

It's All Alive!
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In our study of the Hebrew Bible and Christian New Testament last year, our Wednesday night Co-Ministers' class observed how deeply those writings are embedded in the culture from which they come. This year, looking at other religions of the world together with our Wednesday night explorers, we find something very similar in the sacred writings of Islam, of Hinduism, of Taoism and Buddhism and more. These religious writings tell the people of that faith who they are, what their story and purpose is. They speak about what is Holy, what I would call the deepest nature of the Universe. They describe our relationship with that ultimate power which holds sway throughout the known Universe. They do all this with images, stories, poetic language and metaphors, all springing out of the culture that gives them birth. Their purpose is not just to *tell* about the world's deepest truths, but to show.

There's another quality, too. Years ago, in a class on the Christian New Testament, a teacher said something about the difference between scriptures and writing about religion that has held on to my imagination ever since. He called scripture "a ground for an encounter with the Holy." He said that scripture offers something more than just a telling of the culture's saga, the story of their beliefs or the course of their history, the nature of their god. The greatest religious writings of the world's religious traditions are more than a way to learn about what matters most, or about how to live a good life. They are a place, an environment of meaning where we might *meet* the Holy, where it might touch our mind and heart and senses and become present for us.

We have, in these early years of the twenty-first century, knowledge about our physical universe, about our own minds, about the history of our planet and the vast system of matter and energy in which it moves, which the ancient religious sages never imagined. This doesn't mean that Holiness has ceased to exist. The historic writings still have great meaning and power, even in the context of all this new knowledge; there are truths in them which are timeless, and the Holy is still being encountered in them by many people every day. But they did not grow from the culture we live in now. Where is the scripture for our time? If by the Holy we mean, again, the deepest nature of the Universe, what language of image, of story, of metaphor and of imagination might arise from the universe as we have come to know it; what words of poetry and power might help us know our relationship to the cosmic vastness and the quantum tininess which make up the fabric of being as we understand it now?

I used to work as an editor on a college textbook for a course called "Physics for Poets." I never took that class when I was in college; it looked too technical for me. So don't worry; I'm not going to try to explain how it is that matter at the smallest quantum level combines aspects of particles and waves, or why the Higgs Boson is likely to explain how it is that objects which are

mostly made up of empty space can have mass. Yet here are just a few things we are coming to know about ourselves, about our evolutionary biography, about the incredible and highly surprising cosmos which we inhabit.

We know that all matter of any kind is made up of atoms—particles flying around within a structure that’s mostly empty space. We know that the matter and energy which we can see or describe and study directly makes up only a small portion of all that exists; most of our Universe is made up of dark matter and dark energy, which we call “dark” because, basically, we can’t find it and we don’t know much about it except that we think it must be there to account for how big everything is. We know that the physical objects around us, including ourselves, are all made of elements like calcium, carbon, oxygen, helium, hydrogen—elements which came into being at the very beginning of the Universe, gathered into clusters, burst into flame, exploded everywhere and were reformed: star dust. We, the animals, the trees, the rocks, the planet and everything on it: All star dust left over from the birth of everything. We know that life and consciousness have evolved on this planet, whether or not they have anywhere else, and have developed to the point where some of the star dust is now able to look through a telescope and describe what the stars were doing all those billions of years before they became, well, us. Gary Kowalski calls our study of the history which happened billions of years before we existed “the recovered memory of the Universe.” We are Existence studying itself.

What else? We know that *relationship* is the fundamental nature of everything that is. Not things: relationships—between particles, between atoms, between molecules, between elements and entities and individuals and families and societies and planets and solar systems and galaxies—relationships, from the smallest of things to the largest, relationships in relation with other relationships. You’ve probably heard the old story of the Westerner who was trying to undermine the idea that the Earth is resting on the back of an elephant by asking what the elephant is standing on. A bigger elephant, he’s told, but then he asks again and again until finally his worn-down tutor says: “Look, it’s no use asking any more. It’s elephants all the way down.” Well, now it appears what’s actually true is that it’s relationships all the way down.

I know I’m only scratching the surface here, and in grossly oversimplified language. We can describe an enormous amount of the great interconnected web of which we are a part in equations, symbols, and scientific language. But tell me: Do you understand all of this? I don’t, not all of it, not fully. Some of you have probably already made some notes to straighten me out on a point or two. Maybe I could, maybe we all could learn to fully comprehend at least part of it, if we studied long and hard enough.

Or we could try a different direction. In a documentary film called “I Am,” director Tom Shadyac asks a series of contemporary sages and scientists what’s wrong with the world and how we might change it. On the way he learns something unexpected: Science is now telling us something remarkably similar to what the most ancient of indigenous religions believed about

the nature of the Universe. One of the scholars he encounters tells this story about when he was 7 years old: “I was outside with this old guy, sipping ice tea, when all of a sudden he says, ‘Look at that sky, how blue it is.’ I said, “Yeah.” He says, “Look at that grass, how green it is, and how it moves in the wind.’ I say ‘Oh, yeah.’ He says now look at the dust behind the car on the dirt road over there, how it makes a big plume and then settles onto the leaves in the trees, and I say, ‘Wow, yeah.’ And then he leans in real close, like he’s going to tell me this great secret, and he says: ‘It’s all *alive*.’”

