

Big History Sacred Time, a sermon delivered at the
 Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship
 Thunder Bay, Ontario on Sunday, March 29, 2015

Reading #1: “My Tribe,” by Alberto Blanco (English translation: James Nolan)

Earth is the same
 sky another.
 Sky is the same
 earth another.

From lake to lake,
 Forest to forest
 Which tribe is mine?
 --I ask myself—
 Where is my place?

Perhaps I belong to the tribe
 Of those who have none;
 Or to the black sheep tribe;
 Or to a tribe whose ancestors
 come from the future:
 A tribe on the horizon.

But if I have to belong to some
 tribe
 --I tell myself—
 Make it a large tribe,
 Make it a strong tribe,
 One in which nobody
 Is left out,
 In which everybody,
 For once and for all
 Has a God-given place.

I’m not talking about a human
 tribe.
 I’m not talking about a planetary
 tribe.
 I’m not even talking about a
 universal one.

I’m talking about a tribe you can’t
 talk about.
 A tribe that has always been
 But whose existence must yet be
 proven.

A tribe that has always been
 But whose existence
 We can prove right now.

Reading #2: “I drank a buddhist cup of coffee” by Benjamin Dean – SUZANNE

I drank a buddhist cup of coffee
 Out of a christian mug
 I stirred it with an agnostic spoon
 and the steam that rose was
 unmistakably muslim

it was like every other cup of coffee -
 religious and bound to the laws of nature
 with a little room left over
 that it might imagine
 its own breed of reverence

Benjamin Dean

Sermon: “Big History, Sacred Space” by the Rev. Suzanne Wasilczuk

Recently Tim & I have been looking at the night sky, looking specifically for the aurora borealis – the Northern Lights. Even though the index was high, the most we’ve seen is a stray streak of white. But we both remember a time when we lived in Alaska – the really wet part of Alaska, where the sky was cloudy 300 days a year – but a couple of nights when the Northern Lights danced across the sky in whites and greens and reds. A time when the universe sang to us across the heavens.

We both know the science behind the Lights; but the experience, well – it can only be described as sacred.

And then there was the night in Montana. One night we lay on the dock at Salmon Lake, and the stars were so abundant, we couldn’t even make out the Big Dipper, or any of the major constellations. Points of light. Worlds and worlds, as old as our own. “The brightest, most blindingly beautiful cloud of stars.”

I am sometimes asked “What am I?” – what kind of Unitarian am I? Am I agnostic or atheist, humanist, Christian, Buddhist, earth-centered? What am I?

I recently wrote a short article about Easter for the *Thunder Bay Chronicle Journal*. What does it might mean to be a Unitarian and to acknowledge or, indeed, celebrate Easter? I don’t have a literal understanding of salvation or resurrection; so I played with words and symbols, metaphors and meanings.

And I remembered a term I had heard in seminary, from one of my professors, Jerry Stone [he of the “a-theology” descriptor]. Religious naturalism.

Jerry has written a book all about the history of religious naturalism. A very academic book. This sermon is not that book. But, I will try to explain how the idea of religious naturalism came about, what it denotes and what it connotes [what it signifies and what it suggests], and talk about the folks who call themselves religious naturalists, and folks who might be described as religious naturalists.

First, how religious naturalism came about.

Partly through religious folks who saw a wonder and beauty in nature; who saw the divine in nature.

Poet Emily Dickinson writes of Nature as her church:

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church –
 I keep it, staying at Home –
 With a Bobolink for a Chorister –
 And an Orchard, for a Dome –

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice –
 I just wear my Wings –
 And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
 Our little Sexton – sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman –
 And the sermon is never long,
 So instead of getting to Heaven, at last –
 I'm going, all along.]#112, c. 1860]

Unitarian poet Walt Whitman writes:

I believe a leaf of grass is not less than the journey-work of the stars,
 And the pismire [the ant] is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the egg of the wren,
 And the tree-toad is a chef-d'oeuvre for the highest,
 And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven,
 And the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all machinery,
 And the cow crunching with depress'd head surpasses any statue,
 And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels.

