In the fall of 2012, a small group of people gathered at Milarupa, a private home on the Costa Brava in northern Spain surrounded by the immense natural beauty of the Mediterranean and its rugged coastline. They came to participate in a “sangama,” an experiential small group dialogue form pioneered by the late eminent scholar of world religions, Raimon Panikkar. They explored the question, “What do we mean by the ‘new story’ and how do we live it?” The participants spanned seven generations with representatives from the fields of communications, religion, economics, and education.

The following reflections describe the sangama form and how it supports living into the new story. To accompany these reflections, Benedictine monk Brother David Steindl-Rast, who participated in the sangama, outlines five theses for considering the new story and posits that small community gatherings such as the sangama are the “most likely environment for realizing the trajectory of the new story.” In an accompanying essay, Ursula King, a scholar of comparative religion and also a participant in the sangama, conveys the broader cultural context and trends in which the new story is emerging and says the environment of a sangama offers a creative seed pod where new ideas can germinate to inspire living into the new story and for developing “engaged dialogues of the heart so a shared vision can emerge for a new season.”
“The motto for a sangama, says Brother David Steindl-Rast, could be ‘Cor ad cor loquitur,’” (heart speaks to heart), quoting St. Francis de Sales, who was known for his writings on Divine love. Calling this form of gathering a “celebration of the communal heart,” Brother David, who has participated in several sangamas says, “What the world needs now is concord, one heart. The sangama is the perfect form to support this. When we come together on the first day we are not yet a community. But at the end, we are a community of friends."

Raimon Panikkar, a friend and mentor to Brother David, agrees that friendship is ultimately what a sangama is all about. “We live together, we share together, and together we develop a certain type of friendship. And friendship is one of the highest values in life—a gift of the Spirit.”

Panikkar used the word “sangama” to refer to a gathering of a small group of people who don’t simply “get together,” but “go together,” led by the spirit. In describing this way of gathering, he drew on and enriched the Sanskrit term which means “coming together, meeting, harmony.” (Monier Williams Sanskrit Dictionary). Calling the sangama “an experiment in living,” Panikkar says this way of being together is responding to an urgent need to bring together the sacred and the secular in what he calls “sacred secularity,” a way of seeing and living all life imbued with the experience of the divine mystery. “We need a new style of life,” Panikkar says. “It is not a question of fleeing the world but rather of transfiguring it.”

Over the past decade, Panikkar and his collaborator Milena Carrara convened sangamas at Milarupa, Carrara’s home on the Costa Brava in northern Spain. At each sangama, participants explored one topic in depth. The topics ranged from the spirit of
religion at the heart of the world’s faith traditions, to the vision of reality in science and spirituality, and the emerging image of God. “If something is wrong with the secular—it’s the epitome of the modern times—it is superficiality,” Panikkar says. “If we go deep enough into any topic you touch the core, the mystery. And that’s a sangama.”

Brother David says the conversation during a sangama flows not simply from the mind, but from the heart. “In contrast to other gatherings, a sangama is a time when people can speak to one another from their heart; and the heart stands for the whole person—the intellect, will, emotions, body, and mind, everything. The important thing during a sangama is we get to know one another.”

It is the special atmosphere created during a sangama that fosters this in-depth sharing from the heart. Participants not only engage in conversation together, they also live together. They help with preparing and cleaning up after meals, with daily chores such as tending the garden and the grounds; and spend time together in silence throughout the day, and enjoy leisurely time in nature.

Characteristics of a Sangama

A sangama is a small group dialogue for 8 to 9 people held over five days, with the full group beginning and ending their time together.

The gathering is best held in a private home where participants live together, sharing daily chores such as preparing and cleaning up after meals and gardening.

It is best to hold a sangama in a natural setting to experience the rhythms of nature each day.

Participants explore one topic—one key question—in depth. There are no formal presentations. Participants speak from their own experience and build on previous reflections.

Participants share ‘heart to heart’ creating an atmosphere of openness and trust where people can get to know one another.

There are three periods of shared silence a day: morning, noon, and evening.

Two roundtable dialogues are held each day: mid morning and late afternoon.

Participants are considered equals with no hierarchy or roles of authority.

The convener of the sangama facilitates with a light touch and supports what is emerging in the group.

Sponteneity and surprise are key to a successful sangama. The outcome cannot be predicted.

“...a Sangama is a time when people can speak to one another from their heart; and the heart stands for the whole person...”
—Brother David Steindl-Rast
“Some of the best conversations are taking place at the table, or when you’re doing the dishes, or while just waiting around,” Brother David says. “You are living together. That’s the idea of conviviality rather than exchanging ideas but truly sharing them and totally letting them go together, where knowing and loving are not separate.”

