

Cosmic Consciousness
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship
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I want to begin by thanking Charles for offering this topic, for challenging me to give it serious consideration, and for his constancy in preparation for today's service. This is the first time that I've 'sold' a sermon, and it has gifted me with the chance to know Charles better... This has led me to wonder what topic each of you might choose for a service if given the opportunity. It would challenge you to consider what would have meaning for others, and also allow everyone else to deepen their understanding of what is most important to you. This already happens within the Sunday Service Committee as they strive to listen to the hearts of the community and to plan services accordingly. Please share your ideas with them. And, even if it's a big stretch for you, I'd encourage you to consider sharing of yourself by being a service leader or a speaker for some service in the future. We all have such rich experiences and perspectives to share with each other, and it is through this sharing and expanding that we can evolve and grow.

As Charles has already said, he became interested in Cosmic Consciousness when he came across the concept in Tom Harpur's writing, which led him to research it more fully. As he admits, in part, it appealed to him because it was in alignment with his thinking. Seeing it in print, written by the respected and well-published, gave some credence to what he already believed to be true. As I understand it, this helped Charles to give voice to his beliefs, and created a stronger foundation on which he could build greater understanding. It is no coincidence that Charles has been one of the leaders of our lifespan-learning course, *Building Your Own Theology*, because he sets a fine example as one who has questioned traditional thinking and who has come to see things a bit differently. He has indeed evolved.

Frankly, I expected that this exercise in 'selling' a sermon would lead to a message that would not touch me very deeply, and that would maybe even result in a rather rote presentation... an impersonal accounting of what I had learned. It was, after all, Charles' passion, not mine, which inspired the topic. But instead, I found

something that has given me pause for reflection, something that pulled my eyesight in a slightly different direction, something that stirred up the sense of 'original knowing' ...touching something that I have known to be true but hadn't really explored.

Cosmic Consciousness, as defined by Richard Maurice Bucke in his book of the same name, is a higher form of consciousness than is present in ordinary people. It is a consciousness of the life and order of the universe that is accompanied by intellectual enlightenment, moral exaltation, and an awareness of eternal life.¹ Bucke himself had an encounter with cosmic consciousness, which Tom Harpur describes thusly:

" Bucke was in London, England, and had spent the evening with friends reading poetry, especially Whitman. He left at midnight and had a long drive in a horse-drawn cab ahead. In his account of what happened, he as in 'a state of quiet, almost passive enjoyment,' his mind under the influence of the images, emotions and ideas he had just shared. Quite suddenly, without warning of any kind, he found himself wrapped around by what seemed like 'a flame-coloured cloud.' His first thought was that London was on fire. The next moment he realized that the light was within himself.

"At once, there came upon him a 'sense of exultation, of immense joyousness accompanied...by an intellectual illumination quite impossible to describe.' ...Upon his heart fell one drop of Brahmic bliss, leaving thenceforward for always an after taste of heaven.' With bliss came knowledge. He says he did not come to believe but actually 'saw and knew' that the cosmos 'is not dead matter but a living presence, that the soul of man is immortal, that the universe is so built and ordered that...all things work together for the good of each, that the foundation principle of the world is what we call love and that the happiness of everyone is in the long run absolutely certain."²

An unusual experience, yes, yet I have a friend, a very respected friend, who has described a similar awakening. She told me of a moment that changed her life, a

¹ Bucke, Richard Maurice, *Cosmic Consciousness* (Innes and Sons: Canada, 1901) (Penguin Books: New York, 1991), 3.

² Harpur, Tom, *Would You Believe: Finding God Without Losing Your Mind* (McClelland and Stewart: Toronto, 1996), 141-142.

moment that also came upon her completely unexpectedly. It was morning, an ordinary morning, and she was brushing her teeth...an ordinary act...when suddenly she felt surrounded by an intense light through which she could see the undeniable interconnection of all things and all people. She says it was indescribably beautiful – beyond words – and while I don't know that she has ever had another such moment, one changed her life. She left her teaching job and began work as a wellness practitioner, a spiritual director of sorts. It was through and because of my work with her that I eventually decided to pursue ministry. In that work, I learned to hold within myself a picture of interconnection and love that, when I am conscious of it, determines my thoughts and actions.

