

The Starry Heavens and Our Self

Modern astronomy has provided an incredible amount of knowledge on the stellar heavens. With help of enormous observatories and powerful computers, all of what we know about the phenomena of the heavens is now charted with more precision than ever before, our observations double what was previously available.

We can participate in this knowledge through large encyclopedias, thick astronomical books and popular science accounts. But has all this development and accessibility of information resulted in a closer, human relationship to the stars than we have had before? Or has it, to the contrary, actually distanced us from a more intimate experience of the stars?

Modern astronomy presents a model of the starry heavens that resembles a huge machine. And despite the fact that many propose there is probably life and consciousness somewhere else in the cosmos than on earth, it is still unknown. We are most interested in the purely quantitative content, the cold, hard facts, for this kind of information can be manipulated by computers. Life and conscious beings on other planets are only used to balance out the known facts in all kinds of fantasies in the comics and in novels, just as distant from reality as the knowledge that we now have concerning the starry heavens is dead.

And what about the “knowledge” most adults have today concerning the heavens? Of course everyone “knows” that the earth and the planets move in elliptic paths around the sun. Everyone “knows” that the stars are suns that are extremely far away, and so forth. But who “knows” the stars when they appear in the heavens at night? In which constellation does Jupiter stand tonight? Point it out! In which constellation did it stand a year ago? Point it out! And in which constellation will it stand in one year? Point it out! To such specific questions one cannot expect an answer from anyone but a professional astronomer or from those few people who love the stars so much they follow the starry movements over the years.

But this is exactly what one needs to do if one is to truly get to know the stars. Learn the constellations by heart and understand how the planets move so one can point accurately around the starry heavens. But what has one accomplished with that? At best a small beginning. If nothing more happens, it will all be forgotten, as quickly as other superficial knowledge. It would be as if one learned by heart all of the names of people at a party and could point them out perfectly – that is Hansen, that is Petersen, and so forth. If one dies not get to know them better, their names will be quickly forgotten. One can only get to know people by living with them for many years. It is the same with the stars. They can become our friends. The qualities of the starry heavens can be known. Their names become secondary. But to do that we need something for which our hectic tempo and superficial lifestyles do not give much room.

We need quiet observation in which we give ourselves time to linger with every single thing so the important aspects emerge from the unimportant. If we live with the starry heavens for many years we discover three main areas, three spheres. More correctly, we rediscover them, for they are obvious, simple observations that everyone already knows, that everyone has seen, but which we do not notice because we race right on to other daily activities or complicated astronomical calculations. When we have lived with such simple observations over a longer period of time, we will notice the depth of them, they are rediscovered. Here they are:

1. If we look into the northern heavens on a clear, starry night, we notice one of the few constellations we know – the Big Dipper or the Great Bear. This starry figure stands in different positions during the night and during the year. Yet the figure’s form is the same as when we were born, unmoved during our lifetime. So have these stars lit up the skies for our great grandparents and for people in the Middle Ages. In the same constellation they lit up the night skies for the Egyptian pharaohs five thousand years ago. Really? Have they not changed position even a tiny bit? Yes, they have, but only a tiny bit. The changes that have been calculated are so little that two ten-thousand year periods must pass before the constellation will become something very different.
2. It is quite different with the planets. They have stronger light than the „immovable“ fixed stars, therefore they do not twinkle if the air is clear. And they change position in relation to the fixed stars from year to year, from month to month. They travel in rhythmic periods and every planet has its own rhythm. For example, follow Jupiter’s movements for twelve years so that it has moved around the whole fixed starry heaven; then it is no longer merely a theoretical number – 12. Every year Jupiter moves in a small bow through one of the twelve signs of the zodiac. As I write today it shines in the constellation Taurus, as it did also in 1942 at the middle of the World War II, and as it did in 1930 before Hitler came to power. So there are two Jupiter periods, 1930-1942 and 1942-1954. How different is

the Jupiter quality from the fixed star's quality? Both project beyond the day's shifting mood. The fixed stars project all the way into the unlimited, eternal sphere. In contrast the light of Jupiter relates moment's unregulated, diversity with eternal peace in a clarifying, steady, majestic rhythm of time – 12-year rhythms.

3. A star is falling. In a bright arch it shines for a moment and is gone. A shooting star. This brings us to the direct opposite of fixed stars and planets: the unpredictable and chaotic world of the moment. But are there also certain laws that pertain to meteors? They usually arrive in certain directions at certain times. That is so. Yet at the same time they are merely a collection of individual phenomena that are not calculated in advance. When we see a person in deep sleep, we know it is unlikely that he will suddenly begin drumming his fingers. If I see a person I know in a situation where he usually drums his fingers on the table, then it is more likely that he will drum his fingers. But it is also possible that this does not happen this one time. When we describe the qualities of the meteors (it pertains to most atmospheric phenomena), we approach something which in relation to its irregularity can best be compared with human body movements.

When we look up at the starry heavens and live with them over a longer period of time, we can observe:

1. The light of fixed stars in never-ending "eternal" peace with "unmovable" solid structural form
2. The planets and also the sun (in relation to the earth) and the moon in rhythmic movements that exhibit the moment's changeableness and "eternal" peacefulness
3. The atmosphere's meteors that unfold in the moment's changeableness.

