

**Religious Naturalism**  
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Have you ever pondered the infinitude of the universe? Have you ever tried to imagine what lies beyond not just the Milky Way but beyond the billions of galaxies and billions of stars? Have you ever tried to fathom just what this number actually means?( hold up) This number which is the miles in diameter of the universe as we think we know it? Have you ever had your mind then short circuit as you try and comprehend all of that?

Your mind can do the same thing when piecing together the beginnings of the universe, the beginnings of life. Every culture has its own creation story or myth. We humans have this amazing component called consciousness, distinguishing us from other life forms. That component which allows us to question and reflect, to be aware, to try and make sense of. And one of the common questions we as humans have is, “Where do we come from?” And, “How did life begin?” We also have a depth of language that separates us from the dolphin and the ape. And with our language we have created stories, stories that try to answer our questions, stories that get passed along generation to generation.

The problem in at least the Western religious world is that the stories have not kept pace with intellectual and scientific thinking and discoveries. Even though stories and myths carry their own emotional truths within them, they are not the facts, the hard realities. But if we let go of say a story in which it is the breath and hand of a God that created our beginnings, we have to be able to find a new story, something else that works for us. A story that keeps pace with knowledge, a story whose meaning not only addresses evolution but evolves itself. In the late twentieth century a priest named Thomas Berry and a mathematical cosmologist, Brian Swimme, originated the Great Story concept—merging scientific understanding with a reverence for the universe. Wrote Berry in 1978:

"It's all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we are in-between stories. The Old Story - the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it - sustained us for a long time. It shaped our emotional attitudes, provided us with life purpose; energized action, consecrated suffering, integrated knowledge, and guided education. We awoke in the morning and knew where we were. We could answer the questions of our children. But now it is no longer functioning properly, and we have not yet learned the New Story."

Connie Barlow and Michael Dowd, who were featured in the February 2005 issues of the UU World, our national publication, have taken it upon themselves to travel all over the U.S. as evangelists of "The Great Story," building on the works of Berry, Swimme, Joanna Macy, Ursula Goodenough and numerous others. Dowd is a former conservative and now progressive Christian and Connie is an atheist and scientist. Yet each come to "The Great Story" with awe and reverence, religious terms which work for both of them.

Connie and Michael and the other folks I mentioned above are a part of a movement known as "religious naturalism." Here are two definitions of religious naturalism that I found useful:

"Religious naturalists understand naturalism to be an abandonment of supernaturalism. ...It is the scientific view of the world that serves as the primary source of information about human nature and the physical environment that supports life as we know it."

*Benton Stidd*

The second:

"There are those whose sense of the divine comes most profoundly through intimate communion with the natural world. We are the religious naturalists, and we go by many names.

Distinguishing us from what is usually meant by the terms "atheist" and "secular humanist" is our insistence that we be counted among the religious of the world. Our

form of religion is no less than any other. To us, the natural world is sacred, even holy. Ultimacy is diffuse, pervasive; it includes but hugely transcends human consciousness and the human collective. Our interpretation of that ultimacy shapes our values and may fill us with an urge to live our lives in ways that serve the future of the Whole. A religious naturalist can easily celebrate mystery, for it is a truism that the more we come to know, the more we know that we do not know.”

*Jerome Stone*

Religious naturalism distinguishes itself not only from atheism and secular humanism but from pantheism and panentheism. Pantheism is the belief that God is everything and everything is God. “Panentheism is the belief that God includes the universe within God's self (or is "immanent" in the world), and God is also more than the universe.” Religious Naturalism does not need a deity nor does it need to deify the natural world. However, it finds the response of awe and reverence to the complexity and intricacy of life, nature, and the universe. Says Ursula Goodenough in her book, The Sacred Depths of Nature,

“Most religious traditions ask us to bow and tremble in deference to the Divine, to walk humbly with thy God. Religious naturalism asks that we locate such feelings of deference somewhere within the Earthly whole... Religious Naturalism re-enchants the world.”

