

Sacred Cosmos

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"The Journey" – a film produced by the Foundation for Global Community

I hope you found that beautiful. Majestic. Awesome. Debbie Mytels, our member and part of the Foundation for Global Community, made it available to us.

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"In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." The New Revised Standard Version of our most common creation story "In the beginning . . ."

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Human beings have a yearning to know how we came to be, how creation came to be, how we fit into the whole of things. We will have a story that anchors us. The story we just saw, "The Journey," is our newest common story with images from the Hubble telescope. Did you notice the language? Deep mystery. Billions of years and stars. Spirals. Miracle. Responsibility for the future.

We need reassurance that we are somehow connected and that our lives matter. That we are not left out or left behind, that we have some importance. I think these are the universal elements of a creation story, although the iterations are infinite.

Perhaps you were able to hear the wonderful presentation that Geri Kennedy made this summer on creation myths. Our psyche demands a creation story that anchors us in the universe and allows us to see our link to mystery and purpose. We are part of the unfolding of a great thing. Different metaphors but the same longing. And we don't change our story easily.

We are formed by our story of creation, whatever it is. It captures or even generates our world-view, from which we make our moral choices and live our everyday lives. Our world-view is basic to who we are and how we behave and how we make decisions.

There is no such thing as common sense. Everything we "think" comes out of our world-view. I'll be talking about this much more as we explore moral politics. Our basic stories are so much a part of us that usually we can't even see them. But, they make us who we are. And our most basic story concerns who we are in the universe, our creation story.

When I first saw this film "The Journey" at the Foundation for Global Community, it was being taken to the Parliament of World Religions in Barcelona this summer. I wondered how it would play to people with other creation myths from all over the world. A couple of people that I spoke with on the day I saw the movie seemed sure that, in the face of this evidence, a new cosmic story would quickly be adopted. I remain unconvinced. For whatever needs we have inside us; we don't switch creation myths easily. Even in the face of what we'll euphemistically call hard evidence.

A hundred years ago, a great philosopher was explaining creation. Some say it was Bertrand Russell, some say Henry James, but as he finished his presentation about cosmology, a tiny ancient woman came forward.

"You can't fool me, Sonny," she said. "The earth is flat and lies on the back of a turtle."
"Ah," said the great philosopher, "but what does the turtle rest on?"

"Why, on the back of another turtle!" said the woman.
"And what does that rest on?" asked the philosopher.

"You can't fool me like that, Sonny," replied the woman. "It is turtles all the way down."

Turtles all the way down.

For a few thousand years, western civilization had a view of the universe that was built from the familiar biblical image I began with today. God created the universe and we are God's most magnificent creation. We are at the top, only slightly lower than the angels. We are at the top of the pyramid of creation.

After the Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the enlightenment happened and many people stopped believing in miracles altogether. We are, as academics say, "post-enlightenment." Science, not the Bible, created that pyramid and we told the story differently. We told the story differently, but many of us continued to really, deeply, believe that we were special in the universe — or at least here on earth — and that we had dominion over all other life.

If we believe in turtles all the way down, we take new information and make it conform to our old story. It is very hard to give up the story that formed us. It is very hard to actually see the story that formed us because it is in us so deeply and so early that it is hard to distinguish. Fish can't describe the water they swim in.

Astronomers had been figuring things out. Galileo Galilei. And others. You know their story. Mostly they were martyred, or at least silenced by people who were holding fast to their own familiar creation story. The institution of the church did what it could to kill the new stories. Big thinkers have always intuited that if you change your creation myth, everything will change and they appreciated the danger of destroying the story that civilization and institutions accepted.

In the middle of the 1800s Darwin sailed around on a ship called the Beagle (I've always liked that name) and published a new story of life called "The Origin of Species." A critical mass of people were now post-enlightenment thinkers. Lots of ordinary folks were questioning the biblical creation myth and Darwin's work drove a huge wedge into common culture. Darwin was not the first one to have a wedge, but rather wrote in a time when there were lots of wedges and finally the balance was tipped. Half of the world turned upside down.

Within about a hundred years, intellectuals mostly all subscribed to the idea that people and intellect were the key. That science would open all the doors of understanding. That eventually, human systems could be perfected. We called it Humanism. And the period was called "Modern." It was brimming with hope. We believed we could actually arrive. Life was perfectible.

We'll, it didn't work out quite that way. Less than a decade after the first Humanist Manifesto was signed, we had a terrible world war. Nothing was perfected. Nothing was even close. Another couple of decades and people lost heart. The "modern" story was not going to solve all the issues of being human. We now became "post-modern."

If you are dazed and confused and experience considerable unease, you are doing post-modern really well.

One way of understanding this period is that there is no creation story that we recognize as sufficient to our learning and experience. We feel lost. We suffer existential angst. We are unable to find a place of comfort without a good story to anchor us.

