

“Zest for Life” in the *Journey of the Universe*

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Allow me to add my note of congratulations and thanks to the makers of this remarkable film, the *Journey of the Universe*. It is not simply a rhetorical argument that makes use of the film medium, but it is a work of art. The elegant script by Brian Thomas Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker tells the story of the Universe and the music, graphics, and imagery give that script added vividness. Like any good story it captures the imagination, and by doing so, elicits wonder in the viewer and a new appreciation of the magnificence of the Universe, the Earth, and the Human. Indeed, towards the end of the film, Swimme narrates that the fourteen billion year journey of the Universe resulted in spectacular creatures, breathtaking scenery, and the music of Bach. He could have well added, “And this film!” but modesty prevents him.

My task is to draw out some of the themes in the film that reflect the thought of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ, the noted paleontologist, geologist, and theologian. Time prevents a thorough analysis, so I wish to focus on just one theme: the importance Teilhard places on the “zest for life.”

Journey of the Universe is a masterpiece of cinematography that urges the Human community to carefully consider the path ahead. Unlike any other species people can alter their environment to steer the Earth towards prosperity and life or destitution and death. The film is persuasive because it is beautiful. Beauty attracts, sustains a conversation, and motivates. Similarly, the beauty of Teilhard’s writing is what has drawn so many to read and re-read his work.

In his essays and books he develops an argument that first came forth in the trenches of World War I. Throughout his life he continued to try to articulate that argument more clearly and more beautifully, and the results are some of the inspiring phrases familiar to Teilhardians, like the critical importance of the “zest for life” (*Le goût de vivre*, for example see HP 162). Teilhard

defines the “zest for life” as the psychic instinct for survival in the human that continues to drive evolution (SC 212).

Teilhard believed that modern people in the industrial age were losing their “zest for life.” Meaning was slipping away from their worldview due to the harshness of the war and the subsequent materialism of the postwar period. Nearly one hundred years later, Americans are facing the harshness of two wars, economic disaster, environmental degradation, and materialism remains the anodyne of many. *Journey of the Universe* tries desperately to reignite the “zest for life” in three moves, by provoking a sense of: 1) wonder 2) power 3) and promise.

First, the film stirs the “zest for life” by communicating an appreciation for the great age of the Universe and of all the fantastic events that brought about the world. Indeed, this is the focus of the film. For example, Swimme shows the viewer through the clever use of a balloon how the Universe had to overcome chance to even start its journey. Had the Universe expanded one millionth of one percent more slowly, it would have shriveled like a sad balloon with a leak. Had the Universe expanded one millionth of one percent more quickly, it would have continued to burst apart. Instead of these alternatives, it beat the odds and continued its journey.

Second, the film rekindles a “zest for life” by holding a mirror to the viewers themselves. Towards the end of the film, glorious and ignoble images of the Human appear. Through compelling words, images, and music, the viewer learns that the Human has the power to steer the course of the future journey. Whether or not Humankind wants this power, it has it. Though the film never mentions this, one need only consider a nuclear holocaust to prove that people are capable of ending all, or nearly all, life on Earth. Were that to happen, the journey of the Universe would continue, but in a drastically different direction. Teilhard argues in the *Divine Milieu* that the decision for growth or destruction is not solely in the dramatic events of life, but most often in our daily activities and experiences (DM 24). How people live, work, and play can either contribute to the building of the Universe or to its demolition.

Losing the “zest for life” is the shirking of the responsibility for the future. The film tries to make people aware of this awesome power and to urge people to take it up. The temptation may

be for humankind to respond to this inheritance with angst; however, the film transforms that defeatist option with a promise.

In a third move, the film lightens the gravity of our situation by suggesting a promise for the future. This is a Teilhardian interpretation. The film uses the term “journey” as an allegory to tell of its beginning and long history to the present. The narration says that the contemporary period is the middle of the journey and that perhaps there is an end. Teilhard would not take this allegorically. On the contrary, he argues in the *Human Phenomenon* that the explosion of creativity and the oceans of time that preceded Humanity give some promise of a long future. But the present is not the midpoint of the Universe’s history. Teilhard writes that the journey of the Universe, through the Human, is speeding up. An examination of a timeline reveals a quiet Universe for billions of years before life (see the timeline in the appendix of the *Journey of the Universe* book). Once life arises, then the story speeds up as organisms increase in complexity and eventually give rise to the Human. As consciousness continues to develop, perhaps the end of the Universe is not billions of years ahead, but only millions of years ahead. Despite the many challenges facing Humanity at present, if people can work with creative energy, a promising future awaits (see *Future of Man*).

These are three moves the film makes to renew a “zest for life.” Teilhard gives an additional argument, but one that the filmmakers do not propose in order to appeal to a wide audience. Where Swimme and Tucker write that the journey of the Universe has “perhaps an end,” Teilhard says that the Universe does indeed have an end. However, this end is not one of annihilation, but of fulfillment as Christ Omega. The destination is not “where,” but “who.” Taking inspiration from St. Paul, Teilhard sees the whole Universe moving through evolutionary effort towards fulfillment in Christ until God is all in all (I Cor 15:28; see also Rom 8:22). In the *Divine Milieu*, Teilhard writes that God is not in some remote heaven, but is in the very fabric of the Universe. People encounter God through their daily efforts. Human work is now the vehicle for the journey of the Universe. Writers, artists, businesspeople, craftspeople, and laborers all work to bring the Universe to divine fulfillment. No work, taken up rightly, is beyond a certain mysticism that “sees God in all things,” as St. Ignatius says. Mysticism is not a flight from the Universe, but a plunging into it.

“Zest for life” must be cultivated through wonder, creative power, and hope for the future. People can express their zest through their daily activities, especially their work. As Teilhard writes:

God, in all that is most living and incarnate in him, is not distanced from us, altogether apart from the world we see, touch, hear, smell and taste around us. Rather, he awaits us every instant in our action, in the work of the moment. There is a sense in which he is at the tip of my pen, my spade, my brush, my needle—of my heart and mind. (DM 22; see also AE 53; HU 84)

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Works by Teilhard Cited

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