

Rev. Linda Simmons
Finding Common Ground
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Richard Rohr is an American Author and Franciscan Friar. He writes, “[K]nowing is not based on reason or deduction, but on communion. . . . Knowing is intimate, and this intimacy is transformational. We come to resemble that which we know. . . .”¹

Provocative words. What does it mean, we come to resemble that which we know? It seems to me to be linked to identity, this resembling what we know.

Identity is defined as the fact of being who or what a person is. I would change that just slightly and say it is who or what a person thinks she or he is. And to form an opinion of self, one must first be located, positioned, live in relation to something or someone. One must be reflected back.

For us in the West, self is deeply rooted in an individuality that suggests that I am who I am because of choices I have made separate from community, nature and nurture. I am distinct and as such, I strive for further distinction as a way to get ahead, be honored, be recognized, and be seen.

This type of identity has brought us much progress. Individuals seeking recognition and personal excellence achieve great things. Some would call this progress and hail it as good at all costs. This type of individualism and progress has brought great advancement and saved and improved lives and has also brought us great suffering, disconnection, alienation, degradation of environment and inequities between.

So many long for more connection, meaning, more purpose and hope and a language of reverence for the world we live in. We so often cannot construct it from the building blocks of identity we have.

It seems in many ways that the phoenix of this identity has flown too close to the sun and its ashes are scattered on the ground we walk upon, the ground we are so used to securely standing upon on and seeing one another occupy with all of our political differences. Now, our footsteps, our individualism, our rhetoric of us and them are creating a rent in the land into which love, compassion, humanity and hope is tumbling and its echoes haunt us as they fall into the pit of our making.

There is you and me, us and them, those who voted for and support this administration and those who do not and we are moving so far from one another we can barely look one another’s eyes any more.

¹ <https://cac.org/author/richardrohr>

Is there another source of identity that we can reach toward that can restore us to one another now, when we need each other most, when the world, when the earth, when those suffering and without, when the numbers of those who are marginalized and being further pushed out of the ability to live with simple dignity increase: another child, another mother, another father without access to clean water, without a bathroom to use that safely reflects identity, a street to walk down without risk of being shot because of skin color? We need each other now more than ever. There are divides that must be crossed that this individuality we know is too depleted to forge the rivers.

I found a most unexpected light and offer of another source of hope when speaking to Andre Spears recently about the constellations. He is reading a book called Hamlet's Mill, by Giogio de Santillana & Herta von Dechend² in which they write about how people throughout millennia have looked up and seen the stars; the same stars we look up and see now. And when we look up, we look for patterns in the sky that tell stories; stories that guide us into our lives, into the possibility of going on together.

Hamlet's Mill is a book about people looking at the stars and telling stories about them throughout time, as far back as the Mayans. The book suggest that they are led to tell stories about them because the stars have a pattern, because there is a logic and mechanic process involved in their movement and rhythm that can be relied on. There is a science to the stars. Right now, Leo is the constellation rising in the west. In a month's time, it will in Virgo.

We look to the stars and see wonder and our own smallness and connection and we also see the infinite in all this clockwork. And we see ourselves reflected too. They are not only the very far away, the impossible, the cannot ever be reached. They are the stuff of our mythology, the stories through which we make ourselves exist and go on together. As Joseph Campbell writes, "[W]hat we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive. That's what it's all finally about, and that's what these clues called myths help us find within ourselves. Myths are clues to the spiritual potentialities of the human life. Myth helps you put your mind in touch with this experience of being alive."³

Andre has a phone app that when he points it to the sky right away shows where we are in the constellations and draws out which constellation is closer. The one that came up when he pointed it through the roof was Pegasus, the horse; Pegasus, the winged horse in Greek Mythology.

From his birth to his death, Pegasus was a mysterious creature symbolizing the divine inspiration or the journey to heaven, since riding him was synonymous to "flying" to the heavens.

² Giogio de Santillana & Herta von Dechend, Hamlet's Mill (Jaffrey, David R. Godine, 1969).

³ Joseph Campbell, The Power of Myth (New York, Random House, 1988).

Pegasus was represented as a goodhearted, gentle creature, always eager to help.

For his service and loyalty, Zeus honored him with a special immortality turning Pegasus into a constellation on the last day of his life.

As Giogio de Santillana & Herta von Dechend in Hamlet's Mill suggest, the stars with their regularity and patterns birthed an early cosmology which was a preliterate science which also birthed myths which birth us, our creation stories, or as Paul Tillich calls them, our ground of being and ultimately our stories of self and thereby, going back to our opening from Richard Rohr, what we come to resemble.

