

**White Bear
Unitarian Universalist Church**

Psalms for the Event Horizon

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WHITE BEAR UNITATRIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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FIRST READING *from Anne Lamott, adapted*

I head out for church on Sunday filled with my usual mix of joy and profound anxiety about life. But church is my favorite place on earth, after the couch in my living room. In church, we don't live from our minds –we live in community, which is to say, in shared loss and hope, singing, hanging out together. We don't sit huddled together, thinking.

[In church, I remember Spirit.] What I learn in church is this: that what you're looking for is already inside you. You've heard this before, but the holy thing inside you really is that which causes you to seek it. You can't buy it, lease it, rent it, date it, or apply for it. The best job in the world can't give it to you. Neither can success, or fame, or financial security- besides which, there ain't no such thing.

What I learn in church is this: ... You may not be destined to live a long life; you may not have years and years to discover and claim your deepest truth. You have to live every day as if it's your last... because one of these days, you're bound to be right. ... The holy thing inside you is Spirit. It is not what you look like or how much you weigh, or how you do in school. You feel it best when you're not doing much – when you're in nature, when you're very quiet, or listening to music, or in church. We can see Spirit made visible when people are kind to one another, especially when it's a really busy person- like you, taking care of a needy, annoying, neurotic person - like you. In fact, that's often when we see Spirit most brightly.

In church I learn how this is done. First, find a path and a little light to see by. Then push up your sleeves and start helping. ... You don't have to be a missionary overseas. There are people right here who are poor in spirit, worried, depressed, dancing as fast they can; their kids are sick, or their retirement savings are gone. There is great loneliness among us. You do what you can, what good people have always done: you bring thirsty people water, you share your food, you try to help the homeless find shelter, you stand up for the underdog.

Rest and laughter are the most spiritual and subversive acts of all. Laugh, rest, slow down. Rest – but pay attention. Slow down, laugh – and pay attention. At my church, I do this.

SECOND READING *from Paul Murray*

Introit

This morning,
on entering the cold chapel,
I looked first
to the sun,
as the pagan does,
not by strict custom
nor by constraint, but because

I too, as creature,
 sense our primitive emotion,
 this need to praise.
 And so, like priest or pagan,
 According as the sun moves, I perform
 This ancient ritual:
 ...effaced in light, I stand
 before this chalice of the morning,
 I break this
 ordinary bread
 as something holy.

Psalms for the Event Horizon

*What we want says a poet
 is a model of the universe
 that includes everything, leaving nothing out
 Yet is completely different, fresh, unique -
 Holding nothing in common with any of its constituent elements.
 Yet is not strange, exotic and does not make us feel uncomfortable.
 ...What we want is a model of the universe that will answer all our questions.
 To which we can refer for all sorts of advice.
 To foretell the future, cure bursitis, get rich quick, aphrodisiac, etc.
 And will be absolutely foolproof one hundred percent of the time.
 What we want is a model of the universe that we can talk to ...
 And it will pat our shoulders, say "there there dear" ...
 What we want is a model of the universe we can count on time after time,
 Yet is never tiring, never predictable, eternally new.
 What we want is a model of the universe that is better than
 Someone else's model of the universe.
 That makes their model of the universe look really pale by comparison,
 ...We want a model of the universe that everyone understands...
 Where all foreign languages are actually English,
 Though they never lose their ethnic charm...
 We want a model of the universe that explains everything,
 Yet doesn't take the mystery out of anything, in fact adds mystery
 Even to the simplest of daily actions.
 A model of the universe that keeps us fit and eating delicate and healthy foods.
 A model of the universe in which we appear never overweight nor old.
 Yet we don't want to actually appear in this model of the universe.
 We want to be beyond it, holding it in our hand, looking at it from a distance.
 Yet we don't want to feel alien from it either - we want love.*

*What we want is a model of the universe contiguous with the total shape of time,
So that it neither begins nor ends, is neither something nor nothing.
...What we want is a model of the universe so complex we can never understand it.
So simple we can grasp it in a glance and explain it to our friends via a few simple sentences...*

The poet's name is Norman Fischer. He's naming, in a light-hearted way, a heavy thing: this poignant need in us, this plaintive and persistent, ancient need in humans to know, to know for sure, to grasp unknowable reality in our little, mortal fists; to *hold* (in the words of another poet) *infinity in the palm of our hand and eternity in an hour*, whether we're scientists or theologians or artists or babies just starting to put words to all the life-long, age-old questions:

*Where did this all come from?
How is it made, by what eternal hand or eye?
Why are we here?
How will it end?
What matters, and what's matter?
What does the Lord require, or common sense require, or common decency? What ought we to do?
How shall we live?*

What we want is a model of the universe that explains everything yet leaves the luminous mystery.

