

**The Cosmos Conundrum:
All One or Al/one? And the wisdom to know the difference
Or
Where were you when I was *there*?**

Let me cut to the chase tonight: are you and I destined/fated to be alone in the universe? Or, if we are *not* alone, just what or who is out there?

For, if this journey of life, in the words of John Eldredge, is nothing more than just a search for the life we've only dreamed of but can never be found (2000) – then let's be honest about it and say what is difficult to say, that all the values, the treasures of our culture which we hold so dear, our sciences, our philosophies, our beliefs are—however admirable and amazing—just one extraordinary feat of smoke and mirrors.

In other words, let's talk straight and furious. For it seems there is a significant roadblock here. The naked truth is that *the poetry* we have had read to us so beautifully by Margaret just does not match the new science emerging from the James Webb telescope. And the poetry of our reading also doesn't seem to match Zuckerberg's dream of a "deep presence" that his metaverse promises to deliver.

Maybe the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche almost 150 years ago was as right about the modernity of his day as he would have been about our *postmodernity*, had he been alive to see it as we see it. He writes reflecting on his time in Sorrento:

I am overcome with fear when I consider the uncertainty of the horizon of modern civilisation. I praised with some shame the civilisation beneath the glass bell. At last, I took courage and threw myself into the open sea of the world.

Is that all it is, our civilisation, 'a glass bell' ... and the life we lead a kind of fire through which we are obliged to pass to find ourselves? What *do* we do with the realisation that apart from the climate emergency raging around us, below the surface on which we sit and stand and lie, underneath the quiet and silent exterior of the mountains and hills surrounding us—there are these brutal, physical, material convulsions of a former time which mirror back to us, viscerally remind us, of our human psychic landscapes. What do we *do* with the 'memories of a traumatic [historical past,] where, 'volcanic subterranean forces penetrate the sea of forgetting to return into the light of the sun'? Can we really believe, with Nietzsche, that it is

from such unlikely beginnings and sources, in his own words – that ‘a new amazing future will dawn’?

Or perhaps we need first to take a stroll down the novelist Marcel Proust’s memory lane in search for time lost, and there finally re-discover another kind of time another quality/essence of existence which actually matches the joyfulness and yes, even the playfulness so evident in the Proverbs/Wisdom reading:

I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race

In Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*, he pictures for us an innkeeper escorting the hero of the novel “to [come] watch the turbulent sea unchained, before the church.”

As we go down that path past Marcel Proust’s rustic Norman church, past the pomp and ceremony of the passing of Queen Elizabeth II’s Westminster Abbey and its outdated language; past the beauty and the dignity, and the genuine national and international outpouring of grief in the face of the death of such an exemplary leader; past perhaps the fading of a time and a monarchy which have outlived their purpose. What joyfulness, what playfulness, indeed what wisdom can we expect to discover here? And more pertinently—what “deep presence” can possibly be found there—*there* of all places?

A modern story told by John Eldridge in his book *The Journey of Desire* not only captures the pathos of our predicament very well, it also, I believe, furnishes us with a key to a door that seems to be locked to us. Of course, in these short moments, I can only read a précis of that wonderful fuller account.

Appropriately the parable concerns a sea lion – even in the midst of a massive storm – it might well have been basking contently on some rocky coast of Brittany, facing that same rustic, resilient Norman church described by Marcel Proust.

So, imagine the sea lion looking at us remembering a bygone day of struggle, of doubt even of despair. Imagine we are that hero accompanied by that host, invited to hear that story. My précis re-casts and adapts the story in the first person. I speak now as the Sea Lion.

You know there was a time when in my head at least... I had lost the sea. I truly believed I had come to live on a plateau so very far from the coast, so different, that I came to call it my desert. I was so long entrenched there I actually came to think I had always been this way. As you know once you have lived a certain way for a long time you come to make that way your home.

However, quite often in the evening, I somehow found high ground which elevated me above the burning sand. On the best of nights there—especially when the breeze shifted to the East—if I closed my eyes, I could pick up a faint smell of salt air. The aroma would linger, drive me wild and trigger dreams, such vivid dreams of twisting and turning and diving – to the point where when I beached on the rocks, I could actually hear the sound of breakers. Of course, it was my lost sea calling to me.

