

## The Gospel of Everything

Micah J. Murray

I want to start a rumor about a place in Minnesota where the people know salvation not by confession or creed but by tomatoes and dirt and the light of the sun and the rhythms of the moon. I want to tell you a story about a village where people of all ages live in relationship with each other, and with the earth and with the river and with the trees. But before you can understand the story of this Village, first I need to tell you about the Gospel of Everything.

In the beginning was the Mystery. Before the Big Bang. Before Our Father Who Art in Heaven. Before beings of any sort. Before existence began. In the beginning was the Mystery. And the Mystery had no name. Then the Mystery became matter and energy and the Universe was brought into being. This happened about 14 Billion years ago, as we measure time.

What can we say about the Mystery? How do you describe the void? Whatever it is, it lies beyond the reach of language, beyond the grasp of human cognition, deeper than concepts of space and time. The Mystery is a horizon beyond which knowing cannot pass, a black hole that consumes all illumination by its immense Gravity. Even to speak of it as Mystery is in some sense hollow, as this too is a name. Finally, then I accept the futility of language and gesture only toward that which cannot be named, and so I call it by that: The Mystery that Has No Name.

What can we say about the Mystery that Has No Name? Only that it seems to have given rise to the Universe. In the beginning is Mystery. The origin of our Universe is beyond the horizon of understanding, bathed in unknowing. The collective curiosity of our species has extended our understanding of history of the Universe from six thousand years to 14 billion years and yet – in the beginning is still Mystery.

In the beginning was the Mystery, and the Mystery became matter and energy and the Universe was brought into Being. In the beginning the Universe was a seed, smaller than a grain of sand but containing in its singularity all matter that would ever exist. Then the seed expanded, so rapidly it might be imagined as an explosion. “In the beginning, the universe brought forth quarks and leptons, the elementary particles, and within a few microseconds the quarks combined to form protons and neutrons that churned ceaselessly in a thick and gluey form of matter called plasma. There was almost no structure in the universe.”<sup>1</sup> In the beginning, the Universe was formless and void, and darkness was on the face of deep. But deep within this primordial chaos, Mystery was at work.

All my life I have been a prophet in search of a God, a preacher in search of a gospel worthy of my calling. In the early years of my life, this calling had no language, only a sense of longing. When I was a child I stood on the beach at Lake Michigan and watched the Sun fall into the horizon casting a path of gold across the greygreen water, a path which I felt compelled to follow. Though I knew I could never reach the horizon, still I walked a few steps into the water, a

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<sup>1</sup> Journey of the Universe, 7

few steps toward the Sun. I was called. I did not have language for that then, what would later be understood as an encounter with God and later still, a transcendent moment of pure awareness. In many ways, I think I have spent my life trying to find language for that moment. I have been haunted by the mysterious call that came silently to me across the waves. Why did my small body want to walk into the water, into the Sun?

The first Gospel I was given was a story about a Father in Heaven, a loving, powerful Creator who made this world and everything in it. This story begins in a Garden and ends in a supernatural realm where laws of physics are suspended and time is no more and the natural cycles of life and death are obliterated by an all-consuming Holiness.

This Gospel was a gospel of Alienation. It taught me that this world is not my home, I am just passing through. It taught me to love not the world. It taught me to love not my own body. It taught me to reject my embodied existential encounter with Reality. It taught me to doubt my own wisdom, to silence my own voice, to hate my own desires. The Gospel of Alienation, with its Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (and Holy Scriptures) opened a chasm of separation between me and the Divine. By in a God who was a supernatural being, I embraced a fundamental metaphysical alienation. This dualistic story, the dominant story of the culture(s) in which my constructs of reality were formed, permeates every aspect of our encounters with the world. Divinity is made Other, and our spirituality is fragmented by a Subject/Object split. Reality is fragmented into duality, and duality inevitably implies hierarchy of value. God over Nature. Mind over Matter. Soul over Body. Reason over Emotion. Man over Woman. Human over Animal. The alienation pervades us, splits us, consumes us, and causes us in turn to consume one another.

