

IT'S EARTH DAY, LET'S CELEBRATE OURSELVES!

Sermon delivered by Sally Beth Shore
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It's Earth Day, let's think about whence we have come and who we are! From as far back as we can have any theory at all...when the Universe exploded and out of nothing, came the primordial fireball, the big bang, the Great Radiance. In milliseconds, the great forces of gravity, electromagnetism, and the nucleus formed as the Universe expanded into being. It was perfect timing, because *any* faster, and everything would have remained a homogenous blob. Any slower, and the universe would have soon collapsed in on itself. After those first milliseconds, there were particles and antiparticles annihilating each other, but for some reason there was an "asymmetry"; more particles than not. This universe would contain matter, not just energy. These neutrons and protons swirled around for centuries and eventually became what we call Helium and Hydrogen atoms. After a Billion years or so, great globs of these gases had clumped together and the first galaxies were Born.

And around 11 Billion years ago, hydrogen pulled into dense spheres, creating critical mass for fusion. The stars began to light up, all through the universe. Let there be light!

In these colossal hydrogen furnaces matter really began to develop. Stars like our sun turned into Red Giants at the end of their lives and fused light elements like carbon, nitrogen and oxygen. And large hot blue stars, like the one we know as Sirius, went tearing through their fuel more rapidly, forming magnesium, silicon, aluminum, phosphorus, and sodium. Heavy metals—copper, nickel, gold and lead formed when these stars died in dramatic supernova explosions. As far as scientists can tell, these processes continue all over the universe, creating more of the elements we find on earth.

About 5 Billion years ago, these elements were being made in stars in our region of the Milky Way. When these stars burned out, the matter they had created was ejected into space. After enough Hydrogen pulled to ignite our sun, Earth and the other planets coalesced from the material seeded by these stars. With the exception of hydrogen, helium and human-made fission byproducts, there is no element on earth that wasn't formed in the belly of a star!

If we imagine that the Great Radiance, the beginning of the Universe, took place at year 0 on a 100-year time scale, with 100 being the present, then it was about year 67 when our Solar system formed. By year 70 the oceans were filling, and the first cells developed at around year 72. A couple of years later, cells learned how to photosynthesize, and then made oxygen like crazy for over a decade. Sexual Reproduction happened only in the last ten years. The dinosaurs (and their extinction) just three years ago. Human Beings, in the last 24 hours! *We weren't born yesterday, we were born today.*

Our very existence is enmeshed with the processes deep in the hearts of the stars; in a very real sense we trace our ancestry directly to them, and then through a multi-billion year saga of creativity. Yet we are the first age on earth to know this wondrous heritage. Our ancestors used their metaphors, their imaginations to explain the mystery of life and the heavens, and we are no different. Our imaginations have allowed us to perceive of a miraculous story, revealed by scientific inquiry which tells us of the origins not just of us but all of matter. The story I have been telling you is a version of the beginning of the Universe Story, sometimes called the Great Story. Lately, it has been pivotal in my spiritual journey. I parted ways many of the Baptist religious teachings of my childhood long ago, when I felt the stories of the Bible and the interpretations I was taught conflicted too deeply with my reason. But as time went by I found myself yearning for some other key to the unfathomable mystery. As a geology student, I tried science worship, but it turned out that science itself was only a tool, and had little to say about the meaning of life. It was easy to have unlimited awe and reverence for nature, but nature seemed to be inscrutable about why I or the human family (or the world) was here. In fact, as I became more informed about environmental science, even going on to earn a master's degree, I felt increasingly burdened with the bad news of humanity's ill treatment of Nature. And while I hate to admit it, I sometimes thought that humanity was just a blight on the Earth, if only the miserable human species would go away everything would be okay, nature would be safe to take its course! Now, obviously I didn't go so far as to put myself on the list to volunteer for early exit, and--- I don't recommend this as a mindset for raising children!

