

CREATION
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
June 1, 2014

OPENING WORDS *from A Field Guide to the Soul*¹ ~ James Thornton

We are all native speakers of the language of life.
To talk with what lives, we have to listen patiently and quietly for a long time. We have to listen in a place where we can hear,
where the sounds of the living world are louder than the sounds of the machine world.
If we have the patience and the silence we can begin to hear.
If many of us listen, many of us will hear.
We will learn the language of the living earth,
and it will become our language again.

Come, let us listen and learn, together.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *All I See is Part of Me* ~ Cynthia Curtis

READING *Where I Come From is Like This*² ~ Rev. Meg Barnhouse

This reading comes from *Waking Up the Karma Fairy: Life Lessons and Other Holy Adventures*

When I was twenty-three, I felt myself skating over the surface of my life. So focused on who I was, I wasn't paying attention to where I was. Beauties would pass me by. I would find my mind in tomorrow already, not noticing today. So I started seeing things out loud. "This is the time when the daffodils are blooming," I would say to myself. "The sky is pale blue, and there are wispy clouds way up high." My brain would retrieve the name of the clouds. Cirrus. My fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Greiner, called them "horse tails."

One good part of my spiritual path is earth-based, so I like to know where north, south, east, and west are from where I sit. I like to know what is underneath me, too. Three hundred and seventy million years ago there was an ocean here in South Carolina. It was narrowing because the tectonic plate that carried the continent of Africa was headed this way on a collision course. Three hundred and sixty-three million years ago it plowed into the plate carrying the North American continent. The edge of Africa was pushed underneath North America, and it melted. The earth here was pushed up into mountains as high as the Himalayas. The piece of Africa that melted floated up to the surface as the granite along the Pacolet River, whose waters powered the textile mills where Spartanburg County workers wove cotton into cloth until the mills closed down in the 1990s.

The rocks around my house were formed by heat and pressure eight to ten miles below the surface. They are on the surface now because, after the plates had collided for a

¹ <http://friendsofsilence.net/quote/author/james-thornton>

² <http://www.questformeaning.org/page/reflecting/where-i-come-from-is-like-this>

hundred million years, they began pulling apart at the rate of an inch a year, eventually forming the Atlantic Ocean. Over time, weathering and erosion have removed maybe fifteen miles of surface. The Blue Ridge Mountains to the south and west of my house are remnants of the towering peaks ...not even the remnants; they are the roots of those peaks, having made their way up from deep below.

Under my house is dense clay soil formed by the weathering of the rocks that have come to the surface. They are crystalline rocks made up of crystals of quartz, feldspar and mica, pyroxene, amphibole (am-fib-ole,) and olivine (olive-een). As water seeps into the molecules of the minerals and mixes with acid from the roots of plants, these minerals change into clay. The quartz breaks down into tiny pieces and becomes sand.

My yard looks still, but it is not. Change happens fast and change happens slowly, but change is always happening. Geologists call that "dynamic equilibrium." The earth is on the boil.

Life, says Zen therapist David K. Reynolds, is "playing ball on running water." Dynamic equilibrium. In order to keep my feet under me, I have to remember where I am. I want to know the names of the trees and the grasses. It is my goal to know always, no matter where I am, whether the moon is new or full, waxing or waning. There is a sliver of a new moon today. It rose just after the sun rose and will set just after the sun sets. It will rise a little later every day until, at full moon, it will rise as the sun sets.

I have to know where I am in order to be here for my life. I don't want to skate along the surface. Getting oriented helps me dig in. So I talk to myself about what I see, about what the earth is doing, about where I am in time, and about where I am on the crust of the planet.

MESSAGE

On my way home a few days ago, past dinner-time and well into the evening, I was inspired to make a quick trip to buy some annuals for my garden. My first stop wasn't successful, and so I hurried down to FarmBoy, where row after row of colourful flats of flowers are laid out to tempt the gardening spirit. I was surprised at the number of people there; it was approaching dark, and while some were casually browsing, simply enjoying the search on a glorious evening, others were scurrying about and bumping carts, almost frantic to scoop up the beauty lest the moment pass and it get away from them.

I suspect that many of you, like me, are just itching to spend time in the garden...my hands buried in dirt, knees wearing down the ground as the ground wears down my knees, roughly yanking up weeds and tree spouts, and gently placing fresh plant seedlings into the newly churned soil. Working in and with the garden viscerally connects us to the earth, and with all that is. Working in the garden is a way to engage in the ongoing and ever-evolving creation...we play a role in creating our gardens, spending hours digging and puttering, yet remain unable to claim that we made the plants grow. It's a beautiful and mysterious cooperative process.