It’s all alive: That is what we are learning now about the Universe we live in.

That’s how the language of scripture works: It takes the most complex of truths imaginable and distills them into images or narratives or symbols that speak to our imagination and our heart, in addition to our reasoning mind. If the deepest nature of the Universe is what the world Holy means, then sacred writings walk us a step past comprehension, toward the reality that whatever we *understand* about the Holy, we *live in it all the time*. We cannot live without it, because it is the foundation of our life, of all life, of everything that is. The Ground of Being, as theologian Paul Tillich named it. That’s what the Holy is.

The vast majority of the worlds’ scriptures weren’t written by someone. Nobody sat down and said, “You know what? I think I’ll write a Bible today. Sacred writings collect over time, sometimes hundreds and even thousands of years, gathered tale by tale and line by line because each narrative, each line, each word speaks to us, no, sings to us from the heart of what we know as holy and sacred.

So where to look? I started with writers like Brian Swimme and Ursula Goodenough, scientists whose writing has a wonderful lyrical quality. Yet in the end their work doesn’t quite capture the quality I’m thinking of, at least not for me. They are scientists first, and well, it shows. They need to explain.

I find the power of scripture in poetry, stories, and in songs. There’s a quality of celebration in them, celebration of the complex, rich, and above all physical reality we live in, a quality of complete abandon, of delight. I think of them as Psalms—hymns of praise, hymns of lament, hymns of justice, hymns of love and hope.

Listen again to Linda Hogan: “To enter stone, be water/ To rise through hard earth, be plant/desiring sunlight, believing in water./To enter fire, be dry./To enter life, be food.”

Relationships all the way down.

When I first read the story we shared today, “Earth’s Eyes,” an old hymn kept playing back in my musical memory: “His Eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.” And suddenly I

was thinking, oh, yes—Her Eye, Earth's Eye, is IN the Sparrow; the sparrow is Her eye, and so am I. . . I know She watches me; I know She watches IN me.

It's all alive. And we, too, are alive. We are all part of the great living system, the writers of the deep ecology movement say. If that isn't Holy, what is?

Or listen again to Pattiann Rogers' beautiful evocation of where we might find the "greatest grandeur"—"the reptilian dance/of the purple-tongued sand goanna. . . solid rust-orange rock/like dusk captured on earth in stone—/ the harmonics of shifting/electron rings . . . the terror/of lightning peals on prairies or the tall/collapsing cathedrals of stormy seas. . . ." Words like these can be our "Ground for an Encounter with the Holy" in the world as we know it, the world of Charles Darwin and Niels Bohr and the Hubble Telescope and the annual migration of the Sandhill Cranes.

These are just a few; there are so many more examples. I think of Wendell Berry, of Mary Oliver, of Stanley Kunitz, of Seamus Heaney and Galway Kinnell (since it is St. Patrick's Day, after all.) I am sure you have some of your own. These are scriptures for our world, for our time.

A couple of weeks ago TJ told you about one of the preachers at the recent Unitarian Universalist Ministers' Association Institute, the Rev. Dr. James Forbes, longtime pastor at the Riverside Church in New York City. Rev. Dr. Forbes spoke of the Unitarian Universalists he encountered after the September 11 catastrophe, and how comforting their presence was. But he also said something else about us, something equally affirming but not quite as comfortable. He told us that there is a task awaiting Unitarian Universalists, a sacred task that we are uniquely qualified to do.

At a time when old rigid language about God is causing division and hatred all over the world, he said, too many traditions are clinging to the old words and creeds more tightly than ever. Meanwhile, he said, you—that's us—you have been learning for 200 years or more how to live together in a religious community where we love, bear witness to, and serve a Divine power which we cannot name. We have learned to embrace the utterly reliable companionship of a loving, compassionate, creative power which we don't ever claim to know everything about.

No one else can teach this lesson the way we can, he said. The world needs us. God needs us—well, he said, I call it God, you call it whatever you call it—it needs us. So what, he asked, are we going to do about that?

We begin by letting ourselves be deeply affected by the presence of the Power that moves the Universe, the power Dylan Thomas calls "the force that through the green fuse drives the flower." In that presence, we can begin to discover the courage, wisdom, and strength to share what we have found. We can dare to speak about what it means to live with a sense of the Holy

that is rooted in the Universe as we know it now, a sense of the Holy that grows and evolves even as our knowledge grows and evolves. We can sing a new song to a world that needs to hear it.