As a prophet in search of a God worthy of my devotion, I have always given my highest allegiance to whatever is Real. I know that I don't interact with unmediated reality, that I live in layers of stories between me and sheer Existence. But I deeply desire that the stories in which I live be, as much as is available to me, aligned with whatever it is that can be said to be Real. This is why I could not ever shake the question of God's existence during my two decades as a Christian would-be Believer. I called it "doubt", confessed it to my pastor. He told me it was the "sin of unbelief". I repented. I prayed to God to "help my unbelief" and God was for the most part silent and I carried on anyways by sheer willpower. I believed that this was "faith". I understand now that the question of God's existence was not a doubt, much less a sin. It was curiosity, it was wonder, it was longing for what actually exists. I understand now that what I once called "doubt" is actually the very thing that deserves to be called faith – that is, relentless insistence on an actual, embodied encounter with Reality.

My faith led me to unbelief in anything I had once recognized as God. Unbelief in the Gospel of Alienation with its Father/Son/Spirit/Scriptures. My faith led me to atheism, rejecting all notions of Divinity that were dependent on the realm of the supernatural, the realm of human hearsay masquerading as metaphysical certainty. When learned that God was dead, at first I was afraid. It seemed like a terrible loss, this loving, powerful creator. But I trusted the call of faith, even as it led me to the abandonment of everything I once imagined Divine, even as it called me deeper into Mystery, deeper into the Void. I went looking for God and found only Absence. But in the Absence, I found the holiness of all things, the inexhaustible Mystery that pervades every particle of Existence without abandoning the realm of what is Natural. In the Absence of God I encountered the Gospel of Everything, a fundamentally different story than the Gospel of Alienation with its supernatural realms.

The Gospel of Everything is simply this: God is Everything. Separation is illusion.

Embracing it first as an experiment borne of faithful spiritual curiosity, I have found the Gospel of Everything to be the foundation on which I can rest, the soil in which my soul finds purchase for its roots. The Gospel of Everything is known by many names in history and around the world; it often stands in contrast to dominant religious and metaphysical narratives rooted in dualistic categories of Western thought. The Gospel of Everything is a tree in the same forest with animism, pantheism, Earth Goddess religion, eco-spirituality, many indigenous religions, Daoism, Religious Naturalism, and countless other encounters with Reality contained simply within the domain of “spiritual but not religious”. In theological conversations it is known as Pantheism, a name which often elicits suspicion and hostility from mainstream theology, rooted as it is in earthy, embodied, profane, material, intuitive, and feminine encounters with Reality.

Beginning with the simple, radical theological claim that God is Everything, we see an unfolding story of the Universe, a cosmos of infinite Mystery from which pours Creativity and Life and Energy and ultimately, humanity.

Rooted as it is in what is Real, the Gospel of Everything offers a radically different notion of human interaction with the Divine than stories rooted in supernatural mythologies. In this story, the World was not made for the glory of God nor to be exploited for relentless human consumption. Indeed, the World was not “made” at all, it flows from the Mystery with a relentlessness that obliterates notions of purpose and plan. This fundamentally alters our

relationship to the World; we learn to see ourselves as dynamic relational participants in the web of Life rather than disembodied consumers of natural resources. We become participants in the Divine. Individual human bodies are understood to be sites of sacred Incarnation. Where the Gospel of Alienation has opened illusory chasms of separation, the Gospel of Everything brings us home again.

But the Gospel of Alienation has been the dominant narrative of Western society for centuries, and we are reaping the whirlwind. Our fundamental, mythological separation from the Divine by nature of the Gospel of Alienation has come into the fulness of being. Oppressive structures as old as human history, stories built on the illusion of separation, now pervade every moment of our existence through digitally mediated encounters with Reality. In the final aims of this empire, our existence is reduced to resources, our energy exploited for the maximization of shareholder profits.

