

The Overview Effect

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Ancient Witness: John 1:1-5

Last year there was a news story that made me smile. William Shatner, who most of know as Captain Kirk of the Starship Enterprise in the T.V. series and movies, “Star Trek.” The story was about the 91 year-old actor finally being able to fly into space for real this time. And he was able to be aboard the capsule piloted by Jeff Bezos’s company, Blue Origin. And Shatner wrote about this experience in his memoir that was recently published. And his account was covered by several news sources.

“I was crying,” Shatner told NPR. “I didn’t know what I was crying about. I had to go off some place and sit down and think, what’s the matter with me? And I realized I was in grief... I wept for the Earth because I realized it’s dying,” Shatner said. “I dedicated my book to my great-grandchild, and in the dedication, say it’s them, those youngsters, who are going to reap what we have sown in terms of the destruction of the Earth.”

He said, “I saw more clearly than I have, with all the studying and reading I’ve done, the writhing, slow death of Earth and we on it... It’s a little tiny rock with an onion skin of air around it. That’s how fragile it all is. It’s so fragile. We hang by a thread... we’re just dangling.”

Shatner had been wanting to travel to space for years, but he didn’t think he’d be overwhelmed with sadness or that he’d go through “the strongest feelings of grief” that he’s ever experienced. Turns out that there’s a name for what Shatner felt. It’s called the “overview effect,” a term coined by space philosopher, Frank White in his book by the same name.

He said, “The overview effect is a cognitive and emotional shift in a person’s awareness... when they see the Earth from space. They’re at a distance and they’re seeing the Earth... in the context of the universe.”

White has interviewed more than 40 astronauts and says that Shatner’s response is typical. “People often cry when they first see the Earth from space,” he said. After traveling to space, astronauts gain a greater understanding of how precious, and delicate, the Earth is. While many astronauts were aware of climate change and global warming, they became much more sensitive about it after traveling to space.

Like Shatner, astronauts often return from space more convinced of the interconnectedness of humanity. White writes that they return to the planet with “a greater distaste for war and violence, and a desire to do something to improve life back on the surface because they’ve seen the truth of our situation.”

This reminds me of the perspective of the biblical writers, especially the prophets, who saw the Earth as God sees the Earth—as from a distance in its entirety, as a single whole, a humanity that is interrelated, a brotherhood and sisterhood that is that is meant to live in harmony and peace.

Some of them would ascend mountains, achieving the highest possible altitude for their own overview effect. And we refer to spiritual experiences as mountaintop experiences.

Abraham climbed Mt. Moriah and hears God tell him to spare the life of Isaac. Moses ascends Mt. Horeb and sees the burning bush and is given the Ten Commandments. Also on Mt. Horeb, Elijah would hear the still, small voice of God speak to him. Isaiah would have a vision that on Mt. Zion there would be a feast for all people and the veil that was over all people would be destroyed. And there's a story of Jesus taking Peter, James and John "up a high mountain to pray" and they saw Jesus transfigured before their eyes.

And with broad and expansive view, both God and the prophets weep at seeing how the brokenness and destruction threatens the people. They see how useless and unnecessary war is. How the oppression of others and the exploitation of the poor are heartbreaking and misguided and cruel. The overview effect experienced by Jesus and the prophets is due to seeing the world through the eyes of God, gaining a perspective and context that is life changing and life giving.

The prophets would often tear their clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, signifying that they were in deep grief, weeping for the people, for what they were doing to themselves.

In a similar way, Jesus sat on a hilltop that overlooked the entire city of Jerusalem, and he wept, saying, "O Jerusalem, if you only knew the things that bring about peace."

But the spiritual truth, it seems to me, is that we don't have to have physical distance to gain this vision. It's not about literal altitude. This perspective is available to us, not by going into space, but by going within. By touching the presence that is deep at the heart of all things. And this experience impresses upon us the precious fragility of life, the miracle of life, that needs to be valued and protected.

Martin Luther King, Jr., who never went into space and never climbed a real mountain, on the night before his was assassinated, talked about having gone to the mountaintop, and how he had looked over and had seen the promised land—a vision of unity and justice and wholeness.

God, who is both far off and near, can bless us with a spiritual overview effect, a life-changing perspective, a kind of knowledge that is more than intellectual but experiential and immediate.

True spirituality, true religion is not about believing some things and then we simply lay those beliefs on top of everything else. Rather, it is when we are given a new perspective, a new vision, and everything is radically different. We just don't see some new things; we are given new eyes and see everything differently.

The gospel of John begins with this overview, this expansive vision. And we see that all things emanate from the One. The entire cosmos owes its existence to the Word, which is God. And we can see how all things are connected by this Divine Presence.

The great song written by Julie Gold that you will heard earlier in the service talks about this, that “from a distance, there is harmony, and it echoes through the land.”

*From a distance, we all have enough
And no one is in need
And there are no guns, no bombs, and no disease
No hungry mouths to feed.*

May this be a place where we strive to experience and to see the world as God sees it—in all of its fragile beauty and preciousness. May we see in the sacred manner the miracle of life itself and the unity of all things in which we live together like one being.