

*Room in our Hearts
for the Wonders of the Universe.*

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Between Christmas and New Year, I spent five glorious days in Victoria's High Country, in the company of twelve members of the Catholic Walking Club of Victoria. Leaving our cars at Watchbed Creek carpark, we took up our backpacks and walked 5 km up the Big River Fire Trail to Johnson's Hut where we camped for the week.



Photo: Peter Wilson CWCV

After the bountiful spring rains, the country was covered in thick alpine grass and fields of white alpine daisies as well as many other wildflowers. The air was sweet with the scent of their nectar. I've never seen the growth there so luxurious. Lying down among the daisies was like lying on a mattress. In the evenings we gathered around a campfire, preparing our meals and sharing stories until time to crawl into our sleeping bags.

The silence of the High Country is profound. It seeped into my soul, setting me free from my normal preoccupations. No radio or television, no news bulletins. This was a time to simply *Be* in the beauty and grandeur of our surroundings. At

night, the black moonless sky, brilliantly studded with stars and galaxies, drew me deeper into the mystery of the Cosmos. I felt so privileged to be there, to be blessed with the health and fitness to explore such wild places, to breathe in the abundance of nature, and at its heart, the Sacred Presence that is almost palpable in such places.

Coming down from the mountains, once again I am once immersed in our everyday world with its noise, tensions and violence. It feels like an assault after the silence and serenity of the wild places. The constant media focus on Covid creates an atmosphere of anxiety. Talk of possible war throws a dark cloud of anxiety over our world. Oppression and civil wars are tearing some societies apart. In our own country people are taking to the streets in protest at Covid restrictions, at the push to mandate vaccination, or vaccination passports. In other countries yet, military dictatorships violently suppress those who challenge their right to rule. What is at the root of the unrest pervading our world?



Protests in Melbourne
Photo: The Age

Pondering that question, it seems to me that our society suffers from two basic ills: one is our individualism, expressed in the insistence on the rights of the individual without a corresponding sense of social responsibility; the second is the seeming increasingly authoritarian approach of governments to control people, or to 'keep them safe' as they describe it – and maybe keep themselves in power?



Photo courtesy Thien Nguyen svd.

Perhaps the deeper root of our world's problems lies in the deprivation of people's exposure to the wonders of creation. Matthew Fox in his daily meditations this week quoted a saying of Meso American people: *To be human, one must make room in one's heart for the wonders of the universe.* In my days in the High Country I was constantly surrounded by the wonders of the universe, they seeped into me – by day with the beauty of our Earth and at night, gazing at the brilliant starry, I beheld the wonder of the Cosmos. And yes, during my time in the High Country, I experienced myself as being more human.

What is this sense of 'more human'? As I ponder this question in the context of my experience, I am reminded of Aboriginal elder, Victor Steffensen's¹ realisation as he spoke with Indigenous people in various parts of the world. He observed that the major division in humanity does not lie in race or culture, or social status. It lies between people who are *connected* and those who are *disconnected*. People across all divides fall into one or other of these two categories – and the vast majority of those in the so-called developed world are *disconnected*.

Psychologists realise that underlying all mental illness is the sense of loneliness. It seems ironic that in our time we have so many means of connecting with people, yet so many people suffer from loneliness, and we have almost an epidemic of mental illness. There is a *disconnect* between *the means* of connecting with others and *the experience* of connection, of relationship. Real relationship happens when our connecting comes from the heart, when the whole of us is engaged in the relationship. That was my experience in the High Country. The whole of myself was engaged, relating to the country and all it held, to the people who shared the experience with me, and to the Mystery I sensed in it all.



To contemplate the Mystery within each unique being within the Universe

That sense of Mystery evoked a profound sense of wonder: *I experienced being connected.* I experienced my place in the Universe, a sense of belonging, a sense of my greater Self which encompasses the Whole yet is expressed in the uniqueness of every particular being within the Whole. In the experience of the Whole, I also know my own insignificance: all reality can exist without me. Yet it is given to me; in a sense it *is* me.