We are made from stardust they say. As Richard Rohr said in our beginning quote, Knowing is based on communion. . . . is intimate, and this intimacy is transformational.”

What have you been in communion with lately that has transformed you? Do we take time for communion anymore with that which is around us?

The topic of this sermon is Common Ground. Where is our common ground with one another these days? Where are the patterns and regularity that we rely on to create the stories we tell one another, the stories that bind, that build, that make us one people, that put us in touch with the experience of being alive? What can we rely on in these times?

Surely the stars still follow their patterns, the earth still turns on its axis, but what is there within and through us that we can reach toward in these times when the ground is shaking and more and more of those morals and people we care about are being marginalized, that we can reach toward to be in communion with that can both restore us and that we can come to resemble and know we are both healing and coming closer to our vision for ourselves in doing so?

Here is something to consider. In the course of the year, as the earth moves around the sun every twelve months, it comes into alignment, once a month, with one of 12 different constellations that together form the great circle of constellations around both the earth and the sun known as the Zodiac.

Similarly, the axis on which planet earth spins once a day, also rotates on itself approximately once every 24,000 years, so that the earth's axis points to a different constellation in the cosmic belt of the Zodiac's 12 constellations about every 2,000 years. We are entering the age of Aquarius which follows the 2,000 year age of Pisces, etc. Things turn, things evolve.

This reminds me too of the Buddhist concept of time. A Buddhist eon is 31 trillion, 40 billion years. For the Buddhist and Hindus individuality is not the highest indicator of one's success, achievement or merit. It is rather how one has contributed to one's

culture/time/surroundings. It is more of a species time that one lives in than an ego time,⁴ which allows one to let go of the race to be busy as a badge of honor, the race to excel at all costs.

As Joanna Macy writes in her book Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy. "The expression "act your age" takes on a different meaning when we see ourselves as part of an amazing flow of life that started on this planet more than three and a half billion years ago. We come from an unbroken lineage that has survived five mass extinctions. Life has a powerful creative energy and manifests a powerful desire to continue. When we align ourselves with the well-being of our world, we allow that desire and creative energy to act through us."⁵

When I fall into star time, and imagine myself as star dust, literally made up of the carbon, nitrogen and oxygen, iron and sulfur that a dying star gives off when it explodes and falls to earth, I feel differently about what I should do in a day, not that nothing should get done.

But some of things on my list definitely get done with a friend or two after that meditation on connectivity and universal synchronicity. Astrophysicist Karel Schrijver writes "We have stuff in us as old as the universe, and then some stuff that landed here maybe only a hundred years ago. And all of that mixes in our bodies (which change and regenerate all the time)... Nature is not outside us. We are nature."⁶

Where does this leave us my friends? Filled with some wonder I hope. Tuned in and with our apps turned off I hope, except that star app, that one is too cool. And still with the question, what can we rely on, what pattern can we lean against to shape ourselves with that has enough strength and regularity to guide and hold us in this storm.

I believe we can rely on beauty my friends. The beauty of the universe within and around us and the reliability of its movement. The stars we look up to and see. Pegasus winging his way to heaven still.

That awe and beauty of nature lives within us too, as we are made of stardust, and not once and for all the astrophysicists say, but continually in a biological conversation with the stars as our cells die and are reborn, generate and are regenerated. We are part of nature. We are part of the beauty we seek.

If when we look at the other we could seek one another's beauty first, as common ground, what would change for us? If when we met another we noticed the star dust within them first, and after we chatted about what they love and if their children and parents are well

⁴ Heinrich Zimmer, Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2017), 21.

⁵ Joanna Macy. Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy, New World Library. Kindle Edition, 94.

⁶ <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/01/150128-big-bang-universe-supernova-astrophysics-health-space-ngbooktalk/>

and what they dream about for themselves and those they love, only after that if we talked about who we all voted for- might there be enough ground to stand on or maybe even the ground beneath us might have changed, been planted with something new that we slipped from our pockets or conscientiousness; some stardust that feel from our sleeves, some drop of carbon or hydrogen or something that might nurture another kind of seed, way forward, conversation with someone else down the way?

Be the beauty you seek. It is in and all around us. This is our ground. We are part of it and it is part of us.

Everyone who looks up at the stars sees the wonder. Everyone feels the pull.

We are still one people, made of stardust. And one day returning to it.

May the time in between be filled with commitments to add more beauty to each moment, each conversation, each act of resistance, each act of love.

Amen.