EARTH COMMUNITY AND MERCY CONSCIOUSNESS

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In his ground-breaking encyclical Laudato Si’, Pope Francis calls for a new catholicity, one that expresses a new consciousness of belonging to a global community. “Catholicity” means having a “sense of the whole” or consciousness of belonging to the whole. Catholicity, like consciousness itself, is not a static, fixed ideal. Rather, it is an expression of human awareness in relation to the surrounding world; a thread connecting the human person and the cosmos. Catholicity undergirds the question: Are we aware of belonging to a whole greater than our own immediate vision?

I contend that our “ecological” crisis is actually a crisis of catholicity; that is, a crisis of consciousness that lacks a sense of the whole. I would like to examine the roots of this crisis by first exploring the unmaking and remaking of the western mind. Then, in light of this Year of Mercy, I would like to ask what type of consciousness is needed for a world of mercy that builds community. I will look briefly at the life of Jesus and Saint Francis of Assisi from the perspective of the relationship between consciousness and mercy. Finally I will explore the challenges we face in our struggle for a merciful world today.
THE UNMAKING OF THE WESTERN MIND

Many authors attribute the problems of our age to human action but I would suggest that the problems of our age begin with the human mind which, in the deepest metaphysical sense, has become “lost.” British psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist claims that a divided mind has been the unmaking of the western world. He argues that for the first time in Western civilization a predominance of left brain function emerged just as Greek culture was beginning to pass its peak. Prior to 4th c. BC there had been a healthy blending of science and the arts; both right and left hemispheres worked in harmony.

To appreciate his thesis it is helpful to understand how the right and left hemispheres pay attention to the world in very different ways. The right hemisphere sees the world at large, not as a separate object. Our connection to the world of nature and the human community. The right brain is open to new events, ideas, words, skills or music. The right brain is the spacious mind that sees the self as part of the whole and engages life from a place of interdependence and compassion.

The left hemisphere specializes in analyzing data and forming logical connections. In a sense, the left brain is the narrow mind which is shown in either/or thinking; it reduces things to certainty while the right hemisphere opens them up to possibility. The narrow mind imagines itself as separate from the world. Scarcity defines the world of the narrow mind; fear is its primary emotion, and anger its most common expression. Things appear discrete, independent, and competing or “looking out for number one.” It is adept at procedures but sees them as ends in themselves. It is good for only one thing—manipulating the world and controlling the parts.

The intellectual framework for modern science grew out of the medieval scholastic method which began with a hypothetical question followed by deductive reason. The rise of modern science eventually gave way to the systematization of knowledge, as things were reduced to parts. Philosopher Mark Taylor identifies the decisive turning point in human development through the work of René Descartes who tried to reconcile the picture of a mechanical world with belief in God. Whereas Copernicus had displaced the human from the center of the universe by discovering that the earth circles the sun, Descartes insisted that everything revolves around the human. His famous cognito - “I think, therefore I am” - drew a strong line of separation between matter and spirit and shifted the knowledge of God from nature to the individual mind. The human person became self-determining, gaining mastery over that which exists as a whole. That is, the cosmos was replaced by the feeling of being a separate, thinking individual. The combination of heliocentrism and Cartesian dualism created a radical disconnect between God, human and cosmos that eventually found a sense of law and order in Newton’s world machine marked by the detached observer and mechanistic determinism. The “price” of all this was the loss and place for human consciousness; everything is a “machine.”

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BIG BANG CONSCIOUSNESS

The artificial separation between humans and cosmos, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said, lies at the core of our contemporary moral confusion. Similarly, Nancy Abrams and Joel Primack write: “There is a profound connection between our lack of a shared cosmology and our increasing global problems. We have no sense how we and our fellow humans fit into the big picture...without a big picture we are very small people.” The separation between mind and matter arose with the Cartesian need for certainty whereby the mind was artificially separated from the spinning Earth, rendering the human person a detached observer rather than an active participant in the cosmic whole. This separation was overcome in the early twentieth century when, following Einstein’s theory of special relativity, matter and energy were no longer seen as autonomous entities but two aspects of the same reality: quantum physics was born.