Typically a sangama lasts five days—no late arrivals or early departures. “You come together for that time and something is cooking,” Brother David explains. “There is a process of chemical transformation in cooking,” continues Ursula King highlighting the transformational quality of a sangama.

The ideal size of a sangama is eight to nine people. Reflecting on the power of a small group, Panikkar pointed out that “Jesus had 12 disciples,” and with a twinkle, added that was “too many!” King concurs. “The power of love is really experienced in any depth in an interpersonal way, in small groups. It involves relationship, communication, cooperation. I think of the sangama as a seed pod. When you start something new you need a seed pod to experiment, to try things out, and then it can spread. It’s like a source—a start that then can spread further afield.”

The sangama form and practice draws on the values and structure in monastic spirituality and supports “mindful living,” Brother David explains, adding that it is important to have a structure that allows for spontaneity, a key quality of the sangama experience. “The elements of the structure are moving from meditation to table—round table dialogue and eating at table, working together, enjoying nature, and being in silence together at periods throughout the day.” “Pattern might be a better word,” poses King. “A pattern flows. Pattern is an evolutionary word. It’s being in the rhythm of a day.”

“The power of love is really experienced in any depth in an interpersonal way, in small groups. It involves relationship, communication, cooperation.”
—Ursula King
The daily rhythm of a sangama follows the rhythm of nature exemplified in the monastic hours of the day, so it is important to hold the sangama in a setting close to nature where one can see the sunrise and the sunset.

“I was deeply affected by the great beauty of the natural surroundings at Milarupa,” shares King, “captured symbolically by the butterfly flapping its wings around the colorful bougainvillea outside the kitchen window there—like a jewel. This was all part of the experience during the sangama of being expanded—drawn to the outside, becoming connected, and also nourished in my heart. The beauty of nature has such an enriching and transforming effect, and then living within a group in that particular setting—bringing nature to life!”

The day begins in shared silence, sitting (or walking) together for 30 minutes. Breakfast follows, with everyone helping prepare and clean up after the meal. A sangama is highly participatory. “It is a lot of work,” says Joan Konner, who participated in the sangama on Living the New Story. Konner, who’s Dean Emerita of Columbia Journalism School, adds, “We are all gathering sticks and making the fire.”
Mid-morning everyone gathers for the first round table dialogue of the day. Participants explore one core topic—one key question—during a sangama. Each round table begins with a participant sharing for 10 to 30 minutes, then opening up the conversation with everyone. These are not formal presentations prepared ahead of time but rather reflections that draw on one’s personal experience and might include readings, poetry, music, or other forms of creative expression. The morning dialogue sparks the conversation at the afternoon round table. “There’s a kind of alchemy in the flow of exchange during a sangama,” King points out. “In evolution there is a giving up of the solidity of things. It’s all flow—the flow of being, of becoming, of sharing.” “In a sangama you flow together,” Konner echoes. “It’s like being in a cauldron together, where the pattern of the meeting, the pattern of thoughts as the conversation evolves and emerges each day are like solids that turn into a liquid that flows.”

At noon there is another period of shared silence, followed by lunch and an afternoon of silence, at least in the main house. Late afternoon the group gathers for another round table dialogue, followed by a period of shared silence, dinner, fellowship, and then to bed. Typically there are no formal sessions in the evening. It’s important to offer open space and time to rest so the sangama has a feeling of spaciousness that supports deep listening.

Through the rhythm of silence and sharing, living together close to the rhythms of nature, the atmosphere of a sangama enables moving beyond an intellectual, rational, social, and political exchange to discover our shared humanity; a setting where the healing power of the community emerges naturally. The sangama is a form and practice that unearths the communal heart and a communal lens, and offers a “curriculum” where relationship is key.

“Relationship needs to be experienced, not talked about,” Brother David points out. “That is the point of a sangama. It is all about relationship and human interaction. Even the little aggravations that inevitably come up when people live together are part of the experience of the sangama. It’s like rocks rubbing against one another, smoothing the surfaces by doing so.”

“A sangama is really about acceptance, to learn to accept others, and there are different stages one goes through in this process,” King says. “I never felt threatened and felt free to speak, never dominated. People were encouraged to be themselves, to express themselves, and we were all really trying to relate to one another. This is a very helpful and needed experience, to encourage more group work. It’s nourishing for people’s development and for working together.”

