

# THE NATURE OF OUR CONSCIOUSNESS

Orla O'Reilly Hazra

When we meet a 'stranger' for the first time, we are often asked: 'Where are you from, who is your family, what work you do'? People are interested in our sets of relationships, interests and responsibilities. We respond by telling them our stories, our narratives. Depending on the cultural heritage and bioregion we were born into, the mindset shaping our story-telling is anthropocentric or integral and determines our structures of attention and relevance, our framework. Philosopher Bernard Lonnergan addresses the importance of considering the all-pervasive mindset behind our issues: 'How indeed, is a mind to become conscious of its own bias when that bias springs from a communal flight from understanding and is supported by the whole texture of a civilization?'<sup>1</sup> My article here describes some of our efforts to renew the integral consciousness of our students through various exercises and reflections grounded in an overall context of our evolutionary universal *narrative*.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Bernard Lonnergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1958, p. xv

2 This course was team taught from 2014 to 2016 by Prashant Olalekar, SJ, Director of the Department of Interreligious Studies (DIRS); Candice Menezes, MASW, MPhil; and Orla O'Reilly Hazra, PhD, LCADC. In November 2016, we offered a national level course to a group of 61 teachers of Jesuit schools (primary and secondary), sponsored by the Jesuit Educational Association and the Jesuit Higher Education Association, South Asia, at Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, the Pontifical Institute of Philosophy and Religion in Pune, in which we included our colleague Barry Rodrigue, PhD, International coordinator of the International Big History Association. There are plans to expose more teachers and administrators to this

*The Nature (Quality) of our Consciousness*

Individually, many of our identities are shaped by nationality, religion, gender, and class. We have an idealized image of adulthood as being rational and autonomous. Collectively, our community identity is made by the industrial conquest of lands and peoples. As a result, many relationships are often left out of our identity, such as humans on a ‘lower’ economic scale or following a ‘different’ lifestyle, let alone the natural world of soil, birds, flowers, water, elephants, rice, mangoes, and mosquitos.

Such faulty identity is characterized by a sense of anomie, or fragmentation and separation from the world, and is linked to social injustices, spiritual alienation, and global unsustainability. How did we get so out-of-touch with our surroundings?

Many schools teach courses in values, gender, social justice, and environment; they require students do mandatory internships in social service; and they encourage global attitudes with mottos like, ‘men and women for and with others’. Issues are discussed and a moral lens is provided, all in the hope that students will somehow integrate the data and create a responsible worldview. However, the mindset behind the issues is not addressed – the sense of alienation and separation – and the overall context remains as a silent backdrop in a system with endless academic silos.

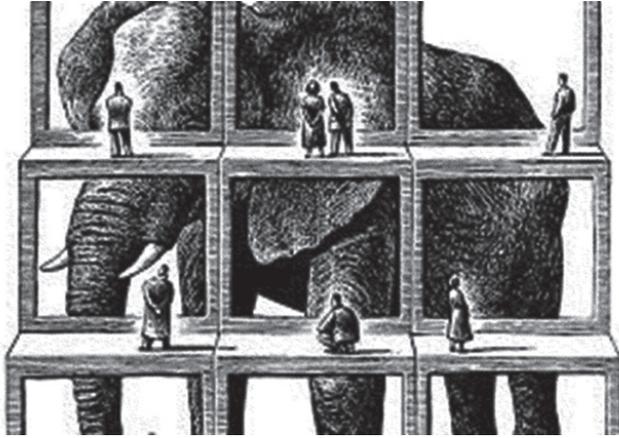
A contemplative view of life has vanished. We are like the bird in Rabindranath Tagore’s story, ‘The Parrot’s Training’, who dies after being fed a steady diet of book pages by the Raj’s men, who think that they are feeding the bird ‘knowledge’ instead of just paper.<sup>3</sup> Although a product of Enlightenment thinking, the artificial duality of ‘mind’ and ‘body’ has contributed to this alienation, and paradoxically inhibits enlightenment!