These three qualities can be observed in a similar manner in the human body:

1. The basic structure of the body, the formation of the skeleton that is fairly static for a long period of time, just as the structure of the fixed star constellations. The fact that mankind has been aware of these relationships is evident from numerous drawings of the human body with the signs of the zodiac placed in specific areas.
2. The life processes, blood circulation and breathing, and so forth, in which there is constant motion as rhythmical and harmonious as the movements of the planets, the sun in relation to the earth, and the moon.
3. The limbs' changeable movements that happen from one moment to the next, without particular rhythm compares with the shooting stars and the atmosphere's shifting life.

When we look up at the stars we see an endlessly large "human being." We see our Self in a bigger picture. In the gigantic cosmos we find the same order as we find in our own body. The same creative forces that live in our body have formed the universe by the same laws through millions of years. If one becomes aware of these relationships this picture can be enlivened and made more complete; step by step through personal experiences, observations or with observations shared by others. The value is found in the fact that we become neither one-sided in a "spiritual" sense nor one-sided from a "material" perspective. The material is observed as it is formed by the spiritual, and the spiritual not something hypothetically assumed, or beyond the world of the dead, or in an inaccessible transcendent-metaphysical world, but rather something here and now.

The human being is no longer split from the world of nature, no longer unknown in an enormous, dead machine. What lives in the human being is expressed in nature because it is all the same forces that created nature. Ancient myths and original fairy tales are often created from the same perspective. The same is true of a number of ceremonial symbols. Let us take one example: the butterfly that emerges from the green caterpillar was often used in ancient times as a picture of the human being that left its body after death. But the same power that eventually appears in the butterfly's colorful life initially words hidden within the green caterpillar. The green caterpillar must die and it does die in the cocoon state. The caterpillar no longer exists as caterpillar. But from the dead, the hidden force appears in a totally new way.

The same is true of the human being. The soul-spiritual nature lies within the human body as in an empty case. It works in the body during life on earth. But the earthly existence is merely one form. Human beings die and do not continue to live after death in a thinned-out "spiritual" copy of the past, nor does the butterfly remain a thinned-out copy of the caterpillar. Life after death for the human soul-spiritual being is just as different from life on earth as the butterfly is different from the caterpillar.

This thousand-year-old ceremonial symbol is not used merely as a beautiful picture. It is used in relation

to the insight that the same reality that appears in human existence at death has worked creatively in nature and therefore the butterfly's "resurrection" appears from the dead cocoon.

When children reach the age of seven, they begin to free themselves from their surrounding environment. An independent soul life begins to emerge slowly. In their ninth or tenth year their independence enters a more confrontational phase with the outer world; my Self and others, my Self and adults, my Self and the world around me! At this time children begin to question in new ways in order to understand what life and death are all about and what happens with them as human beings after death. They ask for something higher, whether or not they put it into those words. They may pick up adult words on the subject and therefore cannot comprehend or they work with these questions with merely awkward words.

Can we even speak about these realities with children, knowing that adults struggle to gain clarity? Adults usually want a precise answer, a conceptual explanation from a certain world perspective or maybe just a theological, dogmatic formulation. But all of that is "stones for bread" when it comes to children. First of all they do not understand it. Secondly it is not what they are looking for. They want answers, but that does not mean always in words. It means in something real, something they can know and experience with their whole Self.

If the adult has resigned and prioritized the daily duties, given up on a closer relationship with larger realities in life, this adult cannot give the child at this age what he needs. For at this point in time children refuse to resign. They have so much life in themselves that they strive, no matter what, to understand the larger relationships in the world.

Children need adults as authorities on whom they can count. Yet they want, especially as of the tenth year, to notice that adult authority serves something much larger, something that lives both out in the world and in their Self. Whatever adults say or do is all measured with this yardstick by the children. Does the adult have devotion for his teaching of nature, of flowers, animals and the stars? Or does he patter out the facts in order to imprint them on the children? Or maybe he merely airs his own opinions.

If the adult has worked in such a qualitative relationship with the starry heavens as set out earlier in this article, he may have a path from which to present astronomy lessons in a way that serves children; every star, every planet, the finest details in all of nature awaken devotion, something that is real for children.

The adult's perspective on the world, no matter how good and correct it may be, is always indigestible for children, something foreign and irrelevant. The same is true of merely naming the names and numbers of stars, planets and their movements. That is also something foreign to children, something they have no use for in their human development. On the other hand, if we present the names and numbers in such a way that the children can experience the qualities of the stars, planets and movements, the children can wrestle and live with the material in a valuable way. The very simple, observable things are important to work with, to weave them into pictures that are understandable and thereby digestible. Nature becomes a picture, and at the same time the soul-spiritual in the child, that could easily become lost in the unapproachable, becomes condensed in a perceptive picture like the butterfly that emerges from the caterpillar. Where such teaching takes place, children are helped to take a step further in their development, to finding their Self even better than before, to uniting their Self with the world.

Jörgen Smit was a class teacher at the RudolfSteinerskole in Bergen, a founding teacher of the Rudolf Steiner Seminariät in Jarna, Sweden, and was for many years a member of the Vorstand in Dornach, Switzerland.

www.joergensmit.org is the adress of the website focussed on life and work of Jörgen Smit. Biography, books, lectures, fotos etc., published by Rembert Biemond.