“It’s a ‘yes’ to difference,” Konner echoes. “In a sangama, communication becomes what it is meant to be—the revelation of the true self to the other. Even if it’s just a small group, you are learning from each other, accepting the perspective of another and out of that, creating a reality that’s very different from

“The sangama is a form and practice that unearths the communal heart and a communal lens, and offers a “curriculum” where relationship is key.”
—Kate Olson
everyday life. Everyday life is full of threats which evoke your defenses. People hide their fears, their vulnerabilities. In this setting and atmosphere, they don’t. They bring their own search and ignorance into the open. People are sympathetic to the questions. We listened as each person offered their ideas and thoughts from various fields. We didn’t have to ‘sell’ them to one another. You open up and genuinely listen. It was a ‘sweat lodge’ without the sweat.”

The best thing a sangama can do, Brother David adds, is “raise the level of fearlessness” in our world. “Name any problem in our world today and it can be traced back to fear. This is a basic problem and we need to do everything we can to overcome fear. When people come together with different backgrounds and outlooks, this can engender a certain amount of fear. Overcoming that fear is an important ingredient in a sangama.”

The late Rabbi Alan Lew, a participant in the sangamas on the spirit of religion, highlights the value of shared silence during the gathering. “In a sangama, you build in time to be silent together, time for just being together, eliminating the goal orientation of the relationship and putting the emphasis on the quality of being together. Having an objective prevents this from happening; and this has implications for living together.”

“The best thing a sangama can do, is raise the level of fearlessness in our world.”

—Brother David Steindl-Rast
“The experience of shared silence,” he continues, “opens this strong sense of connection with others, and all life becomes a reality, not an idea. It is a felt reality—breathing the same air, hearing the same noises, thinking thoughts in rhythm. Though you don’t exchange words, one feels a deep connection with the other’s presence, their soul. Being together in silence, sitting still, letting the chaos of our minds settle, like when the sediment settles in a glass of wine, and it becomes clear—this connection then becomes the basis of everything. This is what makes a sangama so powerful. And where will it lead? It’s unpredictable. You can say it will produce a journey that is powerful and authentic and profound. And how that profundity expresses itself is hard to say. In its own way, it will go where it needs to go. This is different from having an agenda.”

The energy of love is central the spirit of a sangama, Brother David adds. “The sangama gives a form for being in the creative imagination together; and love is fueling the dialogue which is potentially a highly creative experience. That again is the communal heart. And the more ‘equal’ the participants are the better.”

The facilitation of a sangama is done with a very light touch, listening and supporting what is naturally emerging in the group. No one person is an authority during a sangama. It is a “horizontal experience” though it taps the depth dimension. Physicist Paul Gailey, who collaborated with Panikkar on several sangamas, likens the experience of a sangama to what happens in emergent systems. “Authority in a self-organizing system is not ‘up there’ on top but throughout the system. And what seem like chaotic interactions among all the particles give birth to miracles.” This is the science and the hope for whatever outcome emerges from a sangama.

“Most meetings,” Brother David adds, “are consciously designed to produce an outcome, and the sangama does it spontaneously. The great trust that we have to put in the sangama is that it will do just that because people gather to celebrate the communal heart. They don’t come with an agenda for what they will produce. Of course you plan, and you set yourself a question, and it will bear fruit. They will produce more if that creative force that flows through the universe flows through the communal heart present in the sangama.”
“Each sangama is a surprise,” Carrara points out. “Each one is unique,” adding that “openness to surprise” is perhaps the key to a successful sangama.” And though one cannot predict outcomes of a sangama, Panikkar assures there will be ripple effects. “By their fruits you shall know them. At the heart of the experience is personal transformation. If people become more human, more caring, more loving, these are the fruits. We do not have great ambitions of changing the world, but changing the person. If I change myself, the whole world will change. Generally we want to convert others instead of listening to others and being ready to be converted into the world view of the other.”

For Panikkar and Carrara, the sangama offers a way of life they hope participants will commit to live when they return home, and be inspired to create their own versions of the gathering in their communities. This is just what happened for educator Polly Lansdowne, a participant in the sangama on Living the New Story. She sees the value of the form for leadership formation in her country, England. “In an age when people demand to be heard, leaders have to discover how to bring different views together so that decisions can be made. The sangama is a great tool to learn such cooperation since it is an exercise in building discussion without having to win, based on Gandhi’s saying that everyone has a piece of the truth. The idea of spreading the sangama is exciting. I see it as a safe place for people in power to look at how they manage their work, and for all of us to take a further spring into the joy and love of life!”

“At the heart of the experience is personal transformation. If people become more human, more caring, more loving, these are the fruits.”

—Raimon Panikkar
Reflecting on the sangama form, John Mogabgab, the founding editor of the Christian spiritual journal *Weavings*, was struck by the “uniqueness of the vision.” “We all bring our projections and our woundedness, but the ego cannot fix itself. So the healing potential of the community becomes critical.” The image Mogabgab has of a sangama is not a group of people sitting around a campfire, but “a community of people moving together hand in hand, deeply engaged, and also focused outwardly.”

