

"We are Made of Star Stuff"

Sermon and Worship Service for
The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of
Wayne County
Wooster, Ohio
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Opening words [Carl Sagan]

[from, Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space]

"Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there-on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.....

"It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known."

Chalice Lighting [Greta Crosby]

"Let us not wish away the winter. It is a season to itself, not simply the way to spring... The clarity and brilliance of the winter sky delight... A low dark sky can snow, emblem of individuality, liberality, and aggregate power. Snow invites to contemplation and to sport... Let us therefore praise winter, rich in beauty, challenge, and pregnant negativities."

Reading [Carl Sagan]

"Because the word 'God' means many things to many people, I frequently reply [to people who ask 'Do you believe in God?'] by asking what the questioner means by 'God.' To my surprise, this response is often considered puzzling or unexpected: 'Oh, you know, God. Everyone knows who God is.' Or 'Well, kind of a force that is stronger than we are and that exists everywhere in the universe.' There are a number of such forces. One of them is called gravity, but it is not often identified with God. And not everyone does know what is meant by 'God.' ...Whether we believe in God depends very much on what we mean by God. My deeply held belief is that if a god of anything like the traditional sort exists, then our curiosity and intelligence are provided by such a god. We would be unappreciative of those gifts if we suppressed our passion to explore the universe and ourselves. On the other hand, if such a traditional god does not exist, then our curiosity and our intelligence are the essential tools for managing our survival in an extremely dangerous time. In either case, the enterprise of knowledge is consistent surely with science; it should [also] be with religion, and [the enterprise of knowledge] is essential for the welfare of the human species."

Sermon "We are Made of Star Stuff"

(Rev. Jennie)

A few nights ago, I walked out into an open space, away from artificial lights, and looked up at the stars. In winter, many things might move any of us to do that-- Biblical scripture, the recollection of holiday music, or gently falling snow. That night, I was moved by the thought of Carl Sagan, the great scientist and philosopher who wrote: "We are made of star stuff... We are star stuff which has taken its destiny into its own hands. We are a way for the universe to know itself." For Carl Sagan, the contemplation of the stars was the place where science and religion meet. His wife and editor, Ann Druyan, wrote of him, "he never understood why anyone would want to separate science, which is just a way of searching for what is true, from what we hold sacred, which are those truths that inspire love and awe." It is hard to find things that all Unitarian Universalists agree on. But I think the light Carl Sagan has shown, for us

all, on the beauty, wonder, complexity, and vastness of the cosmos, is one of those things.

As I looked up at the stars that night, I felt humbled by how little we are, and by how little we know about them-- certainly by how little I know. I wondered at the uncountable number of stars that I could not see, and that no one on earth can see-- yet. And I also felt something companionable. I thought of people all over the world also looking up at the night sky. And I felt a reassurance that the stars, themselves, were right up there, overhead, patiently waiting for us to turn and see them. And I wondered if something, anything, up there, felt something, in regard to us here below. Is our regard of a night sky in any way mutual? What does it mean to connect with something shining, and to contemplate that connection?

My earliest memory of doing that was when I was a very young schoolchild, probably in the third grade. Some older students in the school were doing a survey. They were asking the various classes what they thought about the U.S. government continuing to spend money on space exploration. Did we think the money should instead go to building schools, bridges, and roads? I recall that there was some question as to whether this survey was too sophisticated for our young class. But the older students really wanted to hear our thoughts. It made me feel valued to be included. Carl Sagan would have approved. Ms. Druyan writes that: "[His] vision of a critically thoughtful public, awakened to science as a way of thinking, impelled him to speak at many places where scientists were not usually found: kindergartens, naturalization ceremonies, an all-black college in the segregated South of 1962, at demonstrations of nonviolent civil disobedience, [and] on the Tonight show." I think that the majority of our class voted for the astronauts. But I think the larger point is that the question got us all wondering. As a child, a collective thrill about space exploration was all around me. Everyone was talking about it, and we watched reports of the lift-offs on tv. [We also watched the original series, Star Trek.] We drank tang and ate those high energy snack bars like the astronauts reportedly ate. Until those older students posed their question to my class, I had never had any cause to question whether money spent on space exploration might be better spent here on earth. To me, for people to explore the stars was as natural as it was for them to build schools, bridges, and roads. My mother is fond of saying that I learned to count, not one through ten, but in reverse—She says I used to go around saying, "Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, zero, blast-off!" I am still inspired by the stars. And I still believe that space exploration was a valuable endeavor. If you look at a list of the unmanned, and then the manned, attempts to reach the moon, you will see the word "failure" repeatedly and, tragically, also the word "crash." But they kept trying. I take courage from that.

