

A Reflection in Response to the Sacred Universe Award
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A king was once given a gift of two falcons, which he turned over to the care of his falconer. Soon the king would arise each morning and walk to the portico to watch a falcon in flight. How easily it would glide on the invisible wind, swoop to snatch its prey or soar upward and seem to disappear in the morning sun.

One day the king summoned the falconer. "Tell me," he asked, "were there not *two* falcons given as gift?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," replied the falconer, "but the second refuses to fly. It does nothing but sit on a branch all day. It is not ill, its wings are intact, its appetite is fine, yet with all our coaxing, it refuses to fly."

The king thought for a moment, then said, "Go speak with the farmer. He is a simple but wise man. Perhaps he will have a solution to the problem."

The next morning the king was doubly delighted as he watched two falcons ride the invisible currents of the wind, swoop to snatch their prey, then seem to disappear as they soared upward toward the sun. Summoning the falconer, the king instructed him, "Go and ask the farmer what he did to solve the mystery that the best of falconers could not solve."

And so the falconer visited the farmer. "How is it," he asked, "that you were able to do with this falcon what no one else could accomplish?"

"It was simple," replied the farmer. "I sawed off the branch.* (*I first encountered this story in the video *Why Walk When You Can Fly?* by Isha Judd.)

We smile at this story because we can so readily connect with the experience. There have been times in all of our lives when a saw has been laid to our comfortable perch. The branch that held us in the illusion of predictability, safety, and security, suddenly gave way and we found ourselves in an unsought free-fall.

And while we can relate to this tale individually, I would like to unpack it in a way that allows us to see it in the context of what we are about this evening – an occasion to reflect upon our relationship with the Sacred Universe and to try to discern what the Sacred Universe may be asking of us. It is not far-fetched to say that as a species our

branch has been severed and we are experiencing among ourselves and in our world the tremors of free-fall.

We know that the dynamic underpinning the continual emergence of our Sacred Universe is the evolutionary impulse, and we know now that we can consciously engage that impulse. Together, as members of the same species, constituents of the same morphic field, full of both uncertainty and hope, we move forward as a whole, as evolutionaries, toward a future that we envision will ensure not only the survival but the vitality of ourselves – “ourselves” meaning all the interconnected relationships with Earth and our fellow species that are essential for life. We know that there will be the pain of breakdown that always comes with evolution, but our own longing and hope is that we will experience the amazement of breakthrough as well. In the meantime we live in the gap – that space left after our branch has been severed and falls away, in that split second in which we sense the dropping away of what is known, but have not yet taken flight.

We know also that the collective, communal aspects of our lives are nested in the personal, individual level of development. It was the individual prokaryote that became the eukaryote. It was a single chlorophyll molecule that first captured light from the sun. The first hominid that stood upright – responding to the Spirit’s pressure from within to evolve – paved the way for the rest of us.

The evolution of the collective and communal is nested in the evolution of the individual and personal, but while in the past cultural development seems to have proceeded like the swing of a pendulum, going from an era of individual development back to one of collective, then individual to collective, and so on, now our ongoing emergence demands that individual and collective development simultaneously. This is one of the shifts that have occurred in our time.

I would like to spend a few moments examining the fated falcon’s free-fall to see what insights may be helpful to guide us at this moment in our time in which we seek to participate as consciously as possible in the evolution of the Sacred Universe. Of course there is always the option to allow only our reptilian brain to engage in such moments (and thank God they do engage in such moments). But we also have the option to transcend, to strive for “the more,” to operate out of a higher consciousness to which we have access by virtue of our being born not only of flesh but of Spirit.

A question: If we choose to avail ourselves to higher consciousness, to evolve consciously, what are the opportunities and gifts present in the experience of free-fall?

First, I would like to suggest that – as frightening as it is – the moment of free-fall is also a moment of release from that which has kept us bound. In the experience we are

released to once again engage consciously and imaginatively in cosmogenesis. Perhaps as never before, we can experience the stirring, the pressure of the Spirit within ourselves, awakening our impulse to transcend, inviting and challenging us to emerge in new-born creativity.

Most often I think what keeps us clinging to our perches – and usually this is not conscious – is fear. But the gift in the free-fall is that we are released from the fear that prevented our flying. Whatever fear has kept us perched is gone and we find ourselves in flight. What a gift! We have overcome our terror – whether we wanted to or not! Hopefully we discover that when we engage the fear, when we do not allow it to overwhelm us but attend to it contemplatively, we can move beyond it and are released from the power it has wielded over us. How wonderful to discover that couched in every experience of fear we find our next invitation to fly!

