



DUANE ELGIN

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY*

THE **Living**
Universe

WHERE ARE WE? WHO ARE WE? WHERE ARE WE GOING?

FOREWORD BY **DEEPAK CHOPRA**

Duane Elgin



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Universe

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Universe

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Voluntary Simplicity

Promise Ahead

Awakening Earth

Changing Images of Man (with Joseph Campbell and others)

Living Legacies (with Coleen LeDrew Elgin)

*Dedicated to the wisdom keepers
across cultures and through history
who guide our exploration
of the living universe.*

Foreword

by Deepak Chopra

As a physician, I am concerned with healing. In my view, the more we are in touch with the universe we come from, the more we will be able to heal ourselves and at the same time heal our planet. We are an integral part of a living and intelligent universe. Not only is the universe alive, it is imbued with consciousness. The universe wants to live and breathe through you. To find out the truth of this, you need to relate to the universe as if it were alive. Otherwise, how will you ever know that it is? Today, begin to adopt the following habits:

Talk to the universe.

Listen for its reply.

Be on intimate terms with Nature.

See the life in everything.

Carry yourself like a child of the universe.

Duane Elgin writes about our living universe as an evolutionary pioneer. He has been an explorer of scientific knowledge and spiritual understanding for more than four decades. He has worked on a Presidential Commission looking into the deep future; helped pioneer sustainable ways of living with his book *Voluntary Simplicity*; developed a stunning view of the big picture of the human journey in *Awakening Earth*; co-founded three non-profit organizations working for media accountability and citizen empowerment, and more. The uniqueness and span of this book reflect Duane's wide-ranging life journey.

The Living Universe is written with elegant simplicity and yet it addresses our most important existential dilemmas.

Where are we? Who are we? What journey are we on? Step-by-step he offers us new insights about ourselves and our human journey. At the foundation is the understanding that we are each an expression of a living universe. The universe is conscious, self-regulating, self-creating, ever-renewing, and always evolving to increasing levels of complexity and creativity.

Through us (the human nervous system), the universe is becoming increasingly aware of itself. We are beings of light, love, music, and happiness. We are evolving toward unity consciousness where we experience ourselves as cosmic beings participating in the evolution of the universe. If we consciously participate in this evolutionary process, we can heal the rift in our collective soul and bring creative solutions to poverty, social injustice, war, terrorism, and ecological devastation. If we ignore the call to our collective awakening, we put at risk the future of human civilization on our precious planet. The choice is ours.

It is my hope that the human family rapidly awakens itself to the reality that we live in a living universe. The human body is part of the cosmic body. The human mind is part of the cosmic mind. Awakening to this cosmic dimension of ourselves is profoundly restorative. With that experience and understanding, we bring healing to our wounded planet and a new sense of adventure to the human journey.

Duane has written an important book because, at this pivotal time when we are separated by so many differences, it is vital that we discover our common ground as a species. A widely shared understanding that we all live in the same living universe provides the foundation for positive visions of the future that offer beacons of hope to pierce the darkness of the world's gathering storms.

Preface

As I complete this book in early 2009, a number of crises are putting the world system under enormous pressure to make fundamental changes: economic breakdowns, growing climate disruption, the end of cheap oil, desperate poverty, violent conflicts over resources and religion, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and more. We are fulfilling the “Warning to Humanity” given by more than 1,600 of the world’s senior scientists, including a majority of the Nobel laureates in the sciences.¹ In 1992 they warned: “A great change in our stewardship of the earth and the life on it is required, if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated.” If a “great change” in our stewardship of life is essential, what does that change look like? Given the enormous differences and divisions within the human community, where can we find a commonly shared understanding for building a new pathway into the future?

To align our efforts and fulfill our potentials, it is vital for the human family to find a compelling sense of direction for living and growing together. But what vision of humanity’s journey has the breadth, depth, and reach to enable us to look beyond our many differences and galvanize our efforts in building a promising future? This integrative vision, or “great story,” of humanity’s journey can be summarized as follows: *The universe is deeply alive as an evolving and learning system and we humans are on a journey of discovery within it. We are learning to live within a living universe.* If we lose sight of *where we are* (living in a living universe) we profoundly diminish our understanding of *who we are* (beings of both biological and cosmic dimension) and *where we are going* (growing into an ever more intimate relationship with the living universe).

We cannot understand who we are or the journey we are on without first understanding where we are and the universe we are in. Our future pivots on how we answer the question of whether we regard the universe as dead or alive. As we will explore in great detail throughout this book, I think the evidence points toward regarding the universe as alive. We will progressively unfold what this means, but here is a preliminary distinction between these two views:

Dead universe view. The universe is a barren and inhospitable place comprised almost entirely of non-living matter and empty space. Life is extremely rare. On Earth, matter has somehow organized itself to high levels of complexity and has produced living entities. However, considered in the context of the larger universe, the human enterprise is a trivial speck. Our existence as humans appears to be pointless and without purpose—a cosmic accident that will be forgotten. A dead universe has no memory and tells no stories. When the body dies, the “lights go out” and we disperse, leaving no trace or remnant, either physical or non-physical. What matters most is matter—material possessions, material power, material pleasure, and material prestige.

