

Sparks From the Past

*a spark from your fire
fell into me
waters of joy flowed from your words
into the river of my heart
but now I understand:
the water was a mirage
that spark was the lightning
struck and gone
everything has been a dream
only memory remains*

Rumi¹

Every time I go into a new Church, the first thing I think of is my father Kevin's encouragement that I am granted three wishes. I asked him once where he first heard of the three wishes idea. He said from his father, Tim. My mother, Joan, often quoted her mother, Mary Anastasia, as she pondered life after death by saying 'no one has ever come back to tell us what it is like'.



I tell these anecdotes just to say how these people's memories remain in me. I name the people to give them a place in time and in my story. During November, we are drawn to remember, especially those who have been dear to us and shaped us as individuals. Both sides of my family have Irish heritage and, whilst I am sceptical of the magic of making wishes, I have to acknowledge how lovely it is to delve into a childlike aspect of dreaming possibilities. My mother inherited from her family a healthy scepticism of all aspects of life that were counter to the mystery of Irish sentimentality. These memories draw me into deeper places. I never knew my grandparents so they are memories of my parents who shared their memories with me and my three brothers. All have a time and place in history and emerge from an evolving family story. It still leads me into the gift of wonder at who really were my ancestors, which sparks my imagination.

The Rumi quote mentioned above allows me to ponder the sparks which recall all those who have shaped me in some way like the potter (*Jeremiah 18:1-12*) who moulds and fashions the clay according to the context and events of the time in which he/she lives. I use my family history as one *potter like* influence. Another would be my religious family; my friends inside and outside the Church would be others. The history and activity of the world affects who I am if I am open to its agenda. This would include how the unfolding universe has contributed to who I am and where I am today. It is not static,



¹ Cf the jpg on the internet: bd44a1123f97c25c086b9fdbb7a3f927.jpg

but in a lot of cases only memory remains.

Rilke challenges us that no matter how we attempt to hang on to certain experiences we can only cherish a memory. All the concepts and intrigue that books may hold, give me only a glimpse of what was. It is an encouragement to learn from the memory, surrender to the grace it offers, and move forward:

*And still you wait, expecting one thing alone
that your life could endlessly renew,
some great and singular thing to be shown,
something like the awakening of a stone,
some secret depth, returning to you.
Your books shine upon their stands
in volumes of brown and gold,
and you think of all the travelled lands,
the images and tattered strands
of all the women you could not hold.
And suddenly you realize: there's nothing there.
You rise to your feet, and before you appear
the fear and form and empty prayer
of the absence of another year.²*

Each year in early November in Catholic circles, we honour our heroes, the saints, who have gone before us. I think it is a pity we separate the days of the saints and souls, those for whom the official Church still wants us to pray in order that they might attain heavenly glory. I consider all those who have lived life to the full, who have cared for the wellbeing of all creatures and the Universe as saints, in the way Paul expresses it in Romans 1:7 where he says: *To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints (NRSV)*. All the beloved are called to be saints. We are all called to be saints, believers, faithful citizens of the Universe.



²"Memory" by Rainer Maria Rilke: cf <https://paulweinfeldtranslations.wordpress.com>

I rather like the idea of the *communion of saints*, as we acknowledge faithful people of all the ages, the past, the present and those emerging. Thomas Berry writes of differentiation, interiority and communion as the three key defining elements of creatures living in the Universe. As we immerse ourselves in the spirit of November, we are invited into the communion of all with whom we have lived and whom we loved. I believe Thomas Berry offers us another way to look at communion and how we can live it today. I Diarmuid O'Murchu's tribute to Thomas Berry he writes:

