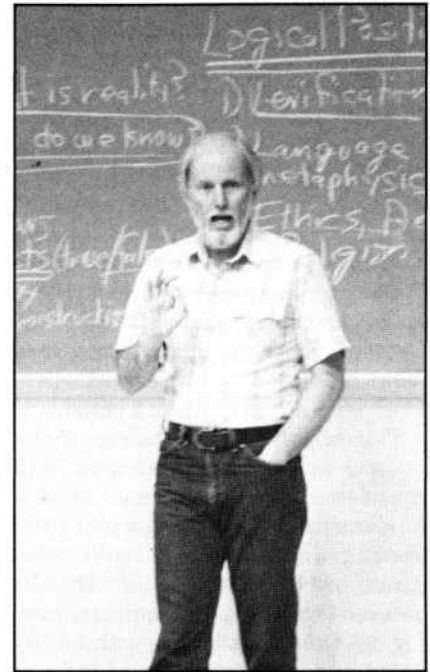
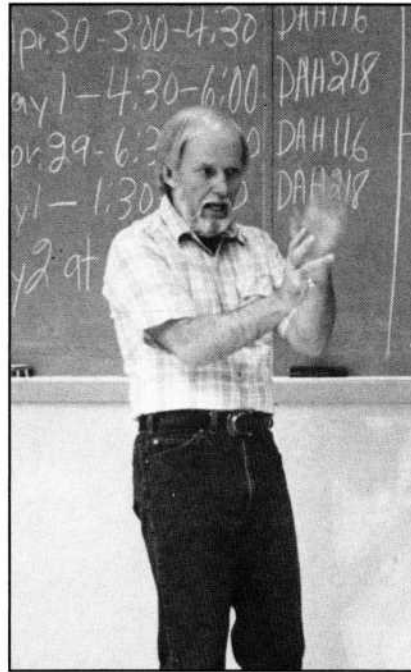
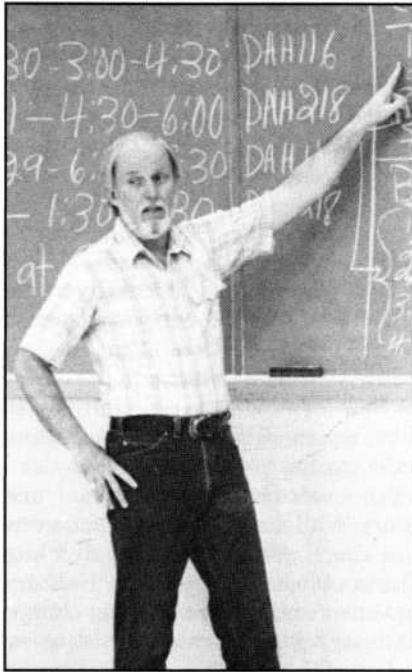


Betsy Baker



## MY QUEST FOR CONNECTIONS

**I**n the last lecture scenario, the professor is invited to deliver his or her hypothetical final lecture on the occasion of the last opportunity to convey a lifetime of learning. The concept debuted at OU in 1959, after which *Sooner Magazine* printed the text of J. Clayton Feaver's immortal address. Other *Sooner* notables have participated in the intriguing premise, which always has drawn eager—and usually overflow—University and community crowds. After the series was resurrected at the University last year by the Association of University Ministries, *Sooner Magazine* heralded its return by sharing the lecture of history professor Vivien Ng. Philosopher Tom Boyd's would-be "last words" to a full house addressed "Connections."  
—MF

[The lecture follows.]

# Last Lecture

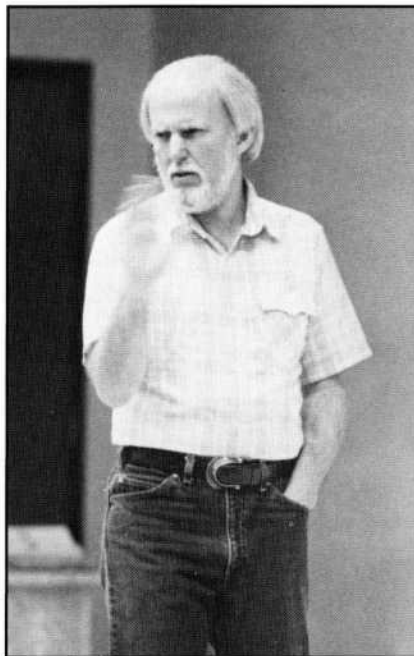
A “last lecture” is the professional equivalent of one’s “last will and testament.” This suggests that it is personal, confessional and declarative. This lecture is, in a most intimate sense, “my” statement in which I am to “blow my cover” and confess where I stand in relation to my world and my lived experience of that world. Thus, I am not to argue for or defend a position. Rather, like Luther before the Diet of Worms, I am herewith driven to that ground where I can only declare, “Here I stand.”

