

## *Reaching, Calling, Hungry, Thirsty: Imagining Abrahamic Creation*

DAN WOTHERSPOON

A KEY INGREDIENT of most ecological visions is notion that everything that exists has intrinsic value—each thing has worth “in itself,” independent of its usefulness (extrinsic or instrumental value) to human purposes.<sup>1</sup> The ethical implications of this assertion are easy to recognize: if we truly believe this, we’ll naturally be inclined to consider in all our decision-making the impact of our actions on the non-human world. The assertion itself suggests a proper way of behaving toward all things that are “not us.”

My sense is that, in general, we Mormons feel more comfortable with the idea that every entity has intrinsic value than do members of most groups. It’s a theme that runs through our minds; we have a “hunch” it is true. We get this feeling through various ideas floating around in our tradition’s theology—e.g., that God’s goal for all things is that each finds “joy” in the measure of its creation, that every existent is somehow “intelligent,” and that the Earth itself has a “spirit.” Yet, even as we might be less inclined than some Westerners to dismiss the idea that all things have inherent value, there is little evidence that our hunch has led us as a group to alter our choices in ways which more fully honor the non-human world.

Mormon storytellers can help change this. We as Latter-day Saints have theological resources and stories with great potential for helping ourselves and others become more ecologically sensitive, more committed to honoring all of creation in such a way that we might help build a bright, sustainable future. But we first need to develop them more thoroughly. We need Mormon shamans to help make our stories sing, to tell them in such a way we might really come to believe and act upon what we now only sense.

ONE OF OUR most fruitful stories for communicating more of this vision is the Abrahamic creation story found in the Pearl of Great Price. And what might a shamanic extension of the ideas found in this account look like? I’ve found clues in three places:

the writings and ideas of Gary Snyder, the work of cosmologist Brian Swimme and theologian Thomas Berry, and most clearly in a novel by Orson Scott Card.

The cosmogony found in the book of Abraham has many resources for a creative development, including the notion of the eternal, uncreated nature of all intelligences (and an assertion that everything is intelligent), a description of a creative process that is both spiritual and physical, and the implication that acts of creation and even godliness itself is a cooperative endeavor. But even more than these, I'm excited by the possibilities found in its depiction of creation as a two-sided dynamic, a sort of "call and response" between deity and the elements being organized.

The Abrahamic story depicts a team of creator Gods who concoct a plan for each stage of creation and who then watch to see if (and, perhaps, even how) the elements they hope to organize will cooperate to make their vision concrete. Note the following verse endings of passages depicting the close of several of creation stages: ". . . And it was so, even as they ordered" (4:7, 11). "... And the Gods saw that they were obeyed" (4:12). "And the Gods watched those things which they have ordered until they obeyed (4:18). "And the Gods saw that they would be obeyed, and that their plan was good" (4:21). "And the Gods saw they would obey" (4:25).

The consistency in the text that every stage required waiting and watching to see if and how the elements would respond is especially striking given the fact that until the final two stages, nothing being organized is typically considered by modern standards to be a "living" entity, nothing that the account portrays as answering the Gods' lures is normally thought of as capable of any kind of volitional response. And my sense is this is the real hurdle to belief in the intrinsic value of all existents.

So how might we overcome this obstacle? How might our shaman/storytellers approach this model of a two-sided (a godly "call" and an elemental "response") creation process? I suggest we approach these questions in three steps. The first two steps introduce provocative ideas from Gary Snyder and co-authors Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry

which, although not narrative examples in themselves suggest ways that might help us understand the most difficult half of a two-sided creation dynamic: how something generally considered lifeless or at least not self-aware can or would “respond.” The third step introduces a striking passage from an Orson Scott Card novel which points better than anything else I’ve found toward ideas Mormon shaman/storytellers might incorporate as they re-envision and imaginatively retell an Abraham-based vision of creation.

EVEN IF WE as Latter-day Saints might have a hunch that everything in the universe is somehow “intelligent” and capable of joy” at some level, this inclination does not make the idea any easier to conceive. It is very difficult to get our minds around a model of the cosmos—let alone creation—that involves some level of spontaneity or self-determination even by the universe’s least-complex entities. So, it is exciting to discover That Mormons are not alone in imagining a view of creation that honors the idea of creativity in all existents.

