

*Introduction to*

**THE LIVING UNIVERSE:**

*The Great Awakening*

*The universe is a communion and a community.  
We ourselves are that communion become conscious of itself.*  
--Thomas Berry<sup>i</sup>

***Three Questions Orient Our Inquiry***

What do you think? Is the universe non-living at its foundations? If it is “dead” and without consciousness in its underpinnings then it is unaware of and indifferent to our existence. Are we “strangers in a strange land,” unwelcome outsiders? However, what if the universe is alive at its deepest foundations? What if there is a permeating field of aliveness and an ecology of consciousness throughout the universe, then what does that mean for our lives and life-purpose?

You may wonder, “With the challenges of climate disruption, energy shortages, wars over resources, deep poverty, and more, why should I care about the universe and our connection with it?” My answer is that we humans need to step back and get our bearings. The dream of material prosperity is becoming a collective nightmare as we overwhelm the Earth with our sheer numbers and voracious appetites as consumers. With growing urgency, we are being pushed to freshly imagine ways we can live together sustainably and happily on this planet. Yet, we find ourselves without a compelling sense of direction. It feels like we are wandering into history—alienated from the Earth, from one another, and from the universe. We are lost. Where do we find a way forward that expresses a common and compelling journey for the human family?

I believe one of the most difficult challenges facing humanity is not devising solutions to the energy crisis or climate crisis; rather, it is bringing images and archetypes of the human

journey into our collective awareness that empower us to look beyond a future of great adversity and to a future of great opportunity. In a self-fulfilling prophecy, we actualize who we think we are. The archetypes and stories we present to ourselves act as beacons for guiding us into the future. To explore our guiding images for the future, we will step back, draw upon the deepest wisdom that humanity has to offer and ask three fundamental questions:

1) **Where Are We?** Although there is a natural inclination to start with ourselves, it is important to start with the question of “where” we are rather than “who” we are. When we start with ourselves we tend to begin with the unquestioned assumption that our biological being defines the scope of who we are and, from this, a cascade of consequences flow, giving us the kind of world that we have now. If we begin, not with ourselves but with *where* we are, and if we freshly open to the universe and ask what kind of place this is, then we may be led to a larger understanding and see that we are more than biological beings—that we have a cosmic connection as well. So, I want to step back and begin by looking at the universe in which we live and ask a core question: Do we live in a living or non-living universe? Einstein said if he could ask God one question, it would be: “Is the universe friendly or not?” This book asks an even deeper question: Is the universe alive or not? How we answer this simple question has profound implications for whether we experience life with feelings of alienation or belonging, see it as either pointless or purposeful, and regard it with feelings of indifference or reverence.

2) **Who Are We?** Having looked at the universe in which we live, we can now ask: Are we beings of biological scope alone or do we somehow connect with and participate in the larger universe? Our collective self-image as a species has yet to form, but it will emerge vividly within the next few decades as the communications revolution intersects with the perfect storm of an unyielding, whole-systems crisis for the Earth. This unfolding crisis will force us to take a hard look at ourselves in the mirror of our collective media and ask, “Who are we as a species?” Are we no more than biophysical beings in a struggle for material

survival or do we have a cosmic scale connection and purpose that calls us to awaken to our full potential?

3) **Where Are We Going?** Is there a discernible direction to life and evolution?

Without a dramatic change in direction, humanity is headed toward catastrophe. The changes required for humanity to live sustainably on the Earth are so broad, so deep, and so far reaching that if we are to avoid a global calamity, it is crucially important that we discover “great stories” that can align and orient our journey ahead as a species. Is there a story of our awakening as a species with such compelling promise that it overcomes our fears and historical inertia?

### ***A Personal Perspective***

To bring a more personal perspective to these questions, I’d like to describe a few experiences to suggest how they have been important threads through my life. Connecting with the miracle of the aliveness around us has been a passionate interest of mine since growing up on a farm in Idaho in the 1940s and 50s. I was born prematurely to my mother, a nurse, and my father, a farmer. I lived in the country with my brother, two dogs, a half-dozen cats and assorted farm animals a couple of miles outside of a small town of about five hundred people. Growing up in the big sky country of Idaho, I felt that, in the overall scale of things, I was a small creature against a vast landscape. Because I worked on the farm until my early twenties, my roots are in the land, and I feel as much a sense of identity as a farmer as I do a scholar, educator, or activist.

