

"Common Ground Between Science and Religion"
Sermon and Worship Service for
The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Wayne County
Wooster, Ohio
February 2, 2020
The Rev. Jennie Barrington, Interim Minister
One service at 9:30 a.m.
Worship Associate: Ivie Sorkin
Accompanist: Merry Gentry
Special Music: Joanne Downs, Piano

Welcome and Announcements (Ivie Sorkin)

Opening words [the Rev. Lindsay Bates] (Ivie Sorkin)

Come, let us worship together.

Let us open our minds to the challenge of reason,
open our hearts to the healing of love,
open our lives to the calling of conscience,
open our souls to the comfort of joy.
Astonished by the miracle of life,
grateful for the gift of fellowship,
confident in the power of living faith,
we are here gathered:
Come, let us worship together.

Chalice Lighting: [the Rev. Cynthia Landrum] (Rev. Jennie)

For the wonder and inspiration
We seek from sun and stars
And all the lights of the heavens
We light this chalice.

Special Music: *Des pas sur la neige (Footsteps in the Snow)* by, Debussy
(Joanne Downs, Pianist)

Time for All Ages (Rev Jennie)

Singing the Children Out #413 Go, now, in Peace

Sharing Joys and Concerns (Ivie Sorkin)

Unison Blessing *Sanctuary* - Scruggs and Thompson

Open my heart, to be a sanctuary
All made holy, loved and true. With thanksgiving,
I'll be a living sanctuary for you.

Spoken Blessing and Moment of Silence (Rev. Jennie)

This morning we are thinking with loving kindness of all those in our congregation, or known and loved by our congregation, who are in a time of transition, loss, uncertainty, or fear. May their fears be assuaged, their minds be put at ease, and their hearts be comforted. The final stone is for the Joys, Concerns, Milestones, and Remembrances which remain silent in our hearts. Let us join our hearts together in a moment of silence in contemplation on the joys and concerns of the day. Blessed be.

Offering (Ivie)

Welcoming of Guests

(Karen Skubik)

Reading: "Let Pisa Lean," by the Rev. Carl Scovel (Ivie Sorkin)

I understand that a team of fourteen scientists has developed a strategy for correcting the five and a half-degree southward tilt of the Tower of Pisa. Their scheme requires sinking steel anchors 130 feet below the surface of the ground to the north of the tower. Then they will fasten these anchors by steel cables to a concrete slab on the surface. By tightening the cables, the scientists hope to lower the ground level on the north side of the tower and thus cause the tower to return slowly to an upright position.

The tower of Pisa was built eight hundred years ago. It is 187 feet high, and each year it leans a bit more southward by .039 inches. The top is now sixteen feet off its perpendicular axis. "The margin of safety is very low," says British geologist John Burland.

I have two unsolicited opinions for the scientists and the mayor of Pisa. The first is, "Nothing is forever," but I don't expect them to believe that. The second is, "Leave well enough alone." And I don't expect them to believe that either.

Maybe the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, remembering its own errors, could convince them. Many years ago, the Park Service in Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, called them in to fix a problem. A huge rock, a hundred feet tall and weighing thirty-thousand tons, was leaning over some ancient Anasazi ruins. It must have been leaning that way since at least the eleventh century when the Anasazis built a huge buttress made of dirt and pine logs to keep the rock from falling.

That old Indian-made buttress wasn't good enough for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and so they demolished it, intending to replace it with a modern steel structure. They took down the old buttress, and before they could install its replacement, at exactly 4:32 p.m. on January 21, 1941, the hundred-foot rock fell with a sound that could be heard for miles. The rock destroyed sixty-five rooms in the Anasazi ruin beneath it, and there it lies to this very day.

The rock was going to fall anyway, and the Tower of Pisa will probably fall someday. The problem in the long run is not scientists or mayors or the Park Service or even the Army Corps of Engineers. The problem is finitude.

All things on earth, including marble towers and stone cliffs, disintegrate. The visible world tends toward disintegration, as the second law of thermodynamics reminds us. All physical objects incline toward a simpler state of being, dust or carbon.

We sometimes say carelessly that time is the cause. But time doesn't cause anything. Time is the word we use to describe the process by which the physical world disintegrates. Yet, here's the thing. We'd never wonder about this time or disintegration, and we'd never observe this process. We'd never measure it, reflect on it, or feel sad about it, if somewhere in our consciousness we didn't have a sense of something permanent, stable, lasting, possibly even something eternal.

