

February 12, 2017
Evolution Sunday
It is Good.

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Greeting

Good morning Friends. Two weeks ago was Charles Darwin's 208th birthday. That weekend, diverse religious communities gathered in worship to affirm that religion and science are not competing adversaries. we gather today in the same Spirit.

In 1931, Albert Einstein wrote an essay for a collection of personal philosophies of famous people, in which he said: *The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed. This insight into the mystery of life, coupled though it be with fear, has also given rise to religion. To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms— this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I belong in the ranks of devoutly religious men.*

*Today We gather together with hope that both religion and science may remember to pause to wonder and to stand rapt in awe. For perhaps that feeling of reverence is our best hope for reconciliation between faith and facts, or a mutual acknowledgement that wonder is the common home of seekers. And in that spirit, let us begin by singing our first hymn, **How Great Thou Art, Green 8.***

Readings

Genesis 1

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the spirit of God moved over the face of the waters.

³*Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. ⁴**And God saw that the light was good;** and God separated the light from the darkness.⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.*

⁶*And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, ...”⁷ And it was so. ⁸God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.*

⁹*And God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. ¹⁰God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. **And God saw that it was good.** ¹¹Then God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so.... **And God saw that it was good.**¹³ And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.*

¹⁴*And God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, ¹⁵and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. ¹⁶God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. **And God saw that it was good.** ¹⁹And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.*

²⁰*And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.” ²¹So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. **And God saw that it was good.** ²²God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” ²³And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.*

²⁴*And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” And it was so. **And God saw that it was good.***

²⁶*Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”²⁷ So God created humankind in his*

image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

²⁸*God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”*

²⁹*God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.*

³⁰*And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so.*

³¹*God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.*

Excerpts from The Universe Story written by evolutionary and mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, who was a **Catholic** priest of the **Passionist** order, a cultural historian and an ecotheologian

In the beginning, the universe flared forth into being.... Out of the supreme fiery radiance the trillion protogalaxies appeared and gathered together into full-sized galaxies, clusters of galaxies, clusters of clusters, vast sheets crisscrossed with filaments of giant galaxies....In the spiral galaxies the flame of the beginning transmogrified into an epoch of supernova blasts, whose explosions stirred each spiral galaxy into a new concoction of elemental potentiality... When pure energy expanded, then splintered, Out of the billions of spiral galaxies rich with the supernova's generosity, at least one planet brought forth (Life) from its boiling rocks, the first living cell, a being both fragile and powerful, alive within an evolving four-fold mode of action: a churning lithosphere, washed by great gyres of the hydrosphere, evaporating into the billowing winds of the atmosphere, and all folded into the electrified intensities of the biosphere. Earth took its quantum of nuclear energy given by the supernova...and after hundreds of millions of years cohered into a planet, the proper size to enable gravitational and electromagnetic balance, and the right distance from a fitfully burning young star to establish a temperature range where complex molecules could be formed, like two perfectly aligned hydrogen atoms and one oxygen. Earth created a cybernetic system that kept itself in a rich metastability, a great ball dancing at the crest of a spraying fountain of water. In the center of such rich energy, life brought forth the wonders of the (cell, cellular reproduction, photosynthetic mutations that enabled light to become food,) ecosystemic communities, and the multicellular beings....Humans have classified on the order of two million species of life. Biologists estimate there may be ten to thirty million species altogether. This number represents only one percent of the species that have come into existence since the beginning of life.

Billions of life's species have emerged and gone extinct. But though so many forms of life have vanished, there was never a time in four billion years of Earth's life with as many species as there were when the human first arose in Earth's community. Great chasms of experience had been irrevocably lost through mass extinctions, but a beauty endured through it all. The (catastrophic extinction event) at the end of the Mesozoic Era was overcome by life's fecundity, and the overall richness of life on the planet surpassed that of any previous era. Perhaps the only word to describe the world that gave birth to the human form of life is paradise.

Shape-shifting matter appeared as primeval fire, 15 billion years ago, transformed into galaxies with their stars and gaseous clouds, took on the form of molten planets, shifted again to wear the face of the squirrel and the mosquito and the incandescent root hairs of the towering sequoia and all the billion living species of Earth's adventure over the last four billion years. And 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...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, could turn back and reflect on itself.