This presentation is the report of a quest. I have chosen that word with considered care. I experience my life fundamentally as a quest, a perpetual seeking. But the search is neither desperate nor frustrating. It is more like an ever-increasing awakening, a coming to myself and therewith to my world and on to the lure of infinity. My quest is not futile, because what I seek is already present and only awaits eyes that see and ears that hear.

George Leonard has stated the case well: “Overcoming our terror, we may at last be able to see ourselves in a grain of sand or a leaf or our lover’s face. We may realize that we need not seek connection, for we are already connected to all existence.” The quest is for the disclosure of what is already there.

I seek because, as a creature of time, space and embodiment, I live in a tension: I am at once a *part of*, while my self stands also *apart* from. The sage of *Ecclesiastes* has put this condition succinctly: “. . . though God has permitted (humanity) to consider time in its wholeness, (humanity) cannot comprehend the work of God from beginning to end.” We have the thought of totality, of “universe,” but we can never presume to have comprehended or circumscribed it. As a contemporary physicist has put it, “. . . no universe can ever be The Universe.”

Thus, we are creatures with *interest*. We are quite literally “caught between” and have our being “in between.” We are caught between the conditions of our finitude and the power of imagination which enter-



tains the infinite, the expanding whole. Today, I believe, we best pursue our interest through our *quest for connections*.

To suggest what I mean by “connections,” I want to begin with some anecdotal hints. The following vignettes from my life may serve to disclose the way this quest has been awakened in me.

When I was 7 years old I came down with scarlet fever. Because my teacher had recently died of complications

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from the disease and because my father was quarantined from living in the house, I was terrified. For six weeks I lay in bed, moving through the symptomatic phases of the then-feared disease. During that time winter gave way to spring, and the first day I was allowed to walk outside, the verdant vitality of the new season overwhelmed me. I stood barefoot in the thriving wet grass, looking down

at the green shoots thrusting between my toes. For a moment—a most memorable one—I sensed how my life and the life of the grass touched and were one. This was one of my early foretastes of connection.

\* \* \*

In 1975, during a particularly trying time, I was in the early stages of a basic life transition. That spring, while visiting at a ranch in the desert of New Mexico, I was especially sensitive, my emotions constantly spilling into rushes of unannounced—and often uncontrolled—passion and tears. While walking on a grand mesa one day, I came upon a small white flower blooming alone in solitary splendor and defiance among clumps of dusty tenacious grass. The utter isolation of the blossom and its tacit courage at daring to bloom in that vast desolation was overwhelming to me. I sat down before the plant with an astonishing sense of identification with it. I began talking to it. I felt that in some sense the flower was myself, or at least a reflection of myself.

A few days later, driving a convertible from Taos to Sante Fe, New Mexico, I found myself boldly acknowledging that the great piles of stone along the highway, composing the mountain, were not actually separate from me. For a fleeting moment I had the sensation of being at one with those stark massive boulders. Connection.

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In 1978 I was lecturing in Yuma, Arizona. My host invited me to drive out along the Colorado River to meet a man and woman living in a modest trailer. The man had for years been a professor of biology and after retiring had moved to the banks of the river to write a book. He was wonderfully eccentric and brimming with zeal for his project. He was trying to show how, through an understanding of biology, we could grasp the intimate relation among all things.

After speaking about his discovery

with great animation, he seemed still more frustrated than satisfied. He reached for a carrot on the table and virtually shouted at me, "See this carrot. I am this carrot. Let me show you." He proceeded to eat the carrot. By eating it, he, in a significant sense, *became* the carrot. They merged. Strange as this seemed to me at the time, the message was another reminder of connection.

