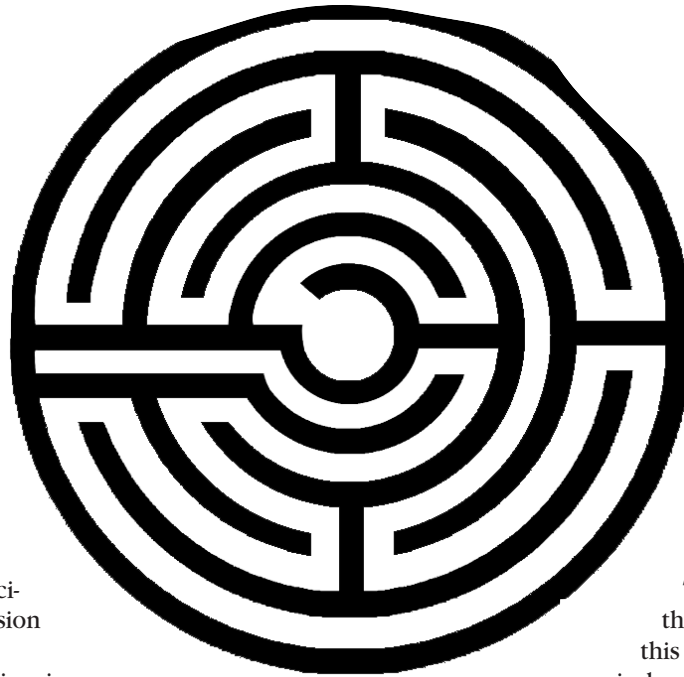

Experiencing the Epic

Part 1: Launching a New Department of the "Epic"

BY CONNIE BARLOW



As evident in the "Our Heritage" section of the inaugural, Spring 1998 issue of the *Epic*, people have been deeply moved by a scientific understanding of the universe for many decades. Only recently, however, has this inward path of understanding been expanded outward into the realm of shared, experiential practice. An increasing number of "Epic practitioners" are creating, performing, and evolving artistic methods and rituals that offer participants opportunities for lived expression of the cosmic and earth story.

In this first installment of "Experiencing the Epic," Ruth Rosenhek provides an overview of the many ways in which Epic practitioners are moving intellectual understanding into heart-felt embodiment. Ruth here assumes her new post as associate editor for this department. She will be writing articles and coordinating contributed essays from other Epic practitioners. If you have an idea or wish to contribute an experiential ritual or story, please contact Ruth at RRosenhek@aol.com.

Ruth Rosenhek is an international environmental activist, organizational consultant, and performance artist. She brings a deep ecology context to her work with environmental and social change organizations in the areas of vision, planning, and conflict resolution. In 1997 Ruth joined John Seed's Rainforest Benefit Tour, facilitating deep ecology workshops and rainforest roadshows in the USA and Australia (all proceeds go to rainforest projects in develop-

ing countries and other local Earth projects). In June 1998 Ruth initiated and facilitated this society's first gathering for a day of ritual practice in California. (See the reflective piece on that event, written by Catherine Browning for the Fall 1998 issue of the *Epic*.) In May of this year, Ruth's spring tour USA will begin featuring the new Timeline of Light workshop and the Deep Time Medicine Show.

The scope of Ruth's commitment to the experiential path, and in making this path available to others, can be seen in her listings within the "Epic Events" section at the end of this publication. Ruth explains the importance of the Epic to her worldview and her work in this way:

"As an environmental activist living through the sixth major extinction spasm, I am offered by the Epic of Evolution an even larger context from which to do my work and to keep my sanity while the biological matrix upon which we depend is collapsing. The awe that the Epic inspires within me is the heartbeat of my soul, moving me forward with great delight and enthusiasm."

Part II: An Overview of Experiential Practice

BY RUTH ROSENHEK

Some months ago, I was delighted to attend a luncheon with Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, John Seed, Bruce and Pamela Bochte, and others from the California Institute of Integral Studies, in downtown San Francisco. Between mouthfuls of pasta and wine, garlic bread and salad, we talked about the power of the Epic of Evolution and what we saw as the implications of humankind's deepening understanding of the Universe

Story. "How does the emerging Story of the Universe inform us individually and collectively?" we asked.

Thomas, a gentle amiable fellow, remained quiet through much of the luncheon until all ears turned toward him as gelates and lattes arrived. I was struck by the simplicity with which he summed up much of our conversation. "No people ever knew so much about the Universe as we do," he

said. After a pause, he continued, "And no people were ever so lacking in rapport with the Universe."

This lack of rapport which Thomas speaks of is deeply etched in Western culture. The Epic holds the possibility of a shared creation myth that could unite all of humankind across lines of class, ethnicity, gender, religion, etc. However, the sense of separation from the natural world that is

inculcated by the Western heritage severely limits our ability to experience and embody this powerful story of our origins.