Thomas Aquinas says, *The greatness of the human person consists in this: that we are capable of the*

¹ Victor Steffensen, *Fire Country: How Indigenous Fire Management Could Help Save Australia*, Hardie Grant Travel, 2020

*universe.*² We are capable of the universe? What might that mean? I don't think it means that we can comprehend the universe. The more we learn about the Cosmos, the more we are faced with an ultimate sense of Mystery, of not knowing. This Mystery powerfully draws us on to contemplate that Mystery in the universe and in each unique being in the universe. And in our contemplation, our sense of wonder and amazement grows and deepens, and so does our sense of connection, of belonging, as being integral participants in that Mystery. It lies at the core of my own being, just as it lies at the core of every other being and of the Cosmos as a whole.

Mystics through all the ages and traditions have intuitively known that the Cosmos is one living organism, everything interdependent with every other being. Physicists are seeing this in their discoveries over the past hundred years. If Aquinas could have known what we can know about the Cosmos today, I wonder what he would have said?

In our daily contemplative hour, we nurture our growing consciousness of our being, not only capable of the Cosmos, but of *being* the Cosmos itself. As far as we know at this stage, we are the only beings in the Cosmos with the capacity for self-reflection. In us the Cosmos itself has become capable of self-reflection. In us human beings, the Cosmos has become conscious of itself.

We are still in the early stages of coming to know the Cosmos. Just as our individual growth in self-knowing is a life-long process, so the self-consciousness of the Cosmos in us is an evolving process. The discoveries of modern science and cosmology continually astound us, and every discovery calls us to ponder anew who we are in the new perspective of the Cosmos that discovery opens for us. Our discoveries *grow us*, and in turn, our growing *grows* the Cosmos. We are in a mutual dance of becoming.

As I ponder my conclusion to this reflection, I am contemplating the image of the spiral galaxy. It consists of countless stars, solar systems, cosmic clouds and much else. But seeing the spiral from the distance of

millions of light years, I do not see its multitude of individual beings. I see the beauty of the whole, and I am drawn into its depth, its dynamism, just as I was drawn into the beauty of the High Country. Again, I am conscious of the Mystery that pervades it, the same One that pervades all that is, enlivening and sustaining every being in its evolving process of birthing the new. This all-encompassing Presence draws every individual being to every other being in a relationship of Love. People in India have a sense of this as they greet one another with *Namaste: the Mystery in me greets the Mystery in you*. Implicit in this greeting is the recognition of the *One* who unites us even if we are strangers to each other.



An image of the large spiral galaxy NGC 1232, located about 100 million light-years away in the constellation Eridanus (The River). The central areas contain older stars of reddish color, while the spiral arms are populated by young, blue stars and many star-forming regions. *ESO*

² Quoted in Matthew Fox, *The Tao of Thomas Aquinas: Fierce Wisdom for Hard Times*, iUniverse, 2020, Chapter 4.

Contemplating all this, I experience anew a sense of wonder, awe and reverence, not only for the Mystery, but for each being that is an expression, a unique incarnation, of the One.

Would that all this were constantly in the forefront of our collective human consciousness! Imagine what our world would be like if it were. Imagine the healing and transformation that would happen through the totally new way in which we humans would relate to the Earth and to one another! This is the vision that inspires our CEN members in their daily contemplative hour. Our contemplation of the wonders of the Cosmos and the Mystery *grows* our own consciousness of it. And in our own growing consciousness, we also *grow* the collective human consciousness, awakening humanity as a whole to the wonder of the Cosmos, and at its heart, the Mystery in Whom everything that is lives and moves and has its being. This Mystery many call "God", though no name can adequately express that which is beyond naming. This Mystery is the One in whom all is One, yet who expresses itself uniquely in each individual being.