Another way to say this is that in the moment the branch gives way and your talons no longer have anything to which they can cling, you remember who you are. So much of our lives are spent in slumber. We forget – through a number of causes – who we really are. We forget that we are manifestations of the same Creative Spirit that fashions and shapes and continues to maintain the Sacred Universe. Each of us is a unique expression of Creator-Spirit. And while in our slumber we may have forgotten, Spirit is at core who we are. So in the moment of free-fall comes the opportunity to awaken, to remember who we are.

Another opportunity and gift that comes from free-fall – if we choose to engage as consciously as we can – is that we are propelled toward becoming the co-creative person we are *intended* to be. So often we talk about our own intentions – how significant they are, that if we hold and envision an intention we will move toward it. We must also remember that we are the Spirit's intention, each of us. Each of us is an expression of Incomprehensible Holy Mystery's intentionality, its effort to engage in the world, to become more present in the world, to tangibly incarnate a greater portion of itself in and for our Earth community.

Perhaps the most exquisite aspect of the free-fall is that past, present, and future collapse into a very pregnant now. In a sense we find ourselves outside the dimension of time and space. In this distillation of past, present, and future the whole of who we have been, are now, and always thought we would become is transcended, and we experience only the consciousness that we are, a consciousness that flows into and out of Holy Mystery. This experience brings a moment of purity, one in which we recognize our own essential nature. It proceeds from that place of witness in which we are very present to ourselves and to all, a space in which we know with absolute certainty that All Is One.

Remembering who we are, we abandon our attachment to the branch and pump our wings. We may have flown before, but not like this. We have transcended the former way of flying. Finding ourselves wisps on the cusp of evolution, vulnerable yet courageously open, we are available for co-creative participation as never before. We are free as never before. Everything is brand new, even as it springs out of what has gone before. This is the privileged moment to which we belong.

Another question: As we open ourselves, both individually and collectively, to the experience of free-fall, as we embrace that moment as gift, how do we live?

I would like to suggest two awarenesses that I think will be helpful for us to cultivate in the times ahead. Both engage our freedom, our capacity to choose to evolve consciously and co-creatively.

The most significant choice we can make is in regard to the response to the branch falling away. We cannot stop the sawing or the breaking or the free-fall, because no matter what the cause, it is also part of the evolutionary process. How often I have been reminded that we are invited to co-creativity, not control! But we do have some degree of choice about how we participate. In an emergency our reptilian brain takes over and the “fight or flight” instinct kicks in. But we humans also have the neo-cortex, the evolutionarily new part of the brain, the seat of higher consciousness that allows us to alter the course by choosing among many possible responses.

How do we do that? How do we see and then make such choices?

First, we need to move to a contemplative mode and from there enter the place of witness. Rather than identify with my fear or anger or helplessness, I can observe it. That is witness consciousness and it is a product of meditation and the contemplative stance. For some of us that is difficult, because it doesn’t feel as if we are “doing” anything productive. But if our doing does not proceed from a place of witness and peace it tends to be filled with the same egocentricity that brought about our predicament.

From the contemplative place we can choose mindfulness. We can choose to free ourselves from the grip of fear and enter into a centered space that allows us to see with less anxiety and more clarity. Rather than being vigilant, on heightened alert, we are mindful, present in the moment, filled not with fear, but with compassion. This is no small challenge, and yet I think it is the critical piece of our co-creative participation in evolution. So the first awareness is the need for a contemplative response that involves the witness stance.

The second awareness that we need to cultivate is that of trust. According to Erik Erikson, the first psychological task of a human being is to negotiate trust. Completely dependent, the infant who is supported in love learns to trust, to settle into the world without undue fear and anxiety, and to surrender to the love and care that surrounds her. It seems to me that from an evolutionary context we are always in this place.

When we view our experience through evolutionary eyes, each day gives birth to something novel – the information changes, the circumstances alter, the news becomes brighter or more dismal, we have an experience of self-dissolution or self-transcendence – all of which challenges us to trust the process that engages us, inviting us to trust the Spirit who continues to pressure us to evolve, while surrendering to the Love from which we come.

