

“A Universe Story: ...”
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January 28, 2007

It's a seemingly fantastic story -- fantastic in it's original sense of the word-- unreal or imaginary. Once upon a time, before time even existed, there was a strange ball of matter. My mind is already boggled -- how could there be a “before time?” So, this theoretical strange ball of matter happens to contain within itself the makings of a universe -- not just *any* universe -- *our* universe. With no explanation for why this might happen, it is believed this strange ball of matter, this universe seed, exploded 15 billion years ago and our universe was born.

Theologian Sallie McFague describes it this way, “From one infinitely hot, infinitely condensed bit of matter (a millionth of a gram) ... , have evolved one hundred billion galaxies, each with its billions of stars and planets. On our tiny planet alone biologists have found in a single square foot of topsoil an inch deep 'an average of 1,356 living creatures ... including 865 mites, 265 springtails, 22 millipedes, 19 adult beetles, and various numbers of 12 other forms ...' (not to mention the microscopic population that would include up to two billion bacteria and millions of fungi, protozoa and algae.”

It is seemingly fantastic. Out of the stars in their flight, out of the dust of eternity, here have we come, stardust and sunlight, mingling through time and through space. This is the current scientific story of our universe. This is a scientific story -- but it's also a religious story. Our Unitarian Universalist heritage is one of integrating faith and reason. Science has been an important part of our faith tradition and our identity.

So, how does this particular story of the universe inform religion? First of all, it's inconclusive as far as God goes. For some, and perhaps for some of you, God could be understood as the origin or creator of the universe seed. A deistic view would suggest God set things in motion with a big bang and then chemistry and evolution took over from there. In process theology, on the other hand, God is thought to be present in every moment in every time in every place in the universe. A process God nudges things along towards the good but works in partnership with the natural world. For others this is simply the description of natural events that don't include a God or Goddess. For

pantheists, such as myself, God is not outside of the universe -- but *is* the universe -- exploding out from the universe seed.

However you understand God's role, it's my personal belief that this story holds the key to salvation. Salvation -- that's a loaded word. Not one you often hear in Unitarian Universalist circles. But at divinity school I often had to work with traditional Christian language -- translating it so it made sense for me. So, when I refer to salvation, I'm not talking about heaven or hell, or the religious requirements to get into heaven. I'm talking about our planet here and now. I'm talking about the salvation of our planet defined by Sallie McFague, as "the health and well-being of ... the world and the many bodies that constitute that larger organism."

I believe the stories we tell shape our world -- they create the boundaries and limitations for what is possible. A children's story tells of a tiger who is captured by a man and kept in a cage. Every day when her captor comes to feed her he tells her she is a pitiful, ugly, and weak creature. For years the tiger lives in that cage -- until one day a lion passes by. "What is a powerful, beautiful tiger such as yourself doing in this cage?" he asks her. At first she thinks he's teasing her -- she's bought into the story that she's weak and ugly. Ultimately, he tells her a new story -- that she is glorious, strong, and powerful -- and she bursts out of that cage only to learn that it was never locked. The story itself imprisoned her -- and the new story set her free.

I tell this universe story because I think if we listen to it, if we hear it enough times and allow it to shape our lives, to filter into our worldview, to become part of our religion, we will find important truths that are necessary for salvation -- for the health and well-being of our planet and the creatures of our planet.

The first of those truths is that this is a story of profound unity. Brian Swimme writes, "No tribal myth, no matter how wild, ever imagined a more profound relationship connecting all things in an internal way right from the beginning of time. All thinking must begin with the cosmic genetic relatedness." Cosmic genetic relatedness. We are made of stardust which has been shaped and reshaped through billions of years. The stuff of our blood and bones links us to everything --*everything*-- in existence -- we're related to the oak tree and the squirrel -- we're distant cousins to the moon. As a friend of mine, Andy Pakula, once wrote, "We are constantly exchanging atoms and molecules with one

another. Because of that, we all have as part of us some molecules that were once part of Jesus [or] the Buddha.”

As much as this is a story of profound unity, it's also a tale of unfathomable diversity. From the approximately 105 natural elements known in existence, billions, billions upon billions, of configurations and reconfigurations of those same 105 elements, have resulted in a world that includes the cabbage and Mount Everest, the snail and the snowflake. Each configuration uses the same recycled materials, and yet each result is 100 percent new and unique. This diversity is the second great truth of this story.

Billions of creatures and natural objects have their shared beginning in the universe seed. They are held together by a common origin, but they're also united through relationships. This idea is, of course, reflected in our Unitarian Universalist principles and purposes when we talk about the interdependent web of all existence. This is the third truth of this universe story. Life is inherently relational. We do not stand alone. From the moment of conception to the time of death, we are relational beings -- dependent not just upon our mothers or fathers or neighbors, but on the wind and the rain, the grass and the trees, the sun and the force of gravity.

