



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Our Environment, the Stars: A Spiritual Perspective”

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Centering Thoughts

If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Unitarian minister

We are the stuff of stars. All the heavy elements in the universe, anything heavier than helium and hydrogen, have been formed in the interior of massive stars that are now dead. They've all exploded and they've given up their existence in order to spread elements out across the cosmos, which eventually end up coagulating into planets and coagulating into creatures like us.

Caleb Scharf, Columbia University astrophysicist

What can we gain by sailing to the moon if we are not able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves? Thomas Merton, Trappist monk

Sermon

The Unitarian minister, philosopher, and transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson once exclaimed, “If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would we believe and adore... But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their astonishing smile.” We normally think of our environment as the natural environment around us, as the forests, rivers, animals, plants, mountains, clouds, plains, and oceans of our beautiful Earth. But our environment is more, oh, so, so, much more. Our environment lies in the stars as well, and the stars are within us, as well as “up there.”

I used to give evening sky watching programs at the State Botanical Garden of Georgia. While the group waited so our eyes could grow accustomed to the dark, I talked about our environment in the stars, our place in the Universe. I told the stargazers we were looking really not up into the Universe but out into the Universe. If the Earth were the size of a point of a pin, there would be on it over 7 billion of us looking out into the Universe. The Moon would be one-fourth of a pinpoint

in diameter and would be a little over a fifth of an inch away from the Earth. If the Earth were the size of pinpoint, the Sun would be the diameter of a quarter and it would be about 7 feet away. The next nearest star, Alpha Centauri, would also be about the diameter of a quarter, and it would be 400 miles distant! We live in a giant galaxy, the Milky Way galaxy, which contains several hundred billion stars. If Earth were the size of the point of a pin, instead of over 8000 miles in diameter, some of the stars in our galaxy would be bigger than a basketball and some no larger than the head of a pin. The galaxy itself would be about ten million miles across. Our nearest galactic neighbor, the Great Galaxy in Andromeda, would be about 200 million miles away from our pinpoint Earth.

In Fall star watches, to help the stargazers understand the real distance to the Great Galaxy, I would point out its faint luminous smudge in the sky -- the farthest thing we can see with the naked eye-- and explain, "When the pyramids of Egypt were being built, the photons of light that are hitting your eyes at this instant—this very instant--had already traveled 99.8% of the distance from the Great Galaxy to your eyes. In other words, traveling at 186,000 miles per second, every second for nearly 5000 years, that light has traveled 2/10 of one percent of the distance between here and there."

The existence of other galaxies was not commonly accepted until the 1920s when Edwin Hubble understood and explained the red shift of light, which proved that some of the objects seen as we look out through the stars of our galaxy were actually far beyond the stars in our galaxy. Much farther.

Then in 2003 astronomers made a remarkable discovery about the number of other galaxies, of how many there actually are, about the size of the Universe. They focused the Hubble Telescope, named after the great astronomer, for over 260 hours on the darkest spot of the sky they could locate. It was a tiny, tiny spot estimated to be the size of a grain of sand held at arm's length. Then they developed the image. To their amazement there were some 10,000 galaxies shining in that tiny dark spot. The spot amounted to a 13 millionth of the entire sky!!

A few years later astronomers repeated the imaging on a different dark spot in the sky and again thousands upon thousands of galaxies appeared in the developed image. The entirely reasonable assumption is that anywhere astronomers focus the Hubble telescope for long periods such numbers of galaxies would appear. Mind blowing? Yep. Jaw dropping and knee-knocking staggering? You betcha.

Density studies suggest that there are over a hundred billion galaxies in the Universe. If the Earth were the size of the point of a pin, and of course it is over 8000 miles in diameter, the farthest edge of the Universe would be 20,000 billion miles away!

About this time the people attending the sky watch are feeling rather small in contrast to the immensity of our environment in the stars. But then I relate something else astronomers and astrophysicists tell us, that gives many of them a sense of wonder and awe about the Universe that

can only be described in spiritual terms. You see, we are the stuff of stars, and of the Big Bang itself. All the elements in our bodies heavier than hydrogen and helium were created in the interiors of giant stars. The very same atoms of the periodic table that spin through our bodies came from the stars. And the two atoms of hydrogen in every molecule of water, water being the greatest mass of our bodies, was created out of elementary particles shortly after the Big Bang, nearly 14 billion years ago. This we know scientifically. This is our environment.

For this reason, the Cambridge Encyclopedia of Astronomy proclaims, "We are children of the universe." In a more accurate and very real sense, we are apertures, apertures through which the Universe sees itself. If somehow we could stand outside the Universe and yet describe ourselves in it, we would say that we are the Universe looking at itself. That is our environment. That is our reality. That is who we are. That we are alive and conscious is proof positive that the Universe is alive and conscious.

And as for feeling small and isolated in the immense Universe, maybe we wouldn't feel that way if we didn't experience ourselves as small and isolated. What if we could experience ourselves as coextensive with all that is, could experience ourselves somehow as the Universe looking at itself. Suppose we could break down the psychological walls separating our individual selves from a vastly greater experience of a universal Self. See where I'm going here, for of course there are spiritual arts of meditation and mindfulness that have been practiced for centuries that lead one to experience one's consciousness in a much different and more universal way.

"That art thou" is but one version of the spiritual expression of those who break through the fetters of our evolved and customary consciousness and realize that they are individual, minute dust specks of the environment only in a limited psychological sense. In another sense--in actuality—they/we, you and I are the Universe looking at itself. The philosopher William James wrote:

"This overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystic achievement. In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness. This is the everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition In Hinduism, in Neoplatonism, in Sufism, in Christian mysticism . . . we find the same recurring note, so that there is about mystical utterances an eternal unanimity which ought to make a critic stop and think Perpetually telling of the unity of man with God, their speech antedates languages, and they do not grow old."

In using the word "God," James is not speaking of the Biblical God of our childhood upbringings. He is referring to something experienced directly, which he also terms the Absolute. I think in modern scientific terms we can say that we are capable of experiencing ourselves as apertures through which the Universe sees itself. As the elements of our bodies reveal, our environment in the stars is not only "out there." It is in here (gesturing to heart) as well. We are the stuff of stars. It is all so very wonderful.

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