As a species, our cleverness outpaces our maturity. While we have tremendous capacity for wisdom, compassion, and empathy, it is matched by our fear and greed. We have been given great power, but lack the responsibility to use it well. It seems that power has its own gravitational pull, consolidating more power with the already powerful, granting increased decision-making ability to those most motivated by greed. This power stratification has, over and over throughout history, given rise to dominant systems that expand and exploit and consume until they have destroyed their supporting ecosystems (both natural and cultural) and collapse under their own weight. Then, and only then, do these systems cease their relentless consumption. The same story has played itself over and over across the landscape of this planet

in almost infinite variations throughout history. Hunter/gatherers become hoarders, and learn war.

Since ancient times, humans have been given a particular allotment of energy: 173,000 terrawatts at all the time, pouring from the heart of the Sun and bathing our Earth in warmth and light. Our limitation was our salvation. Though our greed has always been boundless, our power has not been. Our cleverness has been constrained, our ambition held in check by the physical limitations of our embodied organisms, our power limited by complex ecosystems of interdependent energy. In recent centuries, we have cracked the tombs of the gods, unleashing ancient power buried long ago in the foundations of the earth. Terrawatts of sunlight from eons gone by, vitality that lived and died in the bodies of organisms larger and older than the strangest creatures of our imaginations, the energy of empires long buried beneath rock, distilled by untold centuries of pressure and darkness beneath the surface of this planet into a viscous substance of nearly unlimited potential. The solar power allotment of a million generations compressed into one sea of oil, one vein of coal. When human cleverness found a way to open the earth and extract this sequestered energy, the flames of hell ignited a fire that now threatens to consume all Life. The Earth wise to hide the power of oil from us, locked away for a hundred million years miles beneath our feet. As a species, we do not have the wisdom to handle the concentrated power of all that dead dinosaur energy. From the plains of ill-fated Babel to the modern glass apocalypse of space-age Babylon, our species is unable to resist the temptation to concentrate power, to take more than our daily terawatts from the Sun.

This is the state of our *homo sapiens* today. No longer able or willing to consider ourselves one of the organisms in the web of life, we have made ourselves consumers of the garden's gifts. In so doing, we are killing the garden and exiling ourselves from the ecosystems

in which we were designed to thrive. No longer embedded in a natural ecosystem, we are citizens of a global economy where resources are distributed around the world according to the absurd logic of cheap energy and endless growth for maximum profit. We have access to more energy than we know what to do with, and we're using it to flood the world with plastic and set it all ablaze. As a species, we do not have the wisdom to handle the concentrated power of all that dead dinosaur energy. Give us this day our daily terrawatts, and lead us not into the temptation of dead energy from bygone worlds. We should have stayed in the Garden.

This brings us to tomatoes. When we consider the ecological systems in which human life evolved, we can understand that food is (among other things) the means of capturing, storing, and extracting energy from the sun to fuel the organisms that we are. Unlike our leafy kin, we lack the ability to capture energy directly from the sun. Like our animal kin, we depend on plants to capture energy from the sun for us, which we then can access by ingesting the plants (or by ingesting other animals that have ingested the plants). This is our place in the ecological cycle. But with so-called "modern" technological advances, the cycle has become infinitely complexified. Most importantly, the sun-energy that infuses our food is now heavily subsidized (perhaps even mostly replaced) by fossil fuel energy taken from deep in the earth, and by human energy extracted from the labor of exploited workers.

Researchers estimate that the average bite of food travels 1500 miles before it reaches our mouths.<sup>2</sup> This is absurd. The energy contained in our food is – on average -- only 1/10<sup>th</sup> of the energy used to produce the food. Food is shipped all over the world at the whims of markets and

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<sup>2</sup> <https://foodwise.org/learn/how-far-does-your-food-travel-to-get-to-your-plate/#:~:text=It%20is%20estimated%20that%20the,large%20quantities%20of%20fossil%20fuels.>



profit margins, wasting literal tons of energy and emitting tons of carbon dioxide. This system does not make sense. It does not provide higher-quality food, nor is it better for the earth. It exists solely because it is profitable to mass-produce and transport food in this way. And that profitability can only exist in a society that has completely severed its relationship with the natural world and forgotten that we were made for a garden.