A few minutes ago, Paula read Rev. Meg Barnhouse's words...in which she described paying attention to where she is, and intentionally getting to know the ground on which she lives and

walks. Gardening has that effect...to connect us to exactly where we are, and to know it for what it is. Rev. Barnhouse writes, "I have to know where I am in order to be here for my life. I don't want to skate along the surface. Getting oriented helps me dig in."

I think it's true, though the cause and effect may be impossible to trace, that digging into the earth, making contact with the ground, and noticing and naming exactly where we are, can help us to claim our unique place in all creation and to acknowledge our human role, individually and as a species, in the co-creation of all that is. Digging into the earth, feeling our place, helps us to dig into life.

Here at the Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough, our purpose statement says that we are 'inspired by our interconnection with all that is.' I mean today to explore that little sound byte...and to dig a little deeper into what it is...in "all that is" and our interconnection with it...that inspires us as spiritual and religious beings. How does "all that is" help us to live lives of purpose and meaning?

Creation, and our participation in and with it, is a difficult concept to pin down. As I worked to create this sermon, I found sound bytes from many poems and songs floating like clouds through my mind, and I was tempted to simply offer a series of poetry readings, for surely, since the beginning of time, poets have more successfully captured the essence of creation....and much more eloquently than I can hope to this morning.

Storytellers have also struggled to give creation a voice. Creation myths abound... stories that describe a beginning place, stories which, once integrated into an understanding of how things work, also inform how we live now. Just think of the creation stories found in the Torah...stories about life beginning in a garden, stories which suggest that humans were expelled from that garden. Think of how such an understanding of creation, and humanity's place in it, has informed the western psyche.

Think of the aboriginal story that tells of the creation of Turtle Island, and how each creature participated in the quest for a handful of dirt that would eventually grow into the earth, and how both the turtle and the muskrat sacrificed their lives for the good of the whole. Consider how that creation myth has influenced who the aboriginal peoples are today.

We too, as Unitarian Universalists, have a creation myth, a great story. Lynn Ungar, the minister for Lifespan Learning at the Church of the Larger Fellowship, tells it this way:³

"In the beginning there was The One, all of everything packed together into an unimaginably dense Core of the Universe, the Seed of Everything. No one knows how long it was there, or how to describe the Nothing that surrounded it. It was before time, before Something and Nothing.

"And then, in an instant shorter than an instant, The One exploded out into the Many, crossing what could now be called space at unthinkable speed. And there was the beginning of atoms. And across the unimaginable stretches of what would now be called time, new elements formed, the building blocks of existence.

³ http://www.questformeaning.org/page/reflecting/resources-for-living_15

“And those elements became gas clouds that gave birth to stars, and the stars lived and died, giving birth to new clouds, new elements, black holes, galaxies, planets. And eventually, eventually, a medium-sized rocky planet came to dwell at a medium distance from a medium-sized star. Rain came to this planet in vast storms, creating oceans, and somehow in the oceans and the lightning and the elements a spark of life arose.

“Across the unthinkable numbers of millennia, that spark of life learned to divide in half and make new life. And as the years wore on and on, cells learned to share themselves with other cells, and eventually there were plants and animals in a profusion that will never stop shifting and transforming and adapting so long as life exists.”

Ungar concludes by stating: “That’s our creation myth, a story that is no less beautiful or powerful for the fact that it [or something like it] actually happened. I call it a myth rather than a scientific account because this story of creation holds religious weight and meaning for us. It isn’t just a set of facts; it’s a story about who we are, where we belong, what it means to be human.”

So what does our creation myth, this great story, tell us about all that is? In what ways does it inspire our lives?

Like any creation story, many meanings can be made. But here’s a start...taking my lead from the thoughts of both Rev. Ungar and Rev. David Pyle.⁴

No matter how big you imagine ‘all that is’ to be, it’s always bigger than that. There are a couple of lessons in this. For one thing, it reminds us to be humble and to see the bigger picture. I love Tom Post’s version of *The Galaxy* song...“just remember we are standing on a planet that evolving, and revolving at nine hundred miles an hour.... So...lighten up...you don’t know the answers and neither do I, so meanwhile let’s just all lighten up.”⁵

It’s all about perspective. Astronaut Neil Armstrong said, “It suddenly struck me that that tiny pea, pretty and blue, was the Earth. I put up my thumb and shut one eye, and my thumb blotted out the planet Earth. I didn’t feel like a giant. I felt very, very small.” And our perspective is usually WAY too small, and we might better remember to widen our view, and to look for more than we see at first glance.

Everything’s interconnected. And it’s a system. I tend to think of the workings of the universe as a kind of nesting Russian doll...with each larger and larger layer building on lessons learned from the previous. This is to say that patterns and behaviour at the most microscopic level are reflected in, even mirrored by, patterns and behaviour at the most immense level, and vice versa. We can learn a lot about how to be in the world by watching how atoms and cells behave, how the bumble relates to flowers and to other bumble bees, how the wind blows and moves. We are a part of each of these things, and they a part of us. And when one thing changes, when we act, something else shifts and changes.