This quantum world is composed of deeply entangled fields of energy in such a way that we can speak of undivided wholeness at the heart of the universe. The phenomenon known as quantum entanglement means that two quantum particles that at one time interact and then move away from each other are forever bonded and act as though they were one thing regardless of the distance between them. Reality is nonlocal; things can affect one another despite distance or space-time coordinates. The idea of nonlocal action at a distance requires a connection that travels faster than light, an idea which greatly troubled Einstein. However David Bohm, a contemporary of Einstein, proposed an alternate view of reality.

Rather than starting with the parts and explaining the whole in terms of the parts, Bohm started with a notion of undivided wholeness and derived the parts as abstractions from the whole. He called this unbroken order “implicate order,” indicating an enfolding of events. Implicate order is a way of looking at reality not merely in terms of external interactions between things, but in terms of the internal (enfolded) relationships among things. Whereas classical physics is based on parts making up wholes, Bohm took relationships between parts as primary. Each part is connected with every other part at the quantum level. The whole is the basic reality so that being is intrinsically relational and exists as unbroken wholeness in a system. The notion of implicate order led Bohm to say that while human beings and societies may seem separate, in our roots we are part of an indivisible whole and share in the same cosmic process.

By the time he completed his final work, The Undivided Universe (2002), Bohm had come to realize that active information forms the bridge between the mental and the physical, neither of which can be reduced to the other. He postulated that humans participate in “a greater collective mind, in principle, capable of going indefinitely beyond even the human species as a whole” (2002, 386). Here one sees Bohm as an intuitive physicist apprehending something that is both immanent and transcendent at the heart of reality. Although he never explicitly mentioned God in relation to implicate order, Bohm came very close to the theology of Teilhard de Chardin who described a centering principle in evolution which he identified as Omega, the absolute unity of wholeness or the depth center of reality.

GOD-Omega

Teilhard identified Omega as God and said that
God is not conceivable except insofar as God coincides with everything that exists. God is a “hyper-center,” of greater depth than anything that exists.”2 By positing God Omega within evolution, Teilhard induced a theological shift. God is not the static first cause; rather God is the future of everything that exists; that is, the future of the world is already centered within present reality. The universe rests on Omega as its sole support.

If science tells us that we are already an undivided whole, religion indicates that God is the absolute whole at heart of dynamic life. Evolution, Teilhard indicated, is the process by which life unfolds into more life, a process marked by attraction of elements, complexity of relationships and a rise in consciousness. If God Omega is at the center of physical life, empowering evolution from within, then God Omega is also the transcendent center of life, the goal toward which evolution is moving.

Hence, created, contingent life is oriented toward the fullness of life or, as Saint Paul wrote, creation lives in hope that “God may be all in all” (1 Cor 15:28).

How evolution proceeds toward the fullness of life occupied much of Teilhard’s thoughts and writings. Taking his cue from the new physics, he considered matter and consciousness not as two substances or two different modes of existence but as two aspects of the same cosmic reality. He speculated that each individual element has two distinct components: a tangential energy or energy of attraction, drawing elements together, which he called love-energy, and radial energy or the energy of consciousness which draws elements toward more centered and complex states.

The sheer reality of evolution, Teilhard indicated, points to a fundamental law of attraction at the heart of cosmic life. Love is the energy of attraction and consciousness is the energy of transcendence but one cannot exist adequately without the other. This led him to suggest that the physical structure of the universe is love wherein cosmic life transcends toward greater consciousness: love and consciousness undergird the dynamism of life. There is no love without consciousness and no consciousness without love. We can understand these two dimensions on the human level when we realize that, what we love we are deeply conscious of and what draws our consciousness leads to greater love, if it is an engagement of transcendence. Consciousness without love is lifeless and love without consciousness is selfish. Apathy is the absence of both love and consciousness, since one is neither conscious of another nor attracted to the other; one is like a cog in a machine. Only love that is conscious gives life, and consciousness that deepens love draws life toward more life.

Evolution, in Teilhard’s view, is an immense complexification of consciousness or psychic energy by which consciousness eventually becomes more aware of itself. The human person is integrally part of evolution in that we rise from the process, but in reflecting on the process we stand apart from it. He defined reflection as “the power acquired by consciousness to turn in upon itself, to take possession of itself as an object...no longer merely to know, but to know that one knows.”3 We are evolution become conscious of itself. It is not as if we humans are finished products, however, the final act of God’s creation. As Beatrice Bruteau wrote: “We are not a thing but an activity.”4 This “activity” is God-Omega or God’s action in the very actuality of acting; divine Love constantly invites us to more being and life by drawing us into the center of divine activity.