Pulitzer prize-winning poet Gary Snyder offers just such a resource in a playful re-imagination of the standard way of viewing the evolutionary process. Snyder’s approach to evolution is to shift the focus from random processes and toward how less-complex entities might contain their own inner drive to engage in deeper relation. It is a model of diversification that suggests evolution might be fueled “from the bottom up.” He helps us imagine that very subtle level on which a simpler form might be said to “call” or “reach out” for something more complex:

It would appear that the common conception of evolution is that of competing species running a sort of race through time on planet earth, all on the same running field, some dropping out, some flagging, some victoriously in front. If the background and foreground are reversed, and we look at it from the side of the “conditions” and their creative possibilities, we can see these multitudes of interactions through hundreds of other eyes. We could say a food brings a form into existence. Huckleberries and salmon call for bears, the clouds of plankton of the North Pacific call for salmon, and salmon call for seals and thus orca. The

Sperm Whale is sucked into existence by the pulsing, fluctuating pastures of squid, and the open niches of the Galapagos Islands sucked a diversity of bird forms and functions out of one line of finch.<sup>2</sup>

This passage is full of the sort of evocative language I believe is required if we hope eventually to better conceive the elusive character of a two-sided creation sensibility. Snyder provides an alternative to thinking of change and evolution simply in terms of random interactions between separate, unrelated entities. He introduces the possibility of a “longing” on the part of all existents for greater and more satisfying forms of relationality: smaller patterns “calling” for larger, more complex patterns—in Snyder’s words, “sucking” the next something(s) into existence.<sup>3</sup>

Snyder continues his topsy-turvy look at creation by then asking himself what it was that might have called humans forth. He writes: “So the question I have been asking myself is: what says ‘humans’? What sucks our lineage into form? It is surely the ‘mountains and rivers without end’—the whole of this earth on which we find ourselves more or less completely at home.”<sup>4</sup>

When we return soon to the discussion of the Abrahamic model that also involves the action of Gods—or, in the case of the Card novel, at least divine-like activities—perhaps Snyder will have helped us widen one other aspect of our story a bit. Instead of rushing to imagine that “once upon a time” the Gods simply decided to create human beings in an effort to replicate themselves as closely as possible, perhaps we might consider that some portion of that decision may have been prompted by the “yearning” of the elements of which we are made.

Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry have also imagined creation and evolution “from the bottom up,” and, interestingly, their vision leads them to a position similar to Snyder’s on the final question, “why humans?” Cosmologists both (Swimme with scientific training and Berry a Catholic monk and cultural historian), they have come to marvel at the foundational “stuff” of the universe, and see it as characterized by some sort of self-organizing power that seemingly “longs” for fuller expression. In their masterful book,

*The Universe Story*, they attempt to provide a comprehensive account of creation and evolution that begins with the “big bang” but that also helps us realize the stunning creativity at the heart of every element of universe. They frame their project, and depict the spirituality in the story they tell, in the following:

The most significant change in the twentieth century, it seems, is our passage from a sense of cosmos to a sense of cosmogenesis... to a dominant time-developmental mode of consciousness, where time is experienced as an evolutionary sequence of irreversible transformations. Within this time-developmental consciousness we begin to understand the story of the universe in its comprehensive dimensions and in the full richness of its meaning. This is especially true as regards the planet Earth, a mysterious planet surely, as we observe how much more brilliant it is, when compared with the other planets of our solar system, in the diversity of its manifestations and in the complexity of its development. Earth seems to be a reality that is developing with the simple aim of celebrating the joy of existence.... The important thing to appreciate is that the story as told here is not the story of a mechanistic, essentially meaningless universe but the story of a universe that has from the beginning had its mysterious self-organizing power that, if experienced in any serious manner, must evoke an even greater sense of awe than that evoked in earlier times.<sup>5</sup>

Just as we saw in Snyder’s vision, Swimme and Berry suggest that evolution, even up to and including humans, might be driven by something akin to a “yearning” by less complex forms of life for something larger, an instinctual drive to become part of something “more.” In their tale, this greatest something so far is the human race, a species capable of self-reflection and intelligent enough to consciously celebrate the “joy of existence” in all of its diverse forms.

