

## **On Human Consciousness and Goodness**

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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Several months ago, Michael Clague met with me to discuss the theme for this advent sermon. He'd typed out a quote to serve as a guide for what I'm going to say today. I've been carrying this around with me ever since. Here's the quote: "Carol Shields told Eleanor Wachtel that this will be the century in which we finally figure out what she believes are the two greatest questions: human consciousness and the nature of goodness." Michael told me it's the link between them—consciousness and goodness—that intrigued him, and mused if we knew more and appreciated each and their possible connection, then it could contribute to our sense of responsibility; and, I would add, that we would see that goodness is just as innate a human endowment, perhaps even more so, than our inclination toward its opposite. And if we knew *that*—goodness, and its hallmark characteristics, as essential to us—*then* we'd be better equipped to appreciate who we are, more fit to cultivate the goodness in us, and more able to stand foursquare against those who contend that we are an essentially nasty, competitive, aggressive primate species.

Well, if you'd been able to eavesdrop in on the Epperson kitchen last Wednesday morning, you would have heard me say to Diana: "the more I read, the less I know"—that's usually the way things go with service auction sermon requests, isn't it? Well, in one particular sense, it's true that I'm in something of a muddle in ways I had not anticipated; thankfully, some things are clearer to me. In any case, I've appreciated "the journey." And so we begin.

And then Thursday morning on Burnaby Mountain happened, and this sermon just about got high jacked. I was among a small group of people who witnessed BC First Nations chiefs speak their truth about the sacredness of the land and their opposition to resource exploitation in this Province and our nation, and to the Kinder Morgan project in particular. Amid all that I witnessed, it was the words and emotions of Tsleil-Waututh Elder Amy George that really stood out for me then, and now. With the lived wisdom and traditional insight of the guardians of this land, Elder Amy George apologized to the trees, the land animals, the fish, the rivers, streams and waters of the Burrard Inlet for the ways in which wanton pollution and resource rape have caused them harm and suffering. “This tree is alive,” she said, pointing to a nearby cedar, “and has as much right to live as we do.” “Everything is alive; the land is alive, and we are just one member of its great family,” she said. Moments later, her grandson Chief Rueben George streaked her eyes and mouth with red paint to prepare her to walk down the forest trail and to be arrested by the RCMP.

For weeks now, I’ve been reading chapters on the “Structure of Matter and Physical Fundamental Forces,” philosophical papers and disputes on the nature of knowledge, books and lectures on experimental psychology and primatology—all in preparation for this sermon. And then, Amy George and Grand Chief Stewart Phillip and Chiefs Reuben George and Ian Campbell spoke—and in sum, with one voice, they said: *everything is alive and sacred in its living*; and they were there with their bodies to give witness to their truth.

I think that’s the simple and *profound* answer to the question of consciousness and a suggestion of its link to human goodness. It’s just that in these past weeks, I’ve been looking at it from a different angle and with different tools.

Let's return to Carol Shields for a moment. In one sense, what she predicted may well turn out to happen in this century. If by solving the great question of *human* consciousness, she means that for every conscious and unconscious mental and emotional event—from thoughts to dreams, to perception of colour and sound, to feelings of disgust and love—that for every subjective experiential state we have, there is a *corresponding* neural, brain-based event going on that scientists will be able to identify and map, then Shields may be right. Where else could they be taking place but inside us, arising from our bodies and organs? Amazing progress in brain and body mapping has been made in our lifetimes in neurology and physiology; and I only see this continuing with greater precision and accuracy until we arrive at creating a fairly well detailed map that shows correlations between electro-chemical events in the body and subjective mental events. But a map is not the territory we *individually, uniquely* walk, experience and live through, is it (?); it's here that Shields' prophesy about the question, the mystery of human consciousness will probably not pan out; nor do I think that it can.