I was delighted to finally come home to this UU congregation a few years ago, where I found community, (as well as other transfigured Baptists,) But the provocative sermons, classes, and even the warm friendships were doing little to relieve my existential angst. I had everything in the world, beautiful children, hubba husband, basic needs far and away exceeded....but the nagging sense of nihilism dogged me—not only could I find no unifying meaning, I was sure that none could be found. I knew there were Unitarian principles about searching for truth and meaning, and spiritual growth, but I was stuck. And plenty of nights I cried myself to sleep over this most basic of questions. Sometimes it seemed as if my life was just speeding by, and I might die without ever finding a true sense of meaning and purpose.

I marvel now that I made it through so many years of post high-school science education without having the sense that there was any story, leave alone a redemptive story, in the evolution of the universe. Because I had all the pieces. I knew all about evolution, I was a believer, I knew at least a little about human history, knew about paradigms and “the structure of scientific revolutions.” I'd watched Cosmos, as a teenager. I knew we were “the stuff of stars.” But so what.

But when I heard the Universe Story preached for the first time in this very sanctuary, a lightness of being swept over me. Here was a metanarrative that I could grasp, and in fact, under the great story wing other religious narratives could still be celebrated as regional, powerful, intentionally metaphorical stories that gave meaning to life in the cosmos according to the best knowledge of the age.

The pieces fell into place; humanity fit into the Universe, and therefore so could I. Not separate, but as natural as a whale or a seagull, and our manmade creations a natural and valid part of the earth. And humans could have a special role to play—as celebrants, as conscious recorders of the

process. Our consciousness together with whatever consciousness other species possess, IS the Earth's consciousness. This of course is not a new idea, it was expressed in the ancient hindu scriptures in the 6th century BC! More recently, in early 19th century Percy Bysshe Shelley, wrote "I am the eye with which the Universe beholds itself and knows itself divine."

I believe that the tragedies of human history, especially those of our own age, its genocides, other human atrocities and suffering, together with our present environmental concerns, have left many of us wondering if in fact there really is validity in the idea of human progress, leave alone the notion of our divinity. We look around at the state of planet and see the fruits of human ingenuity as destruction and waste. It is depressing. We throw up our hands in despair. We blame human ignorance, greed, the evil of others, our own desires to live comfortably, incompetence. Our focus on analyses of our problems stymies our ability to envision a better world and we settle for working on principle, without real hope, even dabbling openly with one of today's most popular but scarcely acknowledged religions, "FUTILITARIANISM."

Thomas Berry has said that it is our Civilization's great work to be the bridge to the Ecozoic Era, when we will repair the damage we can, and forge mutually enhancing relationships with the rest of the life on the planet. The question for us is, who do we have to be to make a difference, to motivate our civilization to take on our great work of aligning human living with the planet's ecology?

There are helpful metaphors for thinking of our environmental challenges in the Universe story. Two and a half billion years ago (or in 86, on the 100 year time scale), a toxin began building up in the atmosphere that was so poisonous it threatened to annihilate all the life on the planet. By 1.5 Bya, nearly all of the anaerobic bacteria, the original life form of the planet, had gone extinct as a result. However a revolutionary new life form had developed around the same time. This new bacteria not only thrived on oxygen, but apparently it contained inside of it vestiges of the old anaerobic bacteria, which today we know as mitochondria. The first complex cells had been made! It was the poisoning of the atmosphere with Oxygen that paved the way then for complex cells, which eventually became multicellular, which became trees, coral, birds, and us.

Around 65 million years ago, the last dinosaur died. Its generally thought that a that a meteor slammed into what is today the Gulf of Mexico, sending up a shower of debris so obscuring that the sunlight was blocked and the food chain decimated; the dinosaurs literally starved or froze to death. This horrible fate is what paved the way for a little furry rodent-like species to gain a foothold, expanding into the ranges created by the loss of the dinosaurs. Thereupon our Era, the Cenozoic Era, has been the age of mammals, and those furry little rats are our ancestors!