The applicability of the sangama form is vast. It is a small group form for creating community and its strength is its size and the simplicity it offers, making it accessible to individuals of all generations and walks of life; from work teams, to cross-sector collaborations, inter-religious and inter-generational explorations to name several possibilities. It is a community practice form where participants come together and develop and enrich capacities for deep listening and sharing. The sangama is an incubator of sorts, to gestate new and deeper connections—to be in communion—with one another and all life, to birth new insights and ideas that have the potential to have a wide ripple and catalytic effect in the world.

Returning to the sangama on Living the New Story, Konner, who was executive producer of the highly acclaimed television series, *The Power of Myth*, concludes, “The old story of good against evil, of war and conflict and violence is part of the myth of good against evil. We need to put flesh on the bones of a new story that includes collaboration, non-hierarchical ways of being, peaceful co-existence. This is a hard sell in a culture that has thrived on individualism and competition. The sangama supports this collaborative way of being together. The sangama is the new story.”

“The new story cannot be told; then it wouldn’t be the new story,” Brother David adds. “It needs to be lived. It happens by living it. The sangama offers a way of living fully in the evolutionary flow of life.”

“The sangama is the new story.”
—Joan Konner
1. **The New Story is indeed a story**—not a blueprint, not a model, not a forecast; all these are predetermined, but a story unfolds as it happens. It is as unpredictable as life itself.

   This challenges us to rise to that courageous trust in life for which the traditional term is “Faith.” Only by entrusting ourselves fully and faith-fully to the ebb and flow of life will we be able to allow the new story to evolve as a life-affirming celebration. “All sorrows can be borne if you tell a story about them,” says Karen von Blixen, the Danish author also known under her pen name Isak Dinesen. The new story is a story of faith.

2. **The New Story is indeed new**—although it grows out of the past, it is an emergent reality. It arises from complex causes, but it is more than the sum total of their effects; no one could have foreseen it.

   This challenges us to rise to that radical openness for surprise, which traditional parlance calls “Hope.” Life is always surprising. Only by surprising us will the new story prove that it is truly alive and life-giving. To be life-giving, it must be so revolutionary that it revolutionizes even the notion of revolution: Not business as usual with different agents, but the same agents converted to a new way of living. The new story is a story of hope.

3. **The New Story is connected with the story of the universe.** Today, we are conscious with a new intensity that the universe evolves, it has a story. In order to be authentic, our own new story must be in harmony with evolution.

   This challenges us to rise again and again to the occasion for saying—or better living—an emphatic “Yes!” to belonging. But this is a practical working definition for “love” in all its countless forms—“Yes” to belonging to each single member of our human family, to the animals, the plants, the whole evolving universe, and showing our “Yes” to belonging by acting the way people act when they belong together: lovingly. The new story is a love story.
4. The New Story starts now. We are living it now. Its authenticity will depend on the depth to which we live, moment by moment, the full meaning of “now.”

“The future does not come later,” as Raimon Panikkar put it. And as T. S. Eliot knew: “All is always now.” This challenges us to come alive through the power of Now, tapping into the ever-fresh life force that guides the plot and keeps it flowing. If we do not cling to the past or are impatient for the future, the authentic new story will tell itself.

5. The New Story demands decision. To honor the past by bravely transcending it, to be open for surprise, to work in harmony with the universe, and to live consciously in the now—these are all decisions which we must ratify by wholehearted action.

“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” With these words, Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. challenged us to reject war, oppression, and exploitation and to decide for peace, justice, and sharing. Small intentional communities are the most likely environment for realizing this trajectory of the new story.

“Small intentional communities are the most likely environment for realizing this trajectory of the New Story.”
—Brother David Steindl-Rast
The “new story,” as Brother David says, unfolds through “living fully in the evolutionary stream of life.” It is a story connected with the whole universe, all of life, and every human being. It presents us with a tremendous vision of great complexity and beauty. Yet it also contains a compelling summons to undertake the necessary “Great Work” of which Thomas Berry, “geologian” and “Earth scholar” as he preferred to be called, spoke so vividly; an enormous, yet necessary task of transformation without which the human species cannot evolve further.

In *The Dream of the Earth*, Berry has a chapter on “The New Story” where he writes:

> We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories…

> We need a story that will educate us, a story that will heal, guide, and discipline us…

A new paradigm of what it is to be human emerges. This is what is so exciting, yet so painful and so disrupting. One aspect of this change involves the shift in earth-human relations, for we now in large measure determine the earth process that once determined us. In a more integral way we could say that the earth that controlled itself directly in the former period now to an extensive degree controls itself through us.¹

We are steeped in the new story; we are living inside it and are called to participate in its full unfolding. For this to happen, we need to come more closely together and collaborate in our explorations of what is possible and necessary to enable human transformation within the context of larger earth-human relations.

