

# **White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church**

In the Beginning, Once Upon a Time

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**FIRST READING**

*from Chet Raymo astrophysicist, novelist and columnist*

All of my life has been a re-learning to pray – a letting go of incantational magic, petition, and the vain repetition, “Me, Lord, me,” instead of watching attentively for the light that burns at the center of every star, every cell, every living creature, every human heart.

Learning to pray is learning to listen with the mind and heart – making oneself attentive to each exquisite detail of the world. It is a fearsome, exhilarating task, best suited to solitude and silence. I believe prayers are answered not with miracles, tagged with our names and those of our loved ones, but answered instead with beauty and terror. For the prayerful listener, the world itself becomes the sublime scripture, full of stories of structure and chaos, law and chance, complexification and decay, including the story of the human person in whom the universe becomes conscious of itself.

I stand outside on a clear night. Now comes the time to face the ultimate questions, as one must always face them on nights like this, when the starlight soaks the ground like summer rain. The irises in the ditch stand on tiptoes to catch their share of starlight – and of neutrinos raining down, zipping through the flowers’ yellow fingers, plashing into the ground and going on to China. How do I ask the questions, pray the prayers, without sounding like a fool? I am not a philosopher. I am not a theologian. I will ask the questions exactly as I learned them as a child. Let them stand erect like the irises, my questions and my prayers:

*Who am I?*

*Why am I here?*

**SECOND READING**

Psalm 157

*Charles Harper*

find it here: <https://www.yaledivinitybookstore.com/all-together-now-pluralism-and-faith>

## **In the Beginning, Once Upon a Time**

I've been thinking about wonderment, about prayer in the way Chet Raymo describes prayer, and about how all our lives we cast our questions, our confusion, our wonder into space, we cast our sorrows sometimes, and our longing, our intentions, into outer space, toward mystery, toward God, and what comes back to us, what we reel back in, what rains down like neutrinos seeping into us, are stories, what we tell ourselves about ourselves, and what we tell ourselves about each other. Those stories hold us for a while, we walk around in those identities, those certainties, until the next thing happens, the next beautiful or cataclysmic thing, and then we ask another question. In ancient times, when people looked up at the stars they found pictures of their gods up there, images reflecting back what they themselves might be and might become. What do we find when we look up and out, or when we look within?

In Ukraine, a woman named Tatiana Kovalchuk-Skorokhodnik, a scientist, has made a makeshift planetarium out of garbage bags, duct tape and sticks. Ukraine was once at the forefront of the Soviet space program, home to research institutes and rocket factories, but all that is in decline because of war and politics. Some scientists press on with no money or government support, and Tatiana Kovalchuk-Skorokhodnik is among them. Recently she brought her mobile observatory to a camp for orphans and displaced children. She built it on a patch of grass, a black plastic dome maybe 12 feet in diameter, maybe 6 feet high, and poked tiny pinprick holes all over it, replicating the night sky, all the stars and planets that you can see in that part of the world at that time of year. The children crowd inside, leave the sunshine-y world for utter darkness in the dome (dark except for the starlight shining in) and at first they joke around and jostle and have a million questions; she tells them the names of the stars and points out the constellations. They clamor to be shown their astrological signs. She talks about satellites and black holes and the international space station – all the stuff kids like. But every time, she says, wherever she brings this plastic planetarium, the children and teenagers pretty soon get pretty quiet. They stop fidgeting; they lie on their backs or curl on their side looking up and around at all those stars, the lights dappling their faces and dancing across their bodies. One will whisper, “They’re so many.” Someone will ask, “How old are the stars?” or “How did we get here? Where does it end?”

For a little while, in the middle of a field in the middle of the day in the artificial night, they are far from the troubles of their country and our world. They’re far from whatever war is raging. They’re squashed together inside a stretched out garbage bag, holding the questions cathedrals have held, and Galileo held, and learned observatories all over the world, for hundreds and thousands of years. The space expands to hold their wonder; it breathes with their breath to hold mystery. They remember who they are.

Chet Raymo, astrophysicist, says, *All of my life has been a re-learning to pray – a letting go of incantational magic, petition and the vain repetition, “Me, Lord, me,” watching attentively for the light that burns at the center of every star, every cell, every living creature and every human heart. I will ask my questions exactly as I learned them as a child, “Who am I? Why am I here?”*

Sometimes in the winter, I lie in the dark or sit at my desk and try to imagine some wild place I've seen in the daylight in summer – the high meadows at William O'Brien State Park, some secret lake up north, a peninsula in Maine where the surf crashes on the rocks and has been doing that for centuries. I try to picture what it looks like right now, in the dark, in November, no people nearby. What's happening on the water, in the trees, to the grey stones and lichen? What birds are there? What animals? This is a kind of prayer, this attentiveness, this coming into the presence of a place by calling it to mind, because prayers are not only supplications, not only specific intercessions, not only requests to some kind of cosmic customer service hotline for stuff that we want or we need – prayers are plain wonderment, the space we make for silences and listening, space we don't rush to fill with requests and desperation and demands, but simply space for space itself, where all we do is watch and wait and breathe. As Raymo says, *the world itself becomes the sublime scripture, full of stories of structure and chaos, law and chance, complexification and decay, including the story of the human person in whom the universe becomes conscious of itself.*

We do this, make such space, take such time, not only for respite and healing, to restore our souls and rest – though these are so important. We do this – pray or meditate – not only for resting, but to make space and time for the deliberate, hard work of finding meaning, letting the stories of our lives, and their purpose take shape in our minds, and then claiming those stories, and living into them. You remember who you are, or discover who you are, in moments of reverie and wonder, and then blink your eyes open, get up, get dressed, put on your clothes and your conscience, your full identity, and live for a while as if that story were true and sufficient. If you have a daily practice, you might revise your story, or deepen it like this, every single day.