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instructional technique across India and beyond. We also are presenting it at the World Union of Jesuit Alumni conference in Cleveland, Ohio on 1 July 2017. For more details, please see Prashant Olalekar’s paper in this edition of the journal, as well as the editorial.

3 Rabindranath Tagore, ‘The Parrot’s Training’, in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Volume II, *Plays, Stories, Essays*, ed. Sisir Kumar Das, New Delhi: Paulists Press, 1985, pp. 272–274.

The ‘elephant in the living room’ is a term for problems left unaddressed – they are in plain sight but no one wants to talk about them. This sense of alienation and separation is the elephant. The issue is hard to see because we are standing so close to the elephant that we cannot see the whole animal, just parts of it through the lens of our disciplines.



*Figure 1: Observing the quality of the ‘Cartesian Elephant’ by detached views. Source: Google Images.*

What is lacking is a holistic view of the world. We must reconstruct this web of connection in order to overcome the alienation and separation. Our present dilemma is well articulated by theologian and eco-philosopher Thomas Berry:

Our present urgency is to recover a sense of the primacy of the Universe as our fundamental context, and the primacy of the Earth as the matrix from which life has emerged and on which life depends. Recovering this sense is essential to establishing the framework for mutually enhancing human-Earth relations for the flourishing of life on the planet.<sup>4</sup>

Berry suggested a four-fold wisdom conversation to heal and transform this mindset, our sense of anomie. It is firstly, an interdisciplinary integration, transformation, healing, and understanding through the integral wisdoms of science, religion, women, and indigenous people.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as a Sacred Community*, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006, p. 86.

Secondly, it is a transformation of life practices in our schools, family, work and recreation,<sup>5</sup> consciously remembering our context.

*The Nature (Context) of our Consciousness*

Since 2014, the Department of Interreligious Studies at St Xavier's College in Mumbai (India) has merged Berry's four-fold model with the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm, an educational framework employed in Jesuit schools around the world. This educational model provides a dynamic interaction of context, experience, reflection, action and evaluation. Currently, through our style of consciousness, context is interpreted as 'who' and is issue-based.

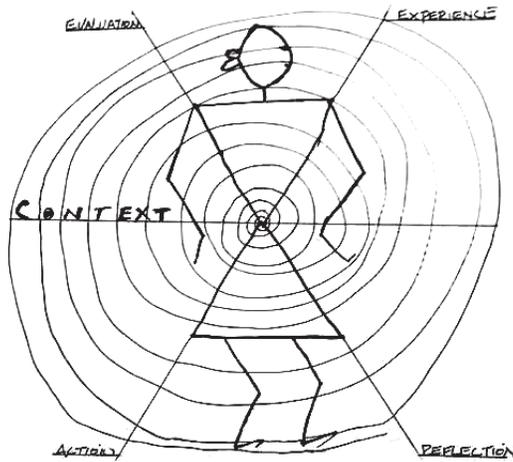


Figure 2: Schematic of the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm by Orla Hazra, Department of Interreligious Studies, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai (India), 2017.

5 A more detailed discussion of the need to transform education is outlined in my following works. Orla Hazra, *Evoking the Spirit to Practice Religiously: Somatic and Narrative Ways of Knowing for Transformative Learning in a Living Tradition*, Ph.D. dissertation, School of Religion and Religious Education, Fordham University, New York (USA); idem, 'The Universe Story: Fostering a Faith in the Integrity of Creation and Responsible Life Practice', *Krystu Jyoti*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2010, pp. 353–373; idem, 'Awakening the Cartesian Dreamer: Universal Values in Solidarity with an Evolutionary Universe', *Journal of Dharma*, vol. 37, no. 2, April–June 2012, pp. 147–168; idem, 'Sponsoring Gaian Citizenship through the Pathways of Somatic and Narrative Ways of Knowing', in *Cultivating Pathways of Creative Research*, ed. Ananta Kumar Giri, Delhi: Primus Books (forthcoming); idem, 'Tarumitra: Friends of Trees: Understanding and Practicing an Integrated Cosmology', in *From Big Bang to Galactic Civilizations: A Big History Anthology*, Volume II, *Education and Understanding: Big History around the World*, eds. Barry Rodrigue, Leonid Grinin and Andrey Korotayev, Delhi: Primus Books, 2016, pp. 191–202.

