

Spirit Earth



Waking Up in the Dark by Ann Schreckenberger

Photo by William J. Fleming

A significant synchronicity occurred in my life when my allurements towards Universe and its story happened simultaneously with my journey through menopause. As my physical body struggled to let go of its childbearing capacities, I was also struggling to let go of a childhood theology whose religious beliefs and doctrines no longer felt congruent with my lived life experience. In my late forties I was yearning to embody a more encompassing expansive spirituality. I felt as if the energy allotted to me for childbirth was shifting and by some mysterious force was being transformed into a new, yet unnamed longing for creation. As my physical fertility waned, my desire for a new awakened consciousness ignited. During this time I was plagued with insomnia. The hormonal swings of menopause

catapulted me from sleep into the darkest hours long before dawn. Awake at two or three in the morning, I tossed and turned unable to fall back to sleep. Weary yet restless, I would get up, come downstairs, brew a steaming hot cup of tea, light a candle to soften the darkness and snuggle into my big chair by the picture window in the living room to read. This became my pre-dawn ritual, my time in silence and stillness to ponder new thoughts, and to wonder. Out of the depths of menopause, I began to discover the fecundity of the dark.

Seeking a new consciousness, I was drawn to the writings of Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme and Diarmuid O'Murchu. *I read The Universe Story, The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos, The Universe is a Green*

Dragon, Quantum Theology, Reclaiming Spirituality and Evolutionary Faith. I felt a deep resonance with their words and fell in love with the New Cosmology, a 13.7 billion year story telling of the origins and evolutionary emergence of the cosmos. I was awestruck by Universe and the incredible discoveries science revealed over the past hundred years. Universe was not static and contained but a cosmogenesis continually emerging, expanding and evolving. Universe unveiled an on-going story of unbelievable depth and mystery so alluring and wondrously huge. I was astounded by the immensities and the unknowing they evoked. The magnificent images from the Hubble Telescope of brilliant colored nebulae exploded my imagination. We live in a Universe of unfathomable dimensions with

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AN EMERGENCY!

For twenty years a publication called *Spiritearth* sought to nurture the planetary and cosmological consciousness of its readers. That publication came to a close this past year. From out of its success, the publication before you has emerged. *SpiritEarth*, with its new editor, editorial board, and group of writers, seeks to nurture that same consciousness.

We on the Editorial Board are grateful to The Well, a Regional Center for the telling of our Universe Story and publisher of *SpiritEarth*. You can read more about The Well elsewhere in this issue.

Initially, *SpiritEarth* will be published twice a year in hard-copy and on-line formats. If you wish to continue receiving the hard-copy version of the publication, we request that you send us confirmation of your name and postal address; a free-will offering is also greatly appreciated. If you prefer to receive the on-line version of *SpiritEarth*, please provide us with your name and e-mail address. An envelope is provided for your convenience. Should you choose to make a free-will offering, checks may be made payable to **The Well: *SpiritEarth***.

I'm grateful to two of the Board members of *SpiritEarth* who generously offer rich reflections on their own prayerful experiences of darkness. As we in the northern hemisphere begin to move toward the light of spring, perhaps what Ann and Pat have shared can help us to reflect on what has been quietly nurtured within during the long dark months of winter.

My deep gratitude to Mary Southard, CSJ, and Bill Fleming for the beautiful images you'll find throughout the publication and to Bridget Spurduto for highlights of Judy Cannato's presentation at The Well.

Finally, thank you to John Surette, SJ, who has entrusted me with evolving his twenty-year labor of love that was *Spiritearth* into this new adventure that is *SpiritEarth*. Graciously, John also served as co-editor of this inaugural issue.

We know that as we awaken--as human consciousness continues to expand and be transformed--we become ever more open to the mysteries our Universe longs to reveal. It is a joy to share the journey of discovery around those mysteries with you. I welcome your comments about what we have offered here and would love to receive your ideas about what we might include in future issues.

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SpiritEarth

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Mission Statement

SpiritEarth is a publication that extends and advances The Well's mission as a Regional Center for the telling of our Universe Story and discovering the role of humankind in that great drama.

What is The Well?

The Well, a sponsored ministry of the Congregation of St. Joseph, is a Regional Center for the telling of our Universe Story and the transformation of human consciousness. When we think about spirituality, faith, and religion, we begin by taking a giant step back billions of years and reflect on the emergence and unfolding of the Universe in which we belong.



