

## Winter Evenings

Around mid November or when autumn is moving toward winter I like to bundle up and sit outside not long after sunset to enjoy the stars which are especially bright this time of year. Actually an anticipation of this starts way in advance, mid August, when it gets darker noticeably earlier. Even this early on you can detect a slant of the sun southward along with a mellower hue of light. As the days go by, the nights grow longer, so it's possible to get outdoors and remain there indefinitely well before going to bed. Thus the time we're entering is just after the softness of summer nights and before onset of the harsher ones of winter. It has the added attraction of allowing you to be outdoors without freezing to death.

Right away you notice that the darkness isn't oppressive but is endowed with a certain luminosity. This is true even when it's cloudy, rainy or snowy. You know something exciting is going on before your very eyes though you can't pin it down. One way to gauge this is if given a choice, you wouldn't want to be anywhere else. Luminosity here of course means something more inclusive than physical brightness. While some find November and the onset of winter depressing (understandably so), it holds a special delight, and that's what counts. If you want the best authority on the matter, check out entries for the month November in Thoreau's **Journal**. They're among the most eloquent of all his observations.

In addition to the regular stars we have those which move. Some people call them airplanes or jets traversing the night sky, fortunately not crashing into the ones that are stationary. This is remarkable, really, with plenty of close calls. There's a website enabling you to track with precision the traffic overhead, so if you want to see where such-and-such a moving star is, pull out your mobile device and *voila*. Before this technology it was fascinating to wonder where one moving star was coming from, where it was going and who might be on board and for what purposes. On top of it, I used to long to be on one of them, preferably headed northeast toward Europe (never the other way around). Now that the attraction has evaporated, I prefer to soak in the glories of a winter night just where I happen to be. Besides, these moving stars follow a regular pattern no different from the departures and arrivals of buses and trains. Such regularity and familiarity quickly become boring and evaporates the mystery.

Beyond the stars, both stationary and moving, we have the immense black background in which they're situated. While we can't help but acknowledge it as

soon as we step outdoors, after a while we ask questions about its immensity. In fact there's no word to describe something that hits you in the face so absolutely, given what we know about the universe today. Everyone lucky enough to behold the night sky unpolluted with light is filled with a wonder now so commonplace that describing it is quite useless. However, it doesn't detract from what we behold. Philosophy is described famously as the beginning of wonder making the night sky the perfect candidate. If what we gaze upon isn't enough, there's talk about alternate universes, infinity upon infinity. If the current universe doesn't suffice to make you feel insignificant, a whole slew of others might do the trick.

After having been so enthralled we realize more than ever that we're stuck here on earth in these flimsy bodies and must make the best of it. We even become more conscious of gravity weighing us down compared with the ethereal-ness of above to which we'd love to ascend. There's no choice, really, but to slug it out, a depressing if not absurd thought compared with the infinity upon infinity we've been contemplating. Again, all this is very familiar and almost not worth reporting. While we're painfully aware of the immense reality above, that turns out to be half the story. It turns out another half exists right under our noses which consists of the apparently equal stretch into infinity down into matter. Not only does it include the sub-atomic level we have below that God-only-knows-what. Supposedly there's just as much empty space down below as up there.

So if we can look up and get lost in the infinity there (presuming there's 'just' one universe, another story unto itself) and then look down into our bodies, we find ourselves in not such a bad place. That is to say, we're in the middle or in between two infinities. The best part is that for some miraculous reason we're not crushed into oblivion. The second best part is that we can mediate between both sides, a fact which we should give more attention. Naturally this brings up the question as to the exact nature or status of our in-between land. While it's obvious that the two infinities, one above and the other below, extend in opposite directions forever, do we really appreciate this middle kingdom? Might the two just happen to run into each other from the opposite direction? Can we attribute any type of reality to it or is it an illusion where influences from above and from below simply flow into each other, thereby brushing us aside? These questions are completely normal, given the two magnitudes with which we're dealing. In fact, they might boil down to one.

The three questions posed in the last paragraph are important, revealing a certain poignancy concerning our human condition where we must make due with what we have. The enigma of our existence is always present, miraculously sustained between

the infinity above and the one below. Its continuance says that all is fine, yet we fail to realize it. In other words, the problem lays in being overly self-conscious instead of appreciating that at heart we're basically sound. Yet we persist to pervert this environment with thoughts that make it appear otherwise, a familiar scenario which requires no explanation.

There is one simple, direct way of getting our bearing in this world as being mediators between the two infinities just described. It arises spontaneously when we gaze at the heavens and discover that the sounds around us stick out more than usual. For some reason we favor those some distance away instead of those near us. Among the most common of these sounds are dogs barking and if you're in the country, the occasional burst of coyotes yelping as a group. Second are motor vehicles, the loudness depending on weather conditions. Then we have the jets way up there beckoning us to follow them as their distant whooshing sound rises and falls. Actually their sound is some distance removed, given the relative slowness with which sound travels. Close by are leaves scurrying around the ground which conjure up the image of crabs on the seashore, a little bit on the eerie side as they start off, come to a sudden halt and then scurry off into the night. Finally we have human noise but luckily it's at a minimum during the colder winter nights.

