

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Dreams and Bones

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FIRST READING

from Carlo Rovelli, theoretical physicist and author of “Seven Brief Lessons on Physics”

When we talk about the Big Bang or the fabric of space, what we are doing is not a continuation of the free and fantastic stories which humans have told nightly around campfires for hundreds of thousands of years. It is the continuation of something else: of the gaze of those same humans in the first light of day looking at tracks left by antelope in the dust of the savannah – scrutinizing and deducting from the details of reality in order to pursue something which we can't see directly but can follow the traces of. In the awareness that we can always be wrong, and therefore ready at any moment to change direction if a new track appears; but knowing also that if we are good enough we will get it right and will find what we are seeking. This is the nature of science.

The confusion between these two diverse human activities – inventing stories and following traces in order to find something – is the origin of the incomprehension and distrust of science shown by a significant part of our contemporary culture. The separation is a subtle one: the antelope hunted at dawn is not far removed from the antelope deity in that night's storytelling.

The border is porous. Myths nourish science, and science nourishes myth. But the value of knowledge remains. If we find the antelope we can eat.

Our knowledge consequently reflects the world. It does this more or less well, but it reflects the world we inhabit. This communication between ourselves and the world is not what distinguishes us from the rest of nature. All things are continually interacting with each other, and in doing so each bears the traces of that with which it has interacted: and in this sense all things continuously exchange information about each other.

SECOND READING

from Robin Wall Kimmerer, botanist, enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, and author of “Braiding Sweetgrass”

[We humans] are embedded in a beautiful poem, written in the language of chemistry. The first stanza goes like this,

Carbon dioxide plus water combined in the presence of light and chlorophyll in the beautiful membrane-bound machinery of life yields sugar and oxygen.

Photosynthesis, in other words, in which air, light and water are combined out of nothingness into sweet morsels of sugar – the stuff of redwoods and daffodils and corn. Straw spun to gold, water turned to wine, photosynthesis is the link between the inorganic realm and the living world, making the inanimate live. Plants give us food and breath, respiration – the source of energy that lets us farm and dance and speak. The breath of plants gives life to animals and the breath of animals gives life to plants. My breath is your breath and your breath is mine. It's the great poem of give and take, of reciprocity that animates the world. Isn't that a story worth telling? The very facts of the world are a poem.

In long-ago times, it was the elders who carried sacred stories. In the twenty-first century, it is often scientists who first hear them. The stories of buffalo and salamanders belong to the land, but scientists are their translators and carry a large responsibility for conveying their stories. Science is the process of revealing the world through rational inquiry, bringing the questioner into unparalleled intimacy with the mysteries of the more-than-human world.

I dream of a world guided by stories rooted in the revelations of science and framed with an indigenous worldview – stories in which matter and spirit are both given voice.

DREAMS AND BONES

A member here told me a story. She'd been in New York with her family, visiting the American Museum of Natural History. She was in the hall of dinosaurs with the gigantic skeletal replicas and a little boy, maybe three or four years old, came in with his parents. He looked up and up and up at an animal bigger than a house, and then did what any reasonable person would do: he opened his mouth, and answered the dinosaurs at the top of his voice (in a clear, sharp New York accent), "Oh my Gawd! Oh. My. Gawd!" Everybody looked (museums are quiet), but the parents didn't shush him, anymore than you would silence a child who was saying his prayers. The person who told me this said she could hear him for a long time as the little family moved from room to room, his voice bouncing off the marble walls, "Oh my Gawd." I visited that museum many times as a young child and I know what that kid was going through. I go through it still, grow through it still, still trying to make an age-appropriate response to AWE.

A Unitarian Universalist parent, someone here, wrote once about his child, who kept waking up in the night distracted by all his thoughts of galaxies and God. His dad asked if he was frightened, and his son said, "I'm not afraid of all this stuff. But I can't sleep when my mind is so wide open. It feels just like a window and I'm flying out."

"That night there were two of us awake," said the dad, "one awash in mystery, the other simply grateful that my child is in his first grade Religious Education class, at home in the land of endless questions, where the world is round and beautiful, and the windows of the house of inquiry are open to the stars."

How do we come to believe what we think we know? What kind of church would teach its children on a Sunday, *Nobody knows. We'll never know how the world began, though we can guess, we can infer, we can theorize, we can calculate and wonder. We can look at the fossil record, measure the stars, keep asking and answering and asking more questions. What matters most is that our minds and hearts stay open, that we follow the traces and tracks wherever they lead us, that we seek the truth and speak the truth in love.*

What kind of people would sing a hymn to mystery, not in despair, but as an affirmation, as a comfort, sing the questions, live the questions, as conviction?

As Pete wrote for us some years ago, this is a Church of the Earth, with no discernable boundary at all between heaven below and heaven above.

Omid Safi, a Muslim writer, asks,

And what would it be, as Rumi insists again and again, to realize that Gabriel is inside us? That Muhammad is inside us? That the means of arriving at God, and entering into God, are already inside us? These are not external characters, but all inside us.