Living universe view. In counterpoint to the dead universe perspective, the living universe is a paradigm that portrays the universe as buzzing with invisible energy and aliveness, patiently growing a garden of cosmic scale. It suggests that we humans, as conscious life forms in this immensity, are very precious. We serve an important purpose for a universe growing conscious forms of life: Through us, the universe sees, knows, feels, and learns. We are learning how to live ever more consciously in a living universe. What matters most is not matter but what is invisible—the aliveness within ourselves, our relationships, and the world around us.

Several hundred years ago, the mechanistic and materialistic view of

a non-living universe was liberating—part of the Enlightenment-born rationalism that helped humanity free itself from superstition and fear to achieve extraordinary intellectual and technological breakthroughs. But this paradigm no longer serves human evolution. By removing aliveness from the fabric of the universe, the initial success of the materialistic perspective has ultimately led to environmental exploitation and a profound global crisis.

Because our view of the universe creates the context within which we understand and choose our future, it is critically important that we have an accurate understanding of our cosmic home. Where a dead-universe perspective generates alienation and despair, a living-universe perspective generates inspiring and resilient visions of a higher pathway for humanity. Is this affirming view of the future justified?

Three core questions run through this book. The Introduction sets the stage and focuses the inquiry. We explore the first question—*Where are we?*—in the next two chapters. In Chapter 1, we expand our thinking about the universe and ourselves. In Chapter 2, we consider the universe through the lens of science and ask whether it has the basic characteristics of a living entity. Because the science of life is at an early stage, it is premature to declare that science can prove the universe is a living system. Instead we ask, does this evidence *point in the direction* of a living or a non-living universe? If so, how does this matter?

We then explore the second question—*Who are we?*—in Chapters 3, 4, and 5. In Chapter 3, we explore who we are in relation to the universe through the eyes of the world's major religious and wisdom traditions. In Chapter 4, we consider how a “Mother Universe” can contain countless daughter universes, including our own. Chapter 5 explores our soulful nature as cosmic beings learning to live in a living universe.

We explore the third question—*Where are we going?*—in Chapters 6 and 7. In Chapter 6, we ask where is the universe going? Does it have an evolutionary direction that is apparent? If so, how does our journey fit with it? Are we “going with the flow,” or not? In Chapter 7, we look at where we are on our journey and focus on the unprecedented pivot we are making as a species—moving from a path of separation and differentiation to a path of connection and communion.

In closing, Chapter 8 presents six tasks that are vital for our journey home and Chapter 9 offers suggestions for personal meditation and group conversation that explore the theme of a living universe.

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Duane Elgin
February, 2009

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The Great Awakening

*The universe is a communion and a community.
We ourselves are that communion become conscious of itself.*
—THOMAS BERRY¹

Is the universe non-living at its foundations? If it is dead and without consciousness in its underpinnings, then it is unaware of—and indifferent to—our existence. What do you think? Are we strangers in a strange land, unwelcome outsiders?

What if, instead, the universe is alive at its deepest foundations? If there is a permeating field of aliveness and an ecology of consciousness throughout the universe, what does that mean for our life and life purpose?

You may wonder, with the challenges of climate disruption, energy shortages, wars over resources, deep poverty, and more, why should you care about the universe and our connection with it? My answer is that we humans need to step back and get our bearings.

The dream of material prosperity is becoming a collective nightmare as we overwhelm the Earth with our sheer numbers and

our voracious appetites as consumers. With growing urgency we are being pushed to imagine new ways we can live together agreeably and sustainably on this planet. Yet we find ourselves without a compelling sense of direction. It feels as if we are wandering into history—alienated from the Earth, from one another, and from the universe. We are lost. Where do we find a way forward that articulates a common journey for the human family?

I believe we must look beyond devising solutions to the energy crisis or the climate crisis, although that is important. Possibly the most fundamental challenge facing humanity is to look beyond adversity and visualize futures of great opportunity. In a self-fulfilling prophecy, we actualize who we think we are. The archetypes and stories we present to ourselves act as beacons guiding us into the future. To explore potential guiding images, let us step back, draw upon the deepest wisdom that humanity has to offer, and ask three fundamental questions:

1. **Where are we?** Although there is a natural inclination to start with ourselves, it is important to begin with the question of where we are rather than who we are. When we start with ourselves, we tend to assume that our physical body defines who we are, and from this a cascade of consequences flow—giving us the kind of world we have now. If we begin, not with ourselves, but with *where* we are, and if we freshly open to the universe and ask what kind of place this is, then we may be led to a larger understanding; we may see that we are more than biological beings—that we have a cosmic connection as well.

Let's look at the universe in which we live and ask this core question: Do we live in a living or non-living universe? Einstein said if he could ask God one question, it would be "Is the universe friendly or not?" This book asks an even deeper question: Is the