Mercy is divine Love at the heart of evolutionary life because the heart of God unconditionally empowers life so that every creature may be drawn into new life. As each element and creature is drawn by God to God, love deepens and consciousness rises; or simply put, the deepening of love is the rise of consciousness. Through this binary movement of love and consciousness, God emerges in human thought in such a way that God and self are unified and differentiated. Through meditation and prayer one is aware that the “I” of self is not alone and neither is God alone, for
the self that desires to possess God is already possessed by God. By focusing our minds on love, consciousness of self and consciousness of God become unified in a coincidence of opposites, and this unity is the felt experience of belonging to the whole.

MERCY: A HEART FULL OF LOVE: JESUS AND FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Thanks to his deep consciousness of oneness with God His Father, Jesus easily moved into solidarity with others. As Jim Marion writes, “Jesus saw there was no separation between himself and any other person. . . . He saw all human beings (and indeed the whole created universe) as part of himself.”5 Out of a deep unity with God Omega, mercy flowed wherever Jesus encountered fragile life whether poor or oppressed, diseased or disabled, prostitutes, tax collectors or public sinners.

The word “mercy,” from the Latin miserecordia, means “a heart sensitive to the misery of others.” Mercy is love expressed on a higher level of unitive relationship. One feels the pain of another and, without demands, embraces the other as sister or brother. Like the prodigal father, Jesus freely expressed the overflowing merciful love of God: the healing of the lepers, the healing of the blind man, the forgiveness of sins; even eating with a tax collector! Through the deep God-consciousness of Jesus, mercy is revealed as heart-space where love graciously goes out to embrace the blind and lame, the wounded and suffering.

The path to a merciful world for Jesus is recognizing the immanent presence of God. Angela of Foligno, a medieval Franciscan mystic, wrote: “As we see so we love and the more perfectly and purely we see, the more perfectly and purely we love.”6 Vision is a matter of consciousness, a visible awareness that the God in me is the same God in you; we are bound together. Jesus constantly challenged others to “see,” to awaken to the presence of God and to be part of an undivided whole, the “kingdom” of God, where Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, male and female, are invited as equals to the divine banquet. He had strong words for those who claimed to see but were blind and oppressive to the weak and fragile. Jesus reminded them that God desires mercy not sacrifice, a heart open to others not legal specialists. As we are mercified by the gracious love of God, he indicated, so too we are to show mercy to others by making space within us to welcome the wounded, the poor and lonely, the cranky and the cantankerous. Mercy thrives on the consciousness of love.

Many of the saints learned the path to merciful love but Saint Francis of Assisi stands out. In his youth, Francis wanted to be a famous knight but he was wounded in battle. After he recovered, he started to wander into abandoned churches to pray. Praying before the San Damiano cross, he had a deep personal experience of God’s compassionate love. The event that changed his life was his encounter with the leper. As an ambitious youth who sought fame and glory, Francis had a great disdain for lepers; as soon as he saw a leper, he would hold his nose and run away. After he experienced God’s merciful love in the San Damiano cross, Francis met a leper along the road. Instead of showing disgust, Francis dismounted his horse, gave the leper alms and kissed the leper’s hand. This experience marked a profound turn of events in his life. By experiencing God’s love for him in the crucified Christ, Francis experienced the same goodness of God in the kiss of the leper. Recounting the experience at the end of his life he wrote: “What was bitter had turned into sweetness of soul and body.”7

Through the cross he came to a new awareness of God’s merciful love. Love opened him up to the divine mystery at the heart of everything. He realized that the God of his life was the God of every life and he called all creatures “brother and sister.” Each and every thing, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, had infinite value because it reflected God in its own unique being - earthworms in the middle of road, bees freezing in winter - Francis attended to every creature with grace and respect. He called himself “brother” not
as a title but as a structure of reality. He lived in solidarity with all creation because his life was part of every other life—bird, tree, rabbit, human—all were bound together in the compassionate love of God. Even at the end of his life when he was blind and wracked with disease, as expressed in the Canticle of Creatures. His inner world was light-filled; his life shows that when we live in the gift of God's merciful love, we discover the whole Earth as "pregnant with God." We discover the truth of ourselves as part of a cosmic family and we live with a new reality of belonging together, bound in the heart of God's mercy.