Our beings are like a bird with two wings. We need both wings — the intellectual and the spiritual — to soar. One wing can elevate us to God’s presence. The other — this fierce and radical divine love — gets us to enter into God’s heart.

May we soar on both of these wings. May we combine the intellectual and the spiritual. May we not settle for heaven, but aspire to enter into God’s own presence.

Stephen Jay Gould, paleontologist, called science and religion “non-overlapping magisteria,” realms that never coincide, the one concerned only with the material world and empirical evidence, the other concerned with intangibles like ethics and feelings and belief. Mostly I think Gould was right, that science is science and faith is not science, and the soul is not science, nor what the soul imagines. But we live in both worlds, we embody both worlds, and many ways of knowing truth. Like the boy in the museum, I have always been not just amazed, but moved, and sometimes even a little unhinged, by the magnitude of everything I know and everything I don’t know about this natural world; amazed and moved by the way the answer to one question opens a hundred new questions. And I am committed, not just intellectually, but morally, to this way of wondering that is called the scientific method. For me it is religion. Doubt is not cynical or weak or a sign of incompleteness; it’s a sacred obligation, an opening of doors, from the moment we’re conscious to the day that consciousness stops. Certainty especially theological certainty, feels too small, too premature for a new species like ours. In this unfolding cosmos certainty seems sacrilegious and probably unwise.

There are people who believe that religious truth exists *out there* – truth about the nature of god and human nature, the nature of nature itself, truth about the moral life, the afterlife, everything. There are people who believe that religious truth exists “out there,” unchanging and unchangeable, and our job is to discover it, accept it as sufficient, and proclaim it. But in this house religion is not a creed but a way, it’s our response to the reality of the natural - not supernatural- world – to what we see and what we can’t see, and it comes out of us as inquiry, it comes out as awe and sometimes fear, and sometimes as the ethical imagination, the part of us that has evolved enough to invent such things as justice, mercy, human rights, the moral law. Over centuries, it’s come out of us as stories, parables, mythology, theology. Religion is our response to reality and mystery, and, sometimes that response is mystical – as, for example, when a beloved person dies, and I wonder where she’s gone to, not her bones and body, but the the soul of her. And sometimes, and this is equally religious, our response to reality and mystery is data driven and precise, as, for example when year after year in Minnesota there’s hardly any snow to shovel, and the winter temperatures are high, delightfully, disturbingly, high. And people in their tee shirts say, “Isn’t this weather great?” and you say, “Um, not *really*.” The world is melting, weeping, warming, and this demands a spiritual response, as when someone

beloved is sick and maybe dying. In this case, of course, faith looks like the logic of cause and effect, it looks like science, and it is.

Robin Wall Kimmerer says we are embedded in a poem- we the humans, we the animals, together with our siblings the plants, the light, the water, the air, and the soil which is made of all of these things, plus the bones of our ancestors, and stone. She writes like a poet herself but in fact she's a biologist. She is also an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation and a mother and an activist, a woman bedazzled and enchanted whenever she goes outside. In her writing and her teaching she draws on all these intertwined identities.

She says the mechanism of the planet is a sacred poem, and the first stanza begins, "*Carbon dioxide plus water combined in the presence of light and chlorophyll yields sugar and oxygen.*" Photosynthesis is music, art, religion. For her, miracles and mysteries once called "magic" and guarded by the elders are now rightly held and interpreted for us by scientists, all these holy orders chanting their imperfect but evolving wisdom. "I dream," she says, "of a world guided by a lens of stories rooted in the revelations of science and framed with an indigenous world view." For her, science is not a cold, categorical analysis confined to the laboratory or the academy (geeky, nerdy, dull, abstract), and nor is it only a means to some entrepreneurial or technological or military end, but rather an intimate relationship. Science, like religion, puts us in our proper place. At its best, it inoculates us against hubris. It is a lens, and like any lens – telescope, microscope, sacred text – it illuminates given reality around us, within us, this reality in which we live and move and have our being. She speaks of science the way theologians speak of sacrament: an outward and visible sign of imminent and indestructible grace.

One time when I was nine or ten, I found a dead deer in the woods. This was in the days when mothers let their kids roam wild. I saw the flies feeding on its open eyes and felt the silky roughness of its coat, forgetting all those warnings never, ever to touch a dead animal, *never, not even with a stick*. A child is made for wonder, not for hygiene. I pressed my living hand against the stiff carcass, smelled the black blood, lifted up the heavy hooves. I thought about death and how deer run, how they stand among spring trees, glance up and disappear. That day I learned as much about the sacred as from all my later classes in theology.

When I say *sacred*, I mean the architecture of this radiant creation, and whatever we intuit, whatever we discover, whatever it reveals to us, of beauty, truth, and love. For me, words like "sacred" refer to the common, holy mystery of life and death. We are part of the cosmos, fragments of its holiness, and in our relation to the whole – expressed as reverence, expressed as joy, as gratitude, as prayer, and among us as compassion- the sacred is made manifest. It is the larger love which transcends our understanding, but which touches us, terrifies us and delights us, meets us, feeds us, in daily tangible, physical, material, ordinary ways.