Last month, two different people here sent me two separate articles about how scientists, particularly astronomers, are asking out loud now what's going to happen when, within the next century, or possibly half-century, life beyond earth is discovered. The writers of these pieces are specifically interested in what will happen to theology. How will religious scholars and religious people generally, across a broad spectrum of faiths, cope, if suddenly – *when* suddenly – we learn that we are not alone? How will that change the stories we've been telling ourselves about the world and our own place within it? How will that change our identity? It's a fascinating question, whether you call yourself a believer or not, because all of us have been raised inside these old religious archetypes, which shape everything from literature and art to ethics, psychology, politics and government.

They interviewed theologians – Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Baha'i – who all expressed excitement when asked how their faith, their creation stories and their stories of salvation, might respond to the news that earth is not the only living world, not the only masterpiece. They share a certain confidence that their faith is strong enough, their Gods immense enough, their morality complex enough, their central story comprehensive enough, to meet any possibility. "God created *all* the worlds," they say. "The truths we hold are universal truths. They apply everywhere, to everything." The scientists are pushing gently, firmly, back, and asking, as scientists do, "Is that really true? Is that even possible?"

It's a cheerful, cosmic pluralism and it sounds great, very post-modern, but it also sounds naïve, and vaguely, uneasily, pre-modern. If the central and defining story of Christianity (as many

Christians understand it) is the resurrection story, in which Jesus dies and Christ returns to atone for human sin, how can that travel, how can that translate, beyond the realm of human life? Would it mean that all potential creatures in all potential galaxies are inherently fallen as we understand fallen-ness, and in need of redemption as Christians have defined it? If the central tenet is the incarnation, God's presence here on earth in human form, the mystical embodiment of human suffering and human love, what happens in a world where no humans have ever existed, but other life does? What is incarnation then? If the story shifts, what has to shift in us? What's our identity then?

The scientists press on, not hostile, but truly curious: if the entire Hebrew bible is the chronicle of God's relationship, God's troubled and tender relationship, to humanity; the written record of the establishment on earth of God's law, God's justice and God's mercy; the history of a people chosen above all others as worthy and beloved - what happens when even more others from elsewhere are discovered? Are the Israelites then even more exceptional? Does the premise hold, and the people's core identity, or does that all implode, like a star?

In Islam, the core intention is submission of the human will to mystery, to Allah – but here again, the stories, the very pillars of the faith, are intensely earthbound, human-centric, geographic. How can Mecca be the center of the cosmos, and how can Islam be Islam if it's not?

It's hard to find anything in western religion that would not be shaken to the core, that *will* not be shaken to the core, when other life is found. Religions, in the west at least, have not been known for grace or patience when science has revealed new truth, as Galileo knew. Typically, religious identity has not expanded as the universe expanded, but just the opposite, almost every time. Religion sometimes fears the light, and more than once in history has dragged the whole world back to darkness. I remember in seminary the dusty debates in classes on historical theology between those who believed that people in remote places, "heathen places," who'd never heard of Christ could still be saved, exceptions would be made, and those who claimed unequivocally the opposite – each side believing that they knew the truth, that they could know the truth, about such things, about whether most people on the planet were bound to burn in hell. What will happen in religion when the center shifts again, as astronomers and astrophysicists believe it surely will, and soon? What happens on a smaller scale, all the time, to our own core identity when the story all around us shifts? What prepares us to be not just fearful, not just defensive, but astonished and amazed? How large and supple and shape-shifting and wide open to the stars is your own religion, your sense of self and yourself among all others? What story are we planted in, and when did we first learn it? Was it set in stone like holy scripture, or invented, or intuited, or some swirling mix of these? How do you know who in the world, and whose, you really are? In the beginning, once upon a time – what stories define your world and you and everybody else? And whether we meet some kind of stand up, sci-fi, intelligent life form, or (much more likely), some tiny molecular smidgeon of something in some planet's water, how could we greet it not with the same old imperial, colonial, crusading habits of holy war, but begin instead with childlike curiosity? It would be good practice for how to meet each other.