We think about the Universe as a center of Divine energy and creativity. We think about the energy and creativity of galaxies, stars, planets, cells, molecules, and atoms. Then we move through time to the present moment, to our beautiful Earth, and to Earth's community of life of which we are members. This starting point creates a large and unifying framework for our understanding of God, our faith, and ourselves. It anchors us in the beginning of everything, roots us in the loving energy and creativity of God, and makes us aware of our ties to everyone and everything that participates in the holy mystery of existence.

This Universe Story is at the core of all that we do here at The Well. We focus on the three great relationships: the Divine-human, the human-human, and the Earth-human. We offer programs and retreats in all three of these, not separating them but seeing them as constituting one sacred relationship.

This *SpiritEarth* publication is part of The Well's outreach. We welcome you into our community!

Befriending Darkness

A Personal Journey

By Patricia M. Bombard, BVM, D.Min.

My journey began many years ago, long before I heard of the New Cosmology. It began when I was in the midst of work on a master's thesis at Mundelein College in Chicago, IL. I was attempting to apply my newly acquired awareness of the feminist critique to the question of racism. In the end, far more than a master's thesis came out of that exploration. Insights I gained through the experience precipitated a significant turning point in my spiritual journey.



Photo by William J. Fleming

My introduction to the New Cosmology came through meeting Mary Southard, John Surette, and later Miriam Therese MacGillis. Through them all, I learned the Story of the Universe and its principles as articulated by Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme: it is all one, *it is all evolving, it is time-developmental, and its transformations are irreversible*. However, it was through my own spiritual journey into befriending darkness that I was able to add one more principle: our Universe holds profound polarities.

In my exploration into a root cause of racism, I realized that the Christian tradition places enormous emphasis on the connection between God and light. This connection is most prominent in the liturgical use of light during the Easter vigil, but often comes through in prayers, creeds, and the lyrics of songs used at any time during the liturgical year. In fact, one might say that darkness overall gets a very bad rap in Christianity.

A Transformative Insight

Just as feminist theologians had begun to seek ways to address “femaleness” in the Divine, in doing a feminist critique of the use of “light” imagery in the tradition, I found myself asking the question, “Is there darkness in God?” As a result, I found myself faced with the necessity to embrace darkness as a positive experience. I began seeking to better understand and embrace the presence of “darkness” as well as “light” in my life.

As a first step to re-thinking the Christian approach, I sat with the creation story in the book of Genesis. I slowly realized that I previously had been led to place my focus for interpreting the passage on the actions of God. The emphasis in Christianity is always placed on God's first proclamation: “Let there be light!” Pondering that Scripture passage with my new desire to befriend darkness, I suddenly thought: “No, creating

light is not the first thing that God did in this story. The first thing that God did was hover in darkness for a very long time.”

This realization brought a new insight into the relationship between darkness, creativity and the emergence of new life. I suddenly became aware of examples all around me:

- seeds spend time buried in the deep darkness of Earth before sprouting into life,
- we humans spend time wrapped in the darkness of our mother’s wombs
- stars are born in the darkness of deep space,
- and ideas spend time in the darkness of our subconscious before they emerge into consciousness and begin to shape reality.

Roots of the Dualism

Continuing my journey I discovered the writings of the theologian Eulalio R. Baltazar. In 1973, he set out to uncover the philosophic and religious roots of racism. He discovered that color symbolism within Christianity followed a developmental trail (not surprising from the viewpoint of the New Cosmology). This trail first saw the symbolism as mere physical contrast (Gen. 1:1-5). Later, the symbolism evolved into moral connotations as evident in the following passage:

*The path of the virtuous is like the light of dawn,
its brightness growing to the fullness of day;
the way of the wicked is as dark as night,
they cannot tell what it is they stumble over*

(Prov 4:18, New Jerusalem Bible)

This moral development continued until the name “Light” is given to God in such a way that “not only is light a gift of God, but God is by nature ‘light’ and in Him there is no darkness at all” (1 Jn1-5).

Broadening my investigations to a global perspective, I learned that in some ancient creation myths found in other cultures, darkness not only precedes but gives rise to light. In Polynesian myth, for example, the idea that chaos and darkness precedes all other things is widespread. Light, day, and sun seem to rise out of

darkness rather than be hostile to it. There are other creation myths in which light, not darkness, is primordial.

In my own spiritual growth toward a harmonious balance between darkness and light, I found a new appreciation for the full spectrum of Christianity’s Paschal Mystery, which moves from life through death to new life. There also is, of course, the depiction by St. John of the Cross of the experience of the “dark night of the soul.”