People far smarter than I, people intimately acquainted with the sciences of brain and mind, have arrived at a position where they contend that the existence of consciousness in a material world is a deep mystery that we will never unravel. And it goes something like this: First, if we can see and understand that at the foundation of all things—going all the way back to the insight of Baruch Spinoza in the 17<sup>th</sup> century—that there is only one nature, one substance and that it is composed of matter, then consciousness itself is an entirely “material” phenomenon, rooted in the physical from which it emerges. And here I am in accord with that great Unitarian scientist, theologian and historian Joseph Priestley (after whom one of our rooms in Hewett Hall is named) when he wrote way back in the 1770s: “the faculty of thinking is the result of a certain

arrangement of the parts of matter”; “sensation and thought do necessarily result from the organization of the brain,” and “the mind...is not a substance distinct from the body, but the result of corporeal organisation.” (quoted in Galen Strawson, “Real Naturalism,” *LRB* 26 Sept, 2013; Two hundred and fifty years later, Strawson sums it up this way: “One thing we do know about physical stuff...is that when you put it together in the way in which it is put together in brains like ours, it regularly constitutes...[conscious, subjective] experience like ours.”) So far, so clear?

But the next step is crucial: even if we discover and map all those subjective mental events, that discovery “will not in itself tell us *how* merely electrical activity in biological cells gives rise to conscious awareness” even if we’re certain that it does, nor will or can it tell us what that experience is felt like and experienced from one person to the next given the senses, feelings, intellect and separate bodies with which evolution has equipped us. As Noam Chomsky pointed out: “if we are biological organisms, not angels, much of what we seek to understand might lie beyond our cognitive limits—maybe [even] a true understanding of anything.” (see Colin McGinn, “Storm Over the Brain,” *NYRB*, April 24, 2014; Thomas Nagel, *Other Minds*, 1995, 196; Noam Chomsky, “The Mysteries of Nature: How Deeply Hidden,” *Journal of Philosophy*, CVI, No. 4, April 2009 )

And I am going to say that’s probably how things stand, not because of the mysterious existence of supernatural entities, miracles, non-material substances or even prohibitions against what we *should* know; rather, there are limits to what we *can* know. And unless Mr. Spock’s Vulcan “mind meld” technique jumps from Star Trek science fiction to empirically validated fact on planet Earth—something I don’t see happening anytime soon or ever—there’s just going to be specific features of consciousness that will remain beyond the ken of physical and biological sciences. That said, being the reflective creatures we are, we will go on seeking to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena of consciousness, of subjective experience, thought and feeling—that search will continue in science and philosophy, in myth and religion, the insights of great literature and, perhaps most important of all, in listening to others.

“This tree is alive,” Elder Amy George said last Wednesday, pointing to that red cedar, “and has as much right to live as we do.” “Everything is alive; the land is alive, and we are just one member of its great family.” I *heard* and *felt* that; and *here* things get interesting, because—though she and I were looking and experiencing *Nature*, with a capital N, from different worlds—we were looking and experiencing essentially the same thing—and here science and Tsleil Wathuth worlds come very close to touching and maybe even understanding each other—and here, perhaps, is a beginning of a bridge from consciousness to goodness.

It may very well be that we can never hope to understand how consciousness, as we know it in everyday life, relates to the embodied brain. But does it follow that *that's* the *really* hard problem, one of the two great questions Carol Shields hoped we'd figure out in this century? What really stops me in my tracks isn't consciousness. Don't we know what that is like—our experience of pain, or redness, of anguish, of thought and elation? You know what it is, even though *I* don't know or experience it exactly the way *you* do.

