

Lovely Stars, Love Me, Stars

Sermon, Sunday, November 14, 2010
Unitarian Universalist Church, Concord, NH
Rev. Michael Leuchtenberger

Moving to New Hampshire this summer was scary. It was scary not because New Hampshire is a scary place in and of itself – though it did take a little time getting used to the pervasive message of “Live Free or DIE.” It was scary, not primarily because we didn’t know where to buy groceries, get light bulbs, see a doctor, or go to a movie theater. It was scary because of the silence, or rather the lack of noise.

When you live in a big city, like Chicago, Minneapolis, or Washington, DC, you never have to face the silence, the lack of noise, the absence of familiar sounds. You step outside your house – day or night - and you are surrounded by the intimate soundscape of busses rattling, cars honking, and sirens howling reminding you that life as you know it is right around you.

Not so in Bow, New Hampshire. On that first night in our new home, it was suddenly and blatantly quiet. There was silence that approached us from all directions and its intentions remained unclear. It made sleeping more difficult, and it made us look outside, into the darkness.

What an amazing darkness. No street lights, traffic lights, car lights, security lights, just our flashlights which we were quick to turn off. There it was. The night sky full of its vast array of planets, moons, stars, galaxies, the milky way. Of course, they had always been there - beyond the haze of light pollution we had come to consider normal - but knowing intellectually and seeing the sky directly are two very different experiences.

All four of us - my wife, my kids, and I - were in awe and it didn’t take long for the questions to come. “Daddy, where is Mars? Jupiter? Can we see the moons of Saturn?” I was glad to see they had paid attention at the Science Museum in Chicago, but as fast as the questions came from our kids, as fast the answers of the adults ran out. So we did what any self-respecting iPhone owner would do – we searched for, found, and downloaded an iPhone app.

With “Star Walk” in the palm of our hands, we are now able to “look” into the night sky and find Venus and Virgo, Mars and Scorpio, or at least we think we know. In the darkness there are so many stars out there.

With the touch of our finger we can find out that Neptune, though invisible to the naked eye, is circling the sun at an average distance of about 2.8 billion miles, 30 times further away than we are on planet earth from the center of our solar system.

At 55 miles per hour, it would take us about 5,800 years to drive that distance, assuming no detours were necessary because of meteoroids, asteroids, or comets and we didn't make any wrong turns. These are huge distances, and yet, at the beginning of the 21st century we take it for granted to know that the distance between our sun and its planets is minuscule compared with the size of our universe. We know that our solar system is merely one small incarnation of millions and millions of other solar systems within our galaxy, the milky way. We know that our galaxy is merely one galaxy among billions. There are dwarf galaxies with a mere 10 million stars, and there are giant galaxies with as many as 100 trillion stars.

Our universe is vast, it is expanding, and it has been expanding for 14 billion years, ever since that mysterious moment we have come to label the big bang. Mysterious because we do not know what happened during the first fractions of a second those many years ago. Mysterious because our observations tell us that the expansion of the universe is accelerating despite the fact that the force of gravity should be decelerating the expansion.

As a result, some cosmologists now suggest that the realm of our observable universe may be only a small patch of a vast bubble or "pocket" in a much vaster ensemble bred endlessly in a chain of big bangs. As Dennis Overbye reported in the New York Times a few years ago:

"The idea, they say, is a natural extension of the theory of inflation, introduced by Dr. Alan Guth, in 1980. The theory asserts that when the universe was less than a trillionth of a trillionth of a second old, it underwent a brief hyperexplosive growth spurt fueled by an anti-gravitational force embedded in space itself, a possibility suggested by theories of modern particle physics.

Because inflation can grow a whole universe from about an ounce of primordial stuff, Dr. Guth likes to refer to the universe as 'the ultimate free lunch.' But Dr. Guth and [his colleagues] have suggested it may be an endless one as well. Once inflation starts anywhere, it will keep happening over and over again, they say, spawning a chain of universes, bubbles within bubbles, in a scheme th[ey] called 'eternal inflation.' [..]

The prospect of this plethora of universes has brought new attention to a philosophical debate that has lurked on the edges of science for the last few decades, a debate over the role of life in the universe and whether its physical laws are unique – or, as Einstein once put it, "whether God had any choice."