For untold eons, the sharing of food has been an essential element of cultural, religious, political, and family systems. With the advent of oil-subsidized mass-produced “food”, we have almost completely replaced the shared table with an unholy amalgamation of stores and restaurants and meal ordering apps. This system literally alienates us from our fellow humans, adding layers of pixels, fossil fuels, and corporate profiteering between us and the people who are involved in the production of our food.

Living in a body evolved for the tasks of hunter/gathering, I wander the anonymous aisles of a grocery store and pick out boxes with images of food printed on them, literally a facsimile of food. I have no sense of place or of season – the grocery store ensures that all things are available at all times, forsaking the rhythms of our planet’s movement arounds the sun and instead stocking its shelves according to the man-made calendar of consumerist holidays / holy days. Devoid of relational context, our food items are branded with fictional characters representative of cows, of corn, of tigers, of farmers in straw hats. In this artificial garden, my body is unneeded. No need for my legs to climb or kneel, for my arms to plow or pull or haul, no need for my fingers to get dirty or grasp fruit and bring it to my mouth. I touch a digital picture of bananas and walk out without ever speaking to another human. This is the default food culture of the society I encounter. To diverge from it requires access to resources of extra time or money or both. Food acquisition that involves bodily participation or face-to-face human interaction is

treated as an treat, a field trip, a special event, an elective activity: farmer's markets, CSA's, pick-your-own, personal gardens. The dominant narratives of our food culture treat these as hobbies, accepting as normal a perverse system of trucks and conveyor belts and sick dirt and artificial light and so-called "food" that never saw the light of day. Is it any wonder my body has so often felt empty, no matter how much I consume?

In the essay "Good Oak", Aldo Leopold writes: "There are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from a furnace."<sup>3</sup> His prescription to these spiritual dangers is simple: Plant a garden. Grow your food. Chop your firewood. Wrestle your life from the earth by the power of the Sun.

As I have encountered reality through the Gospel of Everything, the embodied existential reality of Real World existence, I have grown dissatisfied with notions of spirituality that remain in abstracted realms of eternal discourse and never get real dirt under the fingernails. I want what is Real. Seeking to be liberated from the Gospel of Alienation, I desire to return to my place in the family of things. I want to plant a garden. I want to chop my firewood. I want to own a farm. Or rather: I want to repent from colonial concepts of land ownership and submit to stewardship of a farm, of a forest, of as many ecosystems as we can find not already obliterated by parking lots or restricted by status-quo zoning regulations. I want to disavow the brainwashing of corporate interests that have normalized disconnected food, isolated organisms, dead dinosaur energy, alienated existence. Rejecting stories of food as a commodity, I want to return to it as an

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<sup>3</sup> <https://classes.matthewjbrown.net/teaching-files/american/Leopold.pdf>

essential element of biological as well as cultural life, an embodied experience of solar and spiritual energy.

In the parables of my childhood religion, there is a story about a man who found a treasure buried in a field and sold all he had to acquire the land. He understood that the treasure hidden in its soil was worth more than all the material wealth of a lifetime of accumulation. Jesus has a lot of stories like this one – stories of liberation from the kingdoms of this world through rural economies of absurdity. Narrow paths and narrow gates, the eye of a needle through which a merchant's camel cannot fully loaded pass, feasts populated by misfits and vagabonds, losing everything to gain everything, losing one's life to find it again.

