

# **"Cosmic Theology"**

**Sermon by the Rev. Jim Eller**

**All Souls  
Unitarian Universalist Church  
Kansas City, Missouri  
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**November 12, 2006**

## Readings

### "The Universe as Green Dragon, by Brian Swimme

In order to approach love, we must start with our common context, the emerging universe in which we find ourselves. This realm of existence is our ultimate home. All beings, including humans, have this home in common. If we want to learn anything, we must start with the cosmos, the earth, and life forms.

Love begins as allurements—as attraction. Think of the entire cosmos, all one hundred billion galaxies rushing through space: At this cosmic scale, the basic dynamism of the universe is the attraction each galaxy has for every other galaxy. Nothing in all science has been established and studied with greater attention and detail than this primary attraction of each part of the universe for every other part.

Gravity is the word used by scientists and the rest of us in the modern era to *point* to this primary attraction. Listen carefully, and I'll clarify my point. For three hundred years, the word gravity meant Newton's theory of gravity. Then Einstein published his own relativistic theory of gravity, so that in our time a scientist can think of gravity as being Einstein's theory. The subtle mathematical differences between Newton's and Einstein's theories of gravity are crucial, but both were attempts to say something intelligent about why rocks fall to earth. Before—and after—any theory, there is the ultimate mystery of the falling rock and the revolving Earth. The mystery remains no matter how intelligently we theorize. Do you see?

We understand details concerning the *consequences* of this attraction. We do not understand the attracting activity itself. Years after Isaac Newton wrote out his equations of the Universal Law of Gravitation, he was still wondering aloud: "Whence is it that the sun and planets gravitate toward one another?" We can never penetrate into the basic fact of this attraction, nor determine why it operates at all.

Do you see that the universe might just as well have been different? Might have included *no* attracting activity? But the fact is that our galaxy is attracted by every other galaxy in the universe; and our galaxy attracts every other galaxy. The attracting activity is a stupendous and mysterious fact of existence. Primal. We awake and discover that this alluring activity is *the* basic reality of the macrocosmic universe.

From *The Universe Story*, by Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry

Fifteen billion years ago, shape-shifting matter appeared as primeval fire, to transform into galaxies with their stars and gaseous clouds, then to take on the form of molten planets and to shift again and wear the face of the squirrel and the mosquito and the incandescent root hairs of the towering sequoia and the billion living species of Earth's adventure over the last four billion years. When shape-shifting matter suddenly appeared in human form a great surprise took place. For a new faculty of understanding was making its appearance, a mode of consciousness characterized by its sense of wonder and celebration as well as by its ability to

refashion and use parts of its exterior environment as instruments in achieving its own ends. The story of the human is the story of the emergence and development of this self-awareness and its role within the universe drama.

In its beginnings, and in its early development, the human was so frail, so unimpressive, a creature hardly worth the attention of the other animals in the forest. But these early humans were on a path that would in time explode with unexpectedly significant new power, a power of consciousness whereby Earth, and the universe as a whole, turned back and reflected on itself. Earth's community of life would never be the same, for here was a development with such consequences that it can only be compared to the emergence of oxygen within Earth's early communities of life, a development that carried both the destructive and creative significance of that earlier event.

## **Sermon**

This is the marvel of life, rising to see and to know; out of your heart, cry wonder; sing that we live. This is the marvel of time, this is the marvel of space; out of the stars swung the earth; life upon the road to love.

Religion is the natural human reaction to the realization that we are alive and that we will, and must, die. Therefore religion is also our response to the essentially infinite nature of time, the greater universe, and our finitude. We can experience the marvel and wonder of existence by encounters which remind us of our context, and of the

nature of reality or the Ultimacy. On one hand we are like grains of sand a beach, one among billions and billions, and of no special significance in the cosmic scheme of things. On the other hand, we are remarkably beautiful, amazing, and more powerful than most of us are willing to admit. We live between these polarities and within this context.

Religion has tended to offer stories that give human beings a way of fitting our lives into a picture or story of the whole, of the entirety of existence, or the totality of human history. We know many of the creation myths of ancient religions. Before the modern age, these were binding stories and images that told people how they came to be, and how we are to be with one another. These were human understanding from thousands of years ago. They worked then, but for many of us, these stories from ancient human history only capture a part of who we are, and no longer give an accurate or life-giving image of the Universe.