**Key ideas that can encourage human transformation**

To nurture such a transformation, we need key ideas that can inspire our thinking and living in a new way, ideas that can generate genuine change and create a planetary future for humanity. To describe the nature of these ideas, I use the word “pneumatophore,” a term drawn from the taxonomy of the plant kingdom, carrying a profound ecological meaning. Botanists use it to refer to the air roots...
of plants growing in swampy waters. Such roots, sticking out into the air, are carriers of *pneuma*, of air or spirit, if this word is translated literally. When used metaphorically, it can be understood as referring to those transformative, empowering ideas and inspirations that can serve as bearers of spirit and channels for a new life of individuals and communities today. Pneumatophores are ideas that are truly generative of change.

Within modern society we need many such pneumatophores: ideas that are vibrant bearers of spirit, thoughts that can literally “inspire” and guide us to generate new life. Such ideas may be drawn from many different sources—it does not matter where they come from as long as they lead us to a heightened awareness and sensibility, a sense of global responsibility, and a new kind of spiritual literacy and awakening that can help people to live a life of dignity on the planet without destroying the life support system of the earth or killing each other.

One such idea concerns the “zest for life.” This idea has been much discussed by the French thinker Pierre Teilhard de Chardin whose reflections I follow here. He uses such French expressions as “*goût de la Vie*” or simply “*goût de vivre.*” In 1950 he devoted a whole essay to this theme, translated into English as “Zest for Living.” There exists a close association between the zest for life, the place of human energy in the unfolding of life, and the available energy resources for feeding the zest for life, that is for activating human energies at the individual, social, and species level. The zest for life seems to me an important pneumatophore, a key carrier of spiritual energy and power which can inspire us to live more fully in the new story.

**Nurturing the zest for life**

What is this zest for life? How can we nurture and increase it?

“Zest” is an ancient word connected with taste, with a sense of enjoyment and appreciation that involves all our inner and outer senses. According to *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, the true origin of “zest” seems to be unknown, but one of its contemporary meanings is given as “great enthusiasm and energy.” Other meanings are “eagerness,” “keenness,” and also “drive.” These words resonate with dynamic energy and movement, with an aliveness that spurs us on, inspiring further action, growth, and development. The zest for life is a drive that keeps us alive, engaged, and committed to be involved with what is going on around us.”
around us. The zest for life can also be understood as an alignment with the flow of life, as an awakening to the fullness of life with all its joys and pains, its growth, diminishments, and sufferings.

The zest for life is a primordial energy that runs through all of life. Human beings participate in this energy, but it far transcends them. It is more like an immense wave that carries them, like the life force “Chi” so important in Chinese culture, a force that gives and sustains life, animates human creativity and imagination, and expresses itself through the arts and all other human activities.

With the immense knowledge that humanity possesses at present, and the myriad problems the global human community faces today, what does it mean to be truly human, to be fully alive in the twenty-first century? Growing into the fullness of life must be understood in the largest possible context today, as being part of the immense process of evolutionary becoming.

Life in the widest sense is what humans experience and live for. But what is a truly human life? All life needs tending, nurturing, caring for, and human life especially requires physical, mental, moral, and spiritual care of body, mind, spirit, and soul. That means human life needs spirituality like the body needs breath and blood to flourish. The zest for life—the will to live and love life to the full, and contribute to its growth—is an indispensable requisite for the continuity of life, especially in the form of a higher, more conscious, spiritual life, and for the development of a more integrated human community around the globe that will give priority to promoting more equality, justice, and peace, as well as a planetary ethic.

Enemy number one is indifference and boredom, the loss of a taste for life, the absence of inner resources, and the danger of dropping out of all commitments by not taking responsibility for one’s own life and that of others. In Teilhard’s view, we cannot advance the world and the flourishing of life on the planet without a zest for life. He describes this zest as “nothing less than the energy of universal evolution” but, at the human level, the nurturing and blossoming of this energy “is to some degree our responsibility.”

Elsewhere he writes about “the primordial sources of the Energy of Evolution” which modern science has discovered, but also of humanity’s need “to find a way to increase the Drive of Evolution:” “If humanity is to use its new access of physical power with balanced control, it cannot do without a rebound of intensity in its zest to act, in its zest to seek, in its zest to create.”