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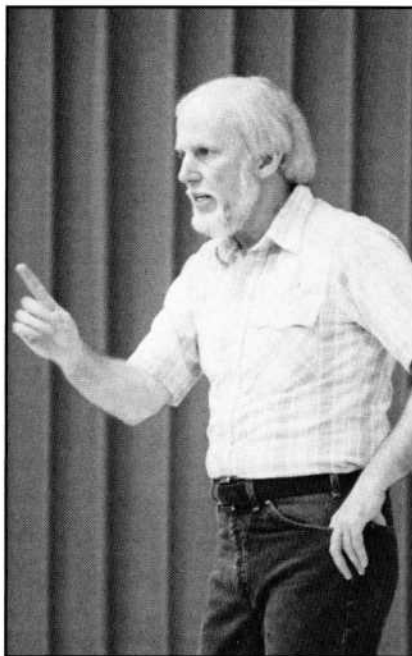
On Easter Sunday morning in 1985 I was awakened early by our cat. She was hungry. I stumbled downstairs and put food in her bowl. As the cat crouched and began eating, I was unexpectedly struck by a simple truth which everyone knows but which had never struck me with its full significance. I realized that that creature bore within her genetic make-up the lineage of every creature of her line all the way back to . . . to . . . what?

Connections reach toward origins and toward ends. My cat bears within her a connection to a phenomenal heritage, running into mystifying and fading yesterdays. Connections.

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Through these experiences and my continuing reflection upon them, my quest for connections has grown. I have come to sense that all distinctions are worthy only as they serve the disclosure of the depth and reach on unitive bonding. To help you comprehend, and I trust to appreciate, my quest, I want to discuss three things: (1) the sense in which ours is an age of distinction making and the implications of being so; (2) the sense in which I understand connection as an orienting or archetypal concept; (3) what it means to live in quest of connections within an age devoted to distinction making.

Our way of thinking today is profoundly different from that of primal peoples, or for that matter, even the great minds of intellectual antiquity. In *How Natives Think*, anthropologist



Levy-Brühl declares that "primitive" peoples are "pre-logical" in their thinking. They have what he calls a "participation mystique"; they feel themselves to be part of and participating in a mysterious continuum with each other and with the world around them. This primal mentality is beautifully described by Lamé Deer, a Sioux Indian:

. . . I'm an Indian. I think about ordinary, common things like this pot. The bubbling water comes from the rain cloud. It represents the sky. The fire comes from the sun which warms us all—men, animals, trees. The meat stands for the four-legged creatures, our animal brothers, who gave of themselves so that we should live. The steam is living breath. It was water; now it goes up to the sky, becomes a cloud again. These things are sacred. Looking at that pot full of good soup, I am thinking how, in this simple manner, Wakan Tanka takes care of me. We Sioux spend a lot of time thinking about everyday things, which in our mind are mixed up with the spiritual. We see in the

world around us many symbols that teach us the meaning of life. We have a saying that the white man sees so little, he must see only with one eye. We see a lot that you no longer notice. You could notice if you wanted to, but you are usually too busy. We Indians live in a world of symbols and images where the spiritual and the commonplace are one. To you symbols are just words, spoken or written in a book. To us they are part of nature, part of ourselves—the earth, the sun, the wind and the rain, stones, trees, animals, even little insects like ants and grasshoppers. We try to understand them not with the head but with the heart, and we need no more than a hint to give us the meaning.

This sense of connection did not die easily. Even the great classical thinkers of antiquity, most notably Plato and Aristotle, made all of their fine distinctions within the vision of a cosmos—a unified and whole "world." Subsequent history, through the Middle Ages, rested largely on the conceptual shoulders of Plato and Aristotle, and the search continued for a comprehensive scheme of connections which would account for all of the distinctions.

Modernity began with a shift toward distinction making. Concern for connections was not denied but postponed—suspended as it were—while the devotion to particulars took precedence. The transition can be dramatized by the emergence of the use of a word, first in the church, and eventually throughout western civilization. The word "seculum" was originally used to distinguish those monks who left the monasteries to serve as priests "in the world" from those who lived constantly in the monasteries. To be a "secular" was to participate in the ordinary, everyday world—the concrete world of particulars. Through a slow but deliberate process the world of the "secular" came to dominance, and now we have entered fully the sec-

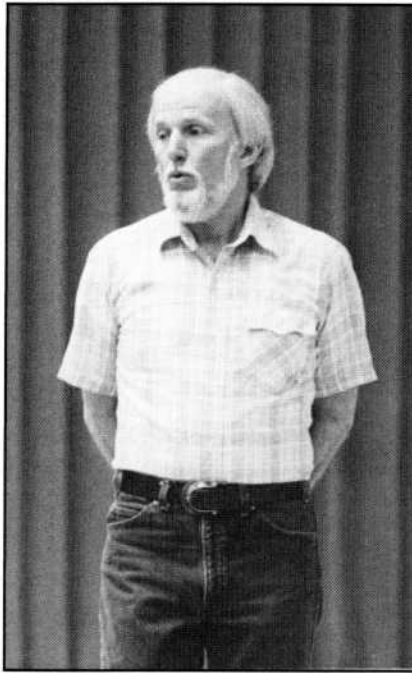
# Last Lecture

ular age, one that is interested in the concrete, measurable and controllable world. This is the world in which, by making endless distinctions, we have learned to master the world to whatever ends we choose. By human ingenuity we have stolen fire from the gods and turned it to our purposes.