THE MERCY VISION OF POPE FRANCIS

Pope Francis has a vision for a new world rooted in merciful love. We have constructed a world, however, that warrants against such a vision. The problems of our age—war, conflict, racial and religious injustice, economic greed, power, corruption, control and manipulation, lying and deceit—are human problems. We have become detached from the cosmos, detached from our minds and detached from our own existence. We live, as Beatrice Bruteau wrote, on the grid of partiality: "A pattern of partialities is not a whole world, and its unwholesomeness is only too evident now, ranging all the way from personal hostilities, through economic and social injustices, ethnic and religious strife, class hatred, to international conflicts and global warfare."8 Partial consciousness results in patterns of power that are separatist and exclusivist. This type of consciousness coupled with narrow vision and mechanistic paradigms perpetuates outdated attitudes of fears, suspicions and selfishness of nation states and their continued insistence on the primacy of unlimited national sovereignty. We are constrained by systems that lead us further and further from each other and from nature. Joan McIntyre laments: "In the end, it may be our loneliness as much as our greed which will destroy us."9

Pope Francis offers a vision of Earth community wrapped in mercy but it will remain an idealistic vision unless there is a profound change in human consciousness. Our whole sense of "location" of human selfhood has to be reordered in a way that is consonant with the Big Bang universe from which we have emerged. We will not care for the whole unless we are conscious of belonging to the whole. As Bruteau indicates, "an entire attitude and mind-set, a way of identifying self and others and perceiving the world has to shift first, before any talk of economic, political, and social arrangements can be considered."10 The type of consciousness needed is one that connects experience and thought, passion and logic, freedom and control; in short,
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an integration of left brain and right brain activities. Anything other than a radical shift in collective consciousness will be futile.

CONCLUSION: WHOLENESS AND MERCY

In our fast-paced, brain-fatigued world, how can we focus our minds on God-Omega? Etty Hillisum wrote: “Ultimately, we have just one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves...and to reflect it towards others.”

Without working toward an inner oneness with God, life becomes an unending series of little distractions. We sit at meetings or in churches but our minds are elsewhere, in other universes.

Gospel mercy demands a higher plane of consciousness, a new type of person, free of egocentrism and living from an inner core of unity. We are invited to surrender our egos to the power of divine love. We have the capacity for a new world but do we have the will? Do we want to be brother and sister to the poor and homeless or to share our wealth in an equitable manner? Do we want a greener Earth? On the present level of partial consciousness, I do not think so. We need a whole mind for a whole Earth which means we have to de-engineer our thinking and examine how mechanistically we are oriented, even in our treatment of one another.

We can destroy the Earth by selfish, unconscious existence or we can help unify it by training our minds for higher levels of conscious love. Brain management is as important today as managing our money. Our minds not only make a difference, they make the world. If the Church wants to see a new Earth empowered by mercy then we need a renewed sense of catholicity, developing a new theology consonant with the new cosmology. To put mind back into matter may be our greatest challenge today, especially in an age of artificial intelligence.

Mercy consciousness begins with recognizing that we are loved into being by a God of unconditional love; we are already mercified. Our challenge is to slow down, unplug our
electronic devices, and become conscious of
the unity that draws us to more life. We are in
a great cosmic whole together—Jews, Muslims,
Christians, black, white, birds, bears, frogs
and flowers—the whole Earth. We are here to
become conscious of the whole, to give voice
to the whole, and to help make this unfinished
universe more whole by loving the world,
especially the weak, the poor and the lame.

The left brain cannot know the whole, only the
right brain can or, better yet, the whole mind
knows the whole earth when it dwells in the
heart of love. When we live from the heart
we realize that every person is brother and
sister; we are part of them and they are part
of us. As we continue to awaken to this unity,
God rises up as the God of the whole. We have
the capacity to be a new Earth community if
we choose to join in the ongoing maturity of
life. The divine love that moves the stars and
galaxies is the love that beckons us to cocreate
a new future, a new planetary consciousness of
life, wrapped in the arms of merciful love.

**Questions for Reflection**

1. As I deal with daily experiences of
“fragmentation” and the burdens of endless details
and schedules, can I also believe in a larger – often
hidden - “wholeness” of my person, our lives and
our destiny?

2. What does “personal ecology” mean in my life at
this time? In what way do I need a conversion to a
different way of thinking about how I “belong” to
this world with all its mysteries and challenges?

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