Additionally, for many, the story as portrayed by science alone fails to activate a deep response. It fails to convey an understanding that this story is humanity's story—indeed, that it is my story. Textbook facts by themselves cannot foster the transformation in consciousness necessary to grasp that it was “I” who was there during the supernova explosion, that it was “I” who populated the Earth as bacteria 4,000 million years ago, and that it was “I” who lived through five major extinction spasms and many other calamities.

In *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos*, Brian Swimme states that, “Even if the discovery of the birthplace of the universe is the greatest of the twentieth century or all time, it is meaningless until it comes alive within us...Facts by themselves are not enough; what is needed is embodiment. What is needed is a transformation from the form of the humanity of today into forms of humanity congruent with the ways of the universe.”

And John Seed, deep ecologist and co-founder of the Council of All Beings says, “For most of us, it is not enough to simply *know* the story of our origins. First we must *feel* our mutuality with the living and nonliving beings of the Earth community, feel ourselves a mere speck in this vast tale of many characters, be utterly awestruck, our souls inspired. Only then do we have the energy and vision to escape the vast momentum of the thousands-of-years-old story on which all the institutions of our society are based: our economic systems, our relationships, the languages we speak, the very air we breathe.”

Robinson Jeffers explored this path of embodiment by way of his poetry decades ago. The mystic William Everson (aka Brother Antoninus) was on this journey during the Beat Era. Now there are many new ways emerging to bring the story into our hearts and souls: rap songs with Drew Dellinger, the Cosmic Walk with Miriam MacGillis and friends, the Tiamat Ritual with Connie Bar-

low, the Timeline of Light workshop with John Fowler, John Seed, and myself, epic music by Alan Tower, and much more.

Our shared hope is that through these different modalities, we will stretch and expand our identities beyond the skin-encapsulated ego to a Universe Self. Thomas Berry has urged this transition from what he calls “the small self” to “the great self.” As Jeffers put it in his poem *Solstice*, “To learn to touch the diamond within to the diamond outside, / Thinning your humanity a little between the invulnerable diamonds.”

Experiencing the Epic is also enhanced by the passionate dedication of practitioners such as Catherine Browning and Mark Steiner of “Cultivating Connections” in Kentucky. Catherine and Mark lead experiential workshops and presentations which invoke a deeper awareness of what it means to be alive in the Cosmos. “Sometimes we just spend our weekends designing new ways to make the Story real to people,” Catherine told me.

Some of these new ways include rituals and ceremonies that bring the Epic alive by rekindling the flame of our ancestral mem-

Reclaiming the rituals that bind the human community with the Earth matrix is particularly important to humankind as we sit perched on the edge of the Cenozoic era. For, as Jean Houston says, “ritual not only illumines our transitions, but puts us back in touch with earlier parts of our brain/mind system and hence with a sense of ‘flow’ and identity with the continuum of Nature and its Beings.”

In this issue of the *Epic*, Larry Edwards presents his evolving version of the Cosmic Walk ritual. In subsequent seasons, we will offer descriptions of many more experiential practices, along with reflective pieces by participants. Some of these practices include: The Evolutionary Remembering (Joanna Macy); The Evolutionary Hand Journey (John Seed); The Sacred Bungee Cord Dynamic Ritual (Roger Davies); The Tiamat Ritual (Connie Barlow); The Flame (Seed and Rosenhek); The Primordial Flaring Forth (Davies, Rosenhek, and others); The Living Cosmology and other Epic Rituals (Browning and Steiner). For an online preview, see <http://forests.org/ric/seed/deep-eco/resource.htm>.

Of course, rituals and ceremonies, dance and poetry will not reach everybody. The diversity that is inherent to the life force is the same diversity that is needed to bring the Story alive within us, to reawaken our minds to the power of the Cosmos. As Mark Steiner enthusiastically declares, “We need to tell the Story in narratives and in dramas. We need to tell it in literal and in metaphorical terms. We need to tell it through song and dance, television and movie theaters, comic books and novels, street theater and

opera and performance art, rituals and reenactments, church services and workshops, buttons and bumper stickers and yard signs.

Mark concludes, “We need to so fill the world with its own Story that there is no escaping it. We need to so fill our culture with the Story that it cannot help but be transformed...so that it seeps deeply enough into our collective consciousness to create a common, contagious unity.” ☺



John Seed and Johanna Macy's Council of All Beings.

ories. Every intact indigenous culture has, at its root, a series of ceremonies and rituals whereby the human community acknowledges and nourishes its interconnectedness with the land and the rest of the Earth Community. Western culture, in contrast, has suffered a traumatic loss of these practices, and what has ensued are worldviews and lifeways unprecedented in their alienation from the Earth Community. This is the lack of rapport that Thomas Berry speaks of.