What we want and have always craved is a model of the universe to tell us who we are and what we are and why we are and where, and how to get along with one another and how to be happy and holy and whole. Such a model is precisely what we cannot ever have it does not exist, and yet we have to strive for it regardless, and seek after it relentlessly with heart, mind, soul and strength, with unwavering courage and utter devotion, so long as we live - whether you call that "model" the *Kingdom of God* or the *Beloved Community* or the *Unified Theory of Everything* - because this is what humans do, this is what we are: *homo sapiens*, the ones who want to know, the wondering ones, who wonder in a way I don't think my dog wonders, or worries, or the trees, or the rocks or the birds. The universe exists, and we among all the animals are here to ask questions, about how it works and how we work and why. That's a beautiful, balanced equation, a sacred trust. Sometimes we get carried away, or frightened by the absence of models beyond our own making, and so we set our theories in stone, fortify them, defend them even unto death, destroying other models, other theories and theologies and the people who build them, forgetting that our place, our role, our singular purpose among the stars and planets, and our greatest gift, is not the declaration of doctrine, not the defense of our own answers, but the asking of questions, the casting of questions like seeds.

Bob Hanson purchased the idea for this morning at the Service Auction; he bought the opportunity to slap down the gauntlet of an idea. Bob's central question, as I think I understand it, is not new; it's an old urgent question. Bob asked, when we spoke some weeks ago: *why religion?*

Do you have to have God to be religious, and if you don't need God and there is no God, why religion?

What is the historical evidence for why religions started? Do these historical conditions still exist today, and if not, why religion?

If it developed first to explain what our ancestors could not understand, and now science prevails with its evidence and explanations, its data and its proofs, why cling to tired habits?

I don't think Bob is questioning personal spiritual practice, or mysticism. I don't think he's talking about all the ways we reckon one by one with mortality and mystery, and beauty, reverence, awe, or how we're brought to our knees, often in the dark of night, by despair or fear or gratitude. He's not asking about the interior conversation that is prayer, nor the solitary world of wonder, nor even whether, as individuals, we believe in God or worship Allah or love Jesus or pray the rosary or quietly keep the ten commandments, because they're just as good as any other rules, and we set them out like little LED lanterns to lead us safely home from temptation every day, our trails of personal ethical breadcrumbs. I think Bob's asking more about Big Religion, big box religion, organized and mighty fortress institutions with their moral codes and dogma and stigma, their holy books and sacraments, and the power that these systems hold even now, thousands of years since their founding. I think Bob, who is a scientist, is asking, *what's up with that, here in the 21st century?*

A few weeks ago, along with millions of other people, I got sucked into a black hole, the one whose face was shown to us, or at least the mouth of it was shown to us, in gorgeous color, the one within the galaxy known as M87, in the constellation Virgo, 55 million light-years away from Mahtomedi. The day it was published I stayed up way too late clicking through dozens of images (really the same image, over and over) and articles, trying to learn, or relearn what maybe once I knew, about black holes, where, according to Einstein, who found them terrifying, matter, space and time come to an end and vanish like a dream; holes that swallow stars, like the whale that swallowed Jonah, or the way time, as we know it here, swallows memory and even history, after a while, into oblivion. The black hole, said one astronomer, is like a smoke-ring framing a one-way portal to eternity. They are, said another, the most exotic disrupters of the comic order, and paradoxically the most luminous objects in the universe. The international array of telescopes which captured the image, the whole project, is called Event Horizon - named for the spectacular circular rim, the fiery threshold, the horizon beyond which even particles of light cannot escape the gravitational pull. I am bedazzled and bewildered and I felt the same tingly, almost joyful but also disturbing excitement that I felt as a child gazing up into cosmology when I was just old enough to get it (and to get that we will never "get it," never grasp the magnitude), and wanting then and ever since to travel out in space and back in time and pull back the velvet curtain of the Big Bang, to ask *but what came before? And what comes next? And What. Are. We. Doing. Here?*