Over and over, the Universe Story is one of crisis, experimentation, breakdowns, learning, and miraculous breakthrough. The story of the universe is one of increasing levels of complexity and consciousness and cooperation. The story of human beings, particle to atom to molecule to cell to organism to rat to human to family to tribe to nation... to planet? Today as we struggle with war, abject poverty, injustice and intolerance, and environmental degradation, we would do well to invite in a celebratory perspective, and not just of a wild nature, of Whales, and Sequoia Trees and Penguins. Creating the consciousness that will bring us into the Ecozoic means that we know in our bones that we live only by the grace of the relationship of the rest of life on our planet. But I

think it also means accepting that we too, our achievements and follies are nature in all of its creative glory.

We don't have to let human screw-ups detract from the very real achievements of humanity, in age after age with endless endeavors. Our mistakes challenge us to do better and we can move forward from them. Our wondrous creations are things we can and should take unmitigated pleasure in— so ably demonstrated just now by Marissa, our choir, Lenora, those of us creating this service and those of you participating by your presence. If one sees the human, every human, as an expression of Earth's creativity, then, going to the heart of the city can become an experience of reverence and gratitude as is a walk in the refreshing green of the woods. I don't mean to make light of the challenges wrought by human development. But if we do not reverence ourselves, we risk lapsing into a posture of blame and despair. And I submit that this will do little to solve our problems, and in fact has gone a long way to alienate our fellow humans (as we environmentalists seem to have done) at the time when all of us need to be engaging in the Great Work of creating a sustainable future.

I wrote this sermon on a computer, a wondrous invention of modern technology. It took mining of metals, extraction of natural gas, and it runs on fossil- or nuclear generated electricity, not to mention the resources utilized by all of those who contributed to the development of my little laptop. It's no stretch to feel really terrible about this, and I could choose not to use it, castigate others for its development, bemoan its shortcomings, reject the efforts of the generations of the ancestors that brought it to me. But these days I tend to think of things like this as the Earth's device. It is an amazing tool, a stepping stone, like so many others we humans have created for better understanding ourselves and the world we are a part of. We can use it for creating sustainable technologies and creating a conversation about our great work. Thus I am happy, grateful, and I seek to use it to enhance my (the Earth's) potential. And in a couple of years, it will run on solar and wind energy. And it will be made from recycled materials.

A viewing our present times as sufficient and necessary to cause the next stage in our development, we perhaps would be more effective, more spirited, more inclusive in our approach. I now see our present crises as potential drivers to bring next stage of Earth's development, and we hope, sustainable development. Or not. We have no guarantee.

Albert Einstein said that “our problems cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them.” Our thinking that our ecological cup is half empty won't empower us meet the challenge of bringing ourselves into the Ecozoic Era. Changing our thinking, might mean seeing our glass as half full, noting not abject failures, but mistakes, opportunities to move forward with new knowledge.

The Epic of evolution continues, and we, who were just born this morning, are still in process. So while we work to create the world of windmills and peace and community and abundance for all species, our greatest power may just be the love and joy and the utter awe at being part of this wondrous story, that we bring to the endeavor.

Closing Words

Sometimes on Earth Day we are charged to go get our hands in the earth, to work harder on environmental legislation, to go change our light bulbs. (ok, so, do change your lightbulbs, we have a table full of them in Sandburg hall just waiting for you.) And these are all great things to do. But perhaps equally important is not just what we do, but that we see ourselves and others, as legitimate and vital players in the great story of the Universe. What will be possible when we learn to truly celebrate each other and the rest of the Earth?

My great environmental professor Don Francisco said, "People will only love and care about the Earth to the extent that they love and care about one another." Amen.

I invite you now to offer your hand to commune with the lump of stardust beside you, that stranger, or friend, as we end our service today with a final chorus of Alleluia.