

We've finished up one year and are the very beginning of a new one. Yet one more under the rug. I remember the year seeming to last forever as a child waiting for Christmas to come round again. Now, it seems that I've just turned around and it's time to take out the Christmas boxes again...

Time is relative. Beginnings and endings and beginnings again. They turn into a rolling indistinguishable blur at some point. But when we look back at our lives, we organize them into chapters, sections which have stories which define them, tell us where we were, what we were doing, who we were in a given moment. Looking back at my life, there is the growing up period – with sub-periods of living in different places and getting to know different folks. There's the launching period – meeting my ex, having children, beginning to step into adulthood. There's the awakening period – separating out what I thought I was supposed to be from who I actually was – and then changing my life to put my actions in alignment with my values.

Each of those segments have a story-line. Stories within which help define my life.

Stories help to define who we are. My family just gathered at Christmas and many of the old family stories were revisited. We told stories about my recently deceased parents – bringing up details that had been forgotten or overlooked before. Revealing who we are by sharing the details that are important to us. We are at the period in our family development when my adult children are suddenly sharing salacious details & stories that I never heard before. Enough time has passed, it's safe to confess those stories which may have gotten them into hot water a little earlier. I was still sharing a few of those with my mom right up until she died. Our stories help us understand our lives and share them. They define who we see ourselves to be.

As cultures, we also tell stories which help us to understand our relationship to reality. Cultural historian and voice for the earth, Thomas Berry, said that the creation stories we tell define who we see ourselves as in relation to the universe. Berry died in 2003 but he spent his life exploring the place of the human being in the story of the universe. In a book of his essays titled, *Evening Thoughts*, Berry says there have been distinct stages in human storytelling which have shaped our understanding and relationship with the natural world.

These were the “tribal-shamanic period; the period of the classical religious cultures of the Eurasian, American, and African worlds; the scientific-technological-industrial period.” He continues that we now entering a new epoch, which he calls an “emerging ecological period when the intercommunion of all living and non-living systems of the planet is being activate at a new level of mutual presence.”

Berry and cosmologist Brian Swimme coined the term Ecozoic, to describe this next period in the evolution of the planet. It will be a time when humans understand themselves as not only within the creation story but as co-creators of our ongoing reality. We are not there yet, but we are at the cusp. Dying to a destructive way of understanding relationship with the planet and being reborn into a life-sustaining story.

The title of today's service is between death and rebirth, because we are looking at endings and beginnings. Our planet is at the tipping point – a defining moment. Brian Swimme says that “the American Museum of Natural History took a poll among biologists... [and] asked a simple question: Are we in the middle of a mass extinction? Seventy percent said yes. A mass extinction.”¹

It is mind-boggling – something humans have never had to deal with before. Swimme continues:

...So now we're just discovering that we're in the middle of a mass extinction. We happen to be in that moment when the worst thing that's happened to the earth in sixty-five million years is happening now. That's number one. Number two, we are causing it. Number three, we're not aware of it. There's only a little splinter of humanity that's aware of it. The numbers are this: At the minimum, twenty-five thousand species are going extinct every year. And if humans' activity were otherwise, or if humans weren't here, there would be one species going extinct every five years. We've pushed up the natural extinction rate by the order of something like a hundred thousand times. End quote.

We are in the midst of a mass extinction, losing 25,000 species a year. It boggles the mind and is horrifying and tragic. There have been 4 major extinction events on earth, but this is the only one caused by human activity. Now where is this going you might ask? Great way to begin a new year – thanks Rev Pam! Please don't kill the messenger.

Before you have a beginning, you need to have an ending. They are tied up together. According to cosmologists like Swimme and Berry we are moving into a new mode of beings for humans. And for us to understand it, we need to tell a new creation story. Swimme and folks like Michael Dowd call it The Great Story. It's a story that weaves in many of the subtleties of the past but is built upon scientific observation. It acknowledges the mythology that has helped shaped our consciousness, but steps into a future that is vastly different than the one we currently inhabit.

Swimme and Berry say the ecozoic period will be defined by understanding ourselves in a whole new relationship with the universe – and that story will change what we do and how we act in the world. Now – we are talking in geologic time – so it will not be coming to fruition in our lifetime. But we can be the ones planting the seeds of this new reality. So what are the stories we have told in the past, and how will the new one be different?

Our first stories, those told by our tribal and shamanic ancestors, were of wonder at the mystery of the universe. They understood themselves as intimately connected to the ongoing story of the natural world and we still see this perspective in the indigenous peoples today. There is a deep connection and relationship, respect and reverence. These were the source of our early stories for much of the world; stories of the divine incarnate in the living world.

The next stage of human stories is what we think of as classical religion. Places where the divine became proscribed and contained within human directed rituals and mythology even as it was made transcendent. This separated out the power and creativity of the universe from the natural world – and even with some accommodation for humility – placed humans at the center of the creation story. In these stories human beings were at the top of a pyramid of value and this shaped our psychic separation from the natural world. Berry says “This completed the alienation and isolation of the natural world from the divine and made possible the conception of the world as a mere external object.” End quote

The final separation of human beings from the natural world came with the scientific-technological-industrial period - the one we are still operating within today. He says “a further step in degradation came later, when not only were the divine and the human taken away from intimate presence... but all

inner dynamism was removed...Thus there emerged the concept of crass matter as mere extension, capable only of external manipulation and mechanistic activity.”ⁱⁱ

Our stories cast us out of connection with the forces that created us in the first place. A metaphorical casting out of the garden of Eden propelled by the human desire to know itself. Biblical.