To an affluent middle-class white Christian at the apex of privilege, these words of Jesus are rendered flat, disembodied, metaphorical, powerless. By the time I encountered this religion, these stories had long been calcified in the canons of its mythology. In the communities of my religious heritage, I watched people tell these stories of Jesus from the comfort of Babylon as if they were not incompatible. I saw White Jesus become the mascot for the system of the empire, This Jesus had no appeal for me, alienated as he was from the reality of my embodied existence. Like so many other radical voices that have protested the empire of greed, the stories of Jesus were for me become neutralized through commodification. I remain wary of canonized myths, but these days I can't help but myself playing a character the stories Jesus told. Stories of food blessed, broken, and shared and never running out. Stories of seeds scattered on uneven soil bringing forth unexpected abundance, stories of tiny ideas becoming trees large enough to provide a home for many creatures.

In the religion of my childhood, I was taught that faith without works is dead. An existential encounter with reality should produce fruit. By their fruits you will know them. I take that literally — theology makes tomatoes. The Garden is literally a Garden. The treasure buried in a field is literally buried in a field, some hundred acres give or take within a few hours of this city and we're going to find it soon. The metaphor has never lacked for potency. Under the influence of oil, embedded in stories of alienation, we have allowed the metaphor to be reduced to an abstraction. I intend to take it seriously. I intend to take it literally. The Kingdom of Heaven, if there's anything of the sort to be found, is literally buried in a field, embedded in the topsoil of this planet not far from the place where my body sits at this exact moment while skyscrapers tower above it and electric cars tunnel beneath its surface. The metaphor has never lacked for potency. Under the influence of oil, embedded in stories of alienation, we have allowed the metaphor to be reduced to an abstraction. I intend to take it seriously. I intend to take it literally.

I understand that I will have to give up — quite literally — the salvation offered to me by the dominant consumer narratives of our culture and its Gospel of Alienation. I suspect that this is the only path to salvation (as Jesus knew). This Gospel of Everything requires me to repent of acquired notions of human superiority (along with its inherited claims to outsized slices of privilege at every intersection of power). I renounce my stake in the empires of the world and cast my lot with the organisms of the Earth. As I seek to extricate myself from systems of consumption fueled by oil and stories of alienation, I cannot stay in this house, in this life, in this story where I have always existed. I must follow the Gospel back into an older way of being, a wisdom understood by our ancestors but forgotten in recent centuries as our species has descended into a maelstrom of ever-increasing consumption driven by stories of fundamental

separation. The environment in which I find my body embedded must be radically rejected, reimagined, and rebuilt at every level, fueled as it is by dead energy and built on the logic of limitless greed. This includes not only the food in my belly but the roof over my head, the clothes on my body, the relational structures of connection in which my organism finds symbiotic belonging, the technological apparatus through which I navigate reality (including most notably technologies of transportation and communication), and the spiritual/religious apparatus by which I make meaning of my existence – including shared stories, songs, and rituals. I understand that if I wish to return to the Garden, it must be more than a metaphor. It must be a literal return to a literal Garden.

This is where the Gospel of Everything comes to fruition. Abstracted notions of interconnected existence break out of the book-stacks of academia and come to literal fruition in the woods of Minnesota. The Mystery brings forth food from the earth, food round and red and bursting with life, dripping with solar energy collected by green leaves without the intervention of plastics or oil, without corporate shareholders nor supernatural benefactors.

I want to start a rumor about a place in Minnesota where the people know salvation not by confession or creed but by tomatoes and dirt and the light of the sun and the rhythms of the moon. There is a place where metaphors are planted like seeds in Minnesota soil and a Village has sprung up – a real place, with a real river and real trees, wisdom embodied in nature and embedded in soil and waiting for us to sell all we have and come find it.

We are gathering a team to build and inhabit an intergenerational ecovillage where we can live in

harmony with the earth by the power of the sun and the rhythms of the moon, in the grace of the river and the company of the trees. We are working together to reclaim forgotten knowledge about how to be human -- recovering ancient wisdom and technologies, re-learning how to live in community, and restoring the land.

This village is a humble collective of people wishing to abandon economies of consumption, competition, and exploitation. It is a laboratory for experimentation in different ways of being human, a workshop for ecological ingenuity, a playground for creative expression, a retreat for the solace of green things, a dance party in the woods, a seed for a better world.