

## BEGINNINGS... WHILE DANCING AMONG WILD LILIES

A supernova explodes in some far-flung corner of the universe.

Billions of years later, driving to work, your heart is broken open  
listening to k.d.lang's cover of Leonard Cohen's song *Hallelujah*. (*Sanguin 2007:77*)

(Music - k.d. lang. *Hallelujah*)

Indigenous Peoples around the world have three common characteristics  
that are all intimately connected:

- they have an intimate, conscious relationship with their place
- they are stable 'sustainable' cultures, often lasting for thousands of years, and
- they have a rich ceremonial and ritual life.

By contrast Western industrial/techno culture has tried to relate to the world around us  
primarily through the rational, left side of our brain.

We have tended to idolise ideals, reason, and logic.

As a result, suggests 'deep ecologist' Dolores LaChapelle, we are failing.

"If we are to re-establish a viable relationship," she urges,

"we will need to rediscover the wisdom of these other cultures who knew that their  
relationship to the land and to the natural world required the whole of their being".

(*LaChapelle 1984*)

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Most religious traditions, past and present, have a story, or a collection of stories they tell regarding  
the nature of the universe,  
the evolution of the Earth and of life, and  
the destiny of humans in this context.

These cosmological stories are sacred. They describe the origin of all things through the action of a  
*supernatural* deity or deities, or through some process of nature.

And those stories were addressed in ceremony. Ritual. Liturgy.

Different religious cultures have different creation myths. In very broad strokes I have collected the  
outline of just three of those creation/beginnings myths.

Where they all sync together is they are really asking one of the first ever questions of Western  
philosophy:

'Why is there something rather than nothing?'

### 1. A Maori Creation myth...

The beginning was emptiness, and nothing existed.

This state is called 'Te Kore'.

Into that emptiness two gods appeared:

one male god of the sky and one female god of the earth.

The earth and the sky came together and spawned six children:  
the gods of weather; of crops; of war;  
of the sea; of the forests; of plants.

Humankind originated when the god of the forest, Tane, used red ochre  
to form the first human and breathed into it.

The first being created was a woman.

## 2. **Aboriginal Dreamtime stories...**

What is now called Australia is a continent of many First Nations  
where country or Dreamtime has been told and sung for thousands - maybe 60 thousand - years.

These stories- such as the creation story of the desert areas in the west of South Australia-  
tell of the connectedness or kinship of humans within the environment.

Of being at one with the universe... with the creator Bunjil, through song and dance.

“During the daytime we can look outside and we see trees, birds, rivers, the wind in the  
clouds and the sunshine. This is the environment that is revealed during the  
daylight hours... But at night the other half of the environment is revealed -  
the universe. Every clear night we can look up and see millions of stars. That is  
also part of our lives...”

*(Kneebone 1991:93-94)*

The stars are the campfires of ancestors on their journey.

Bright stars were the ancestors who were not long gone.

Dimmer stars were the ancestors further on the journey.

## 3. There is the **Hebrew Creation myth...**

Perhaps the most well known myth

because it has inspired and grounded cultures for millennia

as a result of a literal interpretation of the biblical Genesis stories.

However, it is worth remembering that the biblical story  
only arrived in Australia a little over 230 years ago.

Already present were the creation stories of the many First Nations people...

Well, in September 2015 when I was leading a series of workshops in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne  
on the material for my then forthcoming book, *When Progressives Gather Together*,

I was asked to conclude the workshop with a Meditation.

Remembering the Hebrew beginnings myth

and being in the Celtic country of some of my ancestors

I offered a poetic meditation called... “In a Beginning...”.

*B’reshith ba’ra elohim, ’eth hashameyim w’eth ha’arest...*

“In a beginning, when god began to create the heavens and the earth...”

*Wehe ’erest... tohu wa-bohu... al-ph’ne tehom*

“And at that time the earth was desolate, not-yet inhabited...”

Not a birthing story, but a reBirthing story.

A reBirthing story about a primal creativity and

the elements of wind and water and wilderness.

In these slippery elements which resist fixed order, Elohim is trying to fashion her or his or their image.

