

# Our Place in the Scheme of Things

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*(adapted from sermons preached in the fall of 2006)*

## Readings

from Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

from *Journey of the Universe* by Brian Swimme and Mary Tucker

In the beginning the universe brought forth quarks and leptons, the elementary particles, and within a few microseconds the quarks combined to form protons and neutrons that churned ceaselessly in a thick and gluey form of matter called plasma. There was almost no structure in the universe.

...(yet) even in the first few minutes, more structures began to emerge. The elementary particles began forming stable relationships. A single neutron might interact with a single proton, and instead of scattering away they would remain bonded together. At first these new bonds were quickly torn apart by other particles. But as the universe continued to expand and cool, these primordial couples and triads began to survive.

Amidst such bonding and dissolution, the universe moves toward increasingly complex communities.

## Sermon

Physicist and writer Brian Swimme (in *The Universe is a Green Dragon*), reminds us that when we look at our hands we would find it illuminating to know that “Every element was forged in temperatures a million times hotter than molten rock, each atom fashioned in the blazing heat of a star.” Indeed, in a very real way, Swimme affirms, we “*are* that star brought into a form of life that enables life to reflect on itself.”

Our First Parish forebears, those who raised these beams 334 years ago, could not have fathomed this. For they thought they lived in a very different sort of universe from the one we are learning we’re living in.

For them, time was a matter of about 5,000 years, space a matter I suppose of only thousands of miles; and though they had by then learned that the earth was not at the center of the solar system, they probably still felt as though it was. And, paradoxically, though they saw with the naked eye many more stars in the night sky than most of us routinely do, including, on any clear night, the magnificent spray of the Milky Way, they had no idea just how immense it all actually is – or how fast it’s all moving!

After all, even though *we* may know with our brains about this immensity and these speeds, we still hardly find it easy to wrap our minds or imaginations around the distances of time and space in which we live and move and have our being, expanses (and expanding expanses at that) on the order of billions, about which we have only begun to learn within the

past hundred years or so. As recently as the 1920s, astronomers believed that our Milky Way galaxy *was* the entirety of the universe; and we now have learned that our home galaxy is but one of about a trillion.

All this said, however incomplete and inaccurate from our perspective their understanding of the physical universe, they did have a pretty clear idea of their place in the scheme of things – as they understood it.

The world they lived in was, to begin with, 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. It was at first a world of perfection (you know the story), then spoiled by our first ancestors who, shall we say, made some bad choices, so that now we had to work with the sweat of our brow, now we died, now we needed salvation from our sin, salvation generously provided (at least for some of us) through the sacrifice of Jesus and the grace of God.

Oh, our Puritan forebears differed with one another and from other Christians on some of the specifics, but on the broad outlines they agreed – and I expect 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.

And now? Are we any smarter about any of this, about the physical universe to begin with?

Well, sadly, a surprising number of people – actually about half of all Americans – still think we live in a world of a few thousand years of time.

Yet plenty of us *do* realize that we were not just somehow placed on this ready made earth a few thousand years ago, but that, as Joni Mitchell put it, perhaps more truly than she realized fifty years ago, “we are stardust” – or at least descendants of stardust.

I expect you know much of the story as astronomers and cosmologists have been piecing it together – a story some are coming to name “The Great Story.” But even if you know it, I invite you to bring the story to mind once again.

Thirteen or fourteen billion years ago this universe in which we live began from a speck with a “big bang” or what some call “the great radiance” or “the flaring forth.”

We are told that *everything* emerged from this one point, out of mystery really, in any case began and expanded explosively, protons and electrons and neutrons forming almost right away, along with huge amounts of still mysterious (to us) “dark matter” and “dark energy.”

Then before long came the first atoms and the first element, hydrogen; then helium and a little lithium.

Then clumps (big clumps) of matter and energy began to coalesce, forming the beginnings of galaxies, with their billions of stars.

Stars forming, as they continue to form.

Stars. Some of them heavy and dense enough that they explode as supernovas after only millions of years of star life (young for a star), flinging the stardust of these elements into the reaches of space.

In this way about five billion years ago, our own yellow star and planets – including this third planet – were gradually formed out of the stardust of a supernovae.

More millions upon millions of years, and the right conditions led to the beginnings of life on this third planet, life which evolved from single celled bacteria to multi-celled organisms to fish, reptiles, mammals... eventually primates including our own human species.