Over time, our desire to be masters of our environment has propelled us to a place of destroying the very source of our sustenance. And thus, we find ourselves in a time where 25,000 species become extinct each year.

We can find some optimism for the future if we understand ourselves in a more cosmological framework. By healing this schism between the universe and human beings and reclaiming an interdependent relationship, we can continue to follow the unfolding path of connection and awareness. Here's where it really gets interesting. I feel like I've been reading Brian Swimme and watching his videos – and listening to some of their apologists like UUs Michael Dowd and Connie Barlow – for many years now. But this time is the first time I really come to understand the point at the heart of a new creation story. We, humans, are the universe becoming conscious of itself. Not only gaining consciousness, because we've had that for a few million years. But becoming conscious of our consciousness – which is, essentially, the universe becoming conscious of itself.

Can I try that again?

Every stage of life is dependent upon and derived from a stage that came before it. It's not a straight line – and there have been innumerable dead-ends and stopping places, but just like the branches in your family tree, there is a direct line back from humans to the very beginning of the universe. Our bodies are made up of the dust of dying stars. Our biological processes are built up from the most simple exchanges of energy for energy. The mitochondria in our cells come from those very first cells which were able to exchange oxygen for energy. A more understandable example of this might be the development of what Dowd calls the evolutionary brain. Slide

Our original brain stem – first developed eons ago is the reptilian brain (lizard legacy) which controls the basics of breathing, next the mammalian brain – furry little mammal via Dowd; the neo-cortex or monkey mind, and finally our frontal lobe – or higher porpoise which houses higher level thinking. No brain could go from lizard to higher porpoise without the developmental stages along the way. And the prefrontal cortex could not emerge out of nothing. Everything which exists in the universe, save for the universe itself, exists because it evolved from something which came before.

Which brings us to consciousness. Is there a consciousness in the universe from which our own human consciousness developed? For some folks in the room I may be treading on dangerous ground. It can veer into intelligent design with just a little push. Some feel that the idea of a conscious universe is settled and done. But I would argue that the essence of being a good Unitarian Universalist is that nothing is ever settled and done. Being a good UU means being open to new information and possibilities. It means always being willing to let go of past truths when presented with more compelling ones. And it means trusting your gut. What it doesn't mean is closing the book and having the correct answer – that's the definition of fundamentalism.

So, is there some kind of consciousness to the universe? Certainly not like our own human consciousness – but something out of which ours emerged? Berry says that a huge part of the problem

of our current creation stories is that “the emergent universe is still not seen as a revelatory experience of numinous presence... In reality, we might say that the simplest atomic structure, the hydrogen atom, already expresses a radiant intelligibility, a psychic as well as physical aspect of reality.”

He continues “As the articulation of an energy quantum, the primordial particles carry within themselves the total mystery and meaning of the universe, as well as the entire range of creativity that will ever exist.”ⁱⁱⁱ Who we are, down to a molecular level, is the universe in animated, self-conscious and self-directing form. Humans are not part of the universe or within the universe, but a mode of the universe itself. Exactly as the mystics have described for centuries – a drop of water existing within the ocean, containing all the properties of the ocean within our infinitesimal being.

It’s amazing how much we’ve known, through our wisdom tales and intuition, that is turning out to be verified in scientific study. Not literally, of course, but truth that helps us to understand who we are and what we are capable of in our time on this planet. The Great Story is very interesting stuff creating a very wide lens on human existence. A new and empowering story of the universe that locates human beings as cocreators in the ongoing saga. There is so much more to explore in this story. So many ways to understand this mind-boggling concept.

Are we beginning a new era? Can humans make the switch from thinking ourselves as separate and above the natural world to embracing a co-creative and mutually synchronistic mode of being? It’s probably too early to tell. And truthfully, you and I will not be here, in this form, to see if we make it. But, we can embrace our co-creationary identities right here and now. We can be the voice of the universe which points humanity in a life affirming direction. We will revisit this topic, deepening and exploring the nuances of its many teachers and I will offer a showing of one of Brian Swimme’s videos in the coming months. But for today, we can agree that each moment of our lives, we are on the cusp of some new reality – and this moment is no exception.

When asked if he thought humans would be able to make the shift quickly enough to address our current crisis, Swimme replied:

...the universe has been working on this for a long time, and right now, it's exploding within human consciousness. But we're not in charge of it. So I haven't got the slightest idea if we have enough time. That's almost a secondary question to me. It just seems so deeply right that we be thinking about this and working on this. End quote.

We have the choice, to live into that moment with consciousness, with curiosity, with compassion for ourselves and all living beings. I believe it is that choice which will move the evolutionary path toward an ecozoic future of mutuality and creative compassion. Something is always being destroyed and created. We can choose to embrace the coming age with love and hope – and trust that we really do possess powers beyond our wildest dreams to make those dreams a reality.

Amen & blessed be.

ⁱ <http://www.thegreatstory.org/SwimmeWIE.pdf>

ⁱⁱ (Berry, Thomas edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker, 2006)

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