An event which opens up a long chain of subsequent and unforeseeable events, both destructive and re-creative ones,  
in a kind of good news/bad news sequence. (*Caputo 2008*)

A narrative told by a brilliant Hebrew storyteller about 'the earthling' and the life-giving transformations which Elohim wrought not from nothing to something but from the barrenness of being to the excitement of life.

Towards the end of the Meditation I alluded to the Jesus scenario of the wild lilies... A story I have also referred to not that long ago in this place.

Back in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne I said...

The lilies of the field are echoes of the first 'yes', uttered by Elohim. They assure us that the surpassing beauty of the world and the joy life holds are not drowned by senseless and tragic suffering...

Trust in the momentum of life, for Elohim has breathed life into the lifeless, unwieldy elements, and wherever there is life, there the Spirit breathes.

Do not let hope die. Let the breath of life flow through you. The lilies of the field are... the event-fulness and graciousness of existence.

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The need for explanation pulsates in us all.

Philosophers, physicists, cosmologists, theologians, poets, and mythmakers...

All have attempted to say something about the origin and evolution of the universe as a whole as they wrestled with the question: 'Why is there something rather than nothing?'

Storytelling, from ancient times and among all peoples of the earth, had a special role in the life of the people.

It educated the young.

It provided entertainment for the grown men and women.

It made possible the knowledge of a people's history which was passed on by word of mouth from generation to generation.

It served to teach lessons about how to be good people with care for others and respect for all of life.

The modern story of 'beginnings' sparks a sense of wonder with time tracing back almost 14 billion-years, and distances beyond what we can imagine.

It shows that we live on an ordinary planet, circling an average star,

“among many trillions of stars in the cosmos. On this tiny planet, humans are one among several millions of species. In the scale of time, we emerged just a moment ago.”

*(Macalister 2020:13)*

No other creation story is more fantastic in its account of how things came to be in the beginning,

“how they came to be as they are, and how each of us received the special characteristics that give us our personal identity.” *(Berry 2009:122)*

As it turns out Earth is the geological equivalent of the story of Goldilocks...

not too hot and not too cold,  
not too big and not too small.

The cosmic porridge was ‘just right’! *(Sanguin 2007:89)*

Which is just about as close as anyone can get to an answer:

‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’

From the nature mysticism of the ancients

to present-day expressions of wonderment at the beauty and ferocity of the natural world,

it is clear that humans have always sought to understand their relationship to the cosmos.

What greater gift can there be than to be a species endowed with the capacity to perceive, comprehend, and align itself with the very forces that have governed our universe for nearly 14 billion years?

As my very brief excursion into beginnings myths highlights, awe was reserved for feelings toward divine beings.

Today that feeling can arise when we view the extraordinary, such as a photo of Earth from space,

or when we view the mundane such as watching gold and red autumn leaves pirouette to the ground in a light wind...

No forest, no moon, no ocean, no paddock, can be labeled ‘Buddhist’ or ‘Jewish’ or ‘Muslim’ or ‘Christian.’

Nature, Creation, that *which is*, is far bigger and far more ancient than any of our religious traditions. *(Fox 2020)*

The natural world is a vibrant web of radical relationships.

Nothing is itself without everything else.

This much is certain, writes Massachusetts professor Chet Raymo *(Raymo 1985/2019)*

“the turnip is my cousin. The humming bird and the hump back whale are twigs on my family tree. Bacteria and viruses are my kith and kin.”

Radical relationship... the essence of existence.

Radical relationship... which require our urgent responses.

Protective responsibility.

Attentive care.

Deliberate nurturing.

Such responses echo Indigenous peoples wisdom.

Such responses invite feelings of awe and wonder.  
Such responses, supported by the 98% of climate scientists,  
agree that human activity is driving a climate crisis all across the Earth.

As environmental philosopher David Orr so eloquently puts it:

“All of us breathe from the same atmosphere, drink the same waters, and are fed from the land. All of us depend, more than we can know, on the stability of the same bioecochemical cycles, including the movement of carbon from plants to the atmosphere, oceans, soils, and living creatures... All of us are stitched to a common fabric of life, kin to all other life forms. All of us are products of the same evolutionary forces and carry the marks of our long journey in time... We are all made of stuff that was once part of stars, and we will all become dust to be remade someday into other life forms.” (Orr 2009:ix)

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