

Religious Naturalism, Take Two
A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson
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UCV

A human being is part of the whole, called by us the Universe, a part limited in time and space. We experience ourselves...our thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest—this is a delusion of consciousness; a prison restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. (Albert Einstein)

There is a science now to construct the story of the journey we have made on this Earth, the story that connects us with all beings. Right now, we need to remember that story, to harvest it and taste it. We are in a hard time. And it is this knowledge of the bigger story that is going to carry us through. (Joanna Macy)

Nearly twenty year ago, a Commission of Appraisal was tasked by our denomination to map out the theological diversity of the members of our congregations and determine, if possible, to find some “common ground to build a strong, effective religious voice.” The result of their labours was published in 2005 under the title: *Engaging our Theological Diversity*.

A glance at the “UU Identity Mandala” in our order of service insert, sketched out by Rev. Linda Weaver Horton, then minister of North Shore Unitarian Church in Canada, who was a member of the Commission, gives us a picture of how diverse are the worldviews credibly available and descriptive of those who identify as Unitarian Universalists. As well, thumb through our hymnal—it speaks of a religion enriched by a plurality of voices unlike anything I’ve ever seen under the capacious tent of one religion. And we—and this is to be cherished and never to be forgotten—we are unique, unrepeatable human beings. We are an assembly of exceptional originalities, each of us an unprecedented, subjective world within the envelope of

our skins. Altogether, such is the diversity within one religious body that we call Unitarian Universalist.

But the question remains: is there a oneness in all of our manyness? Do we have a “common ground” upon which “to build a strong, effective religious voice?” That’s the question posed by the Commission of Appraisal. I think there is an answer: it’s called “religious naturalism,” and it’s to that which I’ll be address the remainder these remarks.

First though, to begin, a word about theology. A standard definition goes like this: theology is “the study of the nature, attributes and governance God,” [or gods]; and “a particular system or theory of religion” that includes an “analysis of a religious faith,” along with “its principles.” Few of us, and perhaps with good reason, are thus engaged in the pursuit of theology so defined. Better, and more useful, I believe, is to imagine theology as a kind of map we carry around within us. We have one or several going on going on in our heads and working their ways through our lives. Let me put it like this: theology is a way we depict what we think and feel is really true about the world and cosmos in which we live. It’s a picture of reality, an essential worldview; and like a map, a theology helps to give us our basic bearings and orientation as we navigate the terrain of life. Theologies try to answer basic questions like: Where am I, where are we, in the scheme of things? What are we doing here? Is there some purpose and meaning to our lives that goes beyond the daily grind and the getting and consuming of things? How do I deal with loss and pain? In fact, how am supposed to live my life? Are there any basic rules that inform and direct our behaviour?

Most human cultures have created theological “maps” to answer those basic questions. They do it in myths, stories, song, ritual gestures and rigorous thought. Last month, we looked at some of the beautifully ingenious ways numerous cultures have visually expressed the way

things *really* are for them and how we and our lives are situated in the grand scheme of things. With one exception, each depicts us and our world nested within or below supernatural realms and beings that transcend Nature. That is, domains from beyond the natural world from which powers *supernatural* exert their influence, both intimate and epic, down here below.

Coming as they did from western religious cultures, most of our Unitarian ancestors from the 16th up to the 19th century believed in a picture of supernatural, transcendent orders, beings and realities and they shaped their lives accordingly. Though they did it in their own unorthodox ways, Unitarians were unembarrassed talking about God, creation, revelation, Providence, the Bible, Jesus and an embodied life after death. They weren't Martians after all; they were people of their time and place.

They were also sensitively attuned—and this is crucial—beginning in the early 1800s, Unitarians became keenly aware of both the wisdom and teachings from non-western religious cultures and the breathtaking findings of modern sciences. References to Asian and earth centered wisdom traditions began to feature in the writings of Emerson, Thoreau, James Freeman Clarke and others which affirmed the unity of all things and our spiritual kinship with the natural world. The findings of Charles Darwin, Charles Lyell, Caroline and William Herschel, Maria Mitchell and other scientists changed utterly our conceptions of the age of the earth, the laws of evolution by natural selection, the origins of our species and the unimaginable timescales and vastness of the cosmos, and our biological kinship with the natural world.

Altogether, the revolutionary work and discoveries in world cultures and sciences added riches to our Unitarian theological and moral repertoire. It also completely reconfigured our map of Nature, the cosmos and our place within it. Hereafter, no matter how emotionally pleasing were pre-modern notions about humanity's singular pre-eminence, and no matter how

aesthetically comforting were pictures of supernatural beings and domains beyond nature—at least for most Unitarians, it all became incredible, and beyond belief.