Some of my earliest recollections are of lying on the living room floor and watching sunbeams pouring through a window and moving across the rug, their golden rays bringing a living presence and nurturing aliveness into the room. A farming life brought me the gift of deep silence and connection with nature—a setting where subtle ecstasies would regularly blossom—with the smell of freshly mown hay, the fragrance of dry earth moistened by a brief summer shower, or the Sun setting over distant mountains. When working alone, I would sometimes walk out into the middle of a large field and lie down in a furrow to experience the

earth and the sea of surrounding crops. I recall one time lying down on the earth with fully grown lettuce on either side of me and, nearly covered by their abundant leaves, absorbing the humming aliveness of the earth, the fields, and the big sky above me. Irrigating crops, pruning apple trees, tending farm animals—these were regular invitations to witness and celebrate nature’s miracle of luminous aliveness. Like water seeping into a dry sponge, over the course of many seasons my being was gradually permeated with a nameless and palpable presence.

By my early twenties, I had moved from the country to the city life, and I felt a deep separation from the familiar aliveness of my farming days. In 1971, I was working in Washington, D.C. as a senior staff member of a Presidential Commission on the American Future. Thoughts about the aliveness of nature were far away as we focused on the next thirty years and issues of population growth, urbanization, and the shortage of critical resources such as water. Although intuitions of a living universe still existed for me, in the intense world of “real politics,” this seemed like a soft sensibility to be disregarded. Still, I was pulled between two perspectives. Was my sense of the living presence I experienced growing up on the farm in Idaho just my imagination? Or, was there a deeper reality to the invisible aliveness that permeated even the coarse world of Washington politics? How important was something so ungraspable and yet so rich with experience?

After two years in Washington, I was deeply disillusioned with the politics of power and wanted a fresh start. I moved with my family to the San Francisco Bay Area and began to work with a small team of senior researchers in the “futures group” of SRI International, one of the largest think tanks in the world. For the next five years, I worked with small teams of researchers on studies of the long-range future for both government agencies and corporations. During this time I co-authored the book *Changing Images of Man* with a small team that included the eminent scholar Joseph Campbell. Our research explored archetypal images that serve as beacons to guide the human family into the future. Another project involved a yearlong study of future global problems for the President’s Science Advisor. Still another project (for the Environmental Projection Agency) involved looking ahead twenty-five years and projecting an array of alternative future scenarios for the nation along with their

implications for environmental policy. What emerged from all of this research for me was the stark realization that our world is moving into a time of profound change in how we see the universe, ourselves, and the human journey.

At the same time I was immersed in research on the long-range future, I intensified a meditation practice (taught by a Tibetan Buddhist). Then, in an unexpected turn of events, I also became deeply involved as a subject in the earliest psychic research at SRI on behalf of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. In several places, I will describe my experiences as a subject since it provided me with a unique opportunity for learning. This federally funded research over nearly three years gave me a scientific basis for acquiring feedback into the nature of our connection with the ecology of the universe. Instead of “bio-feedback,” I was getting “cosmic-feedback.” These scientific experiments gave me a way to explore in my direct experience, over a period of years, a fundamental question raised here: Is the universe a living system? This question is thousands of years old but I now had access to the tools of modern science to explore the nature of our relationship with the invisible ecology of the universe. Combining intensive meditation with equally intensive laboratory experimentation gave me an unusual learning opportunity. Much of what is contained in this book is grounded in the confidence of these years of combined inner/outer inquiry.

The research on the global future during these years at SRI made it emphatically clear that the world would soon encounter unyielding limits to current levels and patterns of growth. I realized that I wanted to do more than work as a “neutral researcher,” watching from the sidelines of history, so I left SRI in order to meditate and advocate for creative change.

Meditation took the form of a half-year of self-directed reflection and contemplation in my cottage. This culminated in life-transforming experiences that have reverberated through my life ever since (described in my book *Awakening Earth*, Appendix II). Insights from this half-year of meditation are reflected throughout this book.

My advocacy for change has included writing three editions of the book *Voluntary Simplicity* and speaking around the world on themes of building a sustainable future. I’ve also co-founded three different non-profit organizations doing non-partisan work for media

accountability and citizen empowerment.

