the physics of the universe and its chemistry through geology and biology to economics and commerce and so to all those studies whereby we fulfill our role in the earth process. There is no way of guiding the course of human affairs through the perilous course of the future except by discovering our role in this larger evolutionary process. If the way of Western

civilization and Western religion was once the way of election and differentiation from others and from the earth, the way now is the way of intimate communion with the larger human community and with the universe itself.

Here we might observe that the basic mood of the future might well be one of confidence in the continuing revelation that takes place in and through the earth. If the dynamics of the universe from the beginning shaped the course of the heavens, lighted the sun, and formed the earth, if this same dynamism brought forth the continents and seas and atmosphere, if it awakened life in the primordial cell and then brought into being the unnumbered variety of living beings, and finally brought us into being and guided us safely through the turbulent centuries, there is reason to believe that this same guiding process is precisely what has awakened in us our present understanding of ourselves and our relation to this stupendous process. Sensitized to such guidance from the very structure and functioning of the universe, we can have confidence in the future that awaits the human venture.