It's not *consciousness* that's the real puzzle, but *matter*. From ancient Greek atomists, to 18<sup>th</sup> century materialist science and philosophy, to 20<sup>th</sup> century particle physics, to quantum mechanics up to today superstring theory, inexorably, one-step-at-a-time, we've learned, but not really taken it in, that matter is not at all what we think or experience it to be. That two pound lump of meat inside our cranium? Simply solid stuff, a big bowl of noodles? No. Composed of distinct atoms—solid little billiard balls cohering closely together with empty space between them? Not there yet. The stuff of atoms themselves made of up tiny, grainy inert separate particles and full of empty space between them? Still not there. When contemporary physics inspects the volume of space-time occupied by the brain, what does it find?—a vibrant play of

energy, forces and fields, an “astonishing insubstantial, radiant form.” (Strawson, “Little Gray Cells,” *NYTBR*, January 11, 1999; Strawson, “Conceivability, Identity, and the Explanatory Gap,” <http://cognet.mit.edu/posters/TUCSON3/Strawson.html>)

If consciousness is, at root, a physical phenomenon, and if it arises from the material body interacting with the material environment all around it—if we go down deep enough, infinite in its vastness at play in the fields of the Lord—what do we see?: vibrant energy, forces and fields. When facing the thought of *that*—I hope you share with me a vertigo of astonishment; a continuity between mind and matter, between you and me, between us and environment—all forms, all manifestations of energy at play. At a fundamental level, matter is not at all what we normally think it to be.

And then all of a sudden what Elder Amy George said stood forth in all its felt rightness, even though I was coming from a different world view and perspective. “Everything is alive; the land is alive,” said Amy George up on Burnaby Mountain, “and we are just one member of its great family.” In one corner, I hear a big “amen” from the camp of contemporary physics; and from across the way, “amen” from the Chiefs and Elders. And from a third direction, the novelist Marilyn Robinson saying: “The locus of the human mystery is perception of the world,” and with that statement another “amen.” And from us and all our relations; when are we going to give it up and breathe “amen?”

Where there’s continuity of fields, forces and energy down at the very foundation of all things between feeling, mind and matter—across the whole infinite array of living things—there’s the possibility of kinship, and where there’s kinship, there’s loyalty, cooperation, love and compassion. Therefore, Amy George’s apology to the trees, animals and waters of the Burrard Inlet for the ways in which our actions have caused them harm and suffering began to make a

world of sense to me, because, at the root of things, all of Nature—from stars to mountains, to bears to human brains—is alive and interrelated.

It's no wonder then, that we stretch out our hands to unite in collaborative behaviour and wrap a consoling arm around someone in times of grief—for Nature, through evolution, has bounteously endowed us with these adaptive capacities that promote our survival and flourishing. No wonder Unitarians have covenanted—promised—to affirm and promote “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

No wonder, as well, that those with authority and power as they suppose, in the language of my tradition, “exercise unrighteous dominion.” Splattering murder and mayhem across the headlines and the nightly news, criminalizing people of colour and those in emotional distress—all to stoke our fear, to make us feel powerless and under siege, and to brainwash us into thinking we are naked, mad, aggressive apes in dire need of high walls and armoured men in uniforms gunned to the teeth to protect us from each other. No wonder they preach a false gospel of “the survival of the fittest” and mistake so-called selfish genes as grounds for affirming greed and selfishness. No wonder they would compel us to drink the toxic Kool Aid that there necessarily must be a zero-sum, competitive struggle for scarce resources; and that they would label anyone who would question this miserable, earth and soul destroying vision, question those who countenance and sustain vile inequality and heedless plundering of the richness and beauty of the earth for short term financial and political gain—they would label anyone who would question this or struggle against it as a bleeding heart at best and a terrorist at worst—because they exercise unrighteous dominion and cannot, will not see that *everything is alive and sacred in its living*. This is the great mistake and tragedy of our time....

We have evolved for empathy. Nature has endowed us with a primordial instinct for compassion which joins us in kinship with each other and across domains with other living things. In what has been described as one of the “most remarkable psychological experiments” of our time, pre-verbal, six-to ten-month old infants were shown two scenarios. In each, a googly eyed circle is trying to get up a hill; in one scene, a triangle comes along and helps the circle get to the top; in another, a square pushes the circle down, hindering the circle’s ascent.

