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Night Sky an Antidote to Despair

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Can star gazing, and an appreciation of the vast mystery of cosmos, be an antidote to the dehumanizing scourge of racism?

For a number of African-American scholars, artists, and activists, the answer is an emerging yes.

One of these path-finding voices is writer, educator and television producer Belvie Rooks, whom I met a little while ago at a spirituality, justice and ecology gathering in California.

Rooks, who served as Director of the Urban Habitat Program, a U.S.-based environmental justice group, has been working over the past few years with at-risk African Americans and Hispanic youth in central Los Angeles. In a recent telephone interview, she described how exposure to both the awesome wonders of the universe and the intricacies of the Los Angeles bioregion have yielded hopeful results among these communities, which have been pockmarked by racism, poverty, murder, and despair.

For Rooks a “sense of hopelessness” has scarred much of the landscape of U.S. youth. “This becomes really clear when I look at urban inner city African-American and Hispanic communities.” These communities are seared by gangland violence and drive-by shootings, “a willingness to kill and be killed over a few city blocks.”

“What is really sad and has given rise to my work,” she notes, “is the diminished sense of self and place that this denotes.”

Rooks, who is currently Vice-President for Carrie Productions, the production company of film star Danny Glover, gets part of her passion from helping these youths get a larger sense of self, one that transcends their turf battles amidst the concrete expanse of Los Angeles.

Building on the work of mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme, who speaks of the deep mysteries of the unfolding universe, Rooks observes that “awe and wonder are part of the antidote to despair.” Exposing these young people to the night sky and the luminous grandeur of the universe helps them put their own “turf” in the larger context of the universe, and helps engender a sense of belonging in the wider realm of creation.

For Rooks, this awareness leads to a deeper spirituality—which she defines as a “recognition of interconnection” of all life, and the embrace of that interconnection. While religions, she observes sadly, are often embroiled in turf battles, like the gangs of Los Angeles and most nation states of the world, a true spirituality rests on an acknowledgement of the deep connectedness of all races, peoples, and ecosystems.

This sense of interconnection is echoed in the writings and work of theologian Barbara Holmes.

In her book *Race and the Cosmos: An Invitation to View the World Differently*, Holmes suggests that the language of cosmology can supersede earlier ways of approaching race and ethnicity.

I recently spoke to Holmes about her cosmological approach in dealing with racism.

“Essentially here in the US,” she stated, “we have thought of our attainment of liberation as a static goal; we would race toward the finish line, but there wasn’t a finish line.” For her, she began to realize that “we don’t want to be part of this melting pot,” especially if consumerism were the ultimate goal of integration.

Part of the problem, for Holmes, is that “this enterprise has not been cosmologically grounded.”

For Holmes, who currently is Dean of Memphis Theological Seminary in Tennessee, “if we believe that we are here for a purpose, and it is cosmologically grounded, then our agenda becomes different.”

The notion of darkness, she observes, which is the touchstone of racism, becomes a source of mystery, energy and power in the context of the universe, where dark matter serves as a wellspring of generative energy.

Like Rooks, Holmes is interested in how to translate this larger universal context to the world of children. She notes that there is a “cry for us to look up at night to see that the little tiny block you live on is not your turf; the universe is your turf.”

Holmes recounts how a group of poor, and in some cases, homeless children of colour was invited to view the night sky through the observatory at a local university. They all were changed, they said, because they were able to put their lives in greater perspective. They were no longer poor, but rather saw themselves as “articulated stardust,” and they began to sense that the “power of the universe was in them.”

Thanks to the hopeful work of persons like Belvie Rooks and Barbara Holmes, reflecting on our place in the universe becomes not an elitist pastime, but a cogent, cosmic quest for a society, and a universe, that both bend toward justice.

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