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Trees, stones and interstellar gas will teach you

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Eco Catholic

I went on an eight-day vision quest to Canyonlands National Park in Utah when I was in my early 40s, and returned with a major new awareness -- nature and the universe are not composed of inanimate things, but rather pulsing, alive, intelligent, loving realities of which I am a part. I especially remember the message that we humans don't ever have to feel lonely, because we have a constant community of care surrounding us in the form of trees, clouds, earth, animals, stars, and more. And then when I learned from cosmologist Brian Swimme that all of creation has some level of awareness and is sensing me, I was overjoyed by my newly-found I-Thou relationship with my creation kin.

I almost want to cry because so many people are walking around feeling alone and isolated, when the whole universe is holding them with more tender love than any mother could give. I think this is especially true of older people, who often feel lonely and forgotten. These can be hard years, when poor health causes more physical suffering and the mind is plagued with mental pain. Hopefully shafts of light from God can break through the barrier of darkness to provide comfort, but often even God can seem far away and abstract.

I believe that as we learn about and relate to the magnificence of creation, it can become a tangible faithful friend through the cycles of life, especially the more difficult time of aging and death. Let's start with one concrete example -- interstellar clouds of gas, a virtually unknown reality to the average person. But let me introduce you to this one-of-many miracles of God's genius and what it can teach us.

Most of us think outer space is completely void, empty of life. Ah, but that is not so. It only appears empty. It is really filled with interstellar clouds made of 99 percent gas and one percent dust. This hydrogen/helium gas is extremely dilute, with a density somewhere around one atom per cubic centimeter (compared to air which has about 30,000,000,000,000,000 molecules per cubic centimeter). And it is

extremely cold ? minus 10,000 degrees Fahrenheit. On the surface, it may seem like a few atoms of cold gas floating in a sea of nothing are fairly worthless. But in fact, the gases form clusters or clouds which collapse, heating up to a temperature where fusion occurs, which releases energy, and whamo ? a new star is born!

In our aging years, it's easy to feel our lives are empty and worthless when we can't make the same contribution to the world we did when younger. But contemplation of interstellar gas reminds us that one small, cold atom, when combined with many others, can actually be the seedbed of a gigantic burst of light and life in the form of a star. It reminds us that every small prayer, act of kindness, acceptance of suffering, and loving thought is important and adds up to a fertile milieu where new life is born. Even as our lives and bodies are collapsing, they are generating energy for some marvel of creation to occur. And death, the ultimate act of faith and letting go, is not senseless annihilation, but a mysterious transformation into something glorious and luminous.

I encourage you, whatever your age, to keep learning about and contemplating all of creation. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, way back in the 1100s, knew the value of this when he said, "Believe an expert: you will find something far greater in the woods than in books. Trees and stones will teach you that which you cannot learn from the masters."

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