Song of Myself, 1855

In more recent times, religious naturalism was also a reaction to the very human-centered secular humanism. We encountered those sentiments in the hymn we just sang:

"We are of life, its shining gift, the measure of all things..."

Religious naturalism does not deny that humans are a unique part of creation, but also wants to stress our being part of a whole, intricate, inextricably interconnected universe. [More about that later.]

So, religious humanism, even though the term was introduced in the 1860s, is a relatively new designation – a reaction to our unthinking use and over-use of the planet, and Earth's response to our neglect and abuse.

Religious indicates that this approach encourages religious or spiritual ways to respond to the world. [You might ask what is a religious, a spiritual way: Sam Keen lists wonder and awe, gratitude, anxiety and dread, joy, grief and mourning, reverence, potentiality or purpose, empathy and compassion, sacred outrage, hope, trust, humility. IAG, 83-131]

Naturalist designates that this approach is devoid of supernaturalism. Truth, meaning, value are to be found in the natural, not given by something or someone beyond the natural world.

As P. Roger Gillette summarizes:

Thus was religious naturalism born. It takes the findings of modern science seriously, and thus is inherently naturalistic. But it also takes the human needs that led to the emergence of religious systems seriously, and thus is also religious. It is religious, or reconnective, in that it seeks and facilitates human reconnection with one's self, family, larger human community, local and global ecosystem, and unitary universe (...) Religious reconnection implies love. And love implies concern, concern for the well-being of the beloved. Religious naturalism thus is marked by concern for the well-being of the whole of nature. This concern provides a basis and drive for ethical behavior toward the whole holy unitary universe.^[27]

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_naturalism; accessed 17 February 2015.

Varieties of religious naturalism abound.

One of the discussions in religious naturalism is whether God fits into the equation. Some religious naturalists use God-language metaphorically. Some think of God as the totality of the universe, the creative process of the universe. Others are non-theistic, agnostic. And some are most definitely not-theistic, preferring not to use the "G" word.

The mother of modern religious naturalism, Ursula Goodenough, is in the last category .

Cell biologist Ursula Goodenough is the daughter of a Methodist minister and professor of the History of Religion. In her book, *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, she asks herself "Why are people religious? And then: Why am I *not* religious?" and then answers herself: "But was that true? What *is* being religious anyhow? What about the way I feel when I think about how cells work or creatures evolve? Doesn't that feel the same as when I'm listening to the St. Matthew Passion or standing in the nave of the Notre Dame Cathedral?" [*Sacred Depths of Nature* SDN x, xi]

In the end, Goodenough decides, religion "addresses two fundamental human concerns: How Things Are and Which Things Matter. How Things Are becomes formulated as a Cosmology or Cosmos: How the universe came to be, how humans came to be, what happens after we die, the origins of evil and tragedy and natural disaster. Which Things Matter becomes codified as a Morality or Ethos: the Judaic Ten Commandments, the Christian Sermon on the Mount, the Five Pillars of Islam, the Buddhist Vinaya, the Confucian Five Relations. The role of religion is to integrate the Cosmology and the Morality, to render the *cosmological narrative so rich and compelling* that it elicits our allegiance and our commitment to its emergent moral understandings."

Goodenough merges the scientific and the religious. She concludes that those of us who are both scientists/poets – we who believe in both the efficacy and cogency – the usefulness and the believability – of both the scientific method and mysterious metaphor – we need a shared story and a shared planetary ethic in order to know where to begin, why to begin, how to respond to our increasingly global problems [SDN, xv]

Sung: *[The air that is my breath... is the air that you are breathing
And the air that is your breath... is the air that I am breathing
The wind rising in my breast... Is the wind... from the east, from the west*

From the north... from the south... Breathing in, breathing out.]

Chorus: By breath, by blood, by body, by spirit, we are all one.