In our course, ‘Awaken to Cosmic Compassion’ (ACC), we have been especially active in renewing and developing this pedagogy. Our course falls under the Honours Curriculum, so students take it as an elective. Twenty hours are spent in the classroom, along with an intensive three-day field experience. Student journals are submitted bi-weekly and reflect their struggles of awakening to a wider reality. Classroom discussion, done in circle, and journal writings address cultural values, hidden biases, social injustice, and ecological devastation. The students integrate what they learn from other courses in academic silos. It results in their questioning of the current model of education that inadvertently fosters alienation and stress. This understanding and experience of being integral and interconnected serves to facilitate their change in consciousness. Knowing they are ‘of others’ they became motivated to be persons ‘for others’.



*Figure 3: Integral Elephant, co-creating the future. Artist Akshaya Kumar Barkli; colour painting with Orla Hazra.*

Let us now consider some of the effects of teaching the Universe Story, which we present through the five experiential lenses of Ignatian pedagogy.

### Context

Students are introduced to the Universe Story through a deep-systems science approach.<sup>6</sup> As a form of Big History, we structure the course into eight threshold moments, from the Big Bang to the Anthropocene.<sup>7</sup> Unlike traditional courses in evolution, science history or environmental studies, which are taught in a variety of academic silos, our approach includes the emotional and poetic impact of facing a 13.8 billion year journey.

We use the film, *Journey of the Universe*, which is ‘paused’ at the threshold moments for experiential exercises, like Cosmic Movement, art, journaling, integration, reflection and discussion (see Prashant Olaleker’s article on Cosmic Movement in this edition of the journal).<sup>8</sup> The cosmic journey conveyed dramatically through a closing ritual - the Cosmic Walk.

The Cosmic Walk is a ritual reflection of our ongoing 13.8 billion year journey. It evokes a sense of the vastness of time and space in the universe, as well as a sense of sequence. We schedule the ritual at the end of our three-day intensives, after students have had some time to integrate the material. The design of the Cosmic Walk is made of fifty meters of rope (each three-metres representing a billion years) arranged in the shape of an open-ended coil. The events of our universe are marked along the coil, according to the scale / time-frame, and tagged with a candle. A *reader* narrates the story, beginning with the

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6 *The Universe Story* is the name of a book by Brian Swimme (evolutionary cosmologist) and Thomas Berry (Passionist priest/geologist), as well as a term given by a global movement of people inspired by the wisdom inherent in our 13.8 billion year journey together. Thomas Berry, *Dream of the Earth: The Universe Story*, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988; Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era*, San Francisco: Harper, 1992.

7 Big History is part of a wide field also known as Cosmic Evolution, Megahistory, and Universal Studies. It serves as a framework for all knowledge and is an emerging system of pedagogy. It is also a movement of big history professionals <[www.ibha.org](http://www.ibha.org)>. See Barry Rodrigue’s article on the subject in this edition of the journal.

8 Brian Thomas Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Journey of the Universe*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011; idem, *Journey of the Universe*, dirs. David Kennard and Patsy Northcutt, KQED-PBS, 2011. See Mary Evelyn Tucker’s article on the subject in this edition of the journal.