These experiences are reassuring and naturally lead to to consider how we fit into two such immensities which by some miracle of miracles manage not to collide. If of a religious persuasion, we can attribute this to a providential, personal divine being. At the same time anything we come up with doesn't cut the cake. In the end our theories, despite their sophistication, turn out to be a bunch of mental constructs. One thing we know for sure is that we continue in existence despite the two infinities being held at bay. So it turns out that the reality about us isn't all that bad despite its immensity. While we manage to live our lives these two infinities nevertheless evoke a certain loneliness which must be distinguished from the conventional type. After adjusting to the awe and wonder of the night sky, we discover that our middle position is natural and best not to fiddle with it.

This leads to consider that apart from our limited activities and relationships, everything about us is totally impersonal. This isn't a scary thought but one that can be comforting by the enormity of the scales to which we are attempting to adjust. Staying more and more in the presence of these infinities makes us focus upon the puny-ness of what's dear to us and has the benefit of making them irrelevant compared with what we're made for. And this, of course, has nothing to do with our

customary way of understanding depression. More can be said about the joys of impersonal existence but here is not the place. Perhaps later.

If we consider a few verses from Psalm Nineteen as representative of an ancient appreciation of the heavens, our tendency to loneliness with its accompanying gloom will have a better chance to dissipate. In fact, the words from this psalm can be an invitation to withdraw from human interaction...not out of hatred or disgust but to maintain perspective. We're beckoned to shed our humanness, if you will, which doesn't mean our humanity, a distinction in short order today. The two extremes, the heavens and micro-world, show that we're capable of perceiving more than the limited world view in which we function most of the time. So with regard to the psalm at hand, consider vss. 1-4 which will be broken down after giving the full quote: "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech nor are their words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world."

As for vs. 1 ("The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork"), note the distinction between telling and proclaiming, *saphar* and *nagad*, which are in the present tense. *Saphar* connotes writing or better, inscribing as well as the sense of numbering. It's reminiscent of the joyous words of Baruch: "The stars shined in their watches and rejoiced; when he calls them, they say, 'Here we are, and so with cheerfulness they showed light to him who made them'" [LXX, 3.31]. Such is the glory of God, his *kavod*, which implies a sense of heaviness, as though the heavens dropped down to the psalmist.

"And the firmament proclaims his handiwork" [vs. 2]. The second type of announcement which is effected through proclaiming or *nagad*, that implying a sense of full manifestation and confession.

Handiwork or *mahaseh* in Hebrew is better rendered "deeds of his hands," something akin to a professional craftsman, and the result is the firmament as that which is spread out in imitation of the stretching of a sheet or tent: "and (Peter) saw the heaven opened and something descending like a great sheet let down by four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air" [Acts 10.12-2].

Vs. 2: "Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge." The first pair implies perpetual continuity in the form of speech, 'omer while the second or *laylah lelaylah* has a lovely rhythm about it. This period of darkness is the

bridge between day to day; also emphasis is more upon the implied stars and moon as opposed to the night *per se*. Since these celestial objects do not speak, their physical presence is a form of silent manifestation of God's creative word in Genesis. The declaring of this verse or *chawah* is equivalent to the Chaldean verb found in Daniel, all with reference to the showing of interpretations with regard to dreams, etc.: "Tell your servants the dream, and we will show the interpretation" [Dan 2.4]. This alternate meaning relates well with the knowledge or *dahath* manifested at night.

Vs. 3: "There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard" which may be contrasted with vs. 2, "Day to day pours forth speech" with the lack of speech and words. The former is singular and latter is plural. Mention of voice emphasizes this silent present of the heavenly luminaries. Another way of looking at this verse is that they cannot be heard upon earth due to their great height.

Vs. 4: "Yet their voice goes out through all the earth and their words to the ends of the world. In them he has set a tent for the sun. For voice the Hebrew has line, *qaw*, in the sense of a measuring cord used for construction. Towards the conclusion of Revelation an angel has a measuring rod of gold (21.15) to measure the heavenly Jerusalem which unlike the heavenly luminaries under discussion descends from heaven: "And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (21.2). If *qaw* is applied to this city, we could trace its outline in the firmament, as it were, prior to full revelation. *Qaw* in vss. 3 and 4 thus implies silence as the true measuring rod which is perhaps the reason for "there was silence in heaven for half an hour" (Rev 8.1). Note that vs. 4 has voice "going through all the earth" whereas words go "to the ends of the world." Such words may be taken as the particulars of the singular voice; they are needed to expand this voice to the earth's four corners which are north, south, east and west.