For Unitarian Universalists the more practical question is whether we need to consider changing our name to Unitarian Multiversalists. Yet even if we hang onto our name for at least the next few billion years, and even if we ignore the possibility that the laws of physics as we experience them may not apply in all realities, I hope I have managed to remind us that any one of us, as an individual, is ridiculously small, powerless, and insignificant relative to the whole.

Listening to this story, I cannot imagine how the forces at work during the big bang leading to the evolution of milky ways, solar systems, our planet, and life on earth, would pay attention to the particular needs of me, or you, the individual.

Instead, I believe that the universe, with its awesome power over our lives, operates without conscious consideration of the outcomes it produces as it unleashes its forces upon us. There is no democracy at work here. Participation is not voluntary. We cannot escape, but it's no dictatorship either. I see no intention to hurt us, nor do I see the intention to protect us. The forces of the universe, the creators of the lovely stars, are simply indifferent to what happens to us or any other forms of life.

(I considered having the fire alarm go off at this moment during the service, but you may not have come back, and I would hate to conclude on such a down note.)

We as humans have responded to that feeling of exposure to indifferent power throughout our history. It is nearly impossible for us to accept. We are individuals, after all, or at least experience ourselves as individuals, and we crave attention as individuals.

Our creative response to that unfulfilled craving is at the core of what I consider to be religion – the need to feel we belong, the need to feel that our longing for being wanted and loved is affirmed, despite the silence, despite the mixed messages. Lovely stars, love me (please), stars.

A few weeks ago, I watched a film with my family. It portrayed the life of Temple Grandin, an amazing woman who revolutionized the cattle industry. Half the cattle in the United States are handled in facilities she designed improving the conditions for the animals significantly. She was just named a "Hero" of 2010 in Time Magazine's list of the 100 most influential people in the world!

Add to that the fact that she was diagnosed as autistic in 1950 and that her parents were told she should be institutionalized. Her story is remarkable in so many ways. Yet the image I am stuck with is Temple Grandin's creative response to feeling overwhelmed by human interaction and the isolation she feels when she is unable to read the body language of those around her.

Her form of autism makes it impossible for her to welcome human touch. Being held by her mother or a friend is not an option when she is sad or upset. Instead, to calm herself, she built a machine she could climb into that had a lever, and when she pulled the lever, the machine squeezed her gently, but firmly. She had built herself a hugging machine to replace the hugs she was unable to receive directly.

Perhaps religion can be seen as the equivalent of such a hugging machine. We want to be hugged and held by the universe, but we don't quite know how to do that. Most of us can't experience that directly.

The hugging machine that is religion is our creative response to our inability to make sense of the body language of the universe. It calms us when the world seems crazy and incomprehensible. It allows us to summon our strength to do amazing things and to transform the world based on our own visions of what is possible and desirable.

Religion can do that because it offers us a sense of belonging. Religion can do that by sharing stories, myths, rituals, art and songs which connect us to the universe despite its awesome power, despite its lack of interpersonal skills. Religion can do that because it offers an experience of belonging to community that is tangible and real to our senses, a community that can hug us when we need it.

Yet to do its job, for religion to make us feel we belong and are wanted in this universe, we have to give religion time in our lives. We have to make room for the stories that connect us to our past, to each other, to the earth, and the stars. We have to make room for the rituals, the songs, and the symbols that make concrete the paradoxes and contradictions in our mind. We have to make room for the relationships upon which every community depends.

At the beginning of our service we sang "Shabbat Shalom." Shabbat is the seventh day of the Jewish week and a day of rest in Judaism. Shabbat recalls the Biblical Creation account in Genesis, describing God creating the Heavens and the Earth in six days and resting on the seventh.

We know that the timing of this account is off by a number of years but the power of the story does not depend on cosmological accuracy. The power of the story lies in its insight that we all should rest from our labors on a regular basis, that we all should make time for the hugging machine, that we all should make time for religion and its offer to make us feel we belong.

Shabbat Shalom. Shalom means peace in Hebrew and is often used as a greeting. Shabbat Shalom – hello day of rest, hello day of religion, hello to belonging to this religious community, whether you were born into this faith, became a member in years past, or joined today. You are welcome here. Shalom, Salaam, and Amen.