

# The Vintage Voice

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## The Shoreline of Wonder

*The Reverend Edward R. Sims*

Let me take you back to the mid-1930s when I was ten or eleven years old, to one of the turning points of my interior life. My grandparents lived just half a block away; my grandfather was an avid reader of *The Chicago Tribune* and just as avid a disciple of its conservative politics. My brother and I spent part of nearly every Sunday afternoon with the *Tribune's* comic section. On one such occasion, my attention was drawn to the Sunday Supplement, which featured an article on the one-hundred-inch mirror being ground for a new telescope atop Mt. Palomar in southern California. The astronomer being interviewed pointed out that the telescope would bring the surface of the moon optically to within eight miles of the earth, but that it would never be aimed at the moon but rather at what he called "deep space." The reporter asked, "What questions do you expect the world's largest telescope to answer?" The astronomer replied, "We expect this telescope to ask many more questions than it answers."

That article was a watershed experience for me; it introduced me to the reality that as we enlarge our knowledge of the world around us, the area of our ignorance expands rather than contracts. Each expansion of our learning enlarges the unknowns rather than diminishing them; each addition to our learning opens new vistas to our curiosity, new arenas for exploration. This reality applies whether we are looking outward toward the heavens or inward toward the atoms. The microscope and the particle collider reveal infinities within that match the infinities without: new phenomena begging new explanations.

A poet has described it with this lovely phrase: "the larger the island of knowledge, the longer the shoreline of wonder." It is the pi phenomenon: enlarge the diameter by one unit and you lengthen the circumference by three units, or, more precisely, 3.1416 units. The larger the island of knowledge, the longer the shoreline of wonder.

In just this way, our concept of basic matter, the "solid" stuff of which the material world is made, has gone through at least four stages. The ancient "earth, air, fire and water" yielded to the one hundred and three basic elements of the periodic table; those elements gave way to the particles that make up the atoms of those elements; presently, those particles have virtually disappeared into "energy waves and probabilities." The larger the island of knowledge, the longer the shoreline of wonder.

What does this tell us about God? It tells me this: our concept of God cannot remain static while our knowledge of his creation expands. A new conceptual framework is taking shape in the metaphysical landscape; I call that framework "the God within." The concept is not mine, nor is it novel. Rene Dubos, an eminent microbiologist, entitled a 1972 book, *The God Within*. In 1993, Sally McFague, a teacher in the Vanderbilt Divinity School, used a new metaphor for

the Creation in a book called, *The Body of God*. A new word, “panentheism” — God IN everything — has appeared, to distinguish this thinking from “pantheism” — God IS everything.

The poets have explored this territory ahead of us. We sing a hymn that proclaims an early version of the concept of the God within: “To all life thou givest, to both great and small; in all life thou livest, the true life of all.” That poem is a hundred years old. Scott Simon of National Public Radio was speaking last spring of a trip to Africa. He was deeply moved by the experience, and at one point said, “. . . from dung beetles to zebras, from the lush forests to the wide savannah where we first walked upright as ‘homo erectus,’ life finds a way in Africa.” “Life finds a way” — the vibrant, living universe of the God within.

The poet Mary Oliver says it eloquently:

Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting —  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.

The conceptual environment dominated by the image of the God within has expressed itself in two statements about the human creation. The first speaks of humanity at large in these terms: “We, the human species, are the most recent expression of life’s search for itself.” That is, the whole creation story — from the first release of the colossal energy of the Big Bang to this very day on this planet — is the story of life in search of every conceivable expression of itself. We, homo sapiens, are the most recent modulation of that elegant, unfolding experiment of love.

The second speaks of the individual, and it says, “I am what the cosmos is doing at this time, in this place.” There is only one you; you are different from every human being and you will never appear again on the planet. What is the role life is hoping you will play? You stand at a fulcrum of history. You are what the creation is doing at this moment, in that place you have reached, among those people who surround you.

What role will you play in the grand drama? The God within has summoned you to life, and the cosmos awaits your answer.



Edward and Elizabeth Sims enjoy the blessings of a generous church in the beauty of Rockport, Massachusetts, their home for the seventeen years of their retirement.