

# *The Universe Story*

by Brian Swimme & Thomas Berry



NASA image showing a small part of the *Cygnus Loop Supernova*: the outer edge of an expanding blast wave from a colossal [stellar explosion](#) 15,000 years ago.

The story of the Universe has been told in many ways by the peoples of Earth, from the earliest periods of Paleolithic development and the Neolithic village communities to the classical civilizations that have emerged in the past 5000 years. In all these various circumstances the story of the universe has given meaning to life and to existence itself. The story has been celebrated in elaborate rituals. It has been our fundamental referent as regards modes of personal and community conduct. It has established the basis of social authority.

In the modern period, we are without a comprehensive story of the universe. The historians, even when articulating world history, deal not with the whole world but just with the human, as if humans were something separate from or an addendum to the story of the Earth and the universe. The scientists have arrived at detailed accounts of the cosmos, but have focussed exclusively on the physical dimensions and have ignored the human dimension of the universe. In this context we have fractured our educational system into its scientific and humanistic aspects, as though these were somehow independent of each other.

With all our learning and all our scientific insight, we have not yet attained such a meaningful approach to the universe, and thus we have at the present time a distorted mode of human presence on the Earth. We are somehow failing in the fundamental role that we should be fulfilling -- the role of enabling the Earth and the universe entire to reflect on and to celebrate themselves, and the deep mysteries they bear within them, in a special mode of conscious self-awareness.

A new type of history is needed as well as a new type of science. We are long past the time when history was considered to be the recorded account of the past few thousand years, and when everything prior to the Sumerian development was considered to be prehistory. Gone too is the period when the various civilizations could be explained through the sequence of their political regimes, and the listing of battles fought and treaties made. The period is also gone when we could deal with the human story apart from the life story, or the Earth story, or the universe story.

Just as surely, we are beyond the time when the scientific story of the universe could so identify the world of reality with the material and mechanistic aspects of the universe as to eliminate our capacities for that intimate communion with the natural world that has inspired the human venture over the centuries, an intimate communion that has evoked from our poets and musicians and artists and spiritual personalities all those magnificent works of celebration that we associate with the deepest modes of fulfilment of the human personality.

This new situation seems to call for a new type of narrative--one that has only recently begun to find expression. This new story has as its primary basis the account of the emergent universe such as this has been communicated to us through our observational sciences and through such long periods of time. We have only begun to read the immense amount of data that we now have before us. The greater problem is not in the lack of data but in our capacity to understand the significance of the data that we already possess. This data has not yet been sufficiently assimilated to bring about a new period in our comprehension of ourselves and of the universe itself.

The most significant change in the twentieth century, it seems, is our passage from a sense of cosmos to a sense of cosmogenesis. From the beginning of human consciousness, the ever-renewing seasonal sequence, with its death and rebirth cycles, has impinged most powerfully upon human thought. This orientation in consciousness has characterized every previous human culture up to our own. During the modern period, and especially in the twentieth century, we have moved from that dominant spatial mode of consciousness, where time is experienced in ever-renewing seasonal cycles, to a dominant time-developmental mode of consciousness, where time is experienced as an evolutionary sequence of irreversible transformations.



Within this time-developmental consciousness we begin to understand the story of the universe in its comprehensive dimensions and in the full richness of its meaning. This is especially true as regards the planet Earth, a mysterious planet surely, as we observe how much more brilliant it is, when compared with the other planets of our solar system, in the diversity of its manifestations and in the complexity of its development. Earth seems to be a reality that is developing with the simple aim of celebrating the joy of existence. This can be seen in the colouration of the various plants and animals, in the circling flights of the swallows as well as the blossoming of the springtime flowers; each of these events required immense creativity over billions of years in order to come forth as Earth. Only now do we begin to understand that this story of the Earth is also the story of the human, as well as the story of every being of the Earth.

We are now experiencing that exciting moment when our new meaning, our new story is taking shape. This story is the only way of providing, in our times, what the mythic stories of the universe provided for tribal peoples and for the earlier classical civilizations in their times. The final benefit of this story might be to enable the human community to become present to the larger Earth community in a mutually enhancing manner. We can hope that it will soon be finding expression not simply in a narrative such as this but in poetry, music, and ritual throughout the entire range of modern culture, on a universal scale. Such expressions will sensitize people to the story that every river and every star and every animal is telling. The goal is not to read a book; the goal is to read the story taking place all around us.

The urgency of our time is that the story become functionally effective. The present disintegration of the life systems of the Earth is so extensive that we might very well be bringing an end of the Cenozoic period that has provided the identity for the life processes of Earth during the past sixty-seven million years. During this period life expanded with amazing florescence prior to the coming of the human.

But by now the human has taken over such extensive control of the life systems of the Earth that the future will be dependent on human decision to an extent never dreamed of in previous times. We are deciding what species will live or perish, we are determining the chemical structure of the soil and the air and the water, we are mapping out the areas of wilderness that will be allowed to function in their own natural modalities.

All of this is filled with risk and presumption, but if there is any way of guiding our course in such difficult decisions, it will be discovered only through an understanding of the most intimate aspects of the natural world. This is something more than our sciences are generally concerned with. A new mystique is needed, but a mystique associated with the highest level of comprehensive knowledge and critical competence.

from [http://www.ecobuddhism.org/wisdom/psyche\\_and\\_spirit/swimme\\_berry/](http://www.ecobuddhism.org/wisdom/psyche_and_spirit/swimme_berry/)