

Sacred Emergence: A Creation Story in Twelve Short Acts

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July 14, 2019

I.

A world unfolding at every moment. Matter, energy, information; originating from who knows where, when or what? Across vast stretches of time and space, incomprehensibly large and small. Mostly dark and empty we are told. But such terms as 'space,' 'time,' 'dark,' and 'empty'—are they placeholders for something grander still?

Grander.

Still.

II.

Without warning a big BANG!, or many bangs. Gases to stars; minerals to cells. Organs, organisms, consciousness, self-consciousness; artificial intelligence, whatever that means.

III.

What do we know about a molecule of water? Three atoms total: two of hydrogen and one of oxygen. Together they have emergent properties that they

do not possess separately, properties which could not be predicted before their wedding, even by a divine presence that knew everything there was to know about oxygen and hydrogen. Wetness for one; and, two, water is a molecular lightweight with high-boiling, low freezing-points; apparently a quality quite rare in the universe. Hydrogen and oxygen are themselves emergent properties of the universe. Hydrogen appeared 380,000 years after the big bang; oxygen 13 billion years later. We say that frogs come from tadpoles and butterflies from caterpillars, but the actual emergence of one to the other is much more.

Much.

More.

Mysterioso.

IV.

Being, doing, creating, imagining, desiring. In the beginning was a verb. And now, and again; and again for nearly 14 billion, verbing years. Myriad mineral forms, life-forms, musical and artistic forms, cultural forms. Darwin's tangled bank wherein "so simple a beginning, endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved." An "endless net of threads

studded with crystal beads,” proclaims a Rg Veda hymn. The “rhythm of being” in theologian Raimon Panikkar’s danceable phrase.

V.

Like the morning stars in the Book of Job, the sacred in us bursts out singing, shouting for joy in recognition of the ordinary unfolding of the Universe as extraordinary. The way it is described in the story about the Hindu god Krishna as a young child, accused of eating dirt, and opening his mouth so his mother can have a look. Instead of dirt his mom sees the whole universe inside her divine, mischievous son’s mouth. Or years later when the same Krishna, serving as the charioteer for the great warrior Arjuna, provides him with a similar vision. The view is too much, overwhelming both mother and warrior. Creator and destroyer of worlds.

VI

We don’t need a divine child or charioteer to get a peak now and then. Bacteria as numerous as our own cells, living in separate communities, and communicating across those communities, in and on and around our bodies; doing what bacteria do, while we do what we do. Tree roots sharing nutrients with one another. Newly discovered microbial life in the quintillions, miles below Earth’s surface,

thriving without photosynthesis and in extreme temperatures. And yet, always and everywhere, extinction is the rule. Near-miss asteroids the size of small countries; exploding stars; our bluegreen planet whizzing through cold, empty space faster than the Coney Island Cyclone, while quantum pulses keep the circuits humming 24/7.

VII.

Self-conscious cellular organisms--that's us--in the shape of homo Sapiens arrive so late to this party that it's difficult not to conclude that the party must be for us. Many are the creation narratives in which the human story-tellers are lead characters. Gods and goddesses also appear and are given roles and powers that they sometimes share with their story-makers. But sometimes not, and humans become disobedient or worse, thieves. All-too-quickly the latecomers become impatient, eager to separate from the rest, to go it alone, even when their own stories warn them against it. We read in the Book of Genesis that Eve and Adam are expelled from paradise. I imagine them more like teenagers expelled from high school, happy to be out of there, assured and cocky, ready to give the self-employment-thing a try.

VIII.

In a mere 10,000 years, bands of humans—which is to say, not all humans—turn away from the creative, emergent commons; turning most plants into weeds, most animals into predators, and nature into a foe needing discipline and a master. The most basic act of feeding one's body becomes an annual labor of disturbing, ripping, and evicting life from the soil, until only its naked fertility remains. Mostly annual grains--wheat, corn, rice, barley--are increasingly planted and cultivated for human use alone. The bounty from such violence creates mountains of caloric surplus in the form of seeds that can also be stored, counted, traded, taxed and defended. It creates surplus professionals, too, experts at one specialized skill or task: accountants, farmers, priests, soldiers, scholars, kings, slaves. Large, hierarchical state-societies are built on these surplus mounds, and soon the human voice is replaced by script; the wisdom of living memory is erased by formulas, laws and abstractions; the mythical is downgraded in favor of the theoretical; and the flashy prowess of numbers and alphabets overwhelm whole landscapes and cultures in the quick seconds of centuries.

IX.