However, even with all these new insights, I was still looking for something more. I was looking for language or imagery that would help me understand the need to move back and forth between the polarities. Eventually, it was in the Taoist tradition that I found the depiction of balance and movement I was seeking, in the familiar symbol of the Yin/Yang. In this circular symbol, one half of reality is light and one is darkness. They flow into and out of each other with a fluid grace. Each half also holds within it a tiny seed of the other aspect. The Taoist symbol helps me to reflect on the movements between darkness and light in my own life and in the universe. It helps me to trust that both are necessary and to trust, as John of the Cross writes, that the Light is present already there within the Dark Night. There is still a long way for me to go in learning to befriend darkness. In the meantime, I join May Sarton in her prayer: “Help us to be the always hopeful gardeners of the spirit who know that without darkness nothing comes to birth as without light nothing flowers.”

Patricia M. Bombard, BVM, DMin, teaches courses in values-centered leadership and is director of Vincent on Leadership: The Hay Project at DePaul University in Chicago. She also offers workshops and retreats on ecofeminist spirituality. She can be reached at pbombard@depaul.edu.

Judy Cannato

Presented with the Sacred Universe Award at The Well



The Sacred Universe Award, first presented to cultural historian Thomas Berry in 1991, is offered to those whose work and lives have contributed to a mutually enhancing Earth-human relationship. In October, The Well was pleased to present this award to one of our own, Judy Cannato, author and Associate of the Congregation of St. Joseph.

In the presentation she offered as part of the evening, Judy shared what she has been reflecting on since publication of her most recent book, *Field of Compassion: How the New Cosmology Is Transforming Spiritual Life*. Graciously, Judy has welcomed us to offer some of her rich insights here.

In her reflection, Judy speaks to those moments of free-fall in our lives when the branch we have been perched upon breaks away. All of us, individually and collectively, experience this free-fall at some time in our lives, as the branch that holds us in the “illusion of predictability, safety, and security” suddenly gives way. Judy suggests that right now, for us as a species, our branch has been severed, and we are experiencing the “tremors of free-fall.” She helps us to understand that the frightening moment of free-fall is “also a moment of release from that which has kept us bound. In the experience we are released to once again engage consciously and imaginatively in cosmogenesis. Perhaps as never before, we can experience the stirring, the pressure of the Spirit within ourselves, awakening our impulse to transcend, inviting and challenging us to emerge in new-born creativity.” The moment of free-fall also holds the invitation to “remember who you are” and that is a manifestation “of the same Creative Spirit that fashions and shapes and continues to maintain the Sacred Universe.” The further opportunity in free-fall is that “we are propelled toward becoming the co-creative person we are *intended* to be” and that is

“an expression of Incomprehensible Holy Mystery’s intentionality, its effort to engage in the world, to become more present in the world, to tangibly incarnate a greater portion of itself in and for our Earth community.” Ultimately, we come to know “with absolute certainty that All Is One.”

Judy recommends “two awarenesses” for us to cultivate for the times ahead. “First, we need to move to a contemplative mode and from there enter the place of witness” where we can “choose mindfulness,” that is where we are “present in the moment, filled not with fear, but with compassion.” A second awareness to be cultivated is trust so that we may “settle into the world without undue fear and anxiety,” surrendering to the love and care that surrounds us.

Finally, Judy helps us to an understanding of “Christ Consciousness, Unitive Consciousness” that was fully present in but is not limited to Jesus of Nazareth. This consciousness is “awareness of how connected we are to the Holy and to one another;” it is a “deep knowing that this unity is best served through love and compassion and healing presence.”

It was indeed The Well’s own privilege to host Judy and to present her with the Sacred Universe Award.

Waking Up in the Dark

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billions of galaxies and trillions and trillions of stars. Yet despite all the learning of the past hundred years, it's astonishing how much is still hidden in the dark. Ninety percent of Universe is dark matter and five percent is dark energy; at present, ninety-five percent of Universe is still unknowable to humans on Earth. Within the context of these new understandings, I began to ponder the ancient primordial questions of humanity's quest for meaning: *Where are we? Who are we? What is our purpose?* In the dark of the morning I began to comprehend why so often I heard myself say, "What I know most is that I don't know." Embracing the questions became my new spiritual practice.