Looking back, these diverse life experiences have given me a range of perspectives for looking at the world. So far, I have lived in at least three different, perceptual paradigms: I grew up in the mindset of the agrarian era—on a farm where the experience of life was dominated by the seasons and cycles of nature. I then moved into the mindset of the industrial era as I watched our family farm grow into a small agri-business and we moved from the farm into a nearby town. I then moved into the mindset of the communications era when I began doing research on long-range futures and advocating for a more conscious democracy. I've seen how each paradigm develops logically from the next, and each has its unique way of regarding the world and one's self.

Like myself, I believe many people may be living with a foot in at least two worlds: straddling two or more different paradigms of perception and struggling to make sense of the universe. Perhaps you, like me, feel pulled between opening with vulnerability to the subtle experience of aliveness of the natural world, and protecting your experience of aliveness from the deadness of a materially obsessed culture.

Before exploring the idea of a living universe, it is important to acknowledge its antithesis—an extreme view that regards the universe as non-living or “dead” at its foundation. As we will explore, I believe that seeing the universe as mostly dead matter, empty space, and devoid of life at its foundations represents an important stage in humanity's individuation and empowerment. I also believe this is not the whole story, but just one chapter in a much larger story of our awakening—and eventual return—to a living universe.

### ***Living in a Dead Universe***

For perspective, it is important to look carefully at the perceptual paradigm of a dead universe. Particularly in the world of science, it is not uncommon to encounter the view we live in a universe that, at its foundation, lacks feeling, consciousness, and vitality. This view is clearly expressed, for example, by Dr. Susan Blackmore, an author on human consciousness, who said: “We live in a pointless universe. We're here for no reason at all. There isn't a soul. There isn't a spirit. We're not going to live forever in some kind of heaven...there are no

paranormal phenomena, although I can't be sure of that.”<sup>ii</sup>

Dr. Blackmore provides a stark description of a non-living or “dead universe”—and she is not alone.<sup>iii</sup> This has been the “normal” view of many scientists for roughly the past 300 years. For roughly three centuries, science has viewed the physical universe as “all there is.” Therefore, everything that exists represents different combinations of inert matter and to suggest otherwise is to regress into superstition. Matter, at its atomic foundations, is assumed to lack any kind of inherent vitality. In turn, aliveness, thought, and feelings are phenomena that mysteriously arise when matter evolves to high levels of complexity in its physical organization and creates beings like ourselves. All of existence is thereby explained solely in material terms (except for the part about life spontaneously organizing itself and becoming conscious of itself). There appears to be no need for an invisible consciousness because the workings of the entire universe are explained through the workings of matter. Because human aliveness, thought, and feeling are assumed to have emerged from chemical reactions between non-living matter, when the physical body dies, that is seen as the end of consciousness. Understandably, in this view of the universe, more “basic” forms of matter (atoms and molecules) are thought to have no vitality or consciousness of any kind.

If the foundations of the universe are regarded as non-living, then “life” seems to have emerged only recently as matter somehow managed to organize itself into ever-higher levels of complexity—evolving from atoms to molecules to cells to organisms. Consciousness or a knowing capacity is viewed as a biological phenomena located in the physical brain.

If we assume the universe is non-living and without sentience at its foundations, it is only natural to further assume there is no higher purpose or meaning to life. Love and happiness are no more than chemical reactions in the body and have no other meaning or significance. There is no prospect of a future beyond our physical existence. Because the universe will disperse and the stars burn out, all life will eventually die off and be forgotten, meaning nothing. Material possessions and accomplishments are the primary expression of one's identity, and an important source of happiness.

In this “matter-only” view of the universe, it is only logical to conclude that the most intensely living (we humans) have the right to exploit that which is dead (matter and the rest

of nature) for our own purposes. Nature is our warehouse, filled with resources to use. How should we relate to the world? By exploiting that which is dead (nature) on behalf of the living (ourselves). A *tendency* toward materialism, hedonism, and the exploitation of nature are predictable outcomes from a dead universe perspective.

Despite its bleak outlook, a dead universe perspective represents a critically important stage in humanity's long journey of awakening. In pulling back from nature and pulling apart from one another, we have also become much stronger and more differentiated as individuals. My sense is that we humans have separated ourselves as far from union with nature as we will ever go. Now we have little choice: If we are to continue to evolve and realize our potentials as a species, we *must* become conscious of our partnership with nature and one another.