After viewing these scenarios, the infants were presented with a tray of toys resembling the helpful triangle, and the hindering square, with the result that the infants reached out and picked up the helpful triangle—“amazingly robust results” showing “that long before they can walk and talk, human infants are making value judgments about actions and agents, reaching out to individuals who show signs of being [caring] and cooperative...and passing over others who do the opposite.... It’s helping, pushing up that they like, and it’s hindering, not pushing down, that they dislike”—showing that a disposition toward empathic, cooperative things and actions is “almost certainly part of our...inheritance.” (from Joshua Greene, *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap between Us and Them*, 2013, 46-8)

The message of evolutionary theory, writes the primatologist Frans deWaal, “is that all plants and animals, including ourselves, are the product of a single process...and that we are continuous with all other life forms, not only in body, but in mind.” “For the Darwinist,” he writes, “there is nothing more logical than the assumption of emotional continuity.” Empathy is part of our evolution, and not just a recent part, but an innate, age old capacity “engaging brain areas that are more than a hundred million years old.” Knowing this, he concludes, “I derive great optimism from empathy’s evolutionary antiquity. It makes it a robust trait that will develop

in virtually every human being so that society can count on it and try to foster and grow it.” (Frans deWaal, *The Age of Empathy: Nature’s Lessons for a Kinder Society*, 2009, 205-9)

But there’s the rub—aggression is also entwined with empathy in our affective, intellectual makeup—both personal and social; the issue is who and how will we foreground, value and foster empathy in us and our societies. The social psychologist Phillip Zimbardo, who’s studied human behaviour from the ancient Greeks to the prison at Abu Ghraib, has noted the “human mind’s infinite capacity to make any of us kind or cruel, caring or indifferent, creative or destructive, villains or heroes.” (Zimbardo, “The Psychology of Evil,” TED Talks, February 2008) And after a lifetime of studying how and why individuals and groups who usually act humanely can sometimes act otherwise in certain circumstances, has decisively concluded that it is the exercise of power without oversight that is a recipe for abuse everywhere. We need, he says, a paradigm shift away from the medical model that focuses on the individual to a public health model that recognizes situational, systemic processes—like dehumanization of others, diffusion of personal responsibility, and uncritical conformity to group norms—that give rise to the diseases of bullying, prejudice and violence. And going back to those six and ten month old kids and their innate understanding about helpful triangles and hindering squares, we’ve got to counter that fool’s gold, false aggressive gospel of the brute survival of fittest with the true gold, and saving message that we have evolved for empathy; that cooperation is truest of us and arises from the very fundamental fabric of the deep rhythms of nature and the continuity of kinship of all things.

There is a great chain of being; but it does not descend hierarchically from transcendent immaterial spirit to hardened clay in a single strand, top-down, from the heavens to the earth. The great chain of being is an infinitely vast, interlocking radiant form of energy, forces and fields, a cosmic body of links joining, connecting, weaving each to each and to all things.

“Holy, Holy Holy,” the angels cried out in the Good Book, “the whole earth is full of his glory.” “For every living thing is holy,” wrote the poet William Blake. “Everything is alive,” said Amy George on Burnaby Mountain. “What does physics find in the volume of spacetime occupied by the brain?” asks the philosopher Galen Strawson. “Not a sludgy mass, but an astonishingly insubstantial play of energy, an ethereally radiant form.”

For millennia, a chorus of voices may have been answering Carol Shields two great questions the whole while. My hope, today, is that if we can begin to see the material world in its astonishing light—as truly alive and holy—and see and appreciate that we have an instinct for compassion and have evolved for empathy, then we will have already begun our journey on the bridge that leads towards goodness.

#### **Advent services 2002-14**

2002 Evolution

2003 Birth of the Moon

2004 Life from the Seas

2005 Plate Tectonics

2006 Size of the Universe/Sea of Knowledge

2007 Cell: Smallest Living Thing

2008 Atom

2009 Photosynthesis

2010 The Feeling Brain

2011 Teenage Brain

2012 View from the Center of the Universe

2013 The Advent of Us: How We Became Human

2014 On Human Consciousness and Goodness