Big Bang, represented by a large candle in the centre of the coil. A *walker* lights a candle from the original flame and, as each event of our cosmic history is narrated, s/he lights the candle beside the event. Arriving in the present moment, emerging from the labyrinth of time, the walker announces: ‘Today, I know the story of myself’.<sup>9</sup>



*Plate 1: Students reflect during the Cosmic Walk. Xavier College Retreat Centre, Khandala , Maharashtra, India. Photograph by Orla Hazra, 2016.*

### *Experience*

The common response of each participant after listening to and meditating on their integral origins was one of deep awe, wonder and reverence. The journal entries revealed that students were able to see their bodies and themselves and all around them as part of an integral process. As Renisha wrote:

What struck me the most was being told to ‘think beyond what we see.’ The Big Bang theory has never affected me the way it did today. We are all interrelated, we have emerged from the same stars. Thus my view has changed dramatically when it comes to looking at the

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<sup>9</sup> The design of the Cosmic Walk is attributed to have been developed by Sr Miriam MacGillis, OP, in support of her eco-literacy work at Genesis Farm, Blairstown, New Jersey.

problems of the world. The meditation did help us to delve deeper. I did notice that I should listen to myself and nature even more.<sup>10</sup>

This profound awareness gave our students a lens through which they could view life and initiate a significant shift from mere information to holistic transformation. Their consciousness was changed. The importance of adopting other teaching practices honouring somatic and narrative ways of knowing to transform consciousness in school classrooms were also conveyed in journals and evaluations. In other words, it grounded them in the context of an evolutionary universe, awakening what can be considered *cosmic compassion*.

### *Reflection*

Indigenous peoples have long understood the Earth to be at the base of their existence. So, the first day of the course begins with a field trip to the Reay Road slum, where a group of Pardhi live who have been displaced from their lands of origin because of ‘development’. The Pardhi are a tribe in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh in west-central India. The Pardhi and other ‘denotified’ tribes have a particularly difficult time reclaiming rights as a group amongst other indigenous people of India, because of their earlier classification as criminals under colonial rule.

Student discussions reflect the unconsciousness of their own bias and lack of understanding of ‘the whole texture’ of their civilization. Students exhibited interest and pity, along with comments resentful of the ‘government’ for not supporting the tribes. But, in the process, they realized they had inherited lots of prejudices about the Pardhi (thieves, lazy, uneducated, addicts, etc.) from their own family and community. Student awareness of displacement issues or how their own personal habits of consumption result in hardship for others and the land were not evident. They were shocked by the garbage dumped in front of the slum and became aware of how the Pardhis are looked upon as the garbage of a ‘developed society’.

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<sup>10</sup> Renisha, November 2014, Department of Interreligious Studies (DIRS), St. Xavier’s College, Mumbai, India.

However, following the two days devoted to addressing unexamined assumptions, students were able to challenge culture in another way – they were able to see the connections between alienation, injustice, and unsustainability:

The integration was very important . . . . [It] helped me to join the dots much better . . . joining these dots, seeing how (I hate to say this) but (and admit this) that we are really the pawns in the hands of the very rich.<sup>11</sup>

### *Action*

It is difficult to trace the awakening process and various actions taken by students regarding change to their lifestyles and mindsets in a quantifiable way outside the course. However, the qualitative shifts of alienation, awakening and connection were evident in their journals, the pre- and post-course questionnaires, and the mid- and post-course evaluations. The quality of the final projects was indicative of this transformation.

... I also realize that I cannot continue my speech of ‘them’ and ‘us’ because we really are one, and we need to fight not only for the marginalized but also for Mother Earth. If I sit cross legged and decide that there is nothing I can do for Mother Earth, whose metals, atoms, chemicals are that which sustain and have made me, isn’t it rather a bit selfish and foolish to be doing?<sup>12</sup>

I have the role of a ‘mid-wife’ to return what I have taken from Mother Earth, to bring back the trees, water so that all generations can cherish her once again’.<sup>13</sup>

### *Evaluation*

Students observed the contrast between the ACC honours course and two semester-long mandatory college courses, a Special Course (SPC) on ‘Environment’ and another on ‘Values’. Again, the difference confirms the inadequacy of traditional courses that have an overload of

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11 Kala, December 2014, DIRS, St. Xavier’s College, Mumbai, India.