Even in our times, so full of uncertainty and change, human beings still come into the world with a fundamental, underlying trust in life. This is an innate, foundational trust that underlies all life and growth, a basic fundamental faith in the goodness of life, and in the world as our home. It is important to build on this primary trust, expand and consolidate it rather than become disenchanted and destroy it. “Trust life,” Teilhard used to say, “life is never mistaken.” This primary
trust, this sense of being carried, affirmed, and supported, is so different from the existential anxiety that modern philosophers speak about. From a religious point of view this trust is linked to a deep belief in being held and enfolded by something greater, of being cared for and protected by God’s presence and loving care.

In Christianity, for example, God has always been understood as a God of life, a living God who bestows life and cares for the whole of life—the life of the earth, the life of nature, and all human life, past, present, and future. Writing about the universality of the experience of the divine, Raimon Panikkar points out that nature is both a privileged and also a natural place for us to meet God. But he also says that “God is Life,” and that “we meet God in relationship.” A religion truly alive must be a religion of life, communicating a spirit that makes humans come fully alive.

How can we ensure that this primary trust in life is not diminished and lost, that it is encouraged to grow, that it is built up into a courageous, active zest for life?

Feeding the zest for life represents an urgent, new imperative. This is where the new story is vital. Our new, so recent knowledge of evolutionary becoming and all that this implies—the immensities of time and space, the unimaginable complexities of living forms, including the history of the human species—provide a transformative, even revolutionary perspective on the understanding of human needs and potential, and what it means to have access to the fullness of life.

Humans have always been called to attend to the “taste” for life, to nurture its zest, but the need to develop it to a much higher potency is now an evolutionary and spiritual imperative linked to the development of a new stage of consciousness. The requirements for feeding the zest for life have become much more complex and specific. The activation of this energetic drive forward has become a much greater and more urgent task.

“How can we ensure that this primary trust in life is not diminished and lost, that it is encouraged to grow, that it is built up into a courageous, active zest for life?”
Where to find the energy resources to feed humanity’s zest for life?

The “zest for life” is one of Teilhard’s great ideas, a true pneumatophore that can generate new forms of living in our world. It can help to transform the life of individuals and small communities by inspiring them to work for a better life of others. Small, experimental seed communities like the sangama can develop into dynamic centers that radiate outwards like waves, where each ripple moves further and further, reaching out to create new communities that contribute to the transformation of humanity.

This zest for life can be consciously nurtured and taught; it can become a practical help for living that is especially important for young people who will create the future. To take stock and make use of the material and spiritual energy resources available on earth is a gigantic task; human beings have to strive to take this on consciously together. Nowhere does Teilhard speak more often about the zest (goût) for action, evolution, even ultra-evolution, of the human species than in the essays written during the last fifteen years of his life. His sense of urgency comes vividly across when he reflects on the “main lines of a
spiritual energetics” needed for the further development of the human species. This “energetics” relates to the conditions humanity has to create to achieve its own “ultra-evolution” and work toward the transformation of the world. This is a powerful process: humanity is at the crossroads—it has not yet reached its full state of development but must approach its goal of further self-evolution “as a work that has to be done.” Reflecting on the convergence of humanity, and the role of energy in this process, Teilhard wrote in 1952 that it would be no exaggeration to say that:

Humankind of tomorrow, though standing on mountains of iron, of coal, of uranium, of wheat, would do no more than ‘tick over’, if, by some mischance, there should be a weakening of its zest not simply for subsisting and surviving but for super-living.10

The zest to nurture both human and non-human life is essential for the future of people and planet. It draws on many different energy resources that have to be maintained and cared for. But the zest for life cannot be guaranteed by material resources alone; it requires spiritual energy resources. In parallel to our immense concern with preserving the biodiversity of life forms we also need to take conscious account of, and responsibility for, maintaining the rich diversity of religious and philosophical ideas since they provide us with irreplaceable spiritual energy resources for feeding the zest for life.

Teilhard described the zest for life as “that spiritual disposition, at once intellectual and affective, in virtue of which life, the world, and action seem to us, on the whole, luminous—interesting—appetizing.” He characterized this disposition as “dynamic, constructive, and adventurous.” At first it might seem to affect only individual well-being, but it is an energy running through the whole evolutionary process. It can be compared to an immense wave that humans must actively engage with, respond to, and further develop. The most delicate part of this vital development “is entrusted to the expert knowledge and skill of religions.”11 Soon afterwards he refers even more boldly to the “evolutionary role of religions” in providing “the thinking earth” with a great faith, and ever more faith, in working for its own further development.12

Important spiritual energy resources are found within each of the different faiths on earth, and in the great mystical traditions, with their practice of contemplation and prayer. Thus the zest for life is presented as “the central and favored ligament...within...a supremely organic universe, a supremely intimate bond between mysticism, research, and biology.” And finally Teilhard also speaks of an explicit “neo-zest” which is the power of love, an altogether higher form of zest!13

The spiritual dimension is a defining characteristic of human life as distinct from biological life in general. It is closely related to mind and thought, to consciousness, discerning reflection, and self-aware experience. In the past, spirituality has...
usually been presented from a particular religious perspective and been defined by the beliefs of a specific religion. Yet nowadays we also recognize new secular spiritualities arising out of secular experiences. Many contemporary understandings capture the dynamic, transformative quality of spirituality as lived experience linked to our bodies, nature, our relationships with others, and to the evolutionary development of the whole web of life.