And here, we return to that 2005 Commission of Appraisal’s *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*. The authors of the report state that while “our research supports the perception that most Unitarian Universalists draw from diverse Sources in very conceivable combination, the “largest piece of common ground” for all of us is this: “The natural world is a web of interdependent connections of which we are inescapably a part.” And that “this understanding is highly important to [our] faith.” (*Engaging our Theological Diversity*, pp. 72, 73 EOTD)

It’s summed up in our Seventh Principle, which states: “we affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

Though not unique to us, this *is* a theology, a map of our place in the universe; and it stands in contrast to the most common interpretations coming out of the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Let me quote the UU Professor David Bumbaugh:

The heart of a faith for the twenty-first century...is suggested by the seventh Principle. Hidden in this apparently uncomplicated, uncontroversial, innocuous statement is a radical theological position. [It] calls us to reverence before the world, not some future world, but this miraculous world of our everyday existence. It challenges us to understand the world as reflexive and relational rather than hierarchical. It bespeaks a world in which neither god nor humanity is at the center; [rather] the center is an ever-fecund matrix out of which Being emerges.” It calls us to trust the creative, evolving, renewing and redeeming process which calls us into being, which sustains us in being, and which transforms our being. It offers a vision of a world in which the... sacred is incarnated in every moment [and] in every aspect of being. (EOTD, p.90)

With the benefit of some weeks to reflect upon it, I still think this is a fabulous *theological* statement. It takes something like the traditional injunction to “love the Lord with all your heart and mind” and places Nature in its stead. So that we would say: “Love *Nature* with

all your heart and mind, and your neighbour as yourself.” This sums up what is the most profound and radical re-working of a theological worldview in the storied, five-hundred-year history of our religion. It has consequences, not only for how we situate ourselves under the cope of the heavens, but how we relate to one another and to the plenitude of life and beings ever-issuing from that ever-fecund matrix of Nature. I believe that the theology which speaks most compellingly to us and this momentous change of worldviews is called religious naturalism.

Let’s start with naturalism. Naturalism says that Nature is all there is: there is no outer boundary to it, no supernatural creator or power *outside* of Nature, and no time when Nature was not, nor will there be a time when Nature will no longer be—it’s eternal in the sense that it’s continually self-creating and self-renewing. (Robert S. Corrington) And that’s quite enough, says the naturalist, for scientific inquiry has provided us with a mind-bending new core narrative: the epic of evolution, the epic of creation, the universe story—if you will—where we and human cultures are understood to be emergent from and, therefore, part of nature, or what Rachel Carson called “the whole stream of life.” And here I want to emphasize something: though it may be true that we can be over-awed by the vast scales of Nature’s time and space, that sense of awe may well serve, as it should, to give rise within us both a profound, appreciative humility, on the one hand, and on the other?—a rekindled appreciation for the preciousness of our lives here in this, our one and true home on earth, along with a recognition of our responsibility to ensure the flourishing, as best we can, of its systems, rhythms and well-being.

I’ve cited Rachel Carson, in particular, for both the empirical soundness and beauty of her work, and also, because in her lifetime she became a Unitarian, finding here among us a fitting home for her personal life and her capacious vision of Nature. Carson believed that there

is in all of us a “deeply seated response to the natural world...an affinity of the human spirit for the earth and its beauties.”

Now, here, we introduce the wild card of religion, so that we get *religious* naturalism. Being religious traditionally entails four things: picture religion as a kind of architecture, a making of a home for those drawn to religion wherein we can house our deepest longings and convictions. First, religion has a *mythos*, an epic story recorded in texts or oral accounts about the cosmos, the gods and the meaning/purpose of life as interpreted by prophets, shaman, elders and clergy. Second, we have *spiritual* responses to these mythic epics via inward, immediate experience, and the products of creative people with their legacy of arts, crafts, architecture and rituals. The third feature of religion are *moral and ethical* rules and lifeways—that is, the commitment over time to what’s believed to be the good and how we can achieve it. And finally, there’s *community*—the social context where we share mythic stories, where one’s moved by experience, arts and ritual, and where ethical and moral commitments are embodied and expressed socially among us.

Religious naturalism says that Nature is all that we know there to be; its epic story is the awesome narrative of evolution of the cosmos and life on earth, its source is a mystery, and its dynamics and laws “generate emerging life and phenomenon of increasing complexity.” A materialist naturalism would say, that’s it, full stop. Going one step further, however, *religious naturalism* says there is in the world *Something Else*. Rachel Carson calls it the “exceeding beauty of Nature,” a contemplation of which brings “calmness and courage.” Steven Weinberg, the astrophysicist, even with his deep atheism confesses that “nature is more beautiful than is strictly necessary.” Robert Corrington calls that *Something More* our encounter with “sacred folds”—be they unusual features of the landscape, works of art and music, moments of crisis or

extraordinary persons. These, Corrington, a Unitarian philosopher, contends are central to the human religious experience, and when encountered, they can shake us to the core of our being, and open up creative pathways within us and beyond into the world and our on-going story within Nature.