Bucke had a similar response. After having this 'moment,' he spent the rest of his life exploring its meaning, not only for himself, but for everyone. He studied the lives and experiences of some fifty persons throughout history who had given accounts of similar experiences...from the Buddha to Jesus to Mohammed to Swedenborg...Emerson, Thoreau, Dante, Whitman. From this research he concluded that cosmic consciousness is our future. He believed that it is becoming slowly more common, and that our descendents will sooner or later reach the condition of cosmic consciousness because it is the next step in our natural evolution as beings.³ For Bucke, and indeed for me, this presents a very hopeful outlook. He felt that three great changes were coming that would create a new world in which religion would dominate. Now remember that Bucke's book was published in 1901...in addition to the psychological revolution that cosmic consciousness would bring, he thought that aerial navigation was going to cause a social revolution that would result in the abolishment of individual ownership, ridding the earth of both riches and poverty.⁴

Bucke apparently thought that the 'smalling' of the earth made possible by air travel would open our hearts, and that we would truly see the other. The idea of airplanes must have seemed miraculous to him, an impossible feat that was just becoming thinkable. If we are able to fly, certainly we must be able to get along in

³ Bucke, 3.

⁴ Ibid, 4.

harmony. Have we not thought similar things in our day? How often do you start a sentence with...“If we can put a man on the moon...?”

Obviously neither aerial navigation nor moon exploration has resulted in an earthly utopia, or a marked increase in our ability to understand and embrace one another...at least not for most of us. Yet I see no reason that we shouldn't give serious consideration to Bucke's theory. While his 'scientific method' is dated and flawed, there is a lot in it that makes sense. I would be somewhat surprised if there was anyone in this room who holds a creationist view; most, if not all, of us have no doubt that current humanity has evolved out of a lower form of consciousness. Why should we presume that this current state, what Bucke calls self consciousness, is the end, the *piesta resistance*, of our evolution? To think that would be nothing less than defeatist.

Some of you may know of the work of Michael Dowd and Connie Barlow, two UU troubadours who criss-cross the continent telling the “great story” of evolution. There was an article about them in the Spring 2006 issue of the UU World. Connie is a scientist, Michael an evangelical preacher, and their respective passionate and academic bents weave together in a unique telling of the story of evolution and the awesomeness of the universe. (By the way, Michael and Connie visited Wausau, Wisconsin when I was interning there and their presentations were quite thought-provoking; it would be fun to have them come to Thunder Bay some day.) Building on the work of one of their gurus, Thomas Berry, they present a picture of humanity as intimately related to the unfolding universe...made of humble stardust yet imbued with divine purpose. They take apart the traditional 'clockmaker' metaphor, and put together a new story, one in which every element is nested in layers of creativity...like Russian nesting dolls. Each level is uniquely creative, with the power to bring something new into existence. In this great story, the universe is the primary sacrament, a sort of scripture that can inform our lives and actions.⁵ Science becomes a kind of theology. There is profound

⁵ Hassinger, Amy, “Welcome to the Ecozoic Era: Michael Dowd and Connie Barlow offer a new vision of reality, evolution, and the divine,” UU World, Spring 2006.

spiritual significance in placing human life with the context of the great cosmological story.⁶

And herein lies one great difference between the vision of Bucke and the vision contained in the “great story,” as told by Berry, Dowd, Barlow and many others. In Bucke’s visioning, the evolutionary process toward cosmic consciousness is a foregone conclusion. It is happening without our participation or even awareness. He states:

“As life arose in a world without life; as Simple Consciousness came into existence where before was mere vitality without perception; as Self Consciousness leaping wide-winged from Simple Consciousness soared forth over land and sea, so shall the race of [man] which has been thus established, continuing its beginning-less and endless ascent, make other steps (the next of which is now in act of climbing) and attain to yet a higher life than any heretofore experienced or ever conceived.”⁷

The “Great Story” takes a somewhat different view. It sees humans, the consciousness of the universe, as having responsibility to make choices. It takes no definite stand on whether evolutionary change is completely random or has direction; instead it speaks of ‘evolutionary emergence.’⁸ The “great story” has the benefit of the knowledge gained over the last one hundred years (which Bucke obviously did not have) and knows that few species evolve solely by natural selection any more; in other words, with self consciousness, which so far belongs to humans alone, comes the power to be engines of evolution. This uniquely human power to affect evolution for the good of the whole, acknowledged or not, determines what will happen to life on our planet. The hope contained in the “great story” is that “if enough people will embrace a new way of looking at the world and humanity’s role in it, we can become agents of a

⁶ Phipps, Carter, “Preachers of a New Pentacost,” Enlightenment Magazine
www.wie.org/j25/new-pentacost.asp?pf=1

⁷ Bucke, 22.

⁸ Hassinger

creative evolutionary process and live in a mutually enhancing relationship with all life on earth.”⁹ This is a hopeful view of the future, just as that of Bucke’s is hopeful.

