

What is Our Place in the Scheme of Things?

Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

from "The Pale Blue Dot" by Carl Sagan (1994)

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.

The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds.

Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.

The Earth is the only world known so far to harbor life. There is nowhere else, at least in the near future, to which our species could migrate. Visit, yes. Settle, not yet. Like it or not, for the moment the Earth is where we make our stand.

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.

“Talking with the Sun” by Joy Harjo (*opening stanzas*)

I believe in the sun.
In the tangle of human failures of fear, greed, and
forgetfulness, the sun gives me clarity.
When explorers first encountered my people, they called us
heathens, sun worshippers.
They didn’t understand that the sun is a relative, and
illuminates our path on this earth.

After dancing all night in a circle we realize that we are a part of a larger sense of stars
and planets dancing with us overhead.
When the sun rises at the apex of the ceremony, we are renewed.
There is no mistaking this connection, though Walmart might be just down the road.
Humans are vulnerable and rely on the kindnesses of the earth and the sun; we exist
together in a sacred field of meaning.

Our earth is shifting. We can all see it.
I hear from my Inuit and Yupik relatives up north that
everything has changed. It’s so hot; there is not enough
winter.
Animals are confused. Ice is melting.
The quantum physicists have it right; they are beginning to think like Indians: everything
is connected dynamically at an intimate level.
When you remember this, then the current wobble of the earth makes sense. How much
more oil can be drained,
Without replacement; without reciprocity?

Sermon

Our First Parish forebears, those who gathered this congregation in 1635 and those who raised these beams in 1681, could not have fathomed all that we’ve learned in the past hundred years about the story of this unfolding universe, our descent from the stars, from the “big bang” almost 15 billion years ago... could not have imagined that photo of “the pale blue dot” that inspired Carl Sagan’s moving reflection on humanity’s place in the ever-expanding expanse of the universe.

For our Puritan forebears were guided in their understanding of “the scheme of things” by the words of Genesis (“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” And so on.)

So the world our Puritan forebears lived in as they understood it was, simply, God’s world – God, who created the world just a few thousand years ago, and filled it with all the creatures, last and best of all... us... who lived in paradise to begin with... but then... well you know the story.

Further, I expect our early forebears gave little if any thought to other peoples who had other myths and other quite different ideas about the cosmos... including those peoples whose land they had usurped, whose understanding Joy Harjo expressed in contemporary language in the poem we heard earlier, that “we are a part of a larger sense of stars and planets dancing with us overhead.”

And though they were able to see many more stars in their clear skies than we ordinarily can today, our Puritan forebears had no idea just how immense it all actually is – or how fast it’s all moving!

After all, even though *we* may know some of this with our brains, we still hardly find it easy to wrap our minds or imaginations around the expanses of time and space in which we live and move and have our being, about which we have only begun to learn within the past blink of time.

Learned, to put it another way, that we were not just somehow placed by a creator God on this ready-made earth a few thousand years ago on the sixth day of creation, but that, as Joni Mitchell put it, “we are stardust” – or at least descendants of stardust.

Since we now know that our ancestry in what some are calling “The Great Story” of the universe stretches back these thirteen or fourteen billion years to the moment when less than a speck of condensed matter and energy suddenly expanded in what we ordinarily call the “big bang” (or “great radiance” as some have called it) – giving birth to... *everything*... as over unimaginable expanses of time and space simple elements evolved to star-filled galaxies, some of the stars exploding as supernovas, flinging stardust into the reaches of space.

And we now know that about five billion years ago it was in this way that our own yellow star and the planets circling around it – including this third planet, our home planet – were gradually formed... yes, out of the stardust of a supernovae.

Then ... as we also now know, with the passage of more millions upon millions of years came the beginnings of life on this third planet, eventually including primates – such as us.

Yes... we now know that everything we know and love here on our earth *is*... stardust, *still evolving in the ever-creative universe* – maybe, after all, if you like, another name for God: “evolving, ever-creative universe... maybe God’s world after all, though quite differently understood from the God’s world of those who built this Meeting House.