So we live in trust, allowing the invisible wind of the Spirit to give lift to our wings. And trust has two facets: First, there is trust in the Spirit at work in the emergence of Creation. Second, there is trust in ourselves, trust in the Spirit's entrustment of consciousness and gifts to us. Aware that we are on the cusp of the evolutionary impulse, we trust every challenge and opportunity that faces us, whether we have chosen it or it has chosen us.

Our sacred moment in space/time calls us to remember who we are, engage who we are collectively, as members of the same morphic field, and manifest who we are with love and compassion.

For those of us who are members of the Congregation of St. Joseph, or simply those of us who are Christian, we draw on our gospel roots. In this community we have acknowledged the necessity of asking the questions about who Jesus is, how we may understand and relate to the Incarnation in the twenty-first century. I recently read *The Yoga of Jesus* by Paramahansa Yogananda, the Hindu yogi and mystic whose understanding of Jesus brought new clarity for me.

While recognizing and affirming the historical Jesus, Yogananda asserted that what was most significant about Jesus was the Christ Consciousness that permeated his being – his awareness of how connected we all are to the Holy and to one another, his deep knowing that this unity is best served through love and compassion and healing presence. And while Jesus of Nazareth belongs to our particular religious culture, Christ Consciousness does not. It is universal; it belongs to humankind, not to a select few. Perhaps our recognition and engagement of this truth can be our transformative gift to the world. We need not be attached to the words "Christ Consciousness," but we do need to be permeated with its essence, which can then manifest tangibly in and for our Earth community.

In Eastern culture there is a long tradition of extraordinarily conscious human beings who can be described as having Christ Consciousness, Unitive Consciousness, the essence of what our own mystical tradition seeks and embraces. In that tradition not only does the guru teach the essential concepts and practices, but he or she can actually imbue the mature disciple with the higher consciousness that is their heart's desire. Perhaps this is a starting place for our own exploration – to seek to be permeated with Christ Consciousness by the one most familiar to us, from the one who by virtue of his absolute yes to Spirit can instill that consciousness in us. Of course, that requires that we become mystics.

The branch has been sawed off and our talons no longer have anything to clutch. In the context of conscious evolution, the experience is the manifestation of Spirit pressuring from within – the same Spirit that has manifested in the Big Bang, the formation of stars and galaxies and species. Our free-fall is the gift of the Sacred Universe to us in this moment. Our response is our gift to the Sacred Universe.

In the overwhelming challenges that confront us – in these next few moments of time given to us – we have the opportunity to take flight, to transcend and become Lovers, the conscious carriers of the Spirit we are intended to be. In this moment we have the opportunity to remember who we are and to trust the Spirit that has entrusted us with consciousness and vision and co-creativity. Yogananda asks, “Why not remember always that you are the Spirit of God?” Why not, indeed?

Together, we are in a definitive moment in human history.

Together, we must not allow fear to have the better part, but summon our courage to engage in flight.

Together, we are invited to trust the process of evolution that has brought us to this moment, and together we must trust the movement of the Spirit that continues to urge us on.

Together, we can do all of these things with great compassion that ensures justice, brings healing, and manifests always and everywhere as the Great Love of God.

May we truly awaken and arise, entrusting ourselves to the moment, growing in Christ Consciousness, expanding our capacity for compassion, emerging as women and men who are conscious evolutionaries who have entrusted their lives to the Spirit. St. Thérèse of Lisieux, whose feast day is today, said that God does not look at the greatness or difficulty of an action, but at the love with which we do it. And then she adds, “What have you to fear?”

There are no guarantees – but there is grace, the abiding presence of Holy Mystery poured out in each and every circumstance, each and every moment, each and every creature, readily evident when seen through contemplative eyes. Together, then, let us abandon the branch, embrace our gifts, stretch out our wings, and fly.

The Sacred Universe Award

is presented to individuals who have made an outstanding contribution toward a mutually enhancing Earth-human relationship. The Award is sponsored by The Well Spirituality Center in LaGrange, IL, a Center committed to deepening our Sacred Unity with God, Earth and One Another. Previous recipients of the Sacred Universe Award include the late Thomas Berry, CP, Brian Swimme, Elizabeth Johnson, Diarmud O'Murchu and Paula Gonzalez, SC.



"Bright Wings," original painting by
Mary Southard, CSJ.