Joseph Campbell, in his remarkable Public Broadcasting Corporation series, *The Power of Myth*, said at the conclusion of that program that the old religion and mythology has died. He went on to say that we do not yet know what the new mythology is or what it will be, but, he said, "I suspect that the new icon of that mythology is the picture of the earth seen from space." This is the religion I want us to visit today. It is the religion that looks, not to scripture for our story of cosmic beginning, but instead to the Big Bang and to meta-stories from physics and astronomy.

In college, a professor teaching social sciences wanted to make the point of human relativity and cosmic context. So, he showed a short documentary on space, time, and distance, called "The Power of Tens." This ten-minute long adventure begins with a couple on the lawn in a park in Chicago and explodes into outer space moving by factors of ten out to what we believe to be the edge of the known universe. The film then comes back down at ten times the speed until it moves microscopic, going down the smallest known level of existence. This perspective makes the unknown known. It makes the invisible visible. It invites a sense of wonder at the marvel of existence.

I have certainly felt this sense of wonder as friends have offered me opportunities to look through very powerful telescopes. I will always remember looking at the Seven Sisters, or the Pleiades. My friend suggested that we find them with our naked eyes, and then look at this globular cluster with his relatively powerful telescope. What looked like seven stars is actually a region of the sky with hundreds of stars clustered into a small viewing area. It was a marvel to behold. The invisible became visible. The unknown became known.

I am not an astronomer. I am not a scientist, nor do I claim to be one. I am, however, willing to be an interpreter of that which I do not claim to fully understand, though this is probably dangerous territory. I find the story of the Big Bang to be compelling and a cosmic mythology or cosmogony that works. I know that the evidence for the Big Bang is the "red shift." The presence of vibrational energy

helps depict the time and directionality of the universe's expansion. I sometimes image primordial being/becoming, or God, as that energy longing for greater being, which through Itself, across time and space, became all of existence, rather than remain solitary. In my imaging God is not a somewhere else, not a part of a spirit world separate from this world, but is a part of every particle, and a part of each one of us and of all Being and Becoming. This kind of thinking is a part of cosmic, evolutionary or process theology. It is a new way of thinking about religion.

Stars help us see marvel and wonder; just as any new world opens to us and gives us a sense of awe and discovery. Yes, the invisible does become visible. The unknown does become known, and we cannot and will never be able to know all that can be known. This is the nature of infinite being and becoming.

Last spring, I attended our UU minister's retreat. The guest speakers were Michael Dowd and Connie Barlow. They were also featured in the Spring 2006 issue of *UU World*, (which, by the way, is available in our library and also online.) Michael and Connie are passionate proponents of an emerging and evolutionary understanding of religion. Science and religion need not be antithetical. Imagine, he suggested, what it must have been like for the early twentieth century astronomers when they discovered that our galaxy was not the only one. For centuries, really for millennia, human beings believed that we were the center of the universe. We believed that the sun went around the earth. It wasn't until the 17<sup>th</sup> Century that we discovered

that it didn't. It wasn't until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century that the Catholic Church was willing to admit it, and not until the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that human beings discovered that ours was not the only galaxy. Imagine what it must have been like for the first astronomer to see what he thought was a group of stars, hundreds of them, and train one of the new larger telescopes on it and realized that what he was seeing was not a cluster of stars, but thousands of galaxies. The astronomer referred to the experience as cosmic whiplash. Discovery is a form of worship, as the unknown moves to become known.

The work of authors like Brian Swimme, Thomas Berry, Ken Wilbur, and UUs Michael Dowd and Connie Barlow are helping articulate this new way of thinking. For process and cosmic thinkers, God did not create the heavens and the earth in seven days, but is recreating the universe in every moment, sustaining and alluring It into Being or Becoming. Creation moves through, and is sustained by, attraction and allurement. God is not a Being; the Universe is ever evolving and continually becoming.

Allurement is the mystery of attraction, with which the universe is held together, and by which it is creating.