Goodenough, as well as other religious naturalists, talks about emergence, the emerging of new systems, new ways of conceiving How Things Are and Which Things Matter. She writes:

“Emergence. Something more from nothing but. Life from nonlife, like wine from water, has been considered a miracle wrought by gods or God. Now it is seen to be the near-inevitable consequence of our thermal and chemical circumstance.” And she continues:

“I take the concept of miracle and use it not as a manifestation of divine intervention but as the astonishing property of emergence. Life does generate something-more-from-nothing-but, over and over again, and each emergence, even though fully explainable by chemistry, is nonetheless miraculous.” [SDN, 28-29]

“And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels.” [Whitman]

Science and nature writer, and self-styled Catholic agnostic, Chet Raymo writes: “The mystic and the scientist have this in common: they seek the same deeply hidden essence of creation, and both are, by and large, content that much of what they seek remains unknown. Mystic and scientist live at the portal between knowledge and mystery.” [*When God is Gone Everything Is Holy: The Making of a Religious Naturalist*, WGG, 16]

Philosopher and author Sam Keen tells us “The proper task of religion is to remind us that, in spite of the tragic aspect of life that must feed on other life in order to survive, we should tread reverently on the earth and be compassionate to all sentient beings. We may not be able to speak convincingly about the transcendent God of traditional religion or of a kingdom of heaven beyond history, but we are not left without witnesses to the sacred. The Logos, the Word, the Divine Hologram that informs the cosmos – all things great and small – is still spoken in sparrow song, wind sigh, and leaf fall. An electron is a single letter, an atom a complex word, a molecule a sentence, and a mockingbird an entire epistle in the great ongoing saga. The ocean still whispers the song that originated with the big bang.” [*In the Absence of God*, IAG, Sam Keen, 74]

No-thing in the world is sacred.
Every-thing is:
wonderful, not miraculous,
awe-full, not lawless,
graceful, not capricious,
sacramental, not supernatural,
abounding in epiphanies,
lacking any final revelation
of a divine purpose or plan. [IAG, 75]

Peter Mayer writes:

*When I was in Sunday school
We would learn about the time
Moses split the sea in two*

*and Jesus made the water wine
I remember feeling sad
Miracles don't happen still
but now I can't keep track
cause Everything's a Miracle*

Biologist Ursula Goodenough states:

I profess my Faith. For me, the existence of all this complexity and awareness and intent and beauty, and my ability to apprehend it, serves as the ultimate meaning and the ultimate value. The continuation of life reaches around, grabs its own tail, and forms a sacred circle that requires no further justification, no Creator, no super-ordinate meaning of meaning, no purpose other than that the continuation continue until the sun collapses or the final meteor collides. I confess a credo of continuation. And in so doing, I confess as well a credo of human continuation^{[21][22]}

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_naturalism; accessed 17 February 2015.

When I took environmental ethics a number of years ago, many of my younger colleagues argued that the earth would be better off without humans. I argued, in turn, that the earth would be better off with humans who truly cared for the earth.

But Goodenough suggests that:

“Religious naturalism exhorts us to celebrate human distinctiveness with the same full-throated thanksgiving that we celebrate the whale and the spotted owl. The whale and the owl are magnificent, but so are we...

- ✚ We are a symbolic species, unique in our capacity to engage not just in communication but in *language*...
- ✚ While all creatures have the capacity to interpret the reality that they perceive, we [humans] also have the capacity to *analyze reality*, to ask questions that yield answers that generate new questions. All of us, that is, are scientists...
- ✚ We have as well the capacity to *take off from reality*, molding it into the distinctively human forms we call art...
- ✚ And finally, we are uniquely *religious*... we need answers to existential questions. We need to believe in things, to structure and orient our lives in ways that make sense and offer hope, to identify values and ideals, to transcend and interconnect.” [SDN, 165-66]

Sung: *By breath, by blood, by body, by spirit, we are all one.*

The water that is my blood... my sweat, tears from crying

Is the water that is your blood... your sweat, tears from crying

And the rising of the tide... Is in our veins... and in the ocean wide

We are in the rising steam... Rushing river, running stream.