The universe is relational at the largest scale we can imagine. As Brian Swimme writes, “Our Sun is one of the hundred billion stars that the Milky Way swirls around itself, each of them spinning about in a bonded relationship with every other one. And the Milky Way remains bonded to all one hundred billion galaxies of the cosmos, for instant by instant the universe creates itself as a bonded community.”

Quantum physics tells us that our universe is also relational at the smallest level we can imagine. Physicist Danah Zohar describes, “electrons and photons, mesons and nucleons that tease us with their elusive double lives as they are now position, now momentum, now particles, now waves, now mass, now energy -- and all in response to each other and to the environment.” I've got to admit, I don't really know what photons or mesons are -- or exactly what it means if they are acting as momentum versus particles or mass -- but the general concept -- that they influence one another, are shaped and changed by one another -- that makes sense in a relational universe.

Process theologians have added an interesting dimension to this notion that everything begins in relationship. They add the dimension of time. In this moment now (snap) my

preaching is influenced by a number of factors happening in the present. If someone yawns -- if someone looks interested -- if someone gets up and leaves the room (please don't) -- if it's raining or snowing outside -- if it's too hot -- if a baby cries -- if my throat is dry -- if a motorcycle drives by -- all of that and more feeds into my experience of preaching and your experience of listening.

But this moment now (snap) is also influenced by the past. My past -- discussions, reading, classes, thoughts and experiences that I've had are all here with me as I preach. But there's also the past each of you brings as you listen. That's why this sermon will be different for each of you. And there's the past of this church -- the recent past -- a minister on sabbatical. The longer ago past -- your growing religious education program, calling your minister, Sara Ascher-- and the past that's now held in the memories of your congregation's elders. And the past of even longer ago, when our Unitarian and Universalist forebears first declared their religious heresies. This moment now (snap) carries within it everything that has happened since the universe burst into being from the everything seed.

Ray Bradbury wrote a science fiction story called "A Sound of Thunder," in which hunters travel back in time on safari to kill dinosaurs. In order to avoid influencing the future in any way, the safari guides first go back in time to watch for a dinosaur that is dying a natural death. They mark it with a paint gun, travel forward in time to get the hunters, and bring them back to kill the dinosaur minutes before this natural death will occur. Hunters are instructed to stay on a path that hovers in the air, thus avoiding all chance they will step on even a blade of grass and risk influencing the future. One man gets completely unnerved when he is faced by the tyrannosaurus rex he has traveled in time to kill and stumbles off the path into the jungle. When he returns to the present time it is to discover the safari signs are spelled differently, there is a different president in the nation, and even a different smell to the air. Wiping the mud off of his shoes, he discovers the cause for the changes: one single green, gold and black butterfly. Dead.

This is, of course, science fiction. However, I am intrigued by the influence that the past has on the present -- and more importantly, the present will have on the future. While there are countless other implications this particular story of our universe might have for religion -- I must stop with these three: our world is characterized by diversity,

we are cosmically and genetically related to everything that is, and the universe is held together by a web of relationships that are timeless.

What does this mean for us today? What does this mean for religion? First of all, I can't imagine reflecting upon this story with anything short of awe. It's a miracle, really. Not in the supernatural sense -- super --above and beyond the natural --like wine turning into water -- but a miracle of the natural. Everything in this room is a miracle. As the universe was unfolding -- what were the chances that trees would come into being? Or that people would cut the trees and make these pews, or this pulpit? What were the chances of the stones that make the foundation of this building? What were the chances of Lila, your music director, or of Rita, the worship associate this morning? We are surrounded in this room by miracles. Differences, instead of being scary, can be an opportunity for awe and amazement. Surely knowing that must change how we treat one another -- and even how we treat an ant, a fish, or a pile of rocks.

Secondly, interdependence teaches us that we do not stand alone. We need one another. We need the diverse creatures and plants of the earth. In fact, we don't only need them, we are part of them and they are part of us. Our salvation, our health and well-being, is linked indelibly to our planet. Our well-being here in the lap of luxury in the United States is linked to the well-being of those in Israel and Lebanon, and to the fate of a child in Iran.

Finally, interdependence does not only mean we are influenced by others. It also means others are influenced by us. If the death of one butterfly could theoretically change the future, what might be the results of our actions today?

Some years ago I tracked a high school friend on the internet. We hadn't been in touch for many years. He responded to my e-mail with delight -- warmly thanking me for a conversation we had as teenagers. I had apparently been the first person in his life to speak of homosexuality positively. As a young man struggling to come to terms with his own identity as a gay man, this was a lifeline.

I can't take any great credit for this conversation. Truthfully, I don't even remember having it. I did not in any way intend or try to be helpful to him. All I did was share my story as the daughter of a lesbian. And that made me a lifeline when I had no clue that a lifeline was even needed.

When my friend thanked me, I realized that everyday in every moment our actions have the potential to hurt or heal, to inspire or hinder. Incidental comments can be life changing. This is the nature of our relational universe. Right now (snap) we are weaving the future together. What sort of future will it be? How will this moment (snap) influence the days or years to come?