We know that two bodies, when they become attracted to one another, tend to move toward each other. In physics we call this gravitational energy. Physics speaks of magnetic forces. Science can measure them, but science cannot fully explain why or even how magnetic or gravitational forces exist. Yes, bodies have mass which

attracts, but why? It is this attraction that allows life and even the universe itself to exist. It is the force that forms galaxies. It is the force that holds atoms together or creates molecules. This process of attraction and allurements works in chemistry and in biology. It works in the physical world and in human interaction.

Thomas Berry says that we can know cosmic love by knowing attraction. Attraction is the force of love, sustaining and creating life, and being or becoming. By pursuing our interests, our passions, our delights and our curiosity, we reflect and mimic the Universe. Life is created and sustained by allurements.

"Do you like music?" asks Dr. Berry. Sure, most of us would answer. What a marvelous thing it is that music exists, out of all of the sounds and vibrations there are. We group some together and create a kind of order that generates attraction. Why these particular sounds? Why do some of us like one kind of music and others another? The universe moves toward creativity, increasing complexity and community. Life moves from simple single-celled forms to more and more complexity until life became complex. Simple forms of organization have become more complex and more intricate. Life seems to have a direction. The universe evolves and this is the good news. As it evolves, so do we, and so can human community. This is also good news.

This process of allurements is not just a process about gravitational attraction but is also about lovers chasing each

other, whether in the woods or in the bedroom. It is about who we like and what we love. Out of which emerges greater life, more coherent life. Allurement is like falling in love or like joining a new community. We move toward greater familiarity. We go from unknown to known, and from the invisible to the visible.

For me the most profound experience I have of learning to see what I did not know came from learning to sail large boats on the San Francisco Bay. I was already a pretty good sailor of small boats, when I was at the helm of a 40 foot boat for the first time. There were about 10 of us on the boat and most of them were very good sailors, and I was at the helm as the skipper. I remember looking ahead and seeing a patch of white-capped waves ahead of us. I could see it, and I knew it was supposed to mean something. We sailed right toward it. Then that I noticed some of the more experienced sailors getting lower on the boat, bracing themselves. As we sailed into the patch of very high winds that the whitecaps indicated, the boat broached and came about rapidly, nearly out of control. One of the best sailors offered to take the helm for a few moments. I quickly complied as I watch his every move and learned how to control a large boat in such conditions.

Later he and a few of the others told me that it was my lesson to learn and telling me about it would not have had the same impact as experiencing it. They trusted the boat and their seamanship. They taught me how to sail big boats and how to read the water. Soon I found that the water could be read like a book, recorded to show the paths of

wind and current. One needed only to learn to read and the invisible became visible and the unknown became known.

When we learn a new language, a new world opens to us. Our attractions and our discoveries allow us to become more intimate with Life. The unknown and the invisible become visible. When you first join a church, everyone looks kind of the same; they are mostly strangers. Within a few months or a few years of active involvement, the people in a community are not strangers, they are people with stories, lives of richness, and they are our friends. If we are truly engaged, then our lives are the richer for it. We are more life-filled. Community enriches life and thereby creates a greater wholeness and a life worth living.

Being in a healthy, dynamic and life-giving faith and community is life-giving and life-enriching. It is like learning to read or learning to love. It changes our lives for the better. None of us knows what will attract us, or how our lives will be enriched, whether it is through opera, parenthood, psychology, or religious sophistication. All doorways into life offer more life, and in turn bring more life back into being. Discovery and new learning is intimacy with the Universe, and is a most profound form of worship.

The Universe appears to be holographic. Each part is like all other parts, and in some ways contains a bit of everything that is or will be. We can see the nature of existence by looking to our own being. We can know in part how the universe is evolving by looking at our own evolution. We are all remnants of stars and we will again be a part of a

new star being born. We are relics of the attractions that have come before us, just as hydrogen became water, and as smaller particles gave way to larger atoms and to life itself. The light we see is only a relic of the past. What we are seeing is light from stars that existed millions and millions of years ago.

We are holy remnants of what has been on its way to what is Becoming anew. Such is the gift and view of a cosmic theology.

### **Sources**

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