

“STARSTUFF”
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Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Appleton, Wisconsin
www.fvuuf.org

February 15-16, 2014

Sermon

In the religious education classroom of my childhood, I learned about the constellations, those intricate systems of mapping the stars and seeing in them the stories and characters that accompany us as we go about our business under their canopy. In that same phase of my development, my family was in the habit of taking evening walks. Some assortment of one or both parents and one or both daughters—the dog was the only constant—would stroll around the neighborhood. Far above our heads the stars would shine, little pinpricks that revealed glimpses of the sunny sky over which a great wool blanket was thrown each evening, according to one of the myths I learned about at the First Unitarian Church of Portland, Oregon. I would crane my neck and, on clear nights, my dad would point up at the dippers both big and little.

Our universe was so huge and complex, beautiful in its vastness. And it included me! My RE teachers explained that no matter how dissimilar it might appear, everything in the universe is connected in love and beauty. We had a similar RE lesson here a few weeks ago, with kids making constellations with mini marshmallows and toothpicks.

I sometimes wonder if one reason Unitarian Universalism stuck with me is that its spiritual lessons agreed with what I learned in other realms of life, like in science class at secular school. At the same time I was being presented with the religious belief that everything exists within a great cosmic unity some call God, the science I was taught reinforced this. My public school teacher explained about Darwin, who gave us understandings that we now call evolutionary biology, the idea that all species of life have evolved over time from common ancestors.

The question of whether what I learned at church could work with and not against what I learned in school doesn't stay in the classrooms of our childhoods. Recently, an acquaintance learned over beer and pizza that I was a minister. She said, "I just don't see how you can believe all that religious mumbo jumbo when science shows how wrong it all is."

"Actually," I told her, because she really had asked, "I believe that science and spirituality can work together to give life great meaning and beauty." Well, she wasn't buying that so I hastened to give her one of my favorite examples: Hafiz, the great Persian Islamic mystic. His poetry feels so modern, even though it was written in the 1300s. Like when Hafiz uses the image of "galaxies blooming inside" as a metaphor for how our world becomes more complicated as we journey through it. That's an ancient religious assertion but today's

evolutionary science actually agrees that our universe is moving toward greater complexity and diversity.

Scientists express it a little differently than Hafiz, telling us that our whole universe started as just one single element, hydrogen. Due to weight and time, it eventually fused to become a heavier element and went on to create the expansion of stars. The process of collapsing and exploding stars produced all the naturally occurring heavier elements. In other words, stars create most of the atoms that make up the periodic table of elements.

The cynical response to such a revelation might be, "Ok, some stars got squished and here we all are." But I like how the late astronomer Carl Sagan put it. "We come," he says, "from starstuff." All the variation and difference in everything that exists, including us, came from one lone element, from a single united origin long ago.

Science, then, expresses what I feel spiritually, a sense of unity and connection with the world and its fellow inhabitants. One of my spiritual practices is to appreciate, to the best of my abilities, the creative, inexplicable diversity that I witness every day. The diversity I'm talking about is sometimes as simple as sitting at dinner with friends and noticing that each person present has an entirely different laugh, each delightful and contagious in its own way. Or walking in silence, with no iPod or cell phone, the morning after snow has come to paint the world silent and white. As someone accustomed to mild winters, I marvel at the different kinds of snow and wonder at the climate and weather patterns that create it. Sometimes, I've noticed, snow turns slippery the moment it lands, a treacherous trap. Other times it's soft, powdery and squeaks under my feet.

Have you ever noticed that sometimes just noticing diversity connects you to it and calls forth the presence of unity and that feeling of closeness? It can render unavoidable the fact that we are attached, in profound ways, to other humans, to the earth and its other forms of life. Sometimes this kind of spiritual homework is a piece of cake. It's easy to feel in harmony when sharing a meal with cherished friends or strolling along in boots that keep your feet toasty and dry.

Other times, no matter how hard we might try to grasp hold of unity, it can crack, shattering into pieces. For me, this sometimes happens when I learn about suffering that seems far away. It can be hard to read the news. So many bad things are happening. Lately I can barely bring myself to face reports from the Middle East, especially about what's happening in Israel and Palestine. Part of me, I think, intentionally cultivates a sense of detachment from that situation and is grateful to feel distance. Who in their right mind would want connection to violence and chaos? It can seem so distant, even though I've been there.

I traveled to Israel-Palestine in 2000, while working for an academic peace and justice association. To some extent, I expected the mixture of cultures, the desert heat, even the indescribable political tension. I was unprepared for the gentle beauty of East Jerusalem, with its ancient stone streets and lavishly hospitable citizens. I had the feeling I always get when I travel. That the world has either gotten smaller, more intimate. Or who I am has

become more spacious, bigger somehow. My commitment to work for justice and harmony there intensified because I felt connected to a part of the world where I'd never been before.