Prayer

Oh Lord, Our God, so often we move through our days forgetful of the blessings of air, and water, darkness and light, earth, sea, sky and the communion of creatures that hold us here, surround us, make our living possible. Some days go by and we do not once pause, we do not once stop, in awesome wonder, to consider all the worlds thy hands have made. This is our prayer today. On bended knee, we bow before you in humble adoration, and we ask you to Awaken wonder in us again, Oh God. Your children wander and are lost. Your whole creation groans in travail, and when we are quiet enough we can hear it: the cry of the forgotten, the unnoticed, the uncherished. So we come before you humbled, weary, bruised and longing, in a bruised and longing world. We come to hear your Word to us. To stop, to listen. God of the Whole, holy, impenetrable mystery and dearest Friend, highest wisdom and most radiant beauty -- below and above us and speaking in our own souls, we hear your whispered Word today. "It is Good." You tell us in the faithful beating of our hearts, the steady breath we share with all living Creatures, we hear you saying It is Good, it is Good, it is Good. Oh Lord our God, keep calling, that we may remember, in wonder, the unfathomable grace of goodness that is this existence, your living world. For this we pray together today. Amen.

Benediction

*Let us Stop. Let us Take Our foot off the gas.
Feel your breath catch.
Laugh in delight.
Say Isn't it wonderful? Isn't it amazing? Isn't it wondrous?
Insist that Both Both Facts and Faith Are True.
Be amazed.
Consider, in awesome wonder.
Proclaim "My God, How Great Thou Art!"
Listen, again and again, for the Words that echo
It is Good. It is Good. It is Good.*

Message

A few weeks ago, with three minutes to go on our drive to school, and running late, my six year old son Cazimer asked from the back seat “Mommy, did God make me?” His older brother Cyrus grumpily and promptly shot back with perfect and scathing certainty: “No. Mommy and Daddy made you.” With one brilliant denouncement and pronouncement Cyrus boxed his little brother’s big cosmic query into an either/or proposition, a simple matter of provable facts, case closed. And this little two-sentence exchange seemed to me to perfectly illustrate the way that the arguments about human origins often play out in our current fractured cultural climate. First there is a posed question, a point of debate, a proposal, or a hypothesis, like “Mommy, did God make me?” This is a deep question with deep implications, and it’s also a vulnerable question, laying bare internal uncertainty, unknowing, private inklings, fears and suppositions. It exposes. It’s humble. But rather than engaging that depth, rather than honoring that vulnerability and humility, these days, a pundit -- in this case, a cranky eight year old Big Brother -- barks out an antagonistic response, shuts down give and take, and aggressively steers the conversation into a black or white, yes or no framework. Meanwhile, over everything looms the sense that we’re up against a hard break, running out of time, we simply can’t dig into the weight and depth under that question; we’ve got two minutes to debate this issue, quickly unpack the nature of existence, and move on to the next thing.

With two minutes to go until I pulled into the school parking lot, what I wish I had done was gently refuse to consent to my 8 year old’s rigid dualism, respond with encouragement and compassion to the bigness of my 6 year old’s cosmic query, and encourage both of them to envision possibilities for our existence and origins that are expansive, transformative and unitive, embracing a both/and cosmology rather than an either/or ideological framework. Unfortunately, instead, with my foot down hard on the gas, I went all academic seminarian on them: I urgently defined panentheism, feverishly critiqued supernatural theism, offered a persuasive definition of the word “Sacred,” and finally, frazzled, called out “I think both are true!” at their backs as they headed into the school. Despite really not handling that too well, I actually *do* think that anything I can say this morning about the relationship between science and religion starts there, in that morning’s final stressed out appeal to a way of looking at the questions and the conflicts that insists we do not need to choose either/or. There *is* important truth in both what can be observed, what can be proven with evidence, *and* in our impulse to reach for, **to ask after**, what is beyond our capacity to prove with material evidence, what is a matter of faith. I really **do** think that both are true. Faith is a way of understanding

who we are. It is the soul's call of kinship out to the Soul of the World. It is That of God in me greeting That of God in you, and also in the trees, the rocks, and the stars, and then it is listening as you all answer. Faith is not something that rests on evidential proof -- actually proof is beside the point in this way of knowing -- ***but I am sure we cannot have faith without first being able to wonder, to ask the big unanswerable question, to stand in awe and reverence before the reality of the mystery.***

Science is a way of knowing, too. It's a practice of building together communal knowledge that rests on evidence, deductions, and the agreement that there **are** observable, demonstrable facts, and those facts are part of the Earth's commons, the mutual home of this collective, Good World. Proof *is* the point in the scientific way of knowing -- but as with faith I do not think we can have science ***without first having wonder -- without that first willingness to be awe-struck, to feel our pulse quicken and our curiosity piqued enough to ask how and why. That is the place where science and religion both start, the place where Einstein confessed to be a devoutly religious man.***

I found dozens of articles online with some variation on the title *Science Vs. Religion*, or *Facts Vs. Faith*. The perceived conflict is an old one, dating back to the theocracies of the Middle Ages, and the Enlightenment and scientific advances of the 1600 and 1700s. But because I believe that the human heart is one part of the universe which has evolved to be capable of wonder **and** of both ways of knowing, I think that the perceived conflict between science and religion is just that -- a perceived conflict. A wonder-filled, humble science and a wonder-filled, humble faith have no cause to be threatened by one another. It is only where power is sought, where weakness is feared or imposed, that threat is presumed, that supremacy is desired, and that conflict ensues.