By Breath, Words and music by Sara Thomsen

Chet Raymo tells us: “People need a sacred narrative,” a “true evolutionary epic, retold as poetry.” [WGG, 97]

As Stephen Dunne tells us in his poem “At the Smithville Methodist Church,” a poem about sending his child to summer Bible camp:

Evolution is magical but devoid of heroes.
 You can't say to your child
 "Evolution loves you." The story stinks
 of extinction and nothing
 exciting happens for centuries.

Speaking of the sacred narrative, the New Story, this scientific/spiritual view of the universe, mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme and cultural historian Thomas Berry tell us: "One important aspect of this new view of the universe is our new realization that the Earth is a one-time endowment. It is indeed an ever-renewing planet, but within limits. Just what these limits are we do not know. But whatever the limits of this planet, it is infinitely precious. No other such planet exists in the solar system. We know of no other such planet in the universe." [*The Universe Story: A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos*, 246]

And so, our ethical duty, our sacred call, is to do all in our power to protect Earth's many and vast interconnections.

Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme tell us: "We are celebrants of the universe story. But we are not just cheerleaders for the universe. We are the universe, celebrating itself." Essayist Annie Dillard advises, "You were made and set here to give voice to this, your own astonishment."

We are here to "sing the song of the universe."
 [*Green Space, Green Time: The Way of Science*, 270-71]

Chorus: By breath, by blood, by body, by spirit, we are all one.
 The earth is dust, the earth is clay... flow'rs blossoming and fading
 We are dust and we are clay... we are blossoming and fading
 Every color, every sound... Every place... is holy ground
 Oh, every living thing, Can you hear it laugh?... Can you hear it sing?

Gary Kowalski, author of *Science and the Search for God*, writes:

"To see the wonder in each bit of time and space is indeed the occupation of a scientist or a saint. To perceive the mystery that lies behind and beneath this world is to live in a state of astonishment and reverence for What Is.... To become completely conscious of the mystery within us and around us, to look steadily at the unknown, to contemplate the infinite heights and depths of existence is what it means to be most deeply human and most genuinely alive." [SSG, 157]

Gary Kowalski tells us: "Authentic religion has always had the role of orienting people in the cosmos. It has struggled to answer the primordial questions, Who are we? Where do we come from? Where do we fit in the larger scheme of things?"

And in answering these questions, Kowalski give us a multiple choice test:

- a.) We are cells within the four-billion-year-old body of a living planet.
- b.) We are partners in an intricate but improvisational evolutionary dance.
- c.) We are Great Apes – complex yet lovable creatures who can therefore only be fully known through love.

“Are these scientific questions?” Kowalski asks. “Partly. Are they religious questions? Certainly. And the answer toward which many of the most original thinkers in both fields are now tending is d.) All of the above.

Far from being lost or adrift amid the immensities, human beings are expressions of the same creative energy that kindles the stars, worshipful beings in a firmament that rightfully evokes our feelings of kinship and communion, participants in an old but ongoing saga that we not only behold with bemused astonishment but in some mysterious manner help conceive and bring to birth.” [SSG, 169-70]

[The fire in my heart... my soul flame burning
Is the fire in your heart... your soul flame burning
We are Spirit burning bright by the light of day... in the dark of night
We are shining like the sun and like the moon... like the Holy One.]

Chorus: By breath, by blood, by body, by spirit, we are all one.

One tribe
Earth the same
Sky the same

We sip our coffee – or tea, or juice – like every other cup
Religious and bound to the laws of nature.

On this Palm Sunday, the tenth day of Spring, in a time of growing, in a time of growing
concern for our Earth,
May we raise our voices, for the home that gives us birth.

May it be so. May we make it so. Blessed Be. And Amen.