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At retreat, cosmologist offers insight on how to help the planet

by Sharon Abercrombie

Eco Catholic

Waking up to the enormity of environmental devastation can take a very long time. Mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme spent 17 years passing through the stages of shock, annoyance, sadness and numbness before the truth reached him at the levels of heart and gut.

"I was humiliated that it had taken me so long," he said.

His defining moment of illumination was learning that Earth is going through a mass extinction and human activity, "the activity of good people, according to Thomas Berry, is to blame," Swimme said at a weekend retreat June 29 at River's Edge, a Catholic environmental and wellness center operated by the Sisters of St. Joseph in Cleveland.

The icy splash of truth blasted his consciousness from sleep to painful awakeness during the mid-1980s in the form of a front-page *New York Times* story. The story had reported on a major science conference that had been held at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

Scientists there concluded that though the new extinction had been preceded by five others during Earth's history, this one was the worst to take place in 65 million years.

Swimme learned that 25,000 species are going extinct every year. If humans weren't around, the average rate would be just one species passing into oblivion every five years.



"I was changed forever," he said.

In a state of shock, he began flipping through the newspaper for commentaries and editorials reflecting upon the scientists' findings. But all Swimme could find were 25 pages of ads. He hoped for follow-up articles the next day. Again, there was nothing.

By now, the young scientist had another sickening truth to absorb. Mass extinction was just another news story that had faded from headlines and public awareness in order to make room for the next day's titillating happening.

A quarter of a century later, Swimme is the co-author of *The Universe Story* with Fr. Thomas Berry, a professor of cosmology and consciousness at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco and a frequent speaker at the Sophia Center at Holy Names University in Oakland, Calif. Last month, he and Mary Evelyn Tucker of Yale University received an Emmy award from the Northern California Chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences for their new DVD documentary, "The Journey of the Universe."

Where does he place human awareness today regarding environmental issues? It is beginning to grow, he said, but by and large, "our society is still gripped by 25 pages of ads."

Swimme, however, cautions against sinking into anger and hatred. They will accomplish nothing in moving our industrial paradigm away from the destructiveness that is causing needless suffering around our planet, he told the 180 attendees at River's Edge. Returning to his own situation, Swimme said that "developing a compassion for the struggle and realizing that it is going to take a long time for us as a community to change things around, saved me from burning up with rage."

"Science is incapable of moving us forward," just as physicians were ineffectual in medieval times, he said. They failed to heal their patients suffering from the Black Plague because they kept relying on the same old technique of bleeding them repeatedly, even though it didn't work.

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So what is the solution to our current plight? If we cannot save the planet because so much of it is already destroyed, how can we preserve and nurture what is left?

Swimme said he believes it will take a catch-up in consciousness and a moving together as a community where mutually enhancing relationships with every being on earth becomes the normal way of life.

"We have to escape industrial consciousness and change the image of earth as a hardware store for our

shopping pleasure," he said. "We need to move from resource to reverence."

The catch-up in consciousness will mean changing our language so development no longer means turning a forest into a shopping mall, he said.

It will mean being willing to accept ambiguity, and as we live with the seeming contradictions, to turn them into art, music, poetry and drama for possible answers.

It will involve changing our notions of knowledge. Knowledge is now seen primarily as a means for taking control, but instead, in the words of G. K. Chesterton, we need to swim on knowledge's surface and use it to deepen our joy in life in a mutually enhancing way.

Another encompassing word for Chesterton's definition of this transformation is defined by Berry and Teilhard as cosmogenesis, Swimme said.

"Thomas Berry saw cosmogenesis as helping to make society a place where it is easy to be good," he said. "Now it is easy to be a destructive society."

During a question-and-answer session, one man asked Swimme how he would engage in a conversation with a captain of industry who thrives on the hardware-store model for earth.

"I'd try to find a way for us to reflect upon our deepest motivation beyond a corporate charter to get us into alignment with archetypal motivations, like feeding children," Swimme replied.

The River's Edge weekend with Swimme was to dive deeply into the realms of quantum science, cosmology, philosophy, history, mysticism, spirituality and awe.

If one had to condense Brian Swimme's message to a few main thoughts, it would be for humans to be willing to walk their hearts back to the beginning of the universe, and once there, to begin appreciating the beauty, generosity and love which propelled it into existence. Beauty, generosity, pure generativity and love are his descriptions for the dawn of our 13.7-billion-year journey.

In the blink of an eye, he turned scientific explanations into mystical moments. We need more of those all the time, Swimme said: "Karl Rahner said that in the future, all Christians will be mystics or we won't be Christians at all."

Swimme said he regards the universe's creation as a form of comprehensive compassion. Another term for comprehensive compassion, he explains, is gravitational attraction.

"Helium and hydrogen experience an attraction and they have no idea why," he said. "It is the language of allurement and relationship."

Allurement is why Brian Swimme is a mathematical cosmologist today, he said. As a kid, he loved to push aside his mother's white lace curtains and stare out at the starry sky, but he didn't know why. Now he does: The beauty of the stars allured him into his life's work.

In references to gravity, Swimme explains it as the attractor, the glue that pulls and holds the universe together. The mystic in him names gravity as the All-Nurturing Abyss. Gravity is Love -- Space-time Foam.

"Relationship is the primordial thing of the universe," Swimme said. "Humans are genetic cousins to everything in life. Asparagus is 25 percent of our genes. We need to go from thinking 'resources' to

thinking 'relatives.' "

Expounding further upon relationship, Swimme drew upon ancient philosophy and indigenous traditions, where gravity becomes the Eros, the Greek word for the love, which permeates the universe, and Hesed -- in Hebrew, the loving kindness, the unmerited gift bestowed by the creative power of the universe.

Swimme encouraged River's Edge attendees to look to the indigenous people for their wisdom. He introduced them to the African bushmen, who claim to hear the music of the cosmos. There are many ways of knowing, beyond cerebral cognition, when one taps into the intuitive wisdom of the heart and soul, he said.

One of the bushmen's sayings is *Ubuntu*, which means "I am because you are." Taking *Ubuntu* back to 13.7 billion years ago, to the beginning, our gratitude for what is becomes overpowering, prompting us to drop to earth on our knees and say, "Thank you."

In Brian Swimme's words, the universe ceases to be "other." It becomes "Mother."

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