Carlo Rovelli, physicist, says sacred stories are different from scientific knowledge, but they are related and both are necessary. Scientific inquiry is not the same as mystical devotion, but they share the same prerequisites. They require extraordinary openness, the suspension of presumptions. Science and faith (good faith) both require courage because the likelihood of being wrong is very high, in fact it is a premise of the work; you have to be brave, with a stiff backbone and a willingness to bend. To practice good science or good religion you have to want

to bend and grow. Both require solitude **and** collaboration, honoring the experiments and experience of others and building on shared knowledge; and both require integrity, because in the quest for truth, whether material or spiritual, there's just no room for deception or deceit. You need honesty because in science and religion both, denial wastes everybody's time and can be very dangerous.

Some years ago, Timothy Ferris, an astronomer, wrote a history of cosmology called *Coming of Age in the Milky Way*. He describes what happened in Europe as the "Dark Ages" descended with the rise of the Christian church, and how it happened that -- after centuries of progress in the West in the arts, the sciences, especially astronomy -- the wonderers, on pain of death, stopped wondering. He writes:

The climate grew literally colder (this was around the middle of the 6th century, in what's now called "a Little Ice Age"). The climate grew literally colder, as if the sun itself had lost interest in [the workings of the world.] The few Western scholars who retained any interest in mathematics wrote haltingly to one another, trying to recall such elementary facts of geometry as the definition of an interior angle of a triangle. The stars came down: Conservative churchmen modeled the universe after the tabernacle of Moses; the sky was demoted from a glorious sphere to its prior status as a low tent roof. The planets, they said, were pushed around by angels; this obviated any need to predict celestial motions by means of geometrical or mechanical models. The proud round earth was hammered flat; likewise the shimmering sun. Behind the sky reposed eternal Heaven, accessible [now] only through death...

That was 1400 years ago. We live now in a different time. The roof's been raised again, the world is round and wondering is back in style, in most locations. We find it hard to imagine, sometimes, that not so long ago people were tried and convicted on charges of free inquiry, executed for the offering (like a sacrament) of empirical evidence and the asking of beautiful questions. I think of Galileo imprisoned by the Inquisition, sick and dying, going blind. In 1637 (1000 years after the Dark Ages), he looked for the last time through his telescope and wrote, "This universe that I have extended a thousand times... has now shrunk to the narrow confines of my own body."

This is a different time.

In America, currently, 80% of adults believe that God created the universe. They define these vast words (God, create, universe) in about as many ways as there are stars in the sky. Their beliefs together with those of non-believers, comprise a rare and wondrous plurality. But within that same landscape, 51% of American adults, more than half, believe that God created humans in our present form, as is, out of clay - no natural selection, no interest whatsoever in the theory of evolution. About half will say with confidence that human beings did not exist at the same time as the dinosaurs, but half will say we did. One fifth of American adults -- 20% - believe that the sun goes round the earth, and not the other way around. And the climate crisis is deemed (not only by those in positions of great power, but by millions of ordinary people) to be a debatable, alternative fact, and human influence a fabrication, a modern-day mythology.

It's a moment of profound hostility to science and it has been for some time, a period willful ignorance perhaps more disturbing now than in the past because it may be based less on religious belief than on self-interest, plain and simple. It's better for the short-term bottom line that some inconvenient truths just not be called true. I wonder: when did the people in the Dark Ages start to notice that the lights were going out?

You may have read in the news about the "data rescue" efforts underway now in universities and agencies across the country, some of them Federal agencies – students, faculty, community volunteers racing to save in protected platforms repositories of research, scientific papers, websites, data and evidence scrupulously reviewed over years and years. They're worried, with justification, that it all may be deleted, so they're saving it. It is an ancient activism - it reminds me of medieval scholars rushing in the night to save the contents of a library, burying the books or smuggling them out as an army of barbarians approaches; or monks or rabbis in the mosque or monastery hiding all the sacred texts. This has happened for thousands of years, and even in our time: they emptied the museums of London during World War II, hiding all the paintings in Scottish caves, and even now, in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, curators risk their lives to smuggle out antiquities, the art, the scrolls, the music, the irreplaceable wisdom and beauty of ages. Data rescue is valiant, it's like banking the fires against the gathering dark.

Our world, the natural, immanent world, is so mysterious to us. History, so often, is written as the story of our wars, but it is also the chronicle, through centuries, of our unfolding understanding, our deepening, shared wisdom, our poetry, whether written in music or words or mathematical equations. History is the story of the human capacity for wonder, and reverence, and reason, and the terrible cost of denying these.

From Gregory Orr, a poet:

*This is what was bequeathed us:
This earth the beloved left
And, leaving,
Left to us.*

*No other world
But this one:
Willows and the river
And the factory
With its black smokestacks.*

*No other shore, only this bank
On which the living gather.*

*No meaning but what we find here.
No purpose but what we make.*

*That, and the beloved's clear instructions:
Turn me into song: Sing me awake.*