

Many years ago, when my mother was still alive, and I was much younger, I'd gone home to stay for a while and take some time to sort my life out. My mother's house sits on the eastern foothills of the Franklin Mountains in El Paso at about 4200 feet in elevation. The mountains rise rapidly in the west to almost 7000 feet, so as the sun goes down, her house is in shadow early, and you can watch the mountain shadows lengthen across the desert until they meet the night arriving from the east.

I was washing the dinner dishes. From the kitchen you could see that dusk had fallen across the back yard. And then... the yard began to glow. The trees, the pool, the deck, everything out the kitchen window was suddenly suffused with bright golden light.

I ran outside, and looked up.

Above me, a column of cloud extended far up into the sky, thousands of feet higher than the mountain tops. The top of that column was catching the last rays of the setting sun and channeling those rays downward like an enormous fiber-optic cable. Some trick of the light focused it in a circle perhaps 30 yards across, with our house and yard in the center. The neighbors yards were dim.

I stood there, awestruck, as the light changed from golden orange to peach, faded into pink, and then to gray. Then the night from the east swept over it all, leaving the world in silent darkness.

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We live on the earth, yes. But we also live in the sky. The sky is not just above us, it comes all the way down to the ground.

The earth is solid to our senses. Most of the time it changes relatively slowly. Eons pass as the continents slowly drift across the world and the mountains rise and fall.

The sky, on the other hand, is liquid and quick, constantly changing. In the blue dome, clouds form and dissipate. Rain and snow come and go. The winds change direction and strength. And above all that, the moon and sun and stars keep time.

And oh those stars! On a cold clear night, with no light pollution, it can be said that you are viewing eternity. Space and time stretching out to infinity.

The days, the months, the years... the heavens mark their passage to the beat of this cosmic dance.

To an unknowing observer on the ground, they appear to be at the center of all this activity. That the Earth, and by implication the observer, is at the center of the Universe.

And for a long time, this was not in dispute.

A spherical earth, fixed at the center of the universe, was surrounded by an enormous celestial sphere of crystal that held the stars and rotated around us once a day. The sun, moon, and planets were somewhere in between, carried around in their circles by other crystal spheres. All kinds of complicated schemes were proposed to account for things like retrograde motion, where planets appear to move backward in the sky.

Beyond the sphere of the stars was Heaven, home of God and the angels.

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In 1543, Copernicus published his great work, *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*, and removed the Earth from the physical center of the Cosmos.

Copernicus placed the sun at the center of the Universe. It would only be a short time before that perspective would also be discarded, and we would come to understand that the Universe has no center, and our planet is only a miniscule speck in a Cosmos so vast as to be beyond comprehension.

While the Copernican and subsequent astronomical revelations removed the Earth from the center of the universe scientifically, it did not remove humans and humanity from the emotional, theological, or psychological center.

Observed truth to the contrary, humanity still acts as if it is at the center of the universe. We now inhabit a world that most of us experience as being filled with the works of humankind. Particularly in the developed countries, but increasingly in the rest of the world, we mostly see other humans and

their works, mostly hear the sounds of humans, think mostly about ideas and viewpoints generated by humans. The sky is so filled with our waste light that many of us can no longer see more than a few stars and we have lost touch with eternity.

Over half of humanity now lives in a built environment filled with other humans. Everything revolves around us and our needs, and as the world has filled up with people, we are increasingly unable to find external reference points that allow us to place ourselves in relationship to other beings, the Earth's ecosystems, and ultimately, the Cosmos. I call this "being lost in the hall of mirrors"—a world that is becoming so self-referential that it is losing touch with any reality but our own self-generated one. I cannot stress enough how dangerous I think has become.

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To be at the center of the Universe is a very real thing. As individuals, we have needs and wants and concerns – concerns for survival, safety, and well-being that are paramount to our lives, as well as the stories and ideas we build our lives around. This is also true of the groups we belong to.

Here on a miniscule speck in an apparently lonely and unforgiving Universe, it would seem all too natural for us to hold onto our anthropocentrism as the only source of meaning.

It is easy, and all too human, to forget that being at the center of the Universe is also an unreal and unnatural condition.

The old cosmologies contained what we might call the Divine perspective, that humans were subject to greater and mysterious powers. Powers that demanded a certain humility of us.

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The great revolution currently taking place in human affairs is one of taking into account the perspectives of other observers, other cultures, of the human community at large – rather than a single cultural viewpoint. Whether this revolution will succeed remains to be seen. It may be that unless we can also know the perspectives of non-human beings, and regain some sense of a cosmic scale, this revolution will fail.