In short... everything we know and love here on our earth *is*... stardust, *still evolving in the ever-creative universe.*

But... why am I talking about all this in our place of worship; and what does it have to do with us in any meaningful, day-to-day, and sometimes crisis-to-crisis, way?

Well, it may well be that the Great Story has a lot to do with the meaning of our lives... maybe everything to do with the meaning of our lives. It *is*, after all, our story, life's story, humanity's story.

Let me suggest three reasons why the Great Story matters, and why it might matter a great deal (some of this gleaned from Unitarian Universalists Michael Dowd and Connie Barolow's work, and also from the writings of Brian Swimme, Thomas Berry, and others).

The first reason that learning and communicating the Great Story matters: Because the Great Story is a story that we human beings all share, it just might help us to bridge the often violent divisions that plague us. It's not that the Great Story should or could *take the place* of any of the great mythic stories found within the world's religious and cultural traditions. But what if more and more adherents of each tradition, more and more people from varied and sometimes conflicting cultures, came to realize that whatever the differences among our traditions, we share the same Great Story of the universe and of life?

Such a transformation of faith perspectives cannot happen overnight. But what could be more important than discovering that whatever we *don't* share, we *do* all share *one* story, the largest story of all?

A second reason for the importance of learning and communicating and in some measure *experiencing* the Great Story: As we bring the Great Story into our minds and hearts, into our bones, we may come to feel more deeply our genuine kinship not only with one another, but with *all* creatures, with the earth, with all that is. For we all – human, non-human, earth, all of it – *are* stardust, *all* descendants of the Great Radiance. Think of it. Feel it. It is not an abstraction. It is who we are.

Of course 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. Even so, learning and integrating into our lives the Great Story can be a way of experiencing our kinship with the whole of the Creation that transcends diverse religious languages.

Further, if we come really to *feel* this universal Great Story kinship – whatever words we use to express it – we may more *naturally* act to live more peacefully with one another and more gently on the earth, not out of a sense of duty and sacrifice, not as a big “should” (we all know how long commitments based on “shoulds” last) 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 our own self.

And a third reason suggesting the importance of the Great Story here and now, in our time:

Well... our forebears here, and those of all traditions for millennia, believed that their lives had meaning; and their religious and mythic stories and teachings affirmed their central place in the scheme of things.

Then, scientific discoveries over the past several hundred years led many to experience the world and our lives as a meaningless, taking place in a random collection of matter in a largely empty universe, thereby taking away the consolations of religion and myth,

Yet now the Great Story, if understood not only with our minds but with our hearts and imaginations, may return us to a world, indeed a universe, of meaning.

Does the Great Story solve all questions? Take away all mystery?

Hardly.

But it may indeed return us to a world in which we are *not* placed randomly with no part to play, but rather a world in which we can once again understand the creative role we do have to play. A world, a universe in which we belong, “star stuff pondering the stars” as Carl Sagan put it; a world in which we do have a place in the scheme of things, as part of the continuing creative process of the universe. Yes, a place in the midst not only of the beauty and the creativity, but in the midst of the pain and suffering and violence of life, yet in any case not separate from, but part of the Great Story – call it God’s story if you will, call the story and all the forces which generate and create the story God if you will. Or not. But the story teaches us that we do belong.

As Brian Swimme has written, what if, as we learn the Great Story, we were to come to *experience* that however vast the distances, however unimaginably numerous the galaxies, that even so...

What if we truly belong here because the Universe has labored for 13 billion years to bring us into being? What if the ultimate meaning of our brief lives is the way in which we enable the care that gave birth to us to extend out through human hands in the great work of building a vibrant, compassionate Earth community?

Or, as Swimme once put it in a lecture, perhaps our “aim is to participate in the creativity” of the universe, to choose “to be at the cutting edge for what might bring forth a more harmonious future.”

You see, though we have a place in the scheme of things that can be described in a scientifically dry way, we also have a *choice* as to how we will understand and experience our place and how we will creatively express our place.

So: Will we squander or will we honor the legacy of the 13.7 billion years since the so-called big bang, the great radiance, the flaring forth – the 13.7 billion years that it took the universe to make us, the 13.7 billion years of stellar evolution and then millions of years of biological evolution that were all necessary to bring us into being?

Will we squander or will we honor this amazing legacy of the universe as the creative process of universe continues to unfold?

It is indeed, and always has been as it always will be, our choice.

Blessed be. Amen.