...That intuition of the eternal is the plumb line by which we measure all inclinations and disintegration-- the tower of Pisa, old rocks, history, ourselves, and maybe time itself.

Reading: "We Never Go Away," by Dennis Downey (Rev Jennie)

This reading is by Dennis Downey. It is what he wrote for the collection called, *This I Believe II – The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women*. It's called, "We Never Go Away."

I believe in genes and a forward flow of time, and in all things visible and invisible. Smaller than a light microscope sees, a gene is a genie... (is a ghost)... is one-half of each of us given by one-half of each parent.

And each of us comes from two parents, each of whom came from two parents, each of whom came from two parents, in an endless crisscross of streams of time and persons going backwards.

And each of us *is*, as in our own incarnation: a soul inside a body (for some reason).

A fire

A flame

A soul...

Lighter than the flesh, the soul is the glow of us...

It's the soul that stands the body up and gets it moving forward. Every body's soul is on a journey.

And I believe we live in a solar system, that we go around a sun, (the Sun), and that the Sun is a giant ball of flame...

I believe that most of the energy for everything on Earth comes from the Sun, except for the energies of the Earth itself because the Earth itself is also on fire. Inside. In the center. At its core.

We know this from volcanoes: that there is fire going on inside of the earth.

We stand on an earth that is a boiling ball of iron on fire in space spinning at its core as it circles a source of sunshine...

And I believe that a book is a box because a book carries something from some one person to another and because it is used (and can be used) to carry ideas across time. Which is how ideas build up.

And each of us is not only our own lives unwinding forward, but also a part of (and in service to) the larger life of the tribe.

Which, in turn, is in service to the larger life of the species.

Which, in turn, is in service to a larger life source lost in a bath of stars that is a galaxy scattered in the hugeness of the universe.

We are not lost when we die.

We never go away.

Why would we go away?

When we're gone, we come back.

*Hymn #191 Now I Recall my Childhood

Sermon "Common Ground between Science and Religion" (Rev. Jennie)

In an episode of the NBC drama called, "This is Us," one of the characters, Kevin, finds himself inextricably caught up in a very challenging conversation about religion and science. In the episode, called, "The Game Plan," Kevin, played by Justin Hartley, is an actor in the rehearsal phase of a new play. Kevin, who is in his thirties, does not have children of his own, and is babysitting his two young nieces. So he has them help him learn his lines by reading parts of the script. They are joined by their grandfather, who has only been in their lives for a few months, and who we know is dying. The grandfather reads the lines of Kevin's best friend, urging Kevin's character to let go of his deceased wife, and move on. Kevin's character responds, "How am I supposed to move on? Ever since she died, her ghost has been haunting me." The youngest niece, Annie, suddenly says, "Hold up-- What's happening in this story?" Kevin tries to explain to her, "Well, she died. She's dead. But she keeps coming back as a ghost." So Annie asks, "So when you die, you become a ghost?" "No. [Kevin says] No, no, no. Oh, Sweetheart, ghosts aren't real." "So what happens when you die?" Annie asks. ["So what happens when you die?" Kevin whispers to himself.] "What happens when you die is, you die." "Forever?" Annie asks, with growing concern. Kevin's response flails around with a, "Sure. Or not. I don't know... Here's the thing: Do we want ghosts? Or do we not want ghosts, because..." His elder niece then says, "Grandpa takes pills because he's sick. Is Grandpa going to die?" [Again, Kevin asks himself in a whisper, "Why are you asking me these questions?"] He then says, hesitantly, "Yes? Yes." "Soon?" Tess asks. We can now see the concern, sadness, and even fear on the faces of his sweet young nieces. Making matters even worse, Kevin then says, "Here's the thing about death: It's natural. It's just natural. I'm going to die. We're all going to die." Really alarmed now, his niece asks, "Are Mommy and Daddy going to die?" Kevin exclaims, "No!" And then, "Oh, my gosh! It's getting late. It's bedtime, girls. Now go brush your teeth. Off to bed. Sleep tight..."