Although the transition to industrial society and hyper-rationalism has largely severed our connection with raw, material nature, I believe we are opening to a new level of connection with nature, particularly in science. From the electron microscope to the Hubble telescope to the human genome, we are transforming how we look at and understand the universe and ourselves. The more we look, the more we are finding the universe to be a place of breath-taking immensity, astonishing subtlety, and unfathomable mystery.

### ***Cosmophilia: Love of the Universe***

The term "biophilia" was first used by Erich Fromm to describe a psychological connection and sense of affiliation between humans and other forms of life. The eminent biologist, E. O. Wilson, has popularized this term and used it to describe our innate urge to affiliate with other living things. In feeling a sense of kinship and connection with other forms of life, we take a quantum leap forward in our motivation to care for all living things.

We can expand this feeling of connection and appreciation of life to the entire "cosmos"—a word that was first used by the Greek philosopher Pythagoras to describe our universe as a living embodiment of nature's order, harmony, and beauty. To build upon the concept of "biophilia," we can create the word "cosmophilia." Cosmophilia describes the kinship and affiliation we feel with the totality of nature and our experience of felt connection

with the harmony and beauty of our universe. Our relationship with the universe involves both biophilia (love of other living things) and cosmophilia (love of the universe in its wholeness).

Naturalists have looked deeply into the nature of the universe and have come away in awe of the beauty and aliveness of nature:

“I believe in God, only I spell it Nature.”

—Frank Lloyd Wright, architect

“Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.”

—John Muir, explorer and naturalist

A feeling of profound and intimate connection with nature and the universe is a theme that also emerges from astronauts:

“On the return trip home, gazing through 240,000 miles of space toward the stars and the planet from which I had come, I suddenly experienced the Universe as intelligent, loving, harmonious.”

— Edgar Mitchell

“When I was the last man to walk on the moon in December 1972, I stood in the blue darkness and looked in awe at the Earth from the lunar surface. What I saw was almost too beautiful to grasp. There was too much logic, too much purpose—it was just too beautiful to have happened by accident.”

— Gene Cernan

There is a vivid feeling of connection and communion that we can experience with nature at every scale—from a small flower to a galaxy. With cosmophilia, we feel our direct immersion in the subtle field of aliveness and energy permeating the universe.

The sense that we live in a living field of existence is an ancient insight. It is only in the last few hundred years that science has disengaged the modern mind from this view by asserting that matter is lifeless and space is but an empty stage. Although science has not been able to define “life,” it has been viewed by science as a property that mysteriously

emerges when matter somehow evolves itself to a high level of organization and complexity. As we will explore in chapter two, the tools of science are bringing into question the assumption of a non-living universe. Just as we are beginning to consider whether the Earth is a unified, living organism, we are also beginning to ask whether the universe is a single, integrated, life-form. The meaning of the phrase “living universe” is complex but a useful definition is: *A “living universe” is a unified and completely interdependent system that is continuously regenerated by the flow-through of phenomenal amounts of life-energy whose essential nature includes consciousness or a self-reflective capacity that enables systems at every scale of existence to exercise some freedom of choice.* We will consider all of these characteristics and more of a living universe in detail in chapter two.

### ***So What—How Does Aliveness Make a Difference?***

What difference does it make if the universe is dead or alive? When children are starving, climate is destabilizing, oil is dwindling, and population is growing, why is it important to put our attention there? So what if we live in a living universe—why should that matter to more than a few? Although it will take the course of this entire book to develop these ideas, below are a few of the core reasons why it makes a profound difference whether we regard the universe as either dead or alive. I’ll present these polarities in stark terms to make the contrasts clear:

**Is the Universe Indifferent or Welcoming?** How we feel about the surrounding universe has an enormous impact on our experience of life. If we think of the universe as dead at the foundations, then feelings of existential alienation, anxiety, dread, and fear are understandable. Why seek communion with the cold indifference of lifeless matter and empty space? If we relax into life, we will simply sink into existential despair. However, if we live in a living universe, feelings of subtle connection, curiosity, and gratitude are understandable. We see ourselves as participants in a cosmic garden of life that the universe has been patiently nurturing over billions of years. A living universe perspective invites us to shift from indifference, fear, and cynicism to curiosity, love, and awe.

