

Luminosity in Life

Mark 9:2-10

As many of you know, over the past few months I've been auditing a course at Hartford Seminary on quantum mechanics and spirituality (which basically amounts to saying, I pray a lot while I try to make sense of quantum mechanics!). Though I'm little more than a dabbler in it, my mind has been stretched beyond my lifelong and deeply ingrained mode of logical thinking.

Until this class started messing with my head, I was an old-fashioned, linear-connecting, gravity-powered Newtonian thinker in a material world. What goes up must come down. What we see is what there is. Every effect has to have a direct cause, and material objects are what's real with lots of empty space in between. Like most, I've figured the laws of physics operate in reliable, deterministic ways so no one gets fooled by a magician's wand. Anything paranormal was intriguing, but being outside of the laws of the physical universe, it seemed little more than a clever illusion or superstition.

This is not to say, of course, that I didn't believe there must be something more than what meets the eye. As a spiritual leader, I presume there is. But that didn't translate into definitive or satisfactory explanations for what the spiritual dimension might be, let alone describing what actually occurs after death, or taking account of every weird happening, every strange coincidence, and all the incredible synchronicities that occur in life. I knew the standard rules don't apply as often as we think.

This is where I've come to appreciate the value of the new physics because all of this seems to take us out of the realm of what

appears real to us—the stuff that can be easily measured or that our human senses can see, touch, smell, feel or taste—and into the realms that are conceived of more through imagination and calculation—the places we cannot see, touch, smell, feel or taste. Quantum mechanics, relativity, and string theory conceptually take us from the subatomic dimensions of wave function and particles out into the farthest reaches of the known universe with plausible explanations of phenomena that Sir Isaac Newton wouldn't have known or accounted for.

What fascinates me is how the new physics opens up possibilities for grasping other dimensions of reality beyond what we know, simply because it explores consciousness more than mere physical existence. The lines between what's perceived to be real and not real, what's known and unknown, what's certain and uncertain, are much more blurry and less definitive and distinct than they appear in the physical paradigm. Rather than reducing reality to a few standard rules that apply well to a material world (and, in turn, debunking everything that doesn't fit into this paradigm), in quantum theory, all sorts of ideas, concepts, and possibilities for what's going on gain legitimacy by being considered, explored, examined, postulated, and debated. What physicists around the globe are realizing, reality is as much about *paradox* as it is *paradigm*. For every conceived property that makes sense by standard rules, there is just as much likelihood of finding those that don't.

I suppose the baseline for quantum theory is the realization that everything is fundamentally multi-dimensional. It begins on the subatomic level, where what can be observed and measured is only

one of the all the myriad possibilities for that subatomic movement, which implies that all of the potential movement has to be acknowledged in order for subatomic particles to be known to exist.

As Danah Zohar in her book, *The Quantum Self*, notes:

In a realm where reality appears to consist not of any fixed actualities that we can know but rather of the probabilities of all the various actualities that we might know, the harder one tries to scrutinize the movements of any given particle, the more elusive it becomes. The elusiveness is one major problem raised by quantum movement; the other is the fate of all those lost probabilities. ...[which] happen simultaneously in every direction at once.¹

So where do all these other “lost possibilities” go if they are, in fact, real? That’s part of the mystery of quantum physics. No one knows with any certainty. However, there is a widely accepted quantum theory about decoherence, euphemistically called “The Many Worlds Theory,” which suggests that reality consists of many dimensions,

...in each one of which we could find a version of our own selves, each different from the others in that it had pursued and developed some other possible chain of events. According to this view, there are no lost possibilities—we can have them all.²

Like me, you might find this very intriguing; but then old-fashioned logic creeps back in and reminds us that even if this is true, does it really matter since we’re only speaking about electrons and other subatomic particles? That’s a natural response. Except *everything* consists of subatomic waves and particles, meaning this is the nature of everything within the known universe, since all energy, light, waves and particles originated billions of years ago in the origin of our universe in the Big Bang.

¹ Danah Zohar, *The Quantum Self: Human Nature and Consciousness Defined by the New Physics*, Wm. Morrow, 1990, pg. 51.

² *Ibid.*, pg. 33.

Even one of the astrophysicists who helped develop the current theory on dark matter and energy speaks almost religiously about this:

People often think of eternity as being “the same thing forever,” but it’s actually much more complicated. Eternity on the quantum scale is dynamic beyond all human imagination, spawning universes that can burst out into time. Eternal inflation is endlessly creative and lavishly profligate. ...In its details, every resulting universe will be unique because the quantum fluctuations during each one’s instant of passing through the floor will be completely different...No one knows if the laws of physics are the same in other bubbles [or states], nor do we yet have any way of finding out.³

Needless to say, this ongoing study has changed my thinking about many things, particularly on parallel realms of existence beyond the physical world, or reality itself operating concurrently on multiple dimensions. What we see isn’t all there is. As a result, one doesn’t need to be religious or a mystic to refer to the spiritual realm; in fact, one can be scientifically comfortable speaking about it since, like astrophysicists and cosmologists, it’s delving into consciousness and imagination that makes us aware and attentive to this dimension, certainly more than measuring physical laws or properties.