⁴ <http://celestiallands.org/wayside/?p=1046>

⁵ <http://www.sfjohnson.com/acad/astronomy/galaxysong.pdf>

Again, it's about perspective. To understand what's happening in our small worlds, we are helped, even healed, by looking at the whole system.

'All that is' is creative and values diversity. Whatever existed before the moment of the big bang, if that's what happened, must have been chock full of possibility and potential...like a table laden with art supplies. Anything could happen, and did! We are, each and collectively, like that moment...loaded with possibility, destined for diversity. No matter how we try to clone things, or nail things down, or keep everything the same, creation will just not allow it! There is an urge to create, and to create variety, that exists within and yet somehow just beyond 'all that is.'

Death and struggle are intrinsically part of 'all that is.' The only way for creativity and diversity to happen is for things to die. Without death, there is no growth or change. All too often, we need to have our hands pruned away from something we're clinging to. Maybe if we acknowledge that life is built on a series of 'letting go' moments, we can trust that something new will come into being in the place of what has passed away.

Everything, and everyone, has a place in 'all that is.' Martha Graham said: "There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening, that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one you in all time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and will be lost." You might not be able to see it. You might not feel it. But you have a place...an important place. As Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz wrote, "It doesn't matter whether we know who we serve...who serves best doesn't always understand."⁶ It doesn't matter if we can't understand what our place might be. Simple because everything is interconnected, nothing can exist without contributing to the system of 'all that is.' Our lives serve some purpose. That's just the way it is.

We are both created and creators. Creativity is the natural order of life. We are shapers, at the same time as we are being shaped by everything around us. It's a creative interchange...a symbiotic relationship...yet we seem to more easily accept that we have been created than accept our ongoing role in creation. I wonder if that's a by-product of creation myths that involve one 'creator', whether that be a god, or a crow, or a turtle...someone or something outside of us that is said to hold all the creative power.

An outside creator isn't included in, nor necessarily excluded from, the Unitarian creation myth. But, in our story, cells learn to share themselves with other cells, and sparks of life divide and create new life. We are made out of stuff that is built to transform and be transformed, to evolve and to affect ongoing evolution. This story gives a more accurate picture of the creative agency and energy that we hold....that is, if we embrace that energy and possibility.

Nothing is finished. There's a great line in a Mary Oliver poem..."inside the river is an unfinishable story, and you are somewhere in it..."⁷ Creation is too often, it seems, used as a noun rather than as a process. A 'creation' is seen as a finished product, something that is completed, something we can no longer change. Creation myths tend to explain how 'all that

⁶ <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/love-2/>

⁷ <http://wordsamany.wordpress.com/2013/02/07/what-can-i-say-mary-oliver/>

is' came into being, but they stop there, so can lead us to overlook the fact that creation is ongoing, ever-evolving, always unfinished, always ready to incorporate our contributions.

We're in 'all that is' together. Everything came from the same place, and evolved in process with everything else. Together. We adapt and change and grow to fit better within a particular context and community, in the place where we live. And with the benefit of human consciousness, we turn our intention toward adapting and changing and growing in order to make the place where we live better...for ourselves, for others and for the future of 'all that is.' Together.

So...we are inspired by our interconnection with all that is. Inspired to open our hearts and minds to the vast possibilities that exist beyond what we know. Inspired to intentionally use our creative powers to bring more love and justice into the world. Inspired to admire and embrace the presence of creativity and diversity. Inspired to learn from others. Inspired to hold out hope that our seemingly small contributions matter, and to know that our lives hold purpose, that nothing is ever final. Inspired to let go of the known and step into the creative interchange of birth and death, in ebb and in flow. Inspired to be creators in the ongoing evolution of 'all that is.'

Finally, **our story of creation calls us to embrace the mystery, the mystery that some might call god.** If we truly see the incredible and creative interchange that is imbedded within and among us, I believe that we can better walk through our lives as embodiments of that mystery...embodiments of a divine and creative spark that is likewise embodied in all else, in everyone else. And in this embrace of mystery, 'all that is' becomes sacred.

May we continue to be inspired by the beauty, and creativity, and sacredness of 'all that is.' So may it be.

RESPONSIVE READING

For You

~ *Walt Whitman* (#659 SLT)

CLOSING WORDS

~ *Carl Sagan*⁸

The nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our apple pies were made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of stardust.

Let us go from this place, to join in the spiraling, infinite dance, pulsing unseen throughout all creation⁹, knowing that all that we see is a part of us, and we a part of 'all that is.'

Go in peace and love.

⁸ <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/144310-the-nitrogen-in-our-dna-the-calcium-in-our-teeth>

⁹ Martha Kirby Capo