In the class I took in January I was introduced to the fancy-sounding concept of hegemonic thinking and hegemonic discourse. I discretely googled hegemony when my professor began talking about it, and discovered that it means, basically, rule by domination, or dominance. Hegemonic discourse is the clash of hegemonies, the battle for supremacy, and my professor suggested that it is the default setting in our culture. Once we attune ourselves to the persuasion and pervasiveness of hegemonic thinking, he said, we'll start to see this kind of worldview and underlying framework everywhere. You can tell hegemonic thought by the way it perceives threats, frames all interactions as a struggle for ascendancy, and always directs conversation, sometimes subtly and manipulatively, toward commanding allegiance and consolidation of power.

Hegemonic thinking insists on dualism -- us vs. them, either/or outcomes. Both science and religion can be manipulated by this kind of narrative without their even realizing it, or they can be harnessed in service to a greater or more insidious power, or it can be built into the way that they function. This kind of thinking is behind the faith vs. facts and religion vs. science headlines. The assumption is that they both can't be true. One's gotta win, and one's gotta lose.

Though they have long been pitted against one another, one of the clearest ways that both science and religion have been in the thrall of hegemonic thinking is in the way that they have cooperated in the subjugation of and dominion over the Earth. A religion of conquest and a science in service to commodification have both been useful in shaping and furthering an exploitative, extractivist human relationship to the earth. Some Science has been persistently uncomfortable with the word Sacred, has refused intrinsic value to the material world that brought forth the conditions of life. Some Science has been loathe to admit the limits of human ingenuity, to concede that Existence itself, Being-ness itself is not ours, is of greater worth than we are capable of assigning, greater than our ability to unravel, own, and command its mysteries. Some Religion, meanwhile, has refused the holiness of this very earth, directing its energies and efforts toward the next world, and has claimed the power and privilege to place God elsewhere, separate, in *another realm, one* that matters entirely and absolutely more than this one. The result in both kinds of thinking is a world where Nothing is Sacred. And we see that a desacralized world very easily becomes a desecrated world.

There is evidence all around us that the way humans are living on Earth is compromising the planet's continued ability to support complex life. That truth is only controversial because in some quarters and ideologies, factuality is controversial. Meanwhile, if we affirm a literal reading of the Creation narrative in Genesis, the command to humans to subdue and have dominion over the earth, has, it appears, gone so well that we are, as author, educator, and environmentalist Bill McKibben wrote, "running that story now in reverse, decreating" the world that God called Good. In these days, while the Earth itself cries out for mercy, we are seeing a battle over the spoils, a war over who gets to decide what is true. This struggle is happening over both facts and faith, and in both, it is power that is at stake, it is power that is sought: the power to define what is real, and in what we should place our faith. And so, we are up against a hard break. We are running out of time. The question is before us: Did God make us? Or was it "**merely**" biologic action? Either/or! What will we answer?

Here's what I hope. I hope that First We'll take our foot off the gas. We'll look in the eyes of the seeker and thank him for such a question, which has given rise to poetry and song and stories for 10,000 years. We'll thank the scientist, the one who insists on attention to facts, which are precious, democratic, our common inheritance and responsibility, and also, often, and in this case, worthy of our reverence. We'll gently refuse the perceived conflict. We will say firmly that both are true. We'll say the fact of existence is far too wonderful to squabble about and the tragedy of failing to notice its Sacredness too big a risk. We'll say that something as wonderful as Being and Living needs both kinds of knowing, and requires all that we can muster of our facts and faith. And We'll answer yes. Yes. God -- the Sacred, something we cannot and do not own -- made us. We'll laugh in delight. And then we'll ask these crucial questions back: Isn't it wonderful? Isn't it amazing? Isn't it *wondrous*?

Whether we think it took us 6000 or 4.5 billion years to get to this moment, whether we believe it to be the result of an unearned gift from the Creator, or the spontaneous, wild cosmogenesis of eons, this moment, when the Earth's continued ability to support our existence is imperiled, is a critical moment, an evolutionary moment, a referendum on both our theology *and* the creative propulsion of 15 billion years. Whatever we name That Which Brought Forth Life -- call it God, or Evolution, or bang or fiat -- but call it Sacred. The Divine, the Ages and the Creation beg us to agree at last on that, and to remember together how to stand in wonder, how to feel awe, how to bow in humble adoration, how to proclaim, "My God, How Great Thou Art."