This process of secularization has been one of attention to distinctions, to "divide and conquer." In *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert Pirsig has described this power of distinction making as the power of the knife:

The application of this knife, the division of the world into parts and the building of this structure, is something everybody does. All the time we are aware of millions of things around us—these changing shapes, these burning hills, the sound of the engine, the feel of the throttle, each rock and weed and fence post and piece of debris beside the road—aware of these things but not really conscious of them unless there is something unusual or unless they reflect something we are predisposed to see. We could not possibly be conscious of these things and remember all of them because our mind would be so full of useless details we would be unable to think. From all this awareness we must select, and what we select and call consciousness is never the same as the awareness because the process of selection mutates it. We take a handful of sand from the endless landscape of awareness around us and call that handful of sand the world.

Once we have the handful of sand, the world of which we are conscious, the process of discrimination goes to work on it. This is the knife. We divide the sand into parts. This and that. Here and there. Black and white. Now and then. The discrimination is the division of the



conscious universe into parts.

The knife is the mental power expressed in technology, and the great tension in our world today is between those interested in the pile of sand and those committed to sorting it into parts.

Pirsig states the matter quite well. He is saying that distinction making kills; it breaks down unities and connections. At the same time, however, the process is creative and opens the world to us in quite a new way. What Pirsig is saying is that we must embrace both the selection and discrimination which kills—that is, motorcycle maintenance—and the art of reuniting the whole through the power of unitive vision—that is the capacity of *Zen*. When we Zen, we allow the connections to become the aim and end of all distinctions.

Unfortunately, ours is an age which has become so enamored with distinction making that we are reluctant to acknowledge — and are often even quite suspicious of—connections. Precisely through the intricate process of endless distinction making, we have become aware of the boundless complexity permeating all things. The

whole is simply too grand to circumscribe, and thus we easily deny or avoid the issue of connections. Or, we postpone the quest into some unfocused future, and we turn to "bits and pieces"—what we can measure, manipulate and manage out of the already limited pile of sand we call "the world."

Of course, the urge to recover connections has not been entirely ignored. It cannot be dismissed because the human urge is toward closure, toward completeness. Consequently, even as we have neglected direct attention to systemic connections, we have tacitly built up implicit systems. The mechanistic world, the organismic world, the evolutionary world all compete and subtly undergird our binge of distinction making. What goes quite unnoticed is that, as always, these underlying—often unexamined—presumptions of connection are taken to be scientific when they are not at all arrived at by rigorous scientific means. They rest on "leaps of the imagination" loosely related to science. They arise and function as *mythic schemes*. And they lie beneath our conceptual superstructures as assumed truths just as mythic systems always have. This is not evil; it is inevitable. But it is dangerous, and the danger lies in the fact that we do not admit what we are doing; that we do have a connective system—a metaphysic—and that it guides us in ways of which we are unaware because of our neglect of the urgency of discovering and engaging connections.

As a result of our overt devotion to making distinctions and our covert importation of systems of mythic connection, we have both generated a magnificent human achievement and reaped a potential whirlwind of increasingly troubling "side effects."

In passing, and without elaboration, I shall name three of the more prominent consequences: in our understanding of human nature we have emphasized *individuality* to an excess that threatens community; in our social relations we have divided our-

selves into *specializations* which threaten the unity of understanding and of sharing; in our intellectual pursuit of knowledge we have settled for *reductionistic* explanations at the expense of comprehensive open-ended understanding. The antidote to these excesses and their threat to our civilization lies in the recovery of the conscious conspiracy to seek connections which transcend and fulfill all distinction making. The maxim for such a recovery might be this: "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts."