There now exists an ever-rising interest in spiritual ideals and practices, in the teachings of spiritual figures past and present. Many people experiment with different forms of spirituality, or with a mixture of spiritual teachings drawn from different religious traditions and from the secular world. Education toward greater spiritual awareness is needed for all people in order to discover their spiritual potential within themselves. The active awakening of our spiritual potential into a spiritually active approach to life is still very underdeveloped in contemporary society. We need to give far more attention to the education of the human spirit, both in children and adults. We must feed their zest for life by developing their spiritual literacy through teaching them about the great spiritual traditions, and offering practices to develop the inner values and virtues promoted by these traditions.

Nurturing the human spiritual potential means the development of a spiritual awareness or consciousness, understood as a different, deeper way of “seeing,” to which Teilhard de Chardin gave such emphatic witness. It is an all-embracing vision, a commitment to a depth dimension of human life, traditionally understood as a “transcendent dimension.” It enables human beings to see their experience in a larger context, to have a greater vision by relating more widely, and responding more effectively, by taking “response-ability” towards themselves and others, the environment, nature, the earth, the human community, and Ultimate Reality, however named, often called the Spirit or, in theistic traditions, God.14

To draw on all available energy resources to feed the human zest for life, we also have to take into account the spiritual resources of modern science. As Thomas Berry pointed out in The Great Work, “Science as a wisdom tradition is only in its beginning phase,”15 but its contribution is indispensable. Teilhard de Chardin was equally convinced of the essential contribution of scientific research in building the future of humanity. And so is the Dalai Lama. He wrote about the convergence of science and spirituality in his book The Universe in a Single Atom: How Science and Spirituality Can Serve Our World,16 where he strongly argues that these two important sources of knowledge can both enhance the wellbeing of humanity. In his plea to bring spirituality to bear upon the course of science and the direction of technology, he writes:

In essence, science and spirituality, though differing in their approaches, share the same end, which is the betterment of humanity. At its best, science is

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motivated by a quest for understanding to help lead us to greater flourishing and happiness. In Buddhist language, this kind of science can be described as wisdom grounded in and tempered by compassion. Similarly, spirituality is a human journey into our internal resources, with the aim of understanding who we are in the deepest sense and of discovering how to live according to the highest possible idea. This too is the union of wisdom and compassion.

Moving to a new interspirituality

The new story is like a fire, a great incandescence that lights up old and new spiritualities. It is closely interwoven with the rise of a new spiritual awakening in the world because it nurtures new religious attitudes to the earth and the whole universe as well as to existing faith traditions. It is giving rise to what Brother Wayne Teasdale (1945-2004) has called a new “interspirituality,” understood as the sharing of religious, especially mystical, experiences across different traditions. The development of this interspirituality is full of promise since it is linked to a new understanding of religious diversity that responds creatively to the pluralistic complexities of human existence and gives access to a new kind of universality.

Teasdale, a Catholic lay monk, has developed his ideas about interspirituality in his book *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World’s Religions*, which has the heart symbol at its center. He describes this interspirituality as “universal” and “communal,” linked to the emergence of a global spirituality based on “the openness, mutual trust, goodwill, and generosity of the members of the world’s diverse traditions.” At the same time interspirituality is closely identified with the mystical life and characterized as “contemplative, interspiritual, socially engaged, environmentally responsible, holistic, engaging of other media, and cosmically open.”

This is a truly inspiring vision, but it can also be misunderstood as a spirituality too focused on individuals. A spirituality primarily developed for individuals is no longer enough; we need a religion of humanity and the earth, commensurate with our understanding of an evolutionary view of the universe and of all life. The Canadian eco-feminist theologian Heather Eaton speaks of the “revolution of evolution,” that is to say, that when we take evolution seriously, this radically changes the reference point for all our thinking:

“...We humans are not the central reference point—even for our own self-understanding. Awareness of Earth processes allows us to see our radical dependency on other organisms for basic survival, in addition to our kinship with, rather than...”
difference from, other animals. Evolution bends the mind, expands the horizon, and reverses the reference points. Earth is not our context, it is our source.