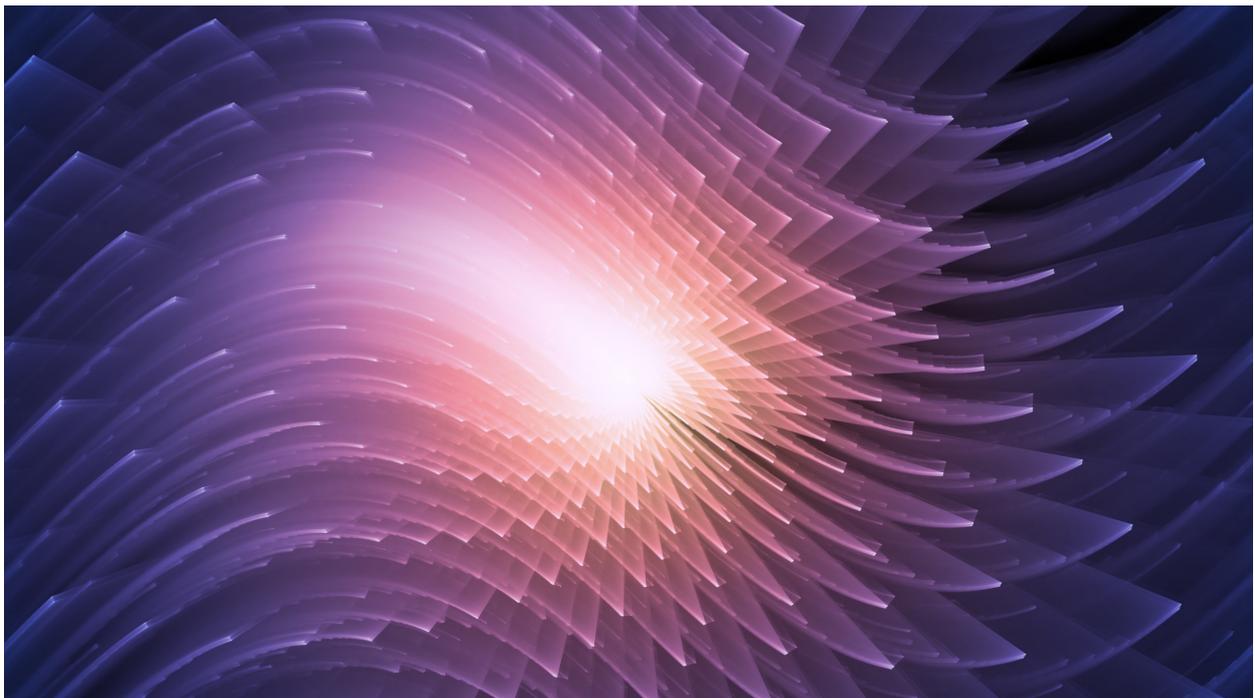
For Thomas, (the new or Great) story is God's primary revelation for us, far exceeding in age and grandeur the doctrinal understanding of revelation provided in and through formal (Christian) religion. And the story is embellished through the tripartite process of differentiation, interiority and communion:

Differentiation: everything in creation has a distinctive uniqueness: every hair on the head is numbered (to paraphrase the Christian scriptures);

Interiority: the basis of all meaning comes primarily from within, not from without;

Communion: everything in creation is programmed to interconnect, interrelate ...³

Is this not our call as CEN members and citizens of the Universe, to acknowledge our diversity, to deepen the search within and to find our place in the whole Earth and Universe community?



The great *compassionate curve*⁴, the life force that passes through all of the ages since the great flaring forth holds us all in balance. How does it do that? If all of the forces that hold us in place were not there, we would not be here. David Whyte reminds us that memory ...

is not just a then, recalled in a now, the past is never just the past, memory is a pulse passing through all created life, a wave form, a then continually becoming other thens, all the while creating a continual but almost untouchable now. But the guru's urge to live only in the now misunderstands the multi-layered inheritance of existence, where all epochs live

³ Diarmuid O' Murchu, "A Tribute to Thomas Berry (1914-2009)", cf <http://thomasberry.org>

⁴ Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grimm, *Thomas Berry: Selected Writings on the Earth Community*, pp13-15

and breathe in parallels. Whether it be the epochal moment initiated by the appearance of the first hydrogen atoms in the universe or a first glimpse of adulthood perceived in adolescence, memory passes through an individual human life like a building musical waveform, constantly maturing, increasingly virtuosic, often volatile, sometimes overpowering. Every human life holds the power of this immense inherited pulse, holds and then supercharges it, according to the way we inhabit our identities in the untouchable now. Memory is an invitation to the source of our life, to a fuller participation in the now, to a future about to happen, but ultimately to a frontier identity that holds them all at once. Memory makes the now fully inhabitable.⁵

One Christian Brother told me he was captured by the notion that a molecule may contain a memory. In the ensuing conversation, we speculated creatively what stories a water molecule could teach us from millions of years of passing through the landscape we know as the earth. We often see this in the animals that have never known their parents, emerging from eggs or cocoons knowing how to be fully alive. Isaiah 55:10 tells us that the word of God is like the water that falls to earth, penetrates the earth, rises through evaporation to become clouds and starts the whole process all over again. This has been known down through the ages. Somehow all creatures know what to do and when to do it. As David Whyte says, we have inherited this pulse.⁶



Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel says we are drawn into radical amazement and incomprehensible wonder through being open to the grandeur of mystery.⁷ Joan Chittister reminds us that memory holds this openness:

⁵ David Whyte, cf <https://www.facebook.com/PoetDavidWhyte>

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Radical Amazement", <http://www.awakin.org>

“Memory is one of the most powerful functions of the human mind. It is also one of life’s most determining ones. What goes on in memory has a great deal to do with what goes on in us all our lives. Memory is a wild horse, unbridled, rider-less, maverick. It takes us often where we would not go, or takes us back over and over again to where we cannot stay, however much we wish we could. So, it leaves us always in one state or the other, one place or the other, leaves us either pining or confused, leaves us in either case in a world unfinished in us ... It is the unfinishedness that is the price we pay for growing always older.”⁸

This reminds us that memory holds a spectrum of perceived experiences as we hold them. Like Chinese whispers, two people can attend the same event but have different memories of that activity later on. Memory can elicit some unique feelings that may affirm, consolidate, engender anxiety and yet embolden us. Sometimes corporate memory raises similar feelings across the spectrum of emotions yet it can clarify for us what we believe. For example, the recent climate protests have garnered all sorts of reactions but often enough reminded us that we are not alone in expressing concern as to where our earth may be heading and we can do something about it.

Judy Cannato refers to morphogenic fields through which we travel in life carrying energy for love, compassion:

“When each of us vibrates love and compassion, our energy mysteriously unites with the energy of love and compassion all over the planet, building a field of compassion, making a very powerful force for transformation and healing ... Could there be any greater cause for hope in the community?”⁹

Maybe this is where we allow our imagination and memory to shape how we are in the world. What is our contribution to the emerging morphogenic fields through which we are entering and passing? We, the community of CEN members, have been growing this field of vibrating love and compassion. In a world that seems dark at times and where choosing prestige, power and privilege has become the norm, we are called to be beacons of hope opting to stand in solidarity with those broken and without hope, and those who cannot speak for themselves as we hear the cry of Earth and all its creatures. Our invitation is to deepen our commitment to the voice of the Spirit emerging and evolving among us and through all creation.

The Christian Brothers at their Congregation Chapter in Nairobi, Kenya, in 2014 built on the statement: *It is the agenda of the world that sets^{SEP} the mission direction of the Church and our Congregation.*¹⁰ So, what is the awareness or memory that sets such sentiment into action? Our response to the agenda could be the plight of asylum seekers, the cry of the earth, the call for a voice for our indigenous folk, etc. For all beings in our society, the agenda is different, our collective or individual responses are different.

Joan Chittister OSB reminds us:

⁸ Joan Chittister: ‘Memory is about what is going on inside of us right now’: cf www.rosemarieberger.com

⁹ Judy Cannato, cf <https://challengeoftransformation.wordpress.com/2011/10/07/morphogenic-fields-chapter-2/>

¹⁰ Congregation of Christian Brothers, 2014 Chapter Document, p9.

Whatever is still in memory is exactly what has most meaning for us. It is the indicator of the unfinished in life. It gives sure sign of what still has emotional significance for us. It refuses to allow us to overlook what must yet be acknowledged if we are ever to be fully honest with ourselves. Most of all, memory and the way we deal with it is the only thing we have that makes us authentic teachers of the young. It tells us what we did that now we miss doing, and it reminds us of what we didn't do that now we wish we had. And such things live in memory forever.

But memory is not meant to cement us in times past. It is meant to enable us to do better now that which we did not do as well before. It is the greatest teacher of them all. The task is to come to the point where we can trust our memories to guide us out of the past into a better future.¹¹

Memory is not static. We sometimes say in spiritual direction that it is important to cherish memories as these are the things that stabilise our spirituality and, when open to the spirit moving in and through us and through all creation, propels us to action and contemplation. If we sit in an old memory, the phrase *living in the past* fetters us in an old paradigm. We are called to hold the gifts of memories and how they inform our present and future.



I go back to where I started, with members of my family, especially those who have predeceased me. I hold them as saints who shaped me and taught me how to live, even though I did not know many of them personally. What great gifts they have been to me! In the mix of this November, I remember the part they have played and will continue to play in my future. They were all different and unique personalities. They were people of interiority and members of the communion of saints. This is true for all of us who reflect on the influence of significant others and the agenda that our universe invites us to explore. May these memories continue to challenge, encourage and invite us to participate as best we can in the evolving, unfolding Mystery of the Divine.

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¹¹ Chittister, op.cit.