Brian Swimme writes in his book, *Hidden Heart of the Cosmos*, "It is in the peace that night brings that something immense can stir in the depths of the listener, things not suspected in the day. Late, very late — such is the time for the great surprises deep in the listener's soul." Awake in the dark, I experienced this truth. Each new learning was more mind-boggling than the last. In my body, three million potassium atoms explode every minute, remnants of the supernova that gave birth to our solar system four and a half billion years ago. Somehow I evolved from stardust and was sitting in my chair conscious of being conscious of knowing this. In the pre-dawn hours possibilities felt limitless. I was often surprised when suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere a thought I was struggling

to express emerged in a beautiful cohesive sentence. Or a concept I found puzzling suddenly became lucidly clear. I would ask myself, "Where did that come from?" And then one early morning I read about the quantum vacuum, what some call The Zero Point Field, the Ground of Being, what Brian Swimme names The All-Nourishing Abyss, the Ultimate Mystery at the base of Universe.

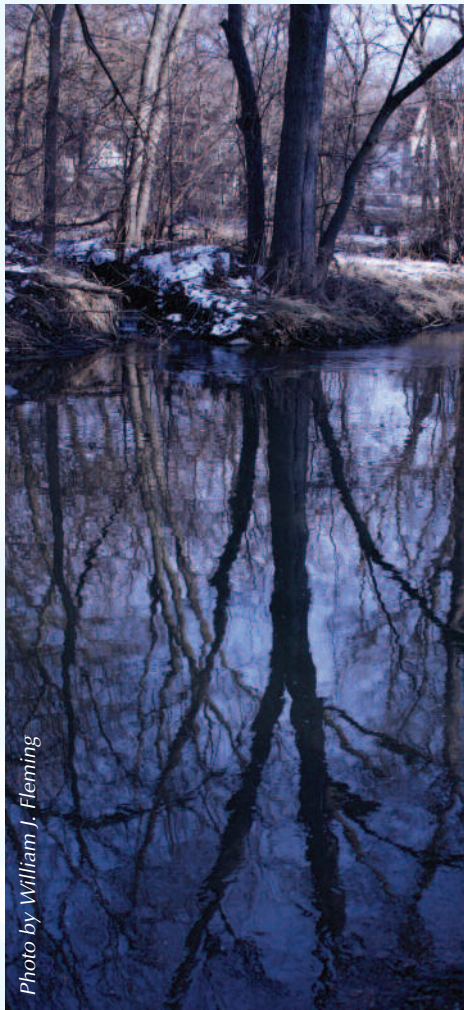


Photo by William J. Fleming

The ground of being of Universe is a nonvisible mysterious realm that appears to be nothing, a vacuum totally void and empty, but when studied by quantum physicists is

found to be seething with creativity. Where there appears to be nothing but dark empty space, elementary particles foam into existence and then are absorbed back into the abyss. Swimme says, "The foundational reality of Universe is this unseen ocean of potentiality. It is not possible to find any place in Universe that is outside this activity. Even in the darkest regions beyond the great wall of galaxies, even in the void between the synapses of the neurons in the brain, there occurs an incessant foaming, a flashing flame, a shining-forth and a dissolving back into existence." Something appears out of nothing. I realize this ocean of potentiality exists in me, in the spaces within and between the atoms in every one of my tens of trillions of cells waiting for me to become co-creator with Universe. In the early hours of morning I fall into the depths of this mystery.

It has been several years since I first started to wake up in the dark. I have discovered that paradox and mystery abound in Universe — what seems empty is full, what seems solid is fluid, what seems separate is interconnected; nothing is itself without everything else. Every place in Universe is the center of Universe, the greatest creativity emerges out of chaos, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, yet the whole is contained within each part. Each single moment holds infinite possibilities, boundaries are illusions, consciousness is invisible yet it illuminates everything.

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Photo by William J. Fleming

Waking Up in the Dark

Brian Swimme says that we learn the new story so we can begin living out of the new story. Unless we live our lives with at least some cosmological awareness, we risk collapsing into tiny contained spaces with antiquated worldviews. We live in the midst of immensities, embedded in infinite Mystery. The life-force energy that begets and sustains creation seems to need vast open spaces and the realm of deep darkness to realize its full meaning and potential. The journey through menopause, the physical transformation named “Change of Life” for a woman, woke me up to a new cosmic consciousness. I continue my ritual of rising the hour before dawn. As I read, ponder and write about what Universe reveals, I encounter over and over again how clearly I see in the dark.

Ann Schreckenberger is a spiritual seeker, teacher and spiritual director deeply allured by the story Universe reveals and the awakening of a new spiritual consciousness. Her on-going quest is the evolution of a cosmic spirituality that emerges from 21st century knowledge and invites the human into a deeper contemplation of where we are, who we are and what our purpose is on Earth at this critical moment in time. Ann is a graduate of The Institute for Spiritual Leadership where she received her certification in Spiritual Direction and holds an MA in Spirituality, Loyola University, Chicago.