These new tools and ideas turn the emergent universe of surprise and co-creativity into a *Cosmos*, a familiar and almost comforting term to our ears, but

derived from a less familiar and less comforting Greek verb *kosmein*: “meant generally ‘to dispose, prepare,’ but especially ‘to order and arrange (troops for battle), to set (an army) in array;’ also ‘to establish (a government or regime).”¹ ‘the Cosmos,’ becomes a dominating proper noun in the writings of Pythagoras 25 centuries ago. Mathematics, logic, philosophy and science soon follow, and thus begins the *Everything Explained Project*: the dream of putting a chaotic world into good cosmic order, marching to commands increasingly human in origin. No wonder some 20 centuries after Pythagoras, the word “emergency” shifts from meaning simply “to arise” or “bring to light,” to describing something fearful, unexpected, and unwanted. Emergencies become the broken promises of a *steady-as-it-goes* world of nouns, laws, and predictable results. The sacred is downgraded to secular, ‘a mere world to be explained.’ As Henry Thoreau observed “Science applies a finite rule to the infinite, its sun no longer dazzles us and fills the universe with light.” The extraordinary? Just ordinary now.

¹ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/cosmos>

X.

Siddhartha Gautama--the Buddha--frequently reminded his followers that the human lifeform offers a rare and uncommon view not afforded to Earth's other living members. As humans we get a glimpse of the universal dance *as a dance*. We dance, but somehow we also *know that we are dancing*. And just like that suffering is born. Compassion and a clear mind rush out to embrace it.

XI.

The human experience lives in paradox and dilemma. The divine presence may turn out to be an emergent property of a creative universe, not its creator. Bold human arrogance leads to discoveries that show us our humble and co-dependent origins. "The Earth bestows," the poet Rilke says, but we forget and plow it up, an unholy and violent sacrifice committed for our loved one's daily bread. We are all guilty; we are all innocent.

XII.

When we gather into wholeness, secular and sacred can meet and embrace. The ordinary *is* extraordinary; the extraordinary, ordinary. Sand in the hands of a glassmaker; glass in the hands of a lens-maker; lenses in the ends of tubes showing us our origins in deep pasts and in our relationships with microbial companions riding us like wings on the wind. "In spite of all the farmer's work and

worry, he can't reach down to where the seed is slowly transmuted into summer." Rilke's lines again, just before he concludes "The earth bestows." And the philosopher Martin Heidegger, in a poetic moment says "all our heart's courage is the echoing response to the first call of Being, which gathers our thinking into the play of the world."

Coda

The play of the world, rough and tumble, is sacred emergence. Nothing left for us to do, then, but to play, too, where play becomes practice and practice, play.

Practice presence, lightness, kinship, kindness; practice imagination, grace, reconciliation and recovery. And play; with every breath and gesture, play. Play the music-of-the-spheres in the *Big Bang Orchestra* that doubles as our hearth and home. It's a great and wondrous gig.

Suggested Readings:

- 1) <https://www.amazon.com/Emergence-Everything-World-Became-Complex/dp/0195173317>
- 2) <https://www.amazon.com/Reality-Not-What-Seems-Journey/dp/0735213925>

- 3) <https://www.amazon.com/God-That-Could-Real-Spirituality/dp/0807075957>
- 4) <https://www.amazon.com/Ask-Beasts-Darwin-God-Love/dp/1472924010>
- 5) https://www.amazon.com/Rhythm-Being-Lectures-Raimon-Panikkar-ebook/dp/B00BMAO17A/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=the+rhythm+of+being&qid=1563213448&s=books&sr=1-1
- 6) https://www.amazon.com/What-Plant-Knows-Field-Senses-ebook/dp/B0071W4X7G/ref=sr_1_1?crid=2W4BMZON7DBCN&keywords=what+a+plant+knows&qid=1563213499&s=books&prefix=what+a+plant%2Cstripbooks%2C145&sr=1-1
- 7) <https://www.amazon.com/Songs-Trees-Stories-Natures-Connectors/dp/052542752X>
- 8) <https://www.amazon.com/Unbearable-Wholeness-Being-Evolution-Power/dp/1626980292>
- 9) https://www.amazon.com/Other-Minds-Octopus-Origins-Consciousness-ebook/dp/B01FQRPIIA/ref=sr_1_2?keywords=other+minds&qid=1563213705&s=books&sr=1-2

- 10) https://www.amazon.com/Nature-Event-Lure-Possible-Thought-ebook/dp/B075L7K7FS/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=nature+as+event&qid=1563213790&s=books&sr=1-1
- 11) <https://www.amazon.com/Sapiens-Humankind-Yuval-Noah-Harari/dp/0062316095>
- 12) https://www.amazon.com/Against-Grain-History-Earliest-States-dp-030024021X/dp/030024021X/ref=mt_paperback?_encoding=UTF8&me=&qid=1563278872