12 Vedika, October 2015, DIRS, St. Xavier’s College, Mumbai, India.

13 Shweta, December 2014, DIRS, St. Xavier’s College, Mumbai, India.

information and do nothing to animate the social energy necessary to address our issues. As one of the students wrote, contrasting the courses:

The environment course that I took for a whole semester, it seemed detached from me. Every lecture I would think, we are talking about the same things, the Narmada bachao, the Delhi pollution, Mumbai garbage but there was no connect. Internally as a person I took it in like Science ... . It never sensitized me. I felt nothing. Nobody wanted to learn environment like any other subject. Rather than cramming the book we would have liked field trips, or a deeper connect to the environment.

The Honours course (ACC) was far different. No books (not compulsory, at least) and it shared a bigger story a bigger history with me. The environment course tells me to protect the environment to stop the depletion of resources, else it will affect our health and we cannot survive. This is still selfish in a way (the underlying words for me sound like, let's leave it now and rape nature later, after it revives itself). The 'Be the Dream' course is more selfless. It tells people that we have all evolved from the same cosmic radiation of the big bang. So what is in me is there in every entity of the universe. We are one integrated body. Hurting the environment is like snipping one's toes off and saying my hands are not going to hurt or be affected. But it does hurt ... the entire body mourns in the pain. It established a sense of equality where all beings of the cosmos are the same as me. So I cannot choose their fate, by harming them.

My classmates never regularly attended the SPC course before either. A night before the exam people went about asking for Photocopies, name of the book to study etc. So the purpose seemed defeated.

I am aware that all my SPC teachers had designed their course with the best interest, however the students never did pay heed to that. ACC is one such course that could change a capitalist like me into thinking about inclusive

development without harming the nature. I do hope my juniors benefit from the course. <sup>14</sup>

The subject matter of the final presentations was determined by the students based on their interests and inspiration. Some joined to develop a multi-pronged programme of intervention to empower the Pardhi tribe at Reay Road. The rest were individual projects, ranging from deep ecology in conversation with the Upanishads to ‘the big history of cashmere coats’ (tracing the origin of the goat, the bioregion, the coat-making and trade history, the changes with industrial farming practices, goat rearing, climate change etc.). Current issues such as farmer suicides and its links with chemical farming and Monsanto, the mysterious leap from unicellular to multi-cellular organisms, and our digestive systems, as well as photo evidence of different attitudes to ecology between northern nomadic tribes and local Mumbai students, all indicate the breadth and depth to which the students plunged.

### *Conclusion*

Our course, ‘Awakening to Cosmic Compassion’ (ACC) expands student notions of ‘social’ by re-grounding the nature of their consciousness in our primary context (our 13.8 billion year journey together). Students are contextually ‘re-membered’ – no longer ‘cosmic orphans’. The experience allows them to reflect on issues in an integral way and understand that they are part of the global bio/psycho/social/spiritual problem, but more importantly and inspiringly, are also the solution, through right action.

By what miracle  
Does this cracker  
Made from Kansas wheat,  
This cheese ripened in French caves,  
This fig, grown and dried near Ephesus,  
Turn into Me?  
My eyes,

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14 Shweta, December 2014, DIRS, St. Xavier’s College, Mumbai, India.

My hands,<sup>15</sup>  
My cells, organs, juices, thoughts?

Am I not then Kansas wheat  
And French cheese  
And Smyrna figs?  
Figs, no doubt,  
The ancient Prophets ate?<sup>16</sup>

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15 In our ACC class, we read this poem before our Cosmic meals (breakfast, lunch and dinner) but have changed the foods and their source to include the local Indian bioregions we were about to ingest and become – rice from Maharashtra, wheat from Gujarat, etc.

16 Judith Morley, in *Earth Prayers: 365 Prayers, Poems, and Invocations from Around the World*, New York: Harper Collins, 1991, p. 357.