

Theme focus: Earth/Early Spring

CELEBRATING EARTH AND WONDER IN EARLY SPRING...

“Earth is stardust-come-to-life, a magic cauldron
where the heart of the universe is being formed.
In me, the Earth and its creatures find their voices.
Through my eyes the stars look back on themselves in wonder.
I am the earth. This is my body”
(Daniel Martin)

In 2005 when I was on a Study Tour in England I was fortunate enough
to have a side-visit to ‘Down House’, the country home of naturalist Charles Darwin and his family.
Few properties can claim to have been as central to the life
and work of its owner as this house.

I remember very well standing in his old study
and being engulfed by its history and its significance.
For it was in that house and in that room that Darwin wrote
his most famous book, *On the Origin of Species...*, published in November 1859.
A book which stands as a wellspring for what we now call ‘evolutionary biology’.

In the last paragraph of the book, Darwin wrote:
“It is interesting to contemplate a tangled bank, clothed with many plants of many
kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with
worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed
forms, so different from each other, and dependent upon each other in so complex a
manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us.” (Darwin 2008:362)

Interesting indeed... For the debate it ignited not only led to the denial
of the creation stories of the western religious tradition, it gave us
the beginnings of an immensely richer, longer, more complex ‘story’,
rooted not in “the history of a single tribe or a particular people”,
but one “rooted in the sum of our knowledge of the universe itself”.

A scientific ‘doctrine of incarnation’ as one person has described it, which suggests
“that the universe itself is continually incarnating itself in microbes and maples, in
humming birds and human beings, constantly inviting us to tease out the revelation
contained in stars and atoms and every living thing.” (Bumbaugh 2003)

Yes, a ‘religious’ story... that invites us to awe and wonder;
that demands a vocabulary of reverence.

Prior to the rise of modern science most people followed a literal interpretation
of the biblical Genesis stories, believing a flat earth was created
about 4,000 years before the Middle Eastern itinerant peasant sage, Yeshu’a.

Or, if they followed Archbishop Ussher, it all started at 9.00am on 3 October 4004 BCE.

Today, as I am sure you all know very well,

the most widely accepted modern estimate of the Earth's age - that third rock out from the Sun - is approximately 4.5+ billion years. While the observable universe - that whole "complex, interrelated and interacting... matter-energy in space-time... of which humans are an integral part..." (Gillette 2006:1) is approximately 14 billion years old, all let loose during an event called the Big Bang.

A misleading term really, in that there wasn't really an explosion, but an expansion.

While careful not to over-estimate the reach and power of the natural sciences, it is modern science that provides the foundation for this 'other' story. It has been called 'the epic of evolution', 'the odyssey of life', 'the immense journey' and most recently, geologist Thomas Berry named it, the 'Great Story'.

Sure, there was an initial outcry that scientific cold reason was killing wonder, but for the most part those days are long past. Now science has become the source rather than the nemesis of wonder.

Modern science is now saying
" [t]he history of the Universe is in every one of us. Every particle in our bodies has a multibillion-year past, every cell and every bodily organ has a multimillion-year past, and many of our ways of thinking have multithousand-year pasts."
(Primack & Abrams 2007:151)

Each of us is a collection of unfinished stories, within other stories.
We are fully linked with our surroundings in time, space, matter/energy, and causality.
We do not live in straight lines.
We truly do exist in a web, a network, a maze...
We're genetic cousins to all living beings on earth.

Which is why a growing number of people around the world are beginning to recognise that our modern life-style and poll-driven politicians are harming other creatures, diminishing the functioning of ecosystems, and altering global climate patterns.

Biology 101 teaches us that if amoebas are inserted into a drop of water infused with nutrients, their numbers will expand, until they become so densely populated they deplete their essential nutrients, and die *en masse*.
The drop of water again becomes uninhabited and sterile.

We humans are doing the same thing on planet Earth.

We are yet to learn from basic biology.
We are yet to learn that humans must cooperate with nature's processes, and if we can do that, then we can develop purposes less likely to be frustrated by nature. (eg. surfing)
We are yet to learn that a debate between people who actually know stuff and people who just don't like what the experts have to say, is not a 'balanced' debate. It's a waste of time.
And as Second Peoples connected to Seas and Oceans, we are yet to learn from the heritage of 60,000 years of interactions between First Peoples and Land.