Religious Naturalists “find our sources of meaning within the natural world, where humans are understood to be emergent from and hence a part of nature. Our religious quest is informed and guided by the deepening and evolving understandings fostered by scientific inquiry. It is also informed and guided by the mindful understandings inherent in our human traditions, including art, literature, philosophy, and the religions of the world. The natural world and its emergent manifestations in human creativity and community are the focus of our immersion, wonder, and reverence.

We acknowledge as well, a shared set of values and concerns pertaining to peace, justice, dignity, cultural and ecological diversity, and planetary sustainability.”

What links all these religious naturalists together is what Goodenough calls a meta-narrative, a great story. She believes that it is *the* missing story for Unitarian Universalism: the great story of life beginning. All else flows forward from this story. All else becomes something, as she would say, out of nothing through the process of evolution. Goodenough concludes her book saying:

“Humans need stories-grand, compelling stories- that help orient us in our loves and in the cosmos. The Epic of Evolution is such a story, beautifully suited to anchor our search for planetary consensus, telling us of our nature, our place, our context. Moreover, responses to this story- what we are calling religious naturalism- can yield deep and abiding spiritual experiences. And then after that, we need other stories as well, human centered stories, a mythos that embodies our ideals and our passions. This mythos comes to us, often in experiences called revelation, from the sages and artists of past and present times.”

Let me try and explain this great story in very simplified terms.

In the beginning there was physics and chemistry, hydrogen and helium ! 13.7 billion years ago all energy as we know it was, depending on who you read, either the size of a pinhead or a basketball. It was hot and dense. In a moment that has been called “The Big Bang” but which folks like Connie and Michael have reclaimed as “The Great Radiance” or the “Primordial Flaring Forth,” this pinpoint or basketball expanded. In the first 3 minutes, the process of high energy physics yielded subatomic particles. Protons and neutrons formed helium ions. As space expanded and cooled, matter was let loose and attracted by the force of gravity formed lumpy gaseous clouds. As they collided and emerged, protogalaxies formed and differentiated. Stars formed, burning hydrogen and helium and when collapsing, atoms. Billions of galaxies and stars were born. Tiny specks of matter called interstellar dust, the molecular building blocks for what would become earth emerged. 3.8 billion years ago life arose in deep-sea hydrothermal vents. The water that seeped into the Earth’s mantle was heated up, circulated back into the cold oceans and created an energy flow. 3 Billion years ago a common ancestor to all life forms on

earth emerged, three kinds of forms, one of which was bacteria, all of which contain similar DNA.

Most atoms interact with one another -that is chemistry. As they interact, they generate opportunities for emergent properties. The phenomena that Ursula Goodenough calls “from nothing, something.” These useful emergent properties are then remembered and passed along in gene encoding- mutations if you will. Goodenough says that emergence is a potent form of creativity generating increased complexity in life, that emergence bridges non-life, life, and the mind.

We humans did not arrive on the scene until approximately 2 million years ago. We owe our ancestry to the chimpanzee and the bonobos. In fact, we share 98.7 % of our DNA with them. (As an aside we share 75% of the same genetic material with pumpkins so think about that before you smash a pumpkin on Halloween.)

And, as Connie Barlow likes to remind us:

“Almost all the atoms of **HYDROGEN** within water, within our bodies, and everywhere else on and within Earth are more than 13 billion years old. If many of the atoms within us are 13 billion years old, and as "we" are our bodies, not just our minds, then, in a way, **WE TOO ARE 13 BILLION YEARS OLD.** Almost all of the **HELIUM** was formed at the birth of the Universe by the fusion of hydrogen and the free neutrons. **ALL THE OTHER CHEMICAL ELEMENTS** were forged from the primordial hydrogen and helium by **nuclear fusion inside of stars** that flared forth and died before our Sun was born. We are recycled stardust.”

To put it on a more poetic way:

"I stand here on the Cosmic Uroboros (the ancient symbol of the dragon or snake swallowing its own tail) midway between the largest and smallest things in the universe. I can trace my lineage back fourteen billion years through generations of stars. My atoms were created in stars, blown out in stellar winds or massive explosions, and soared for

millions of years through space to become part of a newly forming solar system — my solar system. And back before those creator stars, there was a time when the particles that at this very moment make up my body and brain were mixing in an amorphous cloud of dark matter and quarks. Intimately woven into me are billions of bits of information that had to be encoded and tested and preserved to create me. Billions of years of cosmic evolution have produced me."