Standing on the edge now as we are, teetering on the rim of the Event Horizon, having seen its holy face, and knowing also it is legion, not singular, knowing in a way our ancestors did not, that space goes on and on, what song should we be singing? What prayer should we be praying? Maybe our old reverence from way back when the world was flat is still sufficient but I don't

think so. What sacred story should we be telling now to hold this truth along with all the other truths we've been gathering on the way, since we were hunter-gatherers, the wisdom we've collected all the way till now? The old gods never told us about galaxy M87 or black holes or the dinosaurs or the asteroid that came, or other asteroids that could come, or atoms you can split or atoms whatsoever, or how small our planet is, how vanishingly and undeniably small and possibly irrelevant, whether made in seven days or over many millions of years. The old gods never spoke of this, so what song would be fitting now, what psalm should we be raising? *Holy, holy, holy... heaven and earth are full of thy glory...* I can't see how this makes sense – but religion doesn't always make sense, and maybe doesn't have to.

*This morning, says a poet
on entering the cold chapel,
I looked first
to the sun,
as the pagan does,
not by strict custom
nor by constraint, but because
I too, as creature,
sense our primitive emotion,
this need to praise.
And so, like priest or pagan,
According as the sun moves, I perform
This ancient ritual:
...effaced in light, I stand
before this chalice of the morning,
I break this
ordinary bread
as something holy.*

Some things, some gestures, don't change in us, the urge to worship, for example, which means to pay attention.

Bob Hanson is interested in how religions started, how they took root after the oldest earth-based practices, the pagan rhythms tuned to motions of the sun and moon, the seasons, tides and harvest, the ways of animals, cycles of fertility and death; how the old ways, indigenous and universal, gave way to something new and louder, systematic, site-specific. Some scholars say religions grew more complicated as social systems did – that larger, more complex societies needed religions with authority to speak not just about the patterns of nature but the behavior of people: what's right and wrong, and good and bad, forbidden and required. Religion organized societies, with meaning and control, all the moral laws and codes, and priests and councils to enforce them, and scriptures to encrypt them, and temples, churches, mosques, cathedrals, wherein to teach and learn those scriptures, and calendars to worship god or many gods in circumscribed, specific ways. Such things all help the trains to run on time, or the chariots; they harness time, make meaning, bring order and structure and purpose. They all seem set in stone, but really they're evolving, in the painstakingly slow and invisible way that everything on earth evolves. However it began, I'm not sure we need to carry it all forward to the outer edges of the

cosmos as we travel on through time and space. If religion brings solace, we should keep it – not the solace of superstition, but the anchor of hope, the grace of compassion and love. If it counsels humility, reverence, forgiveness, or offers a little set of brass scales to help us balance mercy against justice, which we still haven't figured out entirely, we should keep it. If there are stories that tell us not only what God or the holy might be like, but also what we ourselves are like (which hasn't changed that much in the past two or three thousand years), we should keep those. Some people might say that these things now belong to philosophy or ethics or psychology or even politics more than religion, and maybe that's true if you care about labels. If there are rituals that anchor us, sacraments that steady us or snap us awake, prophets whose voices compel us still across the centuries to love others as ourselves, we should keep them close. But some things may be too heavy, going forward: concepts superstitious or small-minded; beliefs that belittle us; or ideals twisted out of shape, beyond recognition, by people hungry for power and wealth, or used as weapons of oppression – those can go, as can whatever behaviors or creeds may contrast now so comically and nonsensically against the discoveries of science that it's dangerous to cling to them – all of that old-time religion can go. Fundamentalism, anti-pluralism, absolutism, literalism – all of that can go.

When I read about the black hole and how they took its picture, what moved me most was how many telescopes they needed, how many instruments and algorithms on how many continents, and how many people across how many disciplines in so many countries speaking so many languages across so many oceans and ranges of mountains and sources of funding and international treaties and travel bans and customs – how exquisitely complex and collaborative and creative this project had to be. These scientists, mostly very young people, are globalists, not tribalists, not sectarians or partisans. There's something in this project that maybe shines a light on how to make religion in the future, or what to call religious – the scientific method, for example, which to me is a kind of spiritual discipline: to put aside all preconceptions and set about dismantling your own assumptions, as if your only prayer, in the laboratory or observatory, were *May peace dwell within our hearts, and understanding in our minds. May courage steel our will and love of truth forever guide us* – not love of doctrine, or dogma, or safety or the known universe, or alternative facts nor even any truism, but love of truth, wheresoever it may lead. When that private commitment becomes a covenant among persons, spoken in the plural, an ethic grounded in shared action, it can carry a religious weight, as powerful as any creed.