A few years later, 23-year-old Rachel Corrie, a casual friend with whom I went to college, was killed in the Gaza Strip, run over by a Caterpillar bulldozer while she was blocking the Israeli army from demolishing a Palestinian home. I was heartbroken. Shocked. How could such a thing have happened? I had gone there and come safely home, changed by my experiences but unharmed. When I returned, my parents and sister picked me up at the airport. They sat, waiting, at the gate until my plane touched down an hour and a half late. Rachel's family doesn't have a story like that. She never returned.

I'm not proud of this but one of my first reactions to her dying was to separate myself from her. While people all over the world lamented her murder, I focused on the ways I was not like Rachel. We had been in different social circles. We were working in the Middle East with different organizations and at different times. Such a coping mechanism seems transparent now—obviously I was grieving and in denial. When an unfathomable loss comes out of nowhere, it can cause us to retreat from the world, to deny connection. To pull back protectively. Otherwise, the unfairness of my friend being killed was unbearable. Part of my process of fully grieving her loss has been to open my heart to Rachel, restoring my sense of connection to her.

I still think about the soldier who operated the bulldozer, what his life was like before he did this horrible thing and what if, anything, changed for him afterward. At first, I hated him and wished that he might suffer in the most extreme way possible. And then gradually, I came to remember that he is, after all, human in the same ways that I too am human. Probably if I came face to face with him I would again feel that sick kind of fury that raged in the pit of my gut in the days after word of her death soared home. I'm sure I will always carry anger about what happened to Rachel.

Yet it has helped me heal to consider that his life and choices must have their own complexity. My grieving process has helped me recognize the relationship between that which is, Rachel's death, and that which changes, the evolution of life. My life has continued to evolve—what a privilege!—and, therefore, so has my understanding of it. I assume that this anonymous soldier is evolving too in some way. I don't even know his name. Yet we both come from starstuff, from pieces of that single original element. We are both part of this world and therefore, we are connected whether I like it or not. Whether he even realizes it or not. In a way, my desire for peace and justice in Israel-Palestine is as much for his sake as it is for Rachel's or for anyone else's.

Precisely because life delivers the kinds of events that seem tailor made to sever our sense of connection, the spiritual practice of seeking and appreciating unity is crucial. Separating ourselves from the world when it hurts us makes it too small. It cuts out the kinds of unity that bless us, like laughing friends and evening walks. Remaining connected after tragedy and anger is not an easy task. It sure wasn't for me when Rachel was killed but I can say that as it evolved, my process of grieving has brought beauty, love and meaning to my life.

It can be a gift to rediscover, after loss, that we are connected in an interdependent web. This image, also one of our Unitarian Universalist principles, can help reconfigure a damaged sense of unity. It reminds us that we have a place in this world and others do too. There might be some gaps, some predators, some strands spun a little too thick or thin for maximum ease... but we're woven together—fused together, like that ancient process that produced our world. As we struggle for spiritual unity in our hearts and in the world, we can know that the scientific worldview, with its understanding that all life shares a uniform origin, adds its voice to make the chorus stronger and louder.

And haven't the mystics always known this? Our Sufi poet Hafiz's central theme of almost all his writing was the idea that we come from oneness. He's sometimes nicknamed "Tongue of the Invisible," because of his ability to describe how everything originates from and returns to a unity so all-encompassing that it is invisible. One way he does this is by sprinkling his poetry with all sorts of delightful pet names for God. Here are just a few: Sweet Uncle, Generous Merchant, Problem Giver, Problem Solver, Beloved, Ocean, Sky, Moon. So many synonyms. The divine is unified in its diversity.

Remember my friend who wondered how I could possibly be religious in the face of science? I did not manage to convince her of, well, anything. And that's ok because the world is big and complex enough for us to disagree. When I left the restaurant, I bundled up and stepped out into the parking lot. It was one of those fearfully cold nights. But as I scurried to my car, I remembered to glance up. Swirling clouds were smeared all around the stars, and I imagined Vincent Van Gogh peering out of his sanitarium room window in southern France in 1889. I don't know what that was like for him, what prompted the scene he painted. But for me, the spiritual depth of witnessing beauty that was so close yet so far mingled with the science I knew about the age of the stars and the incredible complexity of the solar system. Scientific knowledge and religious experience collided, right there in my mind and heart, amplifying each's powerful meaning, uniting in their diversity.

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