It’s also allowed me to reconsider things like synchronicity, déjà vu, coincidences, and certain unusual experiences I or others have had, as well as stories that I have encountered over the years, about near-death experiences or strange sightings or sensations family members have of those who have recently died, or even the amazing anecdotes some tell of seeing spiritual beings for which they have no logical explanation. What if it isn’t all crazy-talk? Maybe it isn’t

³ Joel R. Primack & Nancy Ellen Abrams, *The View from the Center of the Universe*, Riverhead, 2006, pp. 195-196.

delusional; what if it's another dimension of life or level of consciousness operating within or parallel to our own?

Celtic spirituality refers to “thin places”—moments where the divine is extraordinarily evident. I'm of a mind to say that “thin places” occur on occasion in the physicality of the universe, not just in some indefinable spiritual realm—“supernatural” experiences that allow brief exposure to other dimensions or states of reality, whether or not they are perceived as evidence of the divine presence. I suppose those who have a developed inner life, for instance, who more easily move their consciousness and imaginations beyond the mortal and material world, have greater ability and opportunity to experience a “thin place” that opens them to other dimensions of existence. That would make quantum sense. Those who look for “thin places” are more likely to notice them.

This may also help us to make sense of extraordinary spiritual encounters recorded in religious traditions and sacred texts—the story of the transfiguration being one example—this strange, haunting depiction of Jesus crossing into another state of being, albeit luminous and ethereal, in company with the figures of Moses and Elijah.

I will admit, up to this point it's been hard for me to view this story as anything other than symbol or metaphor, simply because it is so fantastic. Nothing in my own experience or in the physical laws we commonly use could validate it as a literal event. But now I'm more open to possibility and wonder: could an account like this have been very real in the sense of being a “thin place” that exposed an alternative dimension to reality—what we more comfortably refer to

as the spiritual dimension? Could it not be real in another dimension—another nature, another form of existence—that is as real and authentic as the one we’re currently in? Quantum theory would allow for that.

It certainly makes sense to me that Jesus and his disciples delved deeply into their consciousness in times of prayer and meditation. There was a mystical element to Jesus’ persona. Whether this mountaintop episode was a vision that was explicitly real to all of them in the same moment (something they literally saw unfold before their eyes) or something that was perceived through their consciousness as they became aware of Jesus’ significance, we will never know. But we do know that it was remembered as a profoundly luminous moment that provided extraordinary insight to each of them. How is it that a mortal man could stand in the company of the great ones of the past? Was this a window—a thin place—that allowed mortals access into the spiritual realm?

At the heart of quantum theory is a recognition that everything in this universe is made from energy that can change form, be it matter, heat, light, from particles to waves and back again—dark and luminous—all of which emanated out of the initial flash of the Big Bang. Is it possible, or even probable, that since no matter or energy is ever lost in this universe, even at death, that our present realm of human consciousness is but one state of wave function collapse, while what we deem “the spiritual” is yet another? In which case, we might maintain a sense of body form (as the Apostle Paul alludes to in I Corinthians 15), but one that consists of energy which appears more luminous in that life. It would fit into the physical properties of this

universe, if not another dimension altogether, simply because it is a potential state of energy, matter, and light.

Maybe this is also the metaphor by which we can reflect on and understand what human consciousness and existence actually are, i.e., a remarkable conjoining of many realities that intersect in occasional moments of translucence, transcendence, and transparency to show the luminosity in life which exists within our own world as well as in dimensions beyond it. Who knows? As quantum theories would postulate, it's possible—maybe even probable—but, ultimately, it is still a mystery.

Yet, “the light at the center of every cell”⁴ reveals the true luminosity in life—perhaps the essential energy of God that is embodied in and empowers everything known and unknown, all that is meaningful and yet, mysterious—that which consists of the very essence of divine creation that brings forth life and makes all things sacred. Embracing this is where spirituality leads us, be it in a lab, a sanctuary, a mountaintop, or through an extraordinary moment of insight.

This light, this energy of the universe, the luminosity in life itself, could very well be the *Imago Dei*—the image of God—imprinted into every cell that we are born with and which exists in each atom and particle of our very beings—never to be lost in this life or in the worlds yet to come, for it is the eternal and essential light of life.

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⁴ From the poem, “The Black Snake” by Mary Oliver.