Tuning in with the Universe?
A New Story of the Universe, a New Spirituality for the Inner Self

Recently we had a lunch-time series here in Pitt St., about Science and Sustainability on one hand, and the Sacred on the other. I found the series quite absorbing, first because it talked about some recent science – there’s so much that’s new, just in my lifetime; and second because it helped me to make links between the science and my own life. It has been my starting-point for today, though I’ve changed some of it and added a few other bits. I’ll look quickly at some areas of science, then each time I’ll look for a human connection.

I want to look at both ends of a big stretch – way out in the Universe and 13.7 billion years back, with one eye, and with the other eye, to the mysterious spirit that I know is deep within myself, even if it’s often not very clear or just briefly glimpsed. I can’t include the connections to Scripture or our religious language; there simply isn’t time.

Let me first mention the story of evolution, which tells how the various species developed on our own planet Earth – from the atom to the cell, then bacterium, then plant, then animal, and so on. It also shows life’s increasing complexity: for instance, every “eco-system” such as a rain-forest or a coral reef, depends on a co-operation among the species which are in it. So there’s a lesson there for us humans, isn’t there? – it makes more sense, and we’ll do better, if we see ourselves as neighbours, colleagues, of the rest of creation rather than the dominant species, entitled of right to take and use whatever we like without giving anything back. It would be good to expand on this some other time, and apply it to the issue of global warming, for instance.

Now let’s do a quick recap of what scientists tell us about the Universe: how it has developed and evolved over some 13.7 billion years, how our planet has been formed and has become home for so many kinds of life, both extinct and still living, and including ourselves. Take a minute to recognise how new, how recent, this is. I remember, when I was still at school, my father brought home two books, “The Mysterious Universe” and “The Stars in their Courses”; they opened a whole new world for him as they explained things like ‘light-years’ and ‘galaxies’. Nowadays that is simple stuff, basic knowledge to be learned in primary school.

Not so simple is the way physicists talk about atomic structure and the energy that’s inside atoms and, indeed, the energy that’s across the whole wide Universe. Let’s skip the complicated detail, but insomany we can say that Matter and Energy are intertwined. As
an example, we can note, in wonder, that physicists speculate that two electrons – tiny particles, part of an atom – can affect each other though light-years apart: if one changes its “spin” then so will the other. Another example, just last week Professor Ken Freeman received the Australian Science Award for his work on dark matter: no-one can see or weigh or measure it, and yet it’s supposed to make up about 90% of the universe. These recent developments, where matter and energy are intertwined, are quite a new turn for mainstream Science. For three hundred years science had largely assumed that the physical world is the real world; but this kind of science has usually not dealt with the non-material world, such as the mind. Now recent thinking, that matter and energy are intertwined, may allow a different point of view. Some day soon people might know much more about how the mind works than we do now. In fact a lot of research is going on about that right now, about memory and emotion and so on, in the rapidly developing and changing field of neuro-science.

Some people take this new understanding, that the Universe is a blend of matter and energy, to propose that there is some kind of “consciousness-energy” that pervades the Universe. For example, Brian Sheldrake suggests that the human mind can somehow be connected to this universal energy; he talks about “fields of memory” that are non-local and non-physical. There is a related story about the “hundredth monkey” – troops of monkeys on some islands in Japan: some of them were learning to wash sweet potatoes, and after most of one troop learned how to do it, it spread to the other troops by a sort of thought transference. This puts me in mind of what Jung spoke of as the “collective unconscious”. All this is not really my field – but the idea came to me that perhaps a person could have a sensitivity or receptivity to these fields of memory or of energy that would allow him/her to “tune in” on them.

In fact an old family story came to mind about my grandfather’s grandfather, who was a ship’s pilot in the English Channel, out of Cornwall. In the year 1822 his wife, who was pregnant with their fifth child, was waiting for him at home, when she saw him go past the window of their cottage. She ran to open the door for him, but no-one came, he wasn’t there. A couple of days later his friends came home with the sad news that he had been drowned at sea, at the very moment when she had seen him. [Her unborn baby turned out to be a girl who was, eventually, my grandfather’s mother.] How does that strike you for receptivity to the thought-waves of the Universe? It convinces me, at very least, that there must still be a lot to find out about all this.

There’s another more traditional window on our own consciousness, and what we can know about it. That’s through long-established spiritual practices, which many people still use to build habits of consciousness for themselves.
There are many approaches. In the lunch-time series we used a YouTube from the World Community for Christian Meditation. Some practise meditation in silence, or with background music, letting all thoughts go and tuning in to “Being Itself”. Others keep a journal. Others reflect carefully on events of daily life, looking into the moment to discover something that gives you wonder, or you see something about yourself, your concern or care for someone else wells up, or perhaps, there is a moment of just plain abandon, of being “in the seventh heaven” as the old saying goes.

Notice that I said “build habits of consciousness”: this doesn’t just happen. It’s a matter of setting aside some time in your life to attend to your inner workings. Some people get up early, or find a quiet few minutes in the evening. At one time years ago, I found spare time difficult because of family needs and a demanding job, but I would manage to set aside about an hour on a Sunday afternoon, and the result was worth the effort.

The common thread is to allow your mind to be in touch beyond yourself, whatever name you may give to “what is beyond” – Mysterious Other, or Being Itself, or Ground of our Being, for instance. This is a human process with many pathways, and practised in many different faiths. For myself, it’s when something happens to shake me, to jolt me, or on the other hand when something brings me to wonder, that I find myself talking about “God”.

So we have two approaches to spirituality. The wisdom in these older ways hasn’t changed; they are still valuable guides. So what might be the benefit of this new understanding, that the Universe is a blend of matter and energy, that we and the entire Universe are intertwined? I assume that the new ideas won’t be inconsistent with the old or contradict them. Yet the new ideas can help because they fit in with the new faith-story that we need in this new age of science.

Some of this for me is really spooky stuff – awkward and unfamiliar; but just because it’s outside my normal field of view doesn’t mean that it’s wrong. This new kind of spiritual understanding is an invitation to us to tune our energy in with the Universe, because then we can say that in our small way we are supporting the constructive trends and forces of the whole Universe.

If I go back to the matter of global warming which I mentioned earlier: here is some kind of fork in the Evolutionary road. If we (and a lot of other people) can change the way we think, possibly we can have an influence in something that is hopefully about to happen in any case: be a contributor rather than a drag on the direction of Evolution. I call to mind a saying from Archbishop Desmond Tutu, “Without God, you cannot. Without you, God will not.”