The human ego is a kind of black hole, sucking to its center everybody else's truth, everyone else's perspective, the event horizon of ravenous self-interest. What moved me in this international project was that no one camera could capture the image, no one astronomer could do it. They had to step back and expand over the half the surface of the planet to see the bigger picture; a singular point of view was only useful in relation to all the other points. This is also a religious way, this essential pluralism, this willing confession that your own point of view is only that, a pinprick of experience, meaningless unless it's in relation. This is a matter of science and a matter of the heart.

In her novels *The Parable of the Sower* and *The Parable of the Talents*, written in the 1980's, science fiction writer Octavia Butler conjured a future not so far from now in which the Earth is all but ruined and social structures broken down. It doesn't take long, in fiction or the real world, for people to go feral once the water is shut off. The old religions crumble with the

physical infrastructure; they go soft and are easily corrupted to subjugate desperate, frightened people. A little band of scraggly survivors imagines something more – not a creed and not a doctrine, but a way of being in relation to each other and to all others; they decide to live and act and speak in ways they would want to live and act and speak if the world were still hospitable. They keep emerging and adapting and deliberately evolving. They make a plan to leave and live among the stars; they call this the “destiny.” One young man tries to explain it to a stranger on the road:

The Destiny is important for the lessons it forces us to learn while we're here on Earth, for the people it encourages us to become. It's important for the unity and purpose that it gives us here on Earth. And in the future, it offers us a kind of species adulthood and species immortality when we scatter to the stars. We can go on building and destroying until we either destroy ourselves or destroy the ability of our world to sustain us. Or we can make something more of ourselves. We can grow up. We can leave the nest. We can become some combination of what we want to become and whatever our new environments challenge us to become. Our new worlds will remake us as we remake them. And some of the new people who emerge from all this will develop new ways to cope. They'll have to. That will break the old cycle, even if it's only to begin a new one, a different one.

I think it's never a question of whether we will be religious, but how. What covenants will hold us, covenants to one another and the living world and to whatever we call holy? What covenants will hold us, and also hold us accountable? What stories will we tell about who we are and where we've come from and who we mean to be? Will they be stories of domination, or intricate, exquisite, demanding stories of interdependence? What rituals will anchor us in time, remind us to be grateful, bless our going out and coming in? What practices can carry us, since so far, at least, it seems that no amount of knowledge, no amount of information, can ever really equal wisdom? What practices sustain us through grief and through despair? What hymns of hope and praise and gladness and astonishment could rise from a young species on a small planet peering through their telescopes at infinity and through their microscopes at life itself?

Years ago, I remember a visitor to a new member class sitting in a circle and trying to understand what we were telling him about Unitarian Universalism. He had moved with his family from Colombia, from Bogata, a sociologist. He said, “I'm trying to understand this ... religion... if it is a religion. You do not all necessarily believe in God. You do not all necessarily NOT believe in God. You seem all to be striving to believe in what God would want, if there were a God. You seem to be trying to believe in and to do what God would want, if there were a god. I can't tell if this is ancient or post-modern. But if it's true, I think I've found my church, and the church to teach my children!”

It's the same religion Anne Lamott describes:

What you're seeking is inside you. We live in community, which is to say, in shared loss and hope, singing, hanging out together. We don't sit huddled together, thinking. In church I remember spirit, the holy thing inside us, made visible when people are kind to one another, especially when it's a rally busy person, like you, taking care of a needy, annoying, neurotic

person, like you. We find a path and a little light to see by, then push up our sleeves and start helping. There is great loneliness among us.

And is this not true? Consider the cosmos, the most lonely place imaginable -and our only home.

There is great loneliness among us. There are people right here who are poor in spirit, worried, depressed, dancing as fast as they can; their kids are sick, or their retirement savings are gone. You do what you can, what good people have always done: you bring thirsty people water, you share your food, you stand up for the underdog. Slow down, laugh, rest, and pay attention.

In church, we remember spirit.