Neither Snyder’s nor Swimme and Berry’s creation/evolution models are two-sided in the same sense we find in the Abrahamic account. And their depiction of the universe’s omega point (at least so far)—a race that can appreciate the splendor of creation—is not particularly satisfying to me, nor would I guess to most Latter-day Saints. Still, I find their visions very helpful in how they depict a universe that, even at its most microscopic levels, teems with potential; a universe whose constituents long for a kind of elemental

“joy”—the anticipation and pleasure found in joining in deeper, more complex relations with other entities.

With these two doses of “bottom-up” thinking and their depictions of a lively universe, we are better prepared to encounter the work of Orson Scott Card as he moves us closer to the Abrahamic model of a two-sided creation dynamic. Card is a Hugo and Nebula Award-winning writer and a Latter-day Saint who, most often without explicitly naming them, elaborates on LDS themes and storylines in many of his writings.<sup>6</sup> In the passage that follows—taken from his novel, *Xenocide*—we introduce a God-figure into our discussion of creation and find a remarkable example of how we might better imagine how “the Gods” in the Abraham account might have felt and acted as they performed their organizing tasks in an “intelligent” universe.

The following is an excerpt from a conversation between Ender Wiggin, the human protagonist of Card’s “Ender” series, and the “hive queen,” the matriarch of an insect-like species that Ender has befriended and worked tirelessly to help after he unknowingly nearly obliterated her entire species as a young man. In this conversation, the hive queen teaches Ender how the next queen is brought into existence. After explaining to Ender that after a body for the new queen has been created, the hive queen shares tells him that she, in concert with the minds and intellects of past queens, continually “reaches” and “calls.” She says that they together are searching for the “us-thing. The binder. The meaning-maker.... We call it to come and take the queen-body, so she can be wise, our sister.”

Ender asks: “You call it. What is it?”

“The thing we call.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“What are you asking? It’s the called-thing. We call it.... It hears us calling and comes.”

“But how do you call?”

“... We imagine the thing which it must become. The pattern of the hive. The queen and the workers and the binding together. Then one comes who understands the pattern and can hold it. We give the queen-body to it.”

“So you’re calling some other creature to come and take possession of the queen.” “To become the queen and the hive and all. To hold the pattern we imagined.” “... But this is incredible. You’re calling forth some being from another place, and—”

“The calling forth is nothing. All things do it. All new makings. You do it. Every human baby has this thing.... Grass and sunlight. All making calls them, and they come to the pattern. If there are already some who understand the pattern, then they come and possess it. Small patterns are very easy. Our pattern is very hard. Only a very wise one can possess it.”

“... So when you make a hive queen, you already have the biological body, and this new thing... you call out of the non-place where [they] are... has to be one that’s able to comprehend the complex pattern that you have in your minds of what a hive-queen is, and when one comes that can do it, it takes on that identity and possesses the body and becomes the self of that body.”

After more discussion, the conversation turns to the nature of the “non-place” from which the “called things” come. The queen explains as best she can what she understands this state of existence to be: “No place-ness in that place. No where-being. All hungry for whereness. All thirsty for pattern. All lonely for selfness.”<sup>7</sup>

These passages from Card’s powerful imagination provide a wonderful glimpse of the LDS sensibility about the sort of “call” and “response” creation method suggested in the

Abrahamic cosmogony. A God-figure (or better, “God-figures,” if we remember the hive queen works in concert with past queens) conceives a pattern, something she hopes to organize, and then communicates her desires until she receives an affirmative response. She “searches,” “reaches,” “calls,” and ... waits.

Card also helps us deepen our appreciation for this two-way creation dynamic as well as for the inherent creativity in all the universe’s existents by ingeniously using the insect-like hive queen in the role of the teacher and god-figure in this situation. I believe having a non-human act as the teacher helps take us closer to the instinctual level at which it is easier to imagine how each and everything in the universe, no matter how simple, might be said to be “hungry” or “thirsty” for something more complex than its present form. We humans live out of our heads so much that it is easy to lose our sensitivity to what everything in the world around us is quietly telling us about itself (and about our deepest motivations as well).

