

The Wonder of It All!
The Depth of Our Belonging to an Evolving World

Workshop II: Emerging Truth and Beauty

Mary C. Coelho

February 11, 2016

As a student of biology I learned that any changes in evolution are based on only random events and mistakes in copying the DNA. There is no direction in evolution. There is no significance to the arrival of beings with self-awareness. Morality and religion are simply adaptive strategies for survivability. As Melanie Klein says in her movie “This Changes Everything” we have lived in a 400 year fantasy of nature as a machine.

These assumptions have forced many Western people to live in a world that separates the physical world and the spiritual world. As Art Klipfel said in his talk, many of us are heirs of Descartes.

In my mid 30’s I went to seminary attracted to study there because of a personally very important spiritual experiences. I went with the assumption that I was leaving biology behind. However, even though I left the biology textbooks and their topics, I did not recognize that I carried many assumptions from the study of science with me, many of them taken for granted, unexamined and often unconscious. Some of these unexamined assumptions are widespread in the culture.

It is work with the New Story that has helped me recognize and question some of those assumptions and to enter a somewhat different world. It is not a world that devalues science, it greatly values it, but it is one that adds depths and creativity to the manifest world and its interiority in the evolutionary, emergent context.

One occasion when I recognized how serious this narrowing is, was when we read in our New Story Group the book *Evolution’s Purpose* by Steve McIntosh. The title itself, *Evolution’s Purpose* is, of course, a direct, overt challenge to the neo-Darwinian assumption of a purposeless world.

Steve McIntosh writes: the unfolding history of evolution reveals a rising flow of value generation. What are the values? - Ever widening realization of beauty, truth and goodness.

When we read the McIntosh’s book the idea of an intrinsic allure within the nature of things that pulls us toward Truth, Beauty and Goodness I was

The Wonder of It All!
The Depth of Our Belonging to an Evolving World

shocked and heartened. It is a bold claim to many ears. He says value is a real feature of the universe. (p. 60 McIntosh)

McIntosh is not alone. Alfred North Whitehead argued that beauty, or the perfection of harmony, is the universal aim of development. Whitehead wrote that beauty is the final contentment of the Eros of the universe. (McIntosh, p. 90) Teilhard de Chardin, the French paleontologist and theologian that Mary Kay spoke of last week, identified direction in the evolutionary story, calling the convergent focus the omega point. The whole process of cosmogenesis was identified with Christogenesis. (Don't hear that as a narrow dogmatic statement...)

Why is this directionality so important? It is because evolution is occurring now in human consciousness. According to the Baldwin effect there is another power in evolution besides genetic mutation. It states that consciousness itself can be and is the source of major evolutionary change. The clear influence of human consciousness over the destiny of all of the earth certainly cannot be questioned.

People have sought for centuries to discern the nature of beauty and truth. I could not possibly do the subject justice. Mathematicians and scientists ponder the topic as they look for beautiful, elegant solutions. Ideas about symmetry and strange attractors come into play. This search to describe the nature of truth and beauty is very important but the contribution of McIntosh and others is to imbed the values of truth, beauty and goodness in the evolutionary story, so they are values that emerge intrinsic to the our lives as beings of this earth. These experiences are open to us all as earth beings.

McIntosh says we are allured by truth and beauty. Note the word allured...McIntosh recognizes we have a kind of involvement, a kind of inner participation in life distinct from the objective knowledge of science. There is a participatory kind of knowing, a felt experience of these fundamental values of truth, beauty and goodness.

So what is this participatory knowing? There is a way of knowing that is a direct perception derived from our integral belonging to the larger whole. Louis Dupré, formerly a professor at Yale, recognizes a remarkable participatory kind of knowledge which he describes as being with reality, not reflecting upon it. He writes about privileged instances of intellectual

The Wonder of It All!
The Depth of Our Belonging to an Evolving World

intuition in which the mind literally perceives as directly as the senses ordinarily do. Similarly David Bohm writes of a kind of “experience knowledge” in which the experience and knowledge constitute one process. A significant insight or discovery, as when Einstein wrote down his field equations for relativity theory, is not insight belonging to a particular person but the movement of the whole expressing itself in explicate forms through that person (Einstein) and his prepared and inquiring mind.

Beauty, truth and goodness are of this participatory type of knowing. I may live in truth. I may seek to live in beauty— not as an observer of it but a quality of life that I may be immersed in and may create.

To close these brief remarks here are a few examples of experiences of beauty and truth.

When Matisse was asked if he believed in God, he said that he did when he was painting. That is a participatory mode of engagement.

The conductor Kurt Furtwangler used to say that he did not dare conduct Beethoven’s *Missa Solemnis* too often because the Holy Ghost was so active in its splendor and passion that he did not know if he would survive it.

Sr. Miriam MacGillis, founder of Genesis Farm in New Jersey where she and others taught the new story, says that when she heard Thomas Berry speak for the first time she did not understand a word he said but she knew he was telling the truth. She did understand something or better said, entered into some depth of participatory knowing. It changed the direction of her life.

Quakerism - I’m told that the original name of Quakers was “The Religious Society of Friends of Truth.”

I like the story of the man in the motel who picked up the Gideon bible and read one of the gospels and recognized the truth of the life of Jesus he read about. When people want to follow Jesus it can be because they have experienced or been allured by the truth of his life. John Yungblut makes the important observation that in being drawn to Jesus it is “the mystery of being drawn to that toward which one already has a trend.” This indicates the inner depth of truth.

The Wonder of It All!
The Depth of Our Belonging to an Evolving World

The emergence of truth and beauty offers an understanding of evolution different from what I learned as a biology student. It invites a depth of belonging with meaning as we participate in knowing and creating truth, beauty and goodness. Note the interiority of these experiences. There is participation in the immanent numinous realm.

I'll end with these words written about St. Francis of Assisi by Bonaventure.

*In beautiful things
He Saw Beauty itself
And through his vestiges imprinted on Creation
He followed his Beloved everywhere.*