Because the perspectives of other human observers are still human, and without the Divine perspective and the points of view of other beings, without some way to break out of the self-referential trap, we're still caught in that hall of mirrors.

One problem with this is that perhaps the Divine perspective is simply our projection – per William Ellery Channing, who wrote: *The idea of God, sublime and awful as it is, is the idea of our own spiritual nature, purified and enlarged to infinity. In ourselves are the elements of the Divinity.*

The other Western, “rational” objection is that there is no way of knowing – no epistemology - that is not created by, interpreted by, or mediated by human beings. That it is impossible to actually know or understand what non-human beings – birds, mammals, fish, trees - are thinking or feeling, or how they perceive the world.

There is a certain humility in knowing the limits of our understanding.

And yet... and yet.. There is also a certain arrogance here, coming back to what it is that human beings can or cannot know, and who decides that? Human beings.

Perhaps that idea allows us to cut ourselves off from the other, and reinforces our anthropocentrism. It has the human knower standing firmly at the center as the only active agent of knowing in a passive, known world.

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But what if the world, and likely the Universe, is full of agency. Of other than human persons.

So we must ask: What are persons?

Graham Harvey writes that, “Persons are volitional, relational, cultural and social beings. They demonstrate intentionality and agency with varying degrees of autonomy and freedom.”

A person is one who communicates: “Persons may be spoken with. Objects, by contrast, are usually spoken about.”

We usually think of persons as other people. This view says that persons can be plants, or animals, or insects, or fish, or anything that exhibits agency, or which one decides to treat as a person.

Our knowledge of them is created through relationship. Through engagement with them, rather than standing apart from them. Through conversation, rather than passive understanding.

And vice versa. There are many knowers in the world. What do they know about us through their engagement with human beings? I wonder...

The point, though, is that we know together, by being immersed together in knowing each other.

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The Universe of the crystal spheres held the Earth to be a fixed point. It was a Cartesian world, filled with objects acting on each other in predictable and mechanistic ways, like so many billiard balls bouncing off each other. A flat, two dimensional, either-or world.

It is an anthropomorphic, andromorphic, materialist view of the Cosmos. A hierarchical world with God on top, followed by the angels, then humanity in the middle, with animals, plants, and “inanimate” matter below.

A world that placed the transcendent divine on the other side of the sky, knowable by mere earthlings only after death, or via uncertain mystical experience.

This worldview is still deeply embedded our culture.

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One might contrast this with a interwoven world made up of persons and their multiple perspectives. A world engaged in conversation and knowing by way of mutuality.

A co-created world, where the Divine is immanent and knowable, and eternity present everywhere.

A fluid and dynamic web inhabited by... skylings?

As good a word as any, I suppose. Skylings, sharing the world with other skylings.

Although we are all, in truth, creatures of both earth and sky.

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The questions of how we see ourselves and are seen, how we engage with other beings of all kinds, and how we arrive at knowledge and understanding; these questions have always been present. Different cultures have arrived at different answers, and the answers may have been implicit or explicit.

Answering these questions in an intentional way is at the forefront of our time, and how we answer these questions is more critical than ever before.

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El Paso is situated in what is called basin and range country. Ranges of mountains separated by miles of flat and barren land. No trees. I like to say that you can see the bones of the Earth there.

From my mother's house, you could look east across the desert basin to the mountains some forty miles away.

From that vantage, you could see sideways and up into the volume of the sky and all that happened there. The daily play of color and shadow. The clouds forming and dissolving in the shifting layers of the air. You could watch entire thunderheads as they marched majestically across the desert, pierced by lightning, dumping rain.

And you knew, because you'd been there, that to be under one of those storm cells was to drive very slowly on streets flooded with three to six inches of water, driving in rain so dense that visibility was measured in mere yards, subject to a literally higher power.

And that these things were both true, and different for you than they were for the hawk flying away from the storm in a hurry. And in the pouring rain the smaller birds sheltered under the eaves of houses, and the lizards scurried for higher ground, and it was different for them, and yet the same.

And the truth is, any one of us could be swept away.

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Living in the sky seems to be our natural condition.

Living in the sky is to live in four dimensions, not two. A world of no fixed points, no privileged view. There is no center, only places to pause from time to time.

Living in the sky asks that we honor multiple perspectives, and know their truth. To be above the storm, and in it, and under it, scurrying for higher ground with the lizards and the mice.

Living in the sky asks us to be humble, for without the other to know with, we cannot really know what we need to know.