We can all take courage from that-- And we can grow in our spiritual development. Copernicus found, and then Galileo wrote, that human beings are not the center of the universe; the earth is not even the center of the universe; we are of little significance in the vast and complex cosmos. And yet Carl Sagan, knowing this, also maintained that human beings are precious-- Extraterrestrial life may well exist, he thought, but the only humans in the cosmos may be just us, here on earth. In a paper he presented to our UU ministers' study group [the Ohio River Group], the Rev. Mark Belletini focused in on this paradox as being at the heart of Sagan's theology: We humans are simultaneously insignificant and precious. Therefore, we should cultivate humility, and an ethic of care for the beings we share this planet with, and an honoring of the inherent worth and dignity of all people. We now have pictures of the earth that were taken from space. [It was Carl Sagan who told NASA to have the Voyager 2 take a picture of our planet from near Neptune.] Many people, of many faith traditions, have told me that such pictures are the most spiritual to them, and that they meditate on them often. And we now know that, in the cosmos, nothing is substantially larger than anything else, and nothing is more central than anything else. To realize that we, and our little concerns, are not the "center of the universe," as it were, is how real spiritual growth and development are achieved. It is to be simultaneously humbled by some things that are greater than ourselves, and to feel moved to work for worthy causes on behalf of more than just ourselves.

What did Carl Sagan believe about those things that are greater and more powerful than ourselves? People often asked him what he believed about God. In my favorite of his writings, Sagan explores the question known as theodicy, which is essentially: if God is both compassionate and all-powerful, then why do bad things happen to good people? A caring God who had the power to prevent tragedies in the lives of good people would prevent them, wouldn't he, or she, or they, or it? To resolve this question, a person has to give up either that God is compassionate or that God is all-powerful. It can be a painful spiritual conflict for a person to wrestle with their image of a god without either of those attributes. In his 1985 Gifford Lecture entitled, "The God Hypothesis," Sagan wrote:

"We think of some being who is omnipotent, omniscient, compassionate, who created the universe, is responsive to prayer, intervenes in human affairs, and so on. But suppose there were definitive proof of some being who had some but not all of these properties? Suppose somehow it were demonstrated that there was a being who originated the universe but is indifferent to prayer? ...or, worse, a god who was oblivious to the existence of humans...? Suppose this god understood all the consequences of his actions but there were many things he was unable to do, so he

was condemned to a universe in which his desired ends could not be accomplished. [Sagan goes on to say that] These alternative kinds of gods are hardly ever thought about or discussed. A priori there is no reason they should not be as likely as the more conventional sorts of gods." [p. 148-9]

I am pleased to say that, in my experience, these elements of the issue of theodicy are discussed all the time. And it is also the case that many people have found a Unitarian Universalist congregation or clergyperson to be the only opportunity to discuss these questions. Personally, I believe there are forces in the universe that want things to go right-- that want beauty, artistry, truth, and for things to be fair. And I think that we can work with those forces to help create those things. But I also know that there are times when --even as hard as each of us and many of us try-- sometimes things happen that are just not fair. [This is called, "Process Theology." You can read and reflect on it for yourselves in the Unitarian Universalist primer, called, *A Chosen Faith*, in the chapter by John Buehrens called, "Mind and Spirit." Buehrens is citing process theologian Alfred North Whitehead.] So I believe that God is compassionate, but not omnipotent.