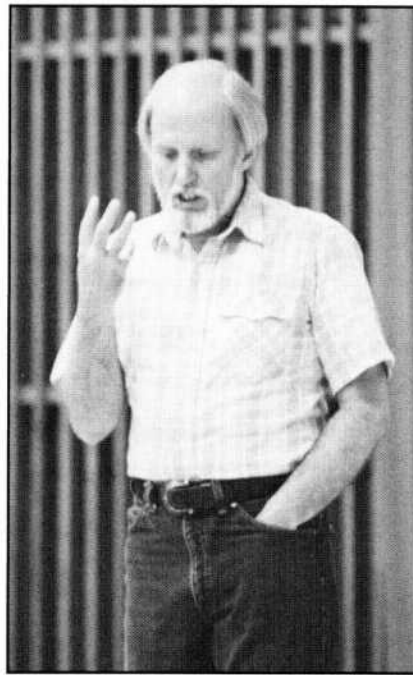
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My conviction is that all distinctions are worthy only as they serve to disclose the connections of which they are a part. My conviction has taken form around three grand, admittedly expansive, claims. These claims cannot be demonstrated or proved. They are like operational orientations by which I pursue the quest. They are not true like bits of knowledge in a game of trivia; they are conceptual imprints to which I have awakened.

1. *All things are connected.* This is my *principle of participation*. All things, including my most unique and singular self, belong to a vast imagination-wrenching tapestry. Nothing whatever is extraneous. We begin to understand ourselves only within this matrix of connections. I am thus ingrediently contexted. Neither I nor anyone else can be spectator, and nothing can be finally and fully excluded from the whole.

2. *All things are in process.* This is what I call my *principle of process*. The connections are not fixed or static but are in constant transformation, forming and re-forming and breaking into forms which are genuinely novel. Hence, an expanding and emerging universe is assumed.

3. *The whole of things is going somewhere.* I refer to this idea as my *principle of purpose*. In other words, there is telos or an intelligible end mediated in and through the process of interrelations. Now here is where the rub



comes. Many moderns might agree with the first two principles, participation and process, but the notion that the whole is directed by meaningful aims toward some grand end is profoundly disputed. I make no pretense of knowing what the end is. Nor do I need to think of it as a fixed—or even final—end in the terms of any sort of time-space terminus. What I do aver

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is that purpose involves an ever-increasing complexity and a connective unfolding of increasingly intimate inter-relatedness. Furthermore, as a creature of self-consciousness, I am ingredient within this unfolding telos.

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To live “as if” connection constitutes the very nature of things is by no

means easy in a civilization so devoted to distinction making. In my own quest several factors have helped me to maintain an orientation to *the whole*.

First, my motivation for living this quest rests in a sense of the sacred. William Irwin Thompson has stated the relation between connectedness and the sacred with notable force:

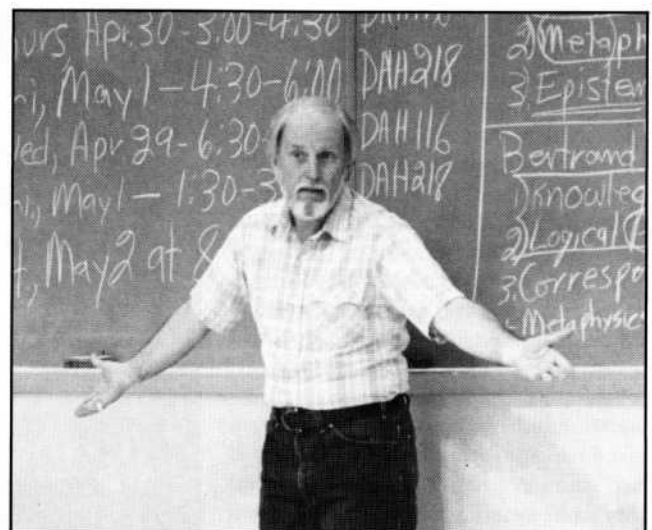
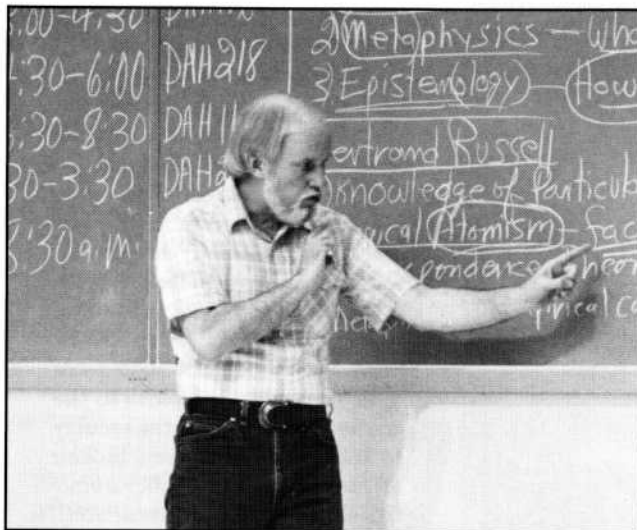
We have to use ‘Imagination’ to recover a sense of the sacred. The sacred is the emotional force which connects the parts to the whole; the profane or the secular to that which has been broken off from, or has fallen off, its emotional bond to the universe. *Religare* means to bind up, and the traditional task of religion has been to bind up the pieces that have broken away from the ecstatic Oneness.

