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Diverse Ways of Knowing

Contribution to GTI Forum [Big History and Great Transition](#)

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In graduate school in the 1980s, I was fortunate to land with an academic adviser who had a keen interest in the “new sciences.” We set up an interdisciplinary Institute for the Study of Alternative Paradigms in Education, attracting a group of science and humanities scholars with a shared interest in figuring out how the stories coming to us from quantum mechanics, chaos theory, the new biology, and other emerging ideas might inform our disparate research epistemologies and fields of practice. An intrepid explorer of the inner world and an unrepentant mystic, I had stumbled upon Fritjof Capra’s *Tao of Physics* and Gary Zukav’s *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* and awakened to the notion that the study of science might hold something for me after all, having had nothing but dismal and uninspired chemistry classes in my youth.

Under the influence of Max Weber’s assertion that the Enlightenment, with its laser focus on empiricism and logic, had brought about the “disenchantment” of the world—the loss of magic, mystery, and creative connections that had given rise to the rapacious exploitation of nature for human ends—I read a number of books with “re-enchantment” in their titles: *The Reenchantment of the World* (Morris Berman), *The Reenchantment of Art* (Suzi Gablik), and *The Reenchantment of Science* (David Ray Griffin). To Suzi Gablik, the task of the “re-enchantment project” was “to cease to be hypnotized by the rational bias of Western society, through developing a more open model of the psyche, so that as a culture we can recover the ability to ‘dream forward’ and recover the power and importance of vision.”¹

The number of books on re-enchantment outpaced my literary binge, but I became convinced that we moderns must find our way into what Helena Norberg-Hodge aptly terms our *ancient futures*, futures that do not discard the inquiry, reason, and logic that has made modern life reasonably comfortable for many, but futures capacious enough for the reanimation of the

sensory world and a relational ontology that is *organismic* (an understanding of the planet as a living organism) rather than *mechanistic* (a view that “denies to nature any purpose, capacity for self-movement, or interiority”).² Futures which overcome the dualisms that have shaped modern education and, hence, consciousness. Futures that summon up the wonder, wisdom, reverence, and awe in our ancestral histories, which, in the wide scale of time, constitute the greater part of our Big History.

The great discovery of contemporary science, say Brian Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker, “is that the universe is not simply a place, but a story—a story in which we are immersed, to which we belong, and out of which we arose.”³ They and their colleagues who consider themselves “postmodern cosmologists” articulate a new story emerging from science itself, drawn from the descriptions of matter generated by quantum physics, from the power of cosmological observations enabled by advanced telescopes, and from the intricacies of the plant world revealed by the electron microscope and time lapse photography. Yet, even the postmodern cosmologists take us only to the infinitesimal dot, the nucleus of the Big Bang, and hesitate to step into the chasm of First Causes—understandably so, as the notion of an initial creative force can be a slippery slope into dogma and doctrine. It is enough, we must assume, to acknowledge our common source in the “great flaring forth of light and matter” from which all life forms eventually emerged.⁴

I find the Tantrik Cycle of Creation *mythos* (Brahmacakra) to most closely meet my own criteria (albeit speculative) for “awakened rationality”—a form of rationality that does not exclude intuitive discernment.⁵ In this narrative, Pure Consciousness exists in a state of equilibrium, containing within it an infinite, immanent creative power. When the creative force manifests itself, the cosmic cycle is initiated, and everything—“galaxies, stars, planets, rocks, bacteria, plants, animals, and human beings”—evolves and exists in various states of vibrational frequency as a thought projection of the Cosmic Mind.⁶ Not only does this particular mythos embrace the modern evolutionary synthesis, it is consistent with emergent explanations of the universe as a self-organizing, intelligent system (or system of systems). What sets Brahmacakra apart from most scientific explanations is the cyclical evolution of Mind, the notion that there is a “return of individual minds to that same state of Pure Consciousness after further evolutionary development of those individual minds.” Language fails us in attempts to describe Pure

Consciousness, though it is said to be a state of infinite bliss beyond the individual mind; its existence is inferred by reports of the waves of bliss experienced by meditators when “having merged one’s mind into that state, one later regains one’s individual mind and is again capable of mental experience.” Hence, the disciplines of Yoga (from Sanskrit *yoga-s*, literally “to yoke,” or “union”) signifying the aim of uniting body, mind, and spirit.

To circle back to my inquiries into educational paradigms begun almost forty years ago, how might this vitalized “new story” of the universe, a cosmology that integrates both rational and contemplative ways of knowing, and that embodies a truly Big History of the universe and our place in it, find its way into education? We must begin with ontology, and a shift from perceiving the human being as an isolated individual, separate from the rest of creation whose destiny is to manipulate, control, and predict nature to one who is deeply connected with the “pluriverse” of beings—plants, animals, and animate and inanimate matter. Also at the center of the educational principles that flow from such a “neohumanist” perspective is the notion of “epistemological pluralism,” which requires that we look beyond the contributions of modern Western-trained scientists to Indigenous people and others who have lived in harmony with their biosystems, for forms of knowledge such as traditional ecological knowledge, intergenerational knowledge, ancestral wisdom and mythic insights, narrative knowing, embodied and intuitional knowing, a spectrum of the ways of knowing that have been marginalized under the regime of a modernity governed by capitalism and colonialism. Recognition of the necessary ontological and epistemological shifts, and their extraordinary implications for basically everything we think we know about the education of young people, is necessary, I believe, to the project of cultivating our “big history” and effecting a “great transition.”

Endnotes

1. Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 48.
2. John Cobb as quoted in David Ray Griffin, ed., *The Reenchantment of Science* (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 1988), 103.
3. Brian Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Journey of the Universe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 2.
4. Ibid., 5.
5. P. R. Sarkar, *The Liberation of Intellect – Neohumanism* (Calcutta: A'nanda Marga Pracárika, 1982).
6. Acharya Ratnesh, *Microvita: The Cosmic Seeds of Life* (Mainz, Germany: Dharma Verlag, 1989), 21.

About the Author



Kathleen Kesson is Professor Emerita of Teaching, Learning and Leadership in the School of Education at Long Island University Brooklyn. She is the former Director of Teacher Education at Goddard College and was the founding Director of the John Dewey Project on Progressive Education at the University of Vermont. She has published numerous books and articles on democracy and education, curriculum, critical theory, and spirituality and education. She is currently a Global Affiliate with the GUND Institute for Environment at the University of Vermont, and deeply engaged with statewide efforts to promote school/community partnerships around a “just transition.” Her next book is tentatively titled *Neohumanist Education: Theory and Practice for the Anthropocene*. She holds a doctorate in education from Oklahoma State University.

About the Publication

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