But even the best of dreams are just that – dreams. And the best of daydreams... the same. Reality – my reality – put an end to them all. The desert got the best of me stripped me of all pretence... its fury in the guise of howling dust storms left me ragged. Left me speechless. Despite years of desert life having taught me to turn my back against the wind, this was too much. In the sheer silence I gave up hope.

When... something quite remarkable happened. Three weeks after the wind had wreaked its utter devastation, I had a dream quite different from the others. This time the ocean filled my consciousness to such a degree, that its beauty and clarity were so vast and profound that it shone like an emerald. And this time when I swam in its depths, the waters around me shone like an emerald which turned into jade. And for the first time ever, I found myself in the company of other sea lions: diving, turning, spinning and twirling around me – and most surprising of all—they were playing and wanted me to play with them.

This time on my awakening, real tears were running down my face, as a steely resolve forged itself in my heart. I set my face to the east. And rather than just dreaming about who I was, for the first time, as best as a land based sealion could do, I walked not just self-talked in that direction.

Now when people meet me and ask me what on earth am I doing—I say, I am going to find the sea, the open sea, the ocean where I belong.

And I don't leave the conversation there. I return the favour with my own question: Where are you going, my friend?

So much for the sealion – we leave him , happy as Larry – whoever Larry was. As you know my wife Susanna and I were hoping to visit Sorrento where

Nietzsche had his great moment of insight. This was not to be, because of a broken and dislocated wrist which only now is almost healed. It was to be the highlight of the trip because it was there looking across to Vesuvius over the profile of the Isle of Ischia from the vantage point of Sorrento that Nietzsche offers his understanding to the world. Not to rescue us from the vast oceans of the cosmos (think *Interstellar*) but to give us the courage to venture into that great unknown and affirm the vastness of life rather than be covered by it. He writes (*Nietzsche to Rohde* June 16, 1878):

I am quietly waiting for the waves in which my poor friends are floundering to die down: if I pushed them into these waves – life is not in danger, I know that from experience; and if, here and there, friendship might be in danger – then we will serve the truth and say: ‘as yet, we have loved only a cloud of one another.

From our perspective tonight, it is very easy, wherever we are to be intimidated by the immensity of the cosmos. But only if we forget that we are never alone. We could so easily stumble over the word ‘alone,’ and not realise that the word itself exposes the lie for it also spells out “all-one;” in German, just in case we didn’t get the message, “All-ein” – “everything is one.” Everything is connected. Be assured if we put that semantic, semiotic exercise to a test, it will not be found wanting. Etty Hillesum, aged 29, who had suffered chronic depression and overcame it, tested and proved the claim, “I am not alone, all things are one” on a train on its way to Auschwitz. She had left all her thoughts in 12 exercise books, but now with a train full of mainly Jewish humanity on the way to their deaths, separated from those books, she only has a card to write on, which is now preserved in her estate. It reads: “We left the camp singing.” The card was tossed out of the train without any assurance it would ever be read.

From this we learn that the cosmos, the universe is a verse-song of joy. No need for a metaverse to find “deep presence.” No need for a sugar Daddy or a Sugar Mountain or even a Magic Mountain of Zuckerberg’s. We have the master worker to guide us.

I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race

That same Master worker in the guise of Jesus of Nazareth asks:

Are you tired, worn out, burned out on religion? Come to me get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to have a real rest. Walk with me, work with me, watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy on you. Keep company with me and you too will learn to live freely and lightly.

Dag Hammarskjöld knew what it was all about as he boarded that plane for the last time. He too had a vision of God as Artist

You take the pen –
and the lines dance.
You take the flute –
and the notes shimmer.
You take the brush –
and the colours sing.
So all things have meaning and beauty
in that space beyond time where you are.

How, then, can I hold back anything from you?

No wonder Friedrich Nietzsche ascribed to the Artist the highest place of honour, above the Philosopher – even above the Saint – but did recommend that we think and act like all three of them.