**Are We Forgotten or Remembered?** A non-living universe is without consciousness at its foundations so it is indifferent to humanity and our evolving creations. Nothing we do will ultimately matter. All will be forgotten. A dead universe has no deep purpose or meaning. It does not matter whether it is a person or an entire species-civilization the same principle applies: a dead universe tells no stories. In contrast is another perspective: A living universe is itself a vast story continuously unfolding with countless, unique characters playing out gripping dramas of awakening. The essence of these life stories and learning is remembered and conserved so that an evolving universe has wisdom to pass along to her offspring.

**Pull Apart or Pull Together?** If we see the universe as mostly barren and devoid of life and our time on Earth as primarily a struggle for material existence, then it makes sense that we humans would pull apart in conflict. However, if we see the universe as intensely alive and our time on Earth as a journey of discovery into that aliveness, then it makes sense that we would pull together in cooperation in order to realize this magnificent potential.

**Consumerism or Conscious Simplicity?** Materialism is a rational response to living in a dead universe. In a material universe, consumerism offers a source of identity and a measure of significance and accomplishment. Where do I find pleasure in a non-living universe? In things. How do I know that I amount to anything? By how much stuff I have accumulated. How should I relate to the world? By exploiting that which is dead (the universe) on behalf of the living (myself). Consumerism and exploitation are natural outcomes of a dead universe perspective. However, if we view the foundations of the universe as being intensely alive, then it makes sense to minimize the material clutter and needless busyness and grow in the non-material riches of life—nurturing relationships, caring communities, creative expressions, and more.

**Are We Separate or Inter-Connected?** If we are no more than biological entities and we are fundamentally separate from one another, then it makes sense to see ourselves as

disconnected from the suffering of other living beings. However, if we are all swimming in the same ocean of subtle aliveness, then it makes sense that we would each have a direct experience of communion with, and concern for, the well being of others. If we share the same matrix of existence, then the rest of life is already touching me, co-creating the field within which I exist.

**Who and What Are We?** Are we no more than a collection of elements that are experiencing a series of chemical and neurological reactions? Is there more to ourselves than our material-biological components? In a dead universe, the boundaries of our being are defined by the extent of our physical body. However, in a living universe, our physical existence is permeated and sustained by an aliveness that is inseparable from the aliveness of the universe. If we are beings whose consciousness can extend beyond our biological bodies and into the depths and reaches of the living universe, then our physical bodies comprise only the smallest fraction of the full scope of our being.

These are just a few of the fundamental ways that our approach to life can be radically different depending on which of these two perspectives seem most real. Everyday life, of course, is not so clear-cut as these polarities suggest. The important point is that, *whether we regard the universe as dead or alive at its foundations has enormous consequences for our future, both individually and collectively.*

Overall, I do not believe that the human community can come to a new relationship with one another and the Earth unless we also come to a new relationship with the universe. The view of a living universe transforms how we see ourselves as a species and the journey that we are on. From our manner of living and relating, to the future that we seek to actualize and the meaning that it has for us, life-changing consequences flow from this new perspective.

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<sup>i</sup> Thomas Berry, *Riverdale Papers VII*, “The American College in the Ecological Age,” Riverdale Center, 1980

<sup>ii</sup> Dr. Susan Blackmore, see: “Zen Meditation Leaves Consciousness Scientist Skeptical,” *Skeptiko*, March 5, 2007. See: <http://www.skeptiko.com/index.php?id=12>

<sup>iii</sup> It is important not to equate the idea of a dead universe with “atheism.” Most atheists focus on denying the existence of an external deity, saying this idea is beyond the reach of scientific investigation. The living universe hypothesis is not focused on an external deity but rather on the here and now. Whether the universe is living or non-living is a subject for scientific inquiry. This means that someone could be an atheist (and not believe in an external deity) and at the same time regard the universe as profoundly alive. Conversely, someone could also be a theist and believe in an external deity and at the same time, regard the universe around us as non-living at its foundations. It seems more likely that someone would be a theist and view the universe as living. However, no particular religious orientation automatically fits persons who regard the universe as alive.