So-called “spiritual life” refers to the vital and unitive force in us which seeks connection and therefore functions in a sacred way. Religion, in its array of forms, is humanity’s way of grasping for the sacred connections. Religion is the crutch needed by bounded beings who have lost their sense of “the ecstatic Oneness.”

Second, my understanding of, and attitude toward all attempts to capture the whole keeps the quest free. We are creatures given to generating *forms* by which we respond to the threat of chaos in experience. The terror of chaos—human beings simply cannot long endure it—drives us to formation, and as a species we have become gifted at creating forms. Our forms serve our urge to connection by providing relevant and useful symbols for it.

Our great dilemma with the gift of formation, however, lies in our tendency to *reify* the forms we generate: we allow them to become “independent” of us and to dominate us. All human forms tend to become idols. In my quest I protect myself from this tyranny of form by keeping before me these principles:

1. *All forms are constructs.* They are



not given, but arise through our engagement with the manifold of the experienced world.

2. *All forms are provisional.* Forms are tentative ways of making connection from within our finite condition. The greatest test of any form lies in knowing when and how to let it go—to break it.

3. *All forms are perspectives.* Forms are not necessarily arbitrary, but they are always bounded in the sense that they represent “a point of view.”

4. *All forms are being transformed.* There is, from my limited perspective, a cutting-across all forms which is encountered as formlessness. That is, I encounter a mystery which both discloses itself as mystery and is never grasped by any form.

Another way of putting all this is that I keep alive a sense of waging life caught between the finite and the infinite, realizing that every finite scheme is inadequate to the boundless infinite game. In the grander realm of connection, “the center is everywhere, the circumference nowhere.” To live constantly conscious of this requires a capacity to surrender all — even our most secure — parochialisms and enter the evolution of consciousness whereby we may indeed become participants in our own evolution. We cease fighting Universe and join it.

Third, the *heart* by which I main-


tained the quest is “the way of compassion.” To use Jonathan Edward’s striking definition of love, we engage our world through “being’s gracious consent to being.” This is the way of compassion, and it makes possible my sense of connection even as I search for connection. Matthew Fox has spoken eloquently of the relation between compassion and connection:

The path by which the connections are sought is that of compassion, a compassion which—rooted in passion—reaches forth to all *others* in bridging. Thus, we move away from the path of competition which sets us at odds with each other in battle and in victor vs. vanquished. Only compassion can achieve connection, and even then only in moments and only fragmentarily.

Finally, without denying any of the powers of mind and human genius—and giving intellectual inquiry its fullest hand—I keep faith with the astonishing mystery of it all. Only this will keep our genius from Promethean presumption. Loren Eiseley has confessed the same with the most fitting scientific humility, and I shall end with his statement:

I am an evolutionist. I believe that my great backyard sphexes (a variety of wasp) have evolved

like other creatures. But watching them in the October light as one circles my head in curiosity, I can only repeat my dictum softly: in the world there is nothing to explain the world . . . Worship, then, like the Maya, the unknown zero, the procession of the time-bearing gods. The equation that can explain why a mere SpheX wasp contains in its minute head the ganglionic centers of its prey has still to be written. In the world there is nothing below a certain depth that is truly explanatory. It is as if matter dreamed and muttered in its sleep. But why, and for what reason it dreams, there is no evidence.

In this dramatic confession Eiseley recognizes the confinement of even our most confident search for connections in science. In the end we are left with that gaping mystery—that zero—not a problem to be solved, but a boundless reach to be revered. 

*Professor Boyd’s “Last Lecture” was originally part of a series sponsored by the Association of University Ministries at OU: University Outreach (Church of Christ), Wesley Foundation (United Methodist), The Muslim Association, Baptist Student Union, St. Thomas More (Roman Catholic), St. Anselm Canterbury Association (Episcopal), B’nai B’rith Hillel Foundation (Jewish), University Lutheran Chapel, Institute of Religion (Mormon) and the United Ministry Center (Presbyterian, Christian [Disciples], United Church of Christ).*