There is no good reason to believe that taking nature to heart
leaves a person with any fewer spiritual benefits
than taking to heart the teachings of *supernaturalist* traditions.

Neither do we need to think the sacred is a separate '*supernatural*' sphere of life,
driven by blinding-light revelations.

“Positing an incomprehensible, invisible, ‘Other’ does nothing to explain the
incomprehensible ‘other’ that is palpably present, and that we actually encounter every
second within and round us”. (*Fleischman 2013:188*)

There is a hymn in the Unitarian Universalist hymn book *Singing the Living Tradition*,
called “*Seek Not Afar for Beauty*”. It’s first verse claims this ‘other’:

Seek not afar for beauty; lo! it glows
in dew-wet grasses all about your feet;
in birds, in sunshine, childish faces sweet,
in stars and mountain summits topped with snows.

If we can go to special places, built by humans, which are designated as sacred,
surely we can go to special places, shaped naturally, which are recognised as sacred...

There is a strong monotheistic tradition of cutting down the sacred groves.

What we need is to realise that to have a sense of sacred place is not tree worship
but rather the acknowledgement of the awesome,
and the overriding and the overwhelming.

There is also a need for all religious traditions to appreciate
that the primary sacred community is the universe itself, and that every other community
becomes sacred by participation in this primary community.

In moments of wonder we simultaneously contain a search for truth,
an openness to reawakening, and a delight in what is.

When we lose our sense of awe and wonder, we objectivise the Earth
as a thing that can be used and abused at our consumeristic whim.

Yet during Winter we don’t think much about any of these things.

It is only when Spring arrives and washes away the clouds of Winter fear,
do we also see the Earth and “worms crawling...” and “new living things”,
as we begin to start again to ‘grow’ and ‘bloom’.

Spring shows us that nature-kind and humankind are continually in relationship.
Spring reminds us and calls us forward to a ‘new’ religious sensitivity.

To transcend the isolated self.

To reconnect.

To know ourselves to be at home.

So it is incumbent upon us to challenge the parochial and limited claims of traditional religions
with the enlarging and enriching and reverent story
that is our story and their story: the Universe Story.

From an attitude of reverence, we can then act with a morality
that nurtures rather than destroys creation.

Religious naturalist and cell biologist Ursula Goodenough,

in her evocative book *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, writes:

“Once we have our feelings about Nature in place, then I believe that we can also find important ways to call ourselves Jews, or Muslims, or Taoists, or Hopi, or Hindus, or Christians, or Buddhists. Or some of each...” (*Goodenough 1998:173*)

With religious naturalism’s acceptance of a diversity and plurality of theologies, perhaps you can see why religious naturalism is a perspective particularly acceptable to many Unitarian Universalists!

So I offer this gentle prod... It is time more people of whatever persuasion, seriously thought about consciously and publicly
adopting religious naturalism,
promoting religious naturalism, and above all,
practising religious naturalism.

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Today a woman is planting flowers in her garden.
Her activity is more than a hobby, even more than a pleasure.
She is digging, dirtying, straining, mulching and lugging,
under the power of plants which do not yet even exist,
but whose images have taken up residence in the atoms
and cells within her imagination.

Weeks or months will elapse before her labour is fulfilled.
Patience and faith will sustain her until, under the majesty of Earth’s dominion,
the unprepossessing little bulbs and seeds will explode into
daffodils, tulips, irises, freesias, geraniums, pansies, daisies and sunflowers.

A war will have been won by soft and coloured things.
The yellow eyes of asters, the purple tongues of irises, and the crayola pansies
have raised their banners above the turrets of Earth’s soil
to defy the dark cold space that pervades almost all of everything else. (*Adapted/Fleischman*)

It is Spring.
If there were a heaven, the gods would abandon it
just for the chance to see this woman in her garden.
Hosanna! Not in the highest, but right here. Right now. This.
A Newer Testament. The gospel of the natural present moment.

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