I like Card’s move for a second reason as well. By having an insect-like God-figure, I believe Card also, very subtly, magnifies another sensibility I value in the Mormon tradition: the idea that desiring and helping encourage the enlargement of other externally existing elements is simply the definition of god-like behavior—it isn’t primarily condescension, it isn’t to create beings solely to honor the Creator, it is simply “godly instinct” to want to help others to know greater relation, greater joy.<sup>8</sup>

THE IDEA OF the shaman is really quite romantic: The healer. The ritualist who through vision, trance, or other altered states of consciousness is able to touch the primordium, to enter the Chaos and discern the signs, to discover and return with the true medicine. Less romantic, perhaps, but most important of all, is the role shamans play as keepers of their society’s stories. It is really our stories that frame our lives—that give us our courage to be, our strength to act with wisdom and resolve. Our stories tell us what things mean, and we all need a world that “makes sense.”

Our world, and thus our lives, is in crisis. And we as Latter-day Saints have yet to begin taking a lead in helping move our world toward Zion, a peaceful, sustainable way of living that truly honors God and all that God honors. We've been blessed by our theological inheritance with many clues that God (and all the Gods) recognize and honor as intrinsically valuable every entity in the universe. Each has purposes in and for itself, each "longs" for something greater. Yet we need to believe it more. We need to conceive it, and then share it with our community. We need shaman/storytellers. May the imaginings of the visionaries introduced here help us all better play this pivotal role.

---

Dan Wotherspoon has a Ph.D. in religion and is currently editor of SUNSTONE magazine. He is married to Lorri Hubbard Wotherspoon, and they have two children, Alex and Hope. This essay is drawn from themes developed in greater detail in his doctoral dissertation, *Awakening Joseph Smith: Mormon Resources for a Postmodern Worldview*, Claremont Graduate School, 1996.

#### NOTES:

An earlier version of this essay was published under the title, "Keepers of the Stories," in *Irreantum: Magazine of the Association for Mormon Letters* 4, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 46–51.

1. For instance, the first plank in the "deep ecology" platform as formulated by Arne Naess is: "The flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth has intrinsic value. The value of non-human life forms is independent of the usefulness these may have for narrow human purposes." Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of Ecosophy* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 29.

2. Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (New York: North Point Press, 1990), 109 (emphasis added).

3. Snyder's thinking here might strike some as cruel: to think a form of life would long for its own predator! This is an area in which Snyder's work has really helped me personally. More than anyone, he has helped me feel more comfortable with the "give and take," reciprocal nature of existence, to learn to view the fact that the life of one individual most often involves the death of another as an "intimacy" not an "enmity." For an accessible introduction to Snyder's thought in this area, I recommend Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living As If Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1985), 12–14.

4. Snyder, *Practice*, 109–10.

5. Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era —A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 2–3, 238 (emphasis added). Swimme has written a stunning monograph that further develops this theme of the mysterious power that infuses the universe: *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos: Humanity and the New Story* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

6. The most striking examples of Card’s creative use of LDS themes and narrative structures can be found in his “Tales of Alvin Maker” series, whose plotline contains parallels to many events in the life of the prophet, Joseph Smith, and his “Homecoming” series which has many elements which match Book of Mormon storylines.

7. Orson Scott Card, *Xenocide* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 1991). 466–70. *Xenocide* is the third novel in Card’s “Ender” series.

8. A clear expression of this sensibility is found in Joseph Smith’s “King Follett Discourse.” There, Smith portrays God’s motivation for bringing our cosmic epoch into being: “God himself, finding he was in the midst of spirits and glory, because he was more intelligent, saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself.” Joseph Smith, Jr., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, Joseph Fielding Smith, ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1938), 354. B.H. Roberts also speaks well to the genuineness of the spirit of cooperation between Gods and all other intelligences: “He without them cannot be perfect, nor they without him. There is community of interest between them ...and hence community of effort for mutual good, for progress, for attainment of the highest possible.” B.H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930), 2:399.