The psalm verses just expanded don't pertain to the second infinity, the micro one, simply because it was unknown until the invention of the microscope. That covers a huge part of human history. Interestingly the Greeks came up with the idea of an atom, miniscule particles that which cannot be cut further being the literal definition. What's more amazing is that they have have intuited a reality somewhere down there as big as the dome above. However, infinity was abhorrent to the ancient Greeks, not a part of their world view. At the same time they applied the word *kosmos* to the sky or dome which embraces the idea of order as well a woman's decoration and is suggestive of flowing hair (I.e., the Milky Way). So while virtually

all ancient peoples from the Aztecs to the Babylonians were fascinated by the night sky and had sophisticated astronomical observations, they were limited by the naked eye. It must have been considered an honor for those directly involved to spend nights laying on their backs gazing upward and dictating their observations to educated slaves. Once the eastern sky became light they'd sleep during the day and start over again once it got dark.

Everything of importance for the ancients therefore was up, not down, and by the latter is meant the micro world. In many ways the same holds true today despite our sophisticated knowledge. Besides, something makes us balk at infinity...that which has no bounds...within the matter around us as well as comprising us. Yet just as a mind experiment allows us to travel "past" the darkness of space, another allows us to descend to molecules to atoms to sub-atomic particles to the zoo awaiting us way down there. Then we have a heck of a lot of empty space which pretty much parallels the astronomical one. In fact, the two might be perfect mirrors of each other.

Again, where does this put us? Our in-between-ness seems more precarious than before, even delusional. Things rise into existence, continue along in existence for x amount of time and then pass out of existence. Yet as we hear from those theologically inclined, we're the only creatures capable of recognizing all this. Obviously this is qualified by our lack of knowledge concerning intelligent life existing elsewhere.

We can speculate until the cows come home, applying all the knowledge we have of the macro and micro worlds, but in the end come up with very little information. Scientists say the almost inconceivable vast distances of space preclude exploration, so what we've got is obtained from a distance. The exception, however, is time travel through worm holes which of yet remains theoretical. Just about everyone is familiar with this through movies and documentaries, fascinating stuff, but in a way boring. Boring because even if we can travel through the infinity above and through the infinity below, we'd run up against more stuff, even if some of it's intelligent. Should that happen, we engage with them and believe it or not get bored again. Time to move on.

Once this scenario runs its course we're stuck with plenty of empty space either above or below. Even should we be able to reach the galaxies, we'd want to go further. The same applies if we could shrink ourselves to the sub-atomic realm. Even if we bump up a barrier of some sort (going around in an enormously large loop seems more like it) we just can't seem to escape all the stuff we'd find. Strange

to say, the infinity above and the infinity below get boring...stuff upon stuff. It's easy to play mind games in this regard. Actually going out there and doing it would be exciting at first but in the end would produce the same ultimate result, boredom. Perhaps the psalmist intuited this more clearly than we'd give credit when he says "Where shall I go from your Spirit? If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there" [Ps 139.7 & 8].

Does this mean that infinity either of the macro or micro variety is the Ultimate Boredom? The answer is a qualified yes insofar as we lose touch about the meaning of our situation as in between that which is up and that which is down. Reflection on this evokes the image of a tightrope walker making his way across a wire suspended in thin air. A long pole is essential to maintaining balance so he won't fall neither to the left nor to the right. It's purpose is to enable him to proceed straight ahead. If he feels his balance is in jeopardy, he stops and focuses more intently upon the pole, placing his mind dead center of it in order to keep both sides balanced evenly.

As the tightrope walker makes his way slowing across the wire he isn't thinking about this and that but remains focused upon being balanced dead center so he won't fall off either to the left or to the right. If he were to entertain a thought about anything, straightaway he'd plunge to his death. If we apply this image to our in between mode of existence, thinking too much of the infinity above would make us fall off in that direction, and instead of being exalted, would succumb to depression. The same holds true with the other infinity. It can drive you crazy thinking that your body is composed of...well, empty space. Not that we'd slip into oblivion either way but quickly would be filled with a multitude of distorted thoughts and images about our life and in the end, be miserable.

Carry this image of a tightrope walker further, we can appreciate better that the infinity above and the infinity below are cut from the same cloth. It's simply a matter of up or down. As far as they're concerned, this up and down begins and ends with us. Chances are they flow into each other; we don't perceive this connection simply by reason of our limitations. Awareness of it makes us appreciate better that perception of our in between state is essentially illusory. It goes to an extreme when we try to make it absolute instead of appreciating our dignity as laying within an in between state. Once we see this, things fall into place on their own minus our personal intervention. The tightrope walker is aware of his goal when stepping out on the wire, but if he entertains thought of getting to the end, he slips to his death. This intimates that while death is inescapable, it's "just physical" compared with falling off prematurely where death is more than something physical.