Wrestling with such complex theological concepts in the abstract can make it difficult to discern what you believe. And so I have two concrete images for you to use that may be helpful. The first is my GPS. Since in the area of navigational ability, I have considered myself to be impaired, my GPS has provided me with invaluable guidance and aid. But a GPS is not all-powerful, is it? They make mistakes. They tell me to take a left onto the highway up ahead, a highway which is, in fact, one-way traffic all going to the right. A GPS is not all-knowing-- especially since it took me a few years to go on-line and update its maps. And, as I think we all know, a GPS is not one-dimensionally affirming of our choices. When we decide to pursue a path different than the one it set out for us, it emits that harsh corrective, "Recalculating." No one likes to hear that sort of corrective. But being in an open, interactive relationship with knowledgeable guides is what leads to growth, personally and spiritually. My second image for you is "Pandora Radio." I originally discovered it at the suggestion of a friend. I had told her that what got me through the drudgery of packing and moving was YouTube. I would go onto YouTube and put in the name of a musical artist or genre --everything from Peter, Paul, and Mary to Mussorgsky-- and YouTube would line up several recordings by that artist, as well as others it seemed to think I'd also like. Five or six tracks in a row was good for packing several boxes. Then I'd scamper over to the computer and set up some more. My friend then said, "You should go onto Pandora!" Pandora is like radio stations used to be, when DJs chose cool music for you. Except with Pandora, you get to design your radio stations yourself. And it's all free! One of my favorite singer is Colin Hay, formerly of the group, "Men at Work." There is

something spiritually reassuring and hopeful about all his songs. Once you create a Pandora radio station, it spontaneously plays other artists it supposes you might also like. And the coolest thing is that there's a "thumbs up" and a "thumbs down" button. So you let Pandora know if you like that song or not. If you click thumbs-down, that recording stops immediately, and another one starts [often one you already told Pandora you approve of]. And if you click thumbs-up, Pandora remembers it! Perpetually! It has an internal list of the tracks you love-- like The Mind of God!

So what are the similarities and differences between a GPS and Pandora Radio? Both are interactive. So if we want to co-create a more beautiful, just, and enlightened world, we have to work with the benevolent forces in the universe and heed their guidance. But Pandora is much more affirming and empowering than a GPS. It never says, "Recalculating." I think I have learned as much from using my GPS as I have playing around on Pandora. From Pandora, I now know the details and subtleties of so many musical artists and genres that I never bothered to learn before. But I think I have grown more from using my GPS. It has pushed me harder to learn new paths, and new skills-- as if it knew I could be a more capable, knowledgeable, brave person than I had thought I could be.

--which begs the question, do a GPS or an on-line radio station care how they are affecting us? Or do they just mechanically keep trying to get us onto the same page with them? --trying over and over again, until or unless their juice runs out? Does it matter at all to my GPS that I make it around a major traffic jam, through dark Midwest corn fields, back onto the highway again, and eventually home, safe and warm? And how did my Pandora station conceive of starting to play instrumental pieces of classical guitar? I love classical guitar. But I never explicitly told Pandora that. What if divine wisdom and love can help us on our way, even through our use of mechanical mundane things? What would that divine wisdom and love be like? Carl Sagan has said, "The Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be." What might that vast and complex mystery consist of? In his book, *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr defines "culture" as: that which human beings superimpose onto that which is natural; he means "language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values." [p. 32] He calls all that the "social heritage" that we inherit, contribute to during our lifetime, and leave behind us. "Social heritage" is the result of human achievement, including "speech, education, tradition, myth, science, art, philosophy, government, law, rite, beliefs, inventions, and technologies." [p. 33] All of these things have been created as the end result of specific values human being were trying to convey. We preserve and recreate our social heritage as a way of trying to make our values live on. As such, I imagine that, if there is a higher power out there, it is a collection of all those things-- our words

and deeds and remnants; our traditions, myths, and rites-of-passage; and what we've learned from our mistakes. I imagine it's like a collective unconscious, that can help and support us, and that does help and support us.

And so I look, each day, to the culture and care our learned and justice-seeking ancestors left behind-- in photographs, banners, scripture, and song;

And I look to the living beings around me now, making their own way, in their industry, reflection, and play;

And I look to the future: that which we can well-predict, and that which will dawn with glad surprise;

And I look, each night, to that star-filled sky—

And I believe it is both wise and kind.

*Closing Hymn #95 There is More Love Somewhere

Parting Words (Max Ehrmann)

(Rev Jennie)

"You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars. You have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt, the universe is unfolding as it should. Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive [God] to be. And whatever your labors and aspirations in the noisy confusion of life, keep peace with your soul. For with all its sham, drudgery, and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world."