The picture painted by the “great story” should not be new to us. The first Humanist Manifesto declared that humans are part of nature and that science can help us to deepen our understanding of who we are. Like the “great story”, it claimed that the world is emergent, not created. We did not come into this world, we grew out of it. Such a view encourages us to see ourselves as actual live cells in our larger bodies, the Earth and the Universe, so that caring for our planet should be as natural as caring for ourselves.¹⁰ These are the teachings of science; yet long before that Manifesto was written, Bucke had a visceral, non-scientific experience of the Universe as pulsing and alive.

It is obvious, as Bucke documents, that both currently alive and in history there are many examples of persons who have a higher consciousness that leads (or led) them to make enlightened choices and to teach others for the betterment of all. I think there is sufficient evidence to make a case that these illumined individuals did little to bring about their enlightenment...it just happened...they could be flukes, or it could be that there is a natural process within evolution to move in that direction. I’ve had similar images of cancer cells...these biological mistakes, while less positive, are also flukes that gather momentum as they find critical mass. There’s no reason this couldn’t also be true of higher consciousness.

I have to say that I experienced some resistance to Bucke’s methodology because he believed his research proved that enlightenment generally comes to men, and then most commonly to men in their 30’s and 40’s. As a woman in my 50’s, according to Bucke, I’m out of luck. I will probably never experience Cosmic Consciousness. Looking around this room, I can see that there are many others who are in the same boat.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid.

Then I realized that this is beside the point. Or maybe it's actually a point of fact. If I were cosmically conscious, the state of my own consciousness would be of little consequence. Cosmic consciousness goes beyond focus on the self, and sees the universe as the one described in the "great story." Bucke's view of natural evolution and the "great story's" view of responsibility, or creative evolution, need not be mutually exclusive.

As humanity slowly evolves toward cosmic consciousness, the rest of us, those of us without much more than a spark of divinity in our consciousness, can still creatively work toward a better world. For one thing, we have great teachers...people to guide us who have attained at least momentary cosmic consciousness. We can constantly learn from one another, just as I have learned from Charles today.

For another thing, we can recognize our power in the evolutionary process. As British biologist Julian Huxley once put it, "We are the universe becoming conscious of itself." This is an awesome responsibility, and one that I believe Unitarian Universalism takes very seriously. Our faith calls us to try to make sense of our place in the universe and then asks us to consider how we should act, given the fact that we are planetary forces.

Whether or not we can articulate it, we each probably have some vision of a utopian possibility. The Buddha called it nirvana, Jesus call it the kingdom of heaven, Bucke called it cosmic consciousness...a state or time in which all of us will participate in an infinitely good universe whose foundational principle is love.¹¹

Years ago, I saw a movie called "K-Pax"; I don't now remember much of the plot of that movie...I guess I should rent it and see it again. What I do remember is that Kevin Spacey plays a being from K-Pax, a planet which is much more evolved than earth, a planet where no laws are needed and no psychiatrists are needed; the beings there know both what is right behaviour and how to heal themselves. I remember being comforted by this movie; it suggested to me that we have the potential to grow

¹¹ Bucke, 76.

and evolve. Not on the planet K-Pax, but here on earth, Bucke saw a future when a certain spirituality would permeate, even be synonymous with, life. It would not dwell in churches, it would not be constricted to prayers or bibles, it would not teach a future immortality. Living in contact with the flux of cosmic consciousness, he said, “each soul will feel and know...that the entire universe, with all its good and with all its beauty, is for it and belongs to it forever.”¹²

In his seminal work *The Dream of Earth*, Thomas Berry said that humanity must reinvent itself, overcome our destructive spiritual estrangement,¹³ in order to relate differently to earth and in order to eliminate war.¹⁴ Einstein, in the quote on the front of your order of service, said that the experience of ourselves as somehow separate from the rest of creation is a delusion, and that our task is to widen our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures. How can we, when seeing these incredible pictures of the universe, not experience ourselves as part of a profound unity that vastly exceeds any surface differences. With Tom Harpur, may I suggest that “until we achieve cosmic consciousness, we can act as though we already have done so.”¹⁵

As Joni Mitchell sings, we are stardust and we’ve got to get ourselves back to the garden. May the spark of cosmic consciousness come to rest in your hearts and minds, reminding you, often and loudly, to act as though we are already there. For indeed, conscious or not, we are expressions of the immense and continuing journey of this incredible universe.

Blessed be.

¹² Ibid, 5

¹³ Angyal, Andrew J., “Thomas Berry’s Earth Spirituality and the “Great Work””, www.ratical.org/many_worlds/GreatWork.html

¹⁴ Harpur, 138.

¹⁵ Ibid, 150.