Although discussion thus far has dealt with space both above and below, there's the element of time. It's only natural to wonder where this all ends, if at all. We don't have any definitive answer as to the duration regarding both infinities (they could go on forever, morphing as eons pass by), but we do know our in between existence is limited. As noted earlier, our life, marvelous to say, continues in existence and doesn't dissolve as the evidence says it could. Perhaps here is where the adjective "good" comes to the rescue as applied by Genesis to all aspects of creation. Being aware of this goodness which derives from God and applied to the days of creation isn't a throw-back to a long-gone naive era but one that's just as sound today. Awareness of it makes us feel comfortable, part of our response to sitting out in the winter sky or under any other seasonal sky. The adjective good or *tov* occurs seven times in the Book of Genesis, each one after a given round of creation. day

This isn't a hindrance if we consider the opening words of the Book of Genesis. There the text used the adjective *tov* seven times or after a given round of creation. These seven occurrence have their own day labeled as "day one," "day two" and so forth which is more poetic than "the first day" (etc.). The last *tov* in 1.31 is an exclamation of exuberance, "very good," where the adverb *me'od* applies to that which is done to excess. Such goodness is essential to all created things and is set forth before the introduction of physical death as recounted in the famous story of Adam and Eve. If that is remedied as Christian theology says it is, awareness of each *tov* about is precludes anxiety about the two infinities under discussion.

Returning to the initial awe we experience upon encountering the infinity above, we're hit by the all-encompassing silence. Yet if we were to approach any of the gazillion stars, we'd find a lot of noise coupled with violence but couldn't hear it even if an entire galaxy were in the process of collapsing. Reason is that in a vacuum we can't hear a thing. This leads to a broader issue, namely, that a lot of physical processes are done in silence and hearkens back to Ps 19.3 discussed earlier: "There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard." Even though this pertains to heavenly bodies, easily it extends to everything else...except us humans (animals make noise but in a limited fashion). While we can appreciate readily the silence in the infinity above, it's a different story regarding the infinity below. Things are simply too small down there to hear anything. Chances are it's pretty quiet even though we noisy beings would be thrilled if we could hear something.

Confronted with two infinities and thus two silences, we in between them both inhabit the narrowest of band widths, and what a noisy one it is. No wonder we feel isolated looking above as well as below yet can't escape them both. This idea of



escape is contrary to the one of *tov* as applicable to creation; actually *tov* is a sign of being at home where one already happens to be. So if we can make the connection between *tov*-ness and silence, we're in a pretty good spot. All this sound ideal to us who love noise of which the human world is overflowing but again, takes place within that tiny band mentioned above.

So this leads us to make a better connection between the two infinities, allowing each not to swamp but to flow over our in between land separating the two. While hitherto the assumption is that a separation exists, in fact one doesn't. Our contemplation of the infinity above and the infinity below reveals that to appreciate both we're to cultivate their native silence. Better said than done, of course. This spurs us on to consider a way by which we can conform to this overarching silence, that issue having been discussed in different aspects on this home page. Getting into it would switch the theme of this essay, so we'll leave it at that.

Anyone who goes about the task of silencing himself runs up against the perennial problem of sticking with it. Should we obtain a modicum of silence, the span is short because our minds seem to be made for inner noise, actually crave it. After coping with this painful reality over an extended period of time we're tempted to give up. We've come to a point where we've had a number of alterations between inner silence and inner noise, oscillating between them both. As soon as we get in one we know we'll move to the other and so on down the line. The prospect of breaking this rhythm doesn't seem to be in the cards, so one day we decided to say enough. Time to try out something different. The giving up of which we speak is more a discreet withdrawal, not an abandonment, though some of that may be present.

Our withdrawal is more like going out to the two infinities and casting our efforts into their hands (whether the infinity above or the one below catches it is of no concern to us). In the meanwhile our mind continues to be filled with noise as usual. Nothing has changed. Yet we don't care. We detached ourselves from whether the noise continues or stops, for a shorter or longer period of time. Here we can introduce what only can be described as humor. Hitherto it had been hiding much to our chagrin. Humor may be an awkward term, but we'll go for it now. The main point is to understand where this is leading. The lightness we garner from our detachment loosens the narrow band of our existence...our noise...in favor of silence. It does so without the expected dread as emptiness and therefore death. Somewhere out there (below there as well) is something humorous that continues to crank out stuff belonging to either to the infinity above or the one below. We might not know what it is, but we're not afraid; comforted might be a better word because after all,

Genesis says all creation is *tov*. Might as well enjoy it for a change instead of all the fighting we associate with getting on in life.

+