This is what we need religion for-- to help us make sense of who and what we love, in our time on earth, even all the while knowing that things decay, and people age, become ill, and die. We need religion to help us make sense of the fact that we are mortal, in ways that are comforting, reassuring, hopeful, and understandable, at the age or stage of life we are in. And this is what we need the sciences for-- to gain an understanding of what is true about our earthly home, and human beings' place within it-- to gain an increasingly clear understanding of the evolution of scientific truths. As we try to make meaning of the experiences of our lives, we need both

religion, and science, and there does not have to be a conflict between those two things. There can be common ground between religion and science.

So says the Past President of our denomination, the UUA, the Rev. Peter Morales. In his essay, "Science and the Search for Meaning," published in, *The New Atlantis*, in the summer of 2013, the Rev. Morales writes that religions can find themselves in conflict with science when they expect their adherents to believe that certain things are true, and unchangingly so, as a matter of faith. We Unitarian Universalists, on the other hand, affirm and promote, as one of our seven principles, "the free and responsible search for truth and meaning." We are open to learning and accepting evolving truths, including those gleaned from scientific exploration. Rev. Morales writes, "If we are scientists in search of truth, we are also theologians in search of meaning. While science and religion both arise from our need to cope with experience, science and religion are responses to fundamentally different questions. Science can help us discover the truth about our world, but religion can help us give that truth meaning." He says that we create that meaning "in our families and communities..." and "Religion, at its best and most profound and most enduring, has been humanity's way of collecting and transmitting wisdom about the meaning of life from one generation to the next. Religious rituals, rites of passage, moral teachings, images, and stories --especially stories-- are ways of creating meaning together and sharing it. Religion can teach us about the kinds of things worth committing ourselves to: community, family, compassion, justice, the natural world, [and] beauty." [end of quote] This is what the character Kevin, in that episode of, "This is Us," was trying to do for his young nieces but, finding himself caught off guard, he kind of botched it up...

We can do better than that, and we do, in Unitarian Universalist congregations. And so our celebrating the common ground between religion and science this morning is a way we annually honor, "Darwin Day," since Charles Darwin was born in February. This is the fourteenth year that congregations from a variety of religious traditions, around the nation and in other parts of the world, encourage "serious discussion and reflection on the relationship between religion and science" and the fact that "evolution... does not in any way threaten, demean, or diminish their faith." It is a real pleasure for me, and for so many other Unitarian Universalists and other people of faith, to take part in this annual event each February.

My exploration of this topic led me to the delightful writings of Richard Feynman, Physicist, teacher, storyteller, and "curious character," as he liked to call himself. He was known and loved for his "insatiable curiosity, gentle wit, brilliant mind, and playful temperament." He won the Nobel Prize for physics, wrote the bestseller, *Surely You're*

Joking, Mr. Feynman, and served on the Presidential Commission that investigated the crash of the spaceship, *Challenger*. During those hearings, reportedly frustrated by how slowly the testimonies were slogging along, he asked for a glass of ice water. He then grabbed a piece of the rocket booster's O-ring material and dunked it into the icy glass. Thus he instantly demonstrated that the material lost all of its resiliency at low temperatures. In his well-known essay, "The Relation of Science and Religion," Mr. Feynman imagines a panel consisting of specialists from many fields, including religion and the sciences. That's an important image. He is encouraging interdisciplinary scholarship and discussion in ways that are open and non-defensive. He emphasizes that, in science, "it is imperative to doubt," "it is of great value to acknowledge ignorance." He writes that such an "attitude of uncertainty" becomes "a habit of thought." This can make it difficult for scientists to ascribe to some religions that insist that they believe certain things as a matter of faith. Yet Feynman asserts that, if it is difficult for scientists to believe in an omnipotent God, religion can still be helpful to them in their development and application of morals and ethics. He writes, "In this end, it is possible to doubt the divinity of Christ, and yet to believe firmly that it is a good thing to do unto your neighbor as you would have him do unto you." And in as much as religious feeling is a feeling of transcendence, Mr. Feynman experienced that in his exploration of the sciences. He writes, "For instance, the size of the universe is very impressive, with us on a tiny particle whirling around the sun, among a hundred thousand million suns in this galaxy, itself among a billion galaxies... Yet again, there are the atoms of which all appears to be constructed, following immutable laws. Nothing can escape it; the stars are made of the same stuff, and the animals are made of the same stuff, but in such complexity as to mysteriously appear alive—like man himself." [end of quote]

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.