But... but... what does any of this have to do with us in any meaningful, day-to-day, and sometimes crisis-to-crisis, way? Particularly, poignantly beyond words in these days when our attention is appropriately and prayerfully rivetted on Ukraine, the criminal war, the unimaginable suffering. Why talk about or think about this story of the universe? What relevance could it possibly have?

Well, it seems to me that the Great Story of the Universe and of Life... maybe has everything to do with the meaning of our lives – even, perhaps especially as a sustaining reminder at times of crisis, whether personal or global – this reminder of *who we are*.

For all I’ve outlined *is* the Great Story that all of us human beings share, which just might eventually help us to bridge the often (as now) violent divisions that plague us.

Even in this moment, as we do what we can do to help and heal the suffering we see daily on our newsfeeds or that we know closer to home... holding in our hearts this story, this vision, this truth, of who we are might help sustain us in our work, in our lives.

For what could be more important than remembering that whatever we *don’t* share amidst the variety of humanity’s traditions and cultures and religions and myths and stories, we *do* all share *one* story, the largest one of all still being written... the story, the reality, that we are genuinely kin with every human being on the planet, indeed kin with *all* creatures, with the earth, with all that is. Since we indeed all – human, non-human, earth, all of it – *are* descendants of the Great Radiance, all cousins.

Yes, the idea of universal kinship is already expressed in many of the world’s religious traditions and by poets of the ages: We are all children of God, as western traditions often put it; everything is Brahman, a Hindu would say; we all partake of Buddha nature, as Buddhists affirm.

Yet learning and integrating into our lives the Great Story of the Universe which we share, just might help us to know our kinship with the whole of the Creation in ways that transcend diverse religious and cultural languages. Kinship that just might, we can hope and pray, just might lead us to more *naturally* act to live more peacefully with one another and more gently on the earth, not out of a sense of duty or sacrifice, not as a big “should” but in the most natural of ways, as we grow to *feel* that we would no more want to harm another person, another creature, or the earth herself than we would want to harm our own child or any child.

Finally, then, might it not be that the Great Story returns us to a world in which we are *not* placed randomly with no part to play (as some believe that science has taught us), but rather a world in which we can once again know the creative role we do have to play? A world, a universe in which we belong, a world in which we do have a meaningful place in the scheme of things. A world in which we can know ourselves to be *part of* the continuing creative process of the universe (again, if you choose, perhaps another name for God and God’s world...) – yes, all this, even and maybe most importantly, in the midst of the pain and suffering and violence of life.

With all this in mind and heart then, the question for our lives can perhaps be put this way: Will we squander or will we honor the legacy of the billions of years since the so-called big bang, the great radiance – the billions of years that it took the universe to make us, the billions of years of stellar evolution and then millions of years of biological evolution that were all necessary to bring us and all life on Earth into being?

These days... so it seems to me... everything we do to assuage the suffering in Ukraine, to aid refugees from this criminal war and from all the wars raging on the planet, everything we do in relation to so many of the issues that press upon us, from social inequities and hate to the climate crisis, however modest what we do may seem, is part of honoring the legacy of universe by sharing in what cosmologist Brian Swimme has called the “great work of building a vibrant, compassionate Earth community.”

In this spirit, Joy Harjo concluded the poem “Talking with the Sun,” the opening lines of which we heard earlier. It is with Joy Harjo’s words that I will conclude this morning:

I walked out of a hotel room just off Times Square at dawn to find the sun.
It was the fourth morning since the birth of my fourth granddaughter.
This was the morning I was to present her to the sun, as a relative,
as one of us. It was still dark, overcast as I walked through Times Square.
I stood beneath a twenty-first century totem pole of symbols
of multinational corporations, made of flash and neon.

The sun rose up over the city but I couldn’t see it amidst the rain.
Though I was not at home, bundling up the baby to carry her outside,
I carried this newborn girl within the cradleboard of my heart.
I held her up and presented her to the sun, so she would be
recognized as a relative,
So that she won’t forget this connection, this promise,
So that we all remember, the sacredness of life.

May we all indeed remember the sacredness of this life we share.

So may it be. Amen. Blessed be.