I learned recently that the oldest mosque in America is in North Dakota, and it's not in Minot or Bismarck or Fargo, but way out in the middle of the prairie, built in 1929 by farmers who had come, and whose parents before them had come from places in what is now Lebanon, and what

is now Syria, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They built a little wooden mosque that's been recently restored their descendants and others in the local community, and their cemetery has been there all along, circled by an iron fence and one of those high, arched gates you see over ranches, theirs with a wrought-iron crescent moon and star. People rarely worship there now, but the town felt it was important to keep it up, in good repair, out of a sense of respect. This upended all my preconceived thoughts about Islam in in the United States and also about rural North Dakota: the oldest mosque on American soil is a flannel shirt, rattlesnake, cowboy kind of mosque, with rails to tie horses and cinder block minarets, and inside on the concrete floor, a woven carpet facing east to Mecca and skylights on the ceiling, facing the endless and eternal sky and everything beyond. At night it's bathed in starlight, and the prairie wind blows all around, remembering.

What stories do we live in and live by and claim? What becomes of us, our own selves, our old selves, when the stories that comprise us shift? So many times when I learn something new, it's as if I'd been living in a soap bubble (translucent, clear) and suddenly it pops and I realize the world I thought I lived in, the one I'd actually constructed out of my own opinions and ignorance, is small and cramped and dingy and monochrome, and the real world is large and exciting, confusing and a little scary, humbling, and amazing, and what I want to do is breathe in that new air and inhabit that new, more lovely, lively place – become, in some ways, a new person. Sometimes I'm fearful, defensive and resistant – but expansive is how I mean to be, ever open to a better, braver variation of myself.

We live in such a hard, harsh time right now. We always do and always have as humans, but these recent days and weeks have felt just like the November weather- darkening days with ice and tension in the air; our sense of hopeful possibility is narrowing these days; smallness of mind closes in, constriction of our shared imagination, and no wonderment at all. We commemorate our veterans and can barely remember a time when we were not at war somewhere on the planet. We light our votive candles, weeping for people we have never met and never will, caught in the most recent murderous, meaningless shooting – and before we know it, two more shootings have happened. I think of that plastic planetarium, with its tiny holes for light, and picture our earth like that, with all these little lights gone out, one by one, forever and for nothing: Pittsburgh, Tallahassee, Thousand Oaks.

Pull back from the earth a little more, see it suspended there, blue-green beautiful in space, and hold it in your mind like the wild space I imagined earlier. Who are those people, earthlings, and why are they there? What manner of creature could dwell in such a rare and lovely place? What story are they telling themselves and trying to convey, about what their lives are for? The novelist Chimamanda Adiche writes wisely of “the danger of a single story,” and we are learning now how to weave our separate strands together into a variegated fabric, not a melting pot ever again, but something much more wild and beautiful, something we can hold that holds us all.

A poet writes,

*They say the sounds we make  
will travel through space forever--  
through our spinning solar system,  
through the wheeling disc of our galaxy,*

*through what we imagine our universe to be,  
we can't begin to imagine.*

*They say we cannot call a sound back,  
cannot erase a sound,  
can't catch it up and change it,  
no matter how many hymns and prayers  
we send chasing after it.  
A sound goes on and on and on.*

Karen Bashkirew wrote her poem for Matthew Shepherd, a gay college student murdered in Wyoming 20 years ago in a vicious hate crime.

*Can you imagine the sounds he made, broken and bleeding,  
how they must have echoed in the clear Wyoming air...  
through the bitter night, and the whole next day*

*Can you imagine the sounds she made  
when she heard what they did to her child*

*These sounds  
are streaking through space forever.  
These sounds  
are shattering stars...*

This is part of our shared story, the hatred, cruelty, and ignorance, part of our identity, from the very beginning, this evil and this violence. Sometimes it seems like it's the only song we know, and we sing it over and over and over.

But everywhere around us, we hear a different music, equally ancient, equally true and even more true. We sing a different song; we're writing chapters all the time, drafting a new script even as we're standing on the stage. Your kind neighbor, your curious and merry child, your friend, the person here at church who knows your name, the candidates who weren't afraid, and won't be now in office, to speak about the common good. Everywhere around us and within us there breathes a different music; we sing a different song; we are trying hard to tell a different, difficult and more authentic story about who we are and what we're called to be, a better, broader, braver, more grounded human story than the one that's screaming from the news. When we forget how it goes, what it means, who we are, we lie out under stars and cast our questions. When we forget how it goes, what it means, who we are, when we forget our story, we look within and also outward to each other, all these brilliant tiny, lights, because many, many hands, small and young, old and gnarled, are holding it.

*Sing, people of Earth - Sing lustily* - says another poet, Charles Harper:

*Lift your hearts and voices  
 into far reaches of our Universe  
 Let billions upon billions of stars,  
 and planets with their circling moons,  
 hear our songs  
 Boom your music into the fury  
 of exploding supernova  
 Fling your harmonies into vast  
 unknowns beyond farsighted telescopes  
 Shout triple fortissimo into deep darkness  
 that surrounds our fragile lights  
 Chant as though our small species  
 alone, in all the Universe,  
 is able to give voice to awe,  
 terror, amazement, and praise  
 Let your songs, within a nanosecond, fly  
 Home into the heart of fathomless Mystery  
 Let our children hear this music  
 and know they are loved.*

May we hear this music, make this music, tell our separate and shared stories, as a testament of love.

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*some sources:*

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Is Your Religion Ready to Meet ET?

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