Even as we explore and embrace the findings of science, religion can help us make sense of life's most difficult and heart-wrenching questions. Though Richard Feynman did not believe in, nor pray to, a God in the traditional sense, he was able to find peace, reassurance, and even joy in life, despite the fact of our mortality. For Feynman, the most heart-wrenching event of his life was the death of his wife, Arline, his childhood sweetheart, at only twenty-five years old, from tuberculosis. He wrote,

"It's hard to explain. If a Martian (who, we'll imagine, never dies except by accident) came to Earth and saw this peculiar race of creatures --these humans who live about seventy or eighty years, knowing that death is going to come-- it would look to him like a terrible problem of psychology to live under those circumstances, knowing that life is only temporary. Well, we humans somehow figure out how to live despite this problem: we laugh, we joke, we live. The only difference for me and Arline was, instead of fifty years, it was five years. It was only a quantitative difference-- the psychological problem was just the same. The only way it would have become any different is if we had said to ourselves, 'But those other people have it better, because they might live fifty years.' But that's crazy. Why make yourself miserable saying things like, 'Why do we have such bad luck? What has God done to us? What have we done to deserve this?' --all of which, if you understand reality and take it completely into your heart, are irrelevant and unsolvable. They are just things that nobody can know. Your situation is just an accident in life. [He ends with] We had a hell of a good time together."

I'll close this morning by taking us back to that episode of, "This is Us," in which Kevin, having taken a bit of time to reflect on life's biggest questions, and his love for his young nieces, goes back to their room, and humbly tries again. He sits tenderly beside them and says:

"Sometimes I paint. Now, no one knows this; not even your Aunt Kate, but when I get a script, the first thing I do is just sort of paint the way it makes me feel. (He shows them a painting which is a Jackson Pollock-like abstract of the cosmos in all the colors of the rainbow.) I painted this after I read that play for the first time. I think that I scared you before --all that talk of ghosts and dying-- all that adult stuff we were reading about-- that's some pretty confusing adult stuff. So, uh, you know, I thought I would come up here, and show you my painting, and tell you what I think my play is about. --because I was thinking, um, that it might make us all feel a little bit better. But you've got to promise not to make fun of me, okay? (The girls nod, solemnly.) Yeah, I painted this because I felt like the play was about life, you know? And life is full of color. And we each get to come along and we add our own color to the painting. You know? And even though it's not very big, the painting, you sort of have to figure that it goes on forever, you know, in each direction. So, like, to infinity, you know? --'cause that's kind of like life, right? And it's really crazy, if you think about it, isn't it, that, a hundred years ago, some guy that I never met came to this country with a suitcase. He has a son, who has a son, who has me. So, at first, when I was painting, I was thinking, you know, maybe up here, that was that guy's part of the painting, and then, you know, down here, that's my part of the painting.

“And then I started to think, well, what if... What if we’re all in the painting, everywhere? And-- and what if we’re in the painting before we’re born? What if we’re in it after we die? And these colors that we keep adding-- What if they just keep getting added on top of one another, until, eventually, we’re not even different colors anymore? We’re just... one thing. One painting. I mean, my dad is not with us anymore; he’s not alive. But he’s with us. He’s with me every day. It all just sort of fits somehow. And even if you don’t understand how yet, people will die in our lives, people that we love. In the future. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe years from now. I mean, it’s kind of beautiful, right, if you think about it, the fact that just because someone dies, just because you can’t see them or talk to them anymore, *it doesn’t mean they’re not still in the painting*. I think maybe that’s the point of the whole thing. There’s no dying. There’s no you or me or them. It’s just us. And this... sloppy... wild... colorful, magical thing that has no beginning, it has no end... this, right here... I think it is us.”

[Let us sing.]

*Closing Hymn #331 Life is the Greatest Gift of All

*Parting Words [the Rev. Kendyl Gibbons] (Rev Jennie)

“There is, finally, only one thing required of us-- that is: to take life whole, the sunlight and shadow together, to live the life that is given us with courage and humor and truth. We have such a little moment, out of all the vastness of time, for all our wondering and loving-- Therefore, let there be no half-heartedness. Therefore, let the soul be ardent in its pain, its yearning, and in its praise-- Then shall peace enfold our days, and glory shall not fade from our lives.”

Extinguishing the Chalice / Postlude (Merry) / Chime