Or, as Barbara Marx Hubbard has written:

"Our evolution has been an awesome journey of fifteen billion years. Every entity that ever moved or swam or crawled or flew, every being that lived to reproduce itself, all the vast numbers of species now extinct and presently living who have invented the amazing capability which we have inherited as our eyes, our ears, our organs, our very atoms, molecules and cells — all of those preceding us are represented in our emergence now. We bow down in awe and gratitude for the past. Without all that came before us, none of us would be awakening now!"

We human beings are, in the words of one writer: "the universe become conscious of itself. We are the cantors of the universe."

One of the critiques of religious naturalism is that is a form of reductionism: picking everything apart and reducing everything to science. Goodenough talks about explaining a brilliant sunset in terms of explosions and nuclear fusion versus talking about exploding color and the lingering fingertips of God in the colors of the sunset. If I describe to you in vivid prose a sunset I have witnessed and you then reply, "Well, you know Lois, all you are really talking about is nuclear fusion," then you are practicing reductionism. However, if you say to me, "Yes and you know what causes what you just described ..." then I would say you are practicing religious naturalism. One should not negate either poetry or the science. Either explanation or observation can amaze us. Goodenough makes the case that we cannot romanticize nature until we recognize how it works. And she says, understanding the workings of nature does not reduce it but rather evokes, you

got it, the response of awe and reverence. For her, so-called reductionism actually reveals the spectacular, the miraculous, the spiritual, the religious.

If you attend one of Connie Barlow's and Michael Dowd's workshops on the Great Story, you will learn that the Great Story is a changing story, changing with each new scientific discovery, and that it is a creation story that is not over. If you attend one of Connie and Michael's workshops, you will not find yourself singing, "All Things Bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small, all things wise and wonderful, our dear God made them all." You will find yourself singing a new chant with these words: "We are made of stardust, every single atom, of carbon and oxygen, calcium and iron." The great story hymnody has yet to catch up with other creation stories but the, "We Are Made of Stardust" chant is larger than a theology. It is about a cosmology, connecting us to the universe that is in itself worthy of awe and reverence. And connection lies at the heart of religious naturalism. "Everything we are and do is completely connected to the rest of the world. Our bodies and minds are shaped in their entirety by conditions that precede us and surround us. Each of us is an unfolding, natural process, and every aspect of that process is caused, and is a cause itself."

Religious Naturalism fits a lot of what I hear in UU circles. It gives a name other than "atheist" to its practioners and it invites theists as well to claim it. It provides us with all with a story of creation that is scientific as well as full of awe and reverence.

I want to end by showing you a few pictures. One is the famous cover of Life magazine from August of 1965. The second are photos from the Hubble. And I ask you to see if you can see the connection. If you can see that we are all, "recycled stardust."

**POEM: "All My Life"**

All my life I've wanted to believe in God,  
gone to church, followed every spiritual teacher in town,  
meditated and prayed, attended 12-step programs,  
but still I felt abandoned and alone in the universe.

All my life I've wanted to see the face of God.  
Is he really just a mean old man in the sky?  
Perhaps God is a chubby Buddha,  
or maybe the Dalai Lama, always laughing.  
Or is She a woman, the green Tara, weeping pearl tears,  
the Virgin of Guadalupe, crowned with roses?

All my life I've tried to solve that old mystery,  
Who are we? Where did we come from? Why are we here?  
Then one day I saw the pictures  
sent back by the Hubble Telescope:  
Hot blue stars born out of the red glow of galaxies,  
a pulsating firestorm of fluorescent clouds,  
the obsidian sky of deep space.  
Spirals of comets, like swirling diamond necklaces.  
Black holes, exploding supernovas,  
a hundred thousand light-years away,  
endless, unimaginable, eternal.  
And I knew that finally I had seen the face of God.

— **Joyce Keller**