The biologist Ursula Goodenough points to value and purpose in the surplus *Something Else* of religious naturalism. She sees it in “every biological trait, every adaptation, every hummingbird dipping into a flower with its exquisitely shaped beak.” “For me,” she writes, “the flourishing and continuation of life has deep intrinsic Value and Purpose.” And I believe that a thoughtfully engaged empirical knowledge of the sensate world may be for us one of the surest paths to revealing whatever we feel is worth being called sacred, or divine.

Religious naturalism has both an epic mythos, a universe story and its evolution, and a recognition of our spiritual responses to Nature, seen in its full cosmic sweep and intimate detail, where it gives rise to inward awe, reverence and humility and the responsive, creative production of arts and ritual. Let us recall those heightened moments of intense feeling when we encounter what Rachel Carson called the “splendor of life...when the mind is absorbed by beauty...in the migration of birds; the ebb and flow of the tides; in the folded bud ready for the spring. There is something infinitely healing,” Carson writes, “in these repeated refrains of nature.” (She also thinks these are “the only hours when we really live.”) As well, think of extraordinary persons whose very being and message reveal a profound depth dimension to that which is and which call us to keep fresh in our lives our highest resolve. Have you ever met or known someone like that? [I did, once in Russia, many years ago.] Think of the chalice we light on a Sunday morning, and consider the architecture of this Sanctuary: we cross the threshold into this space and feel we have stepped out of the everyday world into sacred space adorned, not with the kind

of iconography and design that we'd normally encounter in a church, but with nature close at hand, and a design in this place that reinforces our democratic, common authority and purpose in our religious faith.

And then, there is the call to the moral, the ethical in religious naturalism. Here, we affirm that morality describes that which enables the successful realization and achievement of the human project, a project of forging ourselves as individuals within flourishing communities of value.

A good human...? Isn't it someone who cultivates moral capacities that inspires each and all to flourish both as individual persons and in community? For this to occur, we attend on our part, with thoughtful, feeling intention, to the moral education to virtues of reciprocity, compassion, courage, reverence, reconciliation and justice. Surely, religion means more than a state of mind or a mystical mood or ritual behaviour. It's also a commitment over a lifetime to achieve what we believe is the good for ourselves and others.

And it's here that religious naturalism takes us one crucial step further. It calls us to extend our moral capacities, education and ethical commitments from human relations to *all* our relations—alive and interrelated within the great web of Nature, the web of Being. Pointing to a nearby cedar tree on Burnaby Mountain, Tsleil-Waututh elder Amy George said, in words I'll never forget: "This tree is alive, the land is alive, everything is alive and sacred in its living." Here earth-centred traditions and science meet. We are of the earth, made by its evolving life. Now as a dominant species on our threatened, fragile, beautiful planet, we have a particular responsibility for the earth's well-being—the well-being of "*all our relations*" root and branch. Where there is continuity of relationships, there is the possibility of kinship; where there's

kinship--loyalty, responsibility, cooperation, and compassion can find a home, abide, endure and bless

It's been said that the test of any theology is whether it is good for children. (Robert McAfee Brown). This is an excellent rule of thumb. Here, I'm thinking of the children of this congregation, and of all out Unitarian congregations; I'm also thinking of my grandchildren for that matter. What would it be like for them, and us, to live with a well-informed, appreciative grasp of the universe story as revealed by the best of our sciences? What would it be like for them, and us, to appreciatively experience that which can be called a vivid, living appreciation of the sacred, the divine, that *Something More, Something Else* coursing within the world of nature and of arts which celebrate it? What would it be like for them, and us, to be a lively part of a flourishing community that responds confidently, non-arrogantly to wicked problems in these challenging times—that responds with cooperative, community building virtues, with kindness, and the oh-so-grownup, the dearly won simplicity of peace, fairness and reverence?

We could call it *religious naturalism*. We could also call it the heart of a faith for the twenty-first century: a vision, a place to live and flourish together with resolve and reverence in the midst of the challenges and splendors of this miraculous, relational, ever-evolving world whose Source is a Mystery and Wonder—a Mystery and Wonder which “moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to that which creates and upholds life.”

(see Ursula Goodenough, “Religious Naturalism and Naturalizing Morality,” http://opensholarship.wustl.edu/bio_facpubs99; Rachel Carson, “The real world around us,” *Lost Woods: The Discovered Writing of Rachel Carson*, 1998, pp.159-63; Robert S. Corrington, “Deep Pantheism,” *JSRNC* 1.4 (2007), 503-7. Additional religious naturalism sources: Chet Raymo, *When God is Gone, Everything is Holy: The Making of a Religious Naturalist*, Ursula Goodenough, *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, Jerome A. Stone, *Religious Naturalism Today: the Rebirth of a Forgotten Alternative*, Loyal Rue, *Nature Is Enough: Religious Naturalism and the Meaning of Life*, Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era--A Celebration of the Unfolding Cosmos*)