She suggests that “we ground religious awareness first in the Earth processes, second within the processes of human symbolic consciousness and only third within specific religious traditions.”

The new story is anchored in a cosmic and global vision which incorporates, while also transcending, the realities of religions as we have known them. The newly emerging, but not yet fully existing “interspirituality” represents a heart that needs to be nourished and expanded to larger dimensions rather than a heart that exists already fully formed. As long as we understand “the mystic heart” as a reality not yet complete, but as an “emerging heart” not fully formed, but still growing, this heart can truly become “a heart for the world.” Such a radiant center can newly energise us to work together in community and communion, beyond existing links of communication, for a better world to be born.

It seems to me that the practical experience of living temporarily and experimentally in a sangama provides an ideal environment for developing such engaged dialogues of the heart, so that a shared vision and common goals can emerge for a new season. The deepest ground and strongest motivating force for such inner work is ultimately found in the energies of love, a fiery zest that runs from the depths of the cosmos to the enfolding embrace of the Divine.

Awakening the energies of love, wisdom and compassion

We need to awaken the energies of love to stir and transform the people on our planet. While making use of all the available resources of knowledge and wisdom, we have to push the boundaries of our understanding of love, find love in a new land, on new roads still to be mapped and established. It is no longer enough to think simply about love in the way our forebears did, or search in sacred scriptures, world philosophy, and literature for the established meanings of love. We live in such a different world and have such a nuanced awareness of our own becoming within the cosmic epic of evolution, within the new story of the rise of life, consciousness, and Spirit, that all our assumptions need to be assessed anew.

As so many mystics have witnessed, love is always there, it always accompanies us, surrounds, upholds, and comforts us. But how to access and partake in this inexhaustible ocean of love? Love is a fire both human and divine. How can we awaken to the power of love so it can heal a world so torn apart?

The energies of love encompass everyone and touch everything. They cannot be seen as something only personal and inward; they overcome obstacles; radiate outward; leap forward. We can dream of the ways and energies of love as new
ways of living. It is a dream that links up with so many other dreams; it goes beyond what existed and was possible in the past. It is the discovery of a new road, the seeding of seminal ideas, the crossing of a new threshold in the long history of our human species and the history of life, the revelation of a communal heart.

The way of love as a new way of living can only emerge out of conjunctions, collaborations, and convergences that transcend so many borders that still divide us. This includes also the resources of wisdom and compassion, so highly valued in the world’s great spiritual traditions. The wisdom of love embedded in our religious, philosophical, and spiritual traditions provides tremendous resources on which the global human community can draw in order to develop a new, more inclusive and powerful way of love. But by themselves these resources are not enough. We need to draw on insights across the traditions in a “trans-traditional” approach to love and wisdom; we need to marry the sacred and the secular, so that a new “interspirituality” can emerge, rooted in a sacred secularity.

There are many signs that we are spiritually progressing, not regressing. A new spiritual birth is occurring in our new world based on new experience, on a new vision, and the emergence of a new global community. It is a universal, ecological, and mystical spirituality deeply linked to the awareness of the immense process of becoming—whether that of nature, of life, or of the world as a whole, and of our place within it. While this is a new development in human history, its roots are ancient and go back to the depths of the birth of life and thought. Thus there is both continuity and discontinuity, a renaissance and a new breakthrough. To be animated by the zest for life was understood by Teilhard de Chardin as “being in communion with becoming,” participating in the immense evolutionary process drawing us upward and forward. He also understood this as being “in communion with fire”—with the fire of life and of love that pervades the great Story of which we are a part.

Living the New Story is more than a dream. It is a summons to new life and action whose deepest resources are found in the zest for life and in an active awakening of humanity’s spiritual resources. This is an important process and a new experience to which the sangama can make a vital contribution.

Discovering a deeper communion with one another and all life in such small group gatherings has the power to transform not only those present but to spread like immense waves that can create ever deeper and larger circles in an ever more globally connected world.
Endnotes

4 AE, 231, 232.
9 See AE, 295-296 for this discussion.
10 AE, 333.
12 AE, 238
13 See AE 242-243.
14 These themes are discussed in more detail in Ursula King, The Search for Spirituality. Our Global Quest for a Spiritual Life (New York: BlueBridge, 2008).
15 Thomas Berry, The Great Work. Our Way into the Future. New York: Bell Tower, 1999, 177. See the whole chapter on “The Fourfold Wisdom,” 176-195, where he discusses the wisdom of indigenous peoples, the wisdom of women, the wisdom of the classical traditions, and the wisdom of science as available resources to guide us into the future.
17 Ibid., 220.
18 Novato, CA (New World Library, 2001)
19 See Teasdale, 201, 238.