Here we are in this un-tethered, free falling, undirected "What's it all about?" era. No wonder many are gripping more tightly to their ancient core story. No wonder fundamentalism has huge appeal. Not having a good story is miserable. As that poem by Stephen Dunn says, "You can't say Evolution loves you! The story stinks of extinction and nothing exciting happens for centuries."

Let me talk a little more about what it is to be un-tethered. It is not, after a little while, a great exhilaration of feeling free. It is more about feeling lost. We have tastes of this in our own lives when a new realization brings us to the end of an era and we have to let go and step into something unknown. Perhaps you outgrow a job. You've been contented, even happy in a certain job for a long time and you become aware that you no longer fit. The company has taken a turn, or a new manager has another vision, or you outgrow what had been satisfying. You know the feeling. Over time, more and more events prove to you that you are not where you should be. If you listen to these signals, you will begin preparing for letting go. If you don't, I believe that the signals will get bigger until you are forced to see them. Eventually, if you don't choose to leave the work you are doing, the company is likely to ask you to leave. The fit doesn't fit.

So whether by planning or force, you find yourself out of that work. Or out of that relationship. Or out of that home. This next period is the most fertile and creative you can be in. It is also that most uncomfortable. You have let go of one trapeze and it feels as if you are swinging out over the abyss without a sure chance of safety. This is the interval of re-evaluation and soul-searching that serves our lives but feels awful.

I have a belief that the longer you can stay in this freefall without prematurely clutching at something, the more likely it is that you will eventually catch the right trapeze for your new life. Consider people who break off a relationship and re-attach almost immediately. It is rarely the right fit. Most likely the way that is most familiar is replicated and we already actually know that it won't work for too long. Having the courage and stamina to stay in the messy fall "for as long as it takes" is a sign of health. Stay instead with all the anxiety until something feels truly right. I think this interval lived honestly is what allows us to choose the life we should be living and not settle for only safety . . . although safety is part of the equation, especially if you are responsible to others.

Now, how do you notice when you have found the new story? I think there is a buildup, just as there was as the old story or old way of life was being left behind. Cues. Moments of clarity. Moments of revelation. Gradually, we wake up to what fits and we are set for another period, another era. When we finally see, it seems goofy that we did not see earlier. It seems so right and as if it had been here all along.

My mom was born in 1903. She loved the twenties. The music, the Charleston and football games wearing great fur coats. Great hats. Dresses all the way up to her ankles. Read F. Scott Fitzgerald and that's the image my mom carried and painted for me. Oh, I thought, "Wouldn't it be wonderful to live in a time with all of that style? A time with such vivid imagery?" As I was thinking this, I was growing up in the Fifties. The Fifties. My friends wore felt skirts with poodles on them. Rene Blass, the rich girl in my class, had twenty sets of matching cashmere sweaters. I regularly went to the Varsity, the drive-in with carhops that trotted to the car and took the order. The Fifties. Elvis. Rock and Roll. Chuck Berry. It wasn't until "Happy Days" came on television that I began to see the time I had lived in. When you are in your life, it is hard to see.

We've been living in a messy and uncomfortable post-modern unknowing. The old stories no longer serve. The idea of a sky god who created everything is not sufficient to hold our imagination. Even if we played with words, like a week being a metaphor, that story is too conflated with all of the other sky god images that we reject. The angry and vengeful God. The god written to evoke images of a great ruler.

In seminary, I was very surprised to discover that most of the Christian seminaries moved right past the particularities of these ancient stories. The miracles of neither testament required literal belief. They were less important to faith than a more profound connection to the sacred. To the experience of Awe and Mystery. Not all churches teach this of course, but those liberal seminaries up on Holy Hill in Berkeley shocked me with their openness to post-enlightenment understanding.

Humanism as it was understood in 1933 is flawed. It has human potentiality rather than a sky god at the top of the pyramid, and I think the essential flaw in that is that there is no pyramid.

I suspect that one of the reasons that Unitarian Universalism is not growing is that we have not been able to tell a "new story" to bind us together. But now it is here. And has been. Just this week I noticed that water I have been swimming in. We have been swimming in. It is the Deep Ecology story, and I truly believe it will come to dominate all the other stories after this period. And I think our denomination is the one to articulate this sacred story into religious community. It has everything. It is grand and magnificent and full of wonder. It addresses our place in the cosmos and our responsibility. It addresses salvation and redemption and purpose . . . all of those required elements of a creation myth.

Now, I don't know if this is the final story. Who can say that? It is true that we can now be more reflective about these things and guess that nothing will last forever, but it is a darn good story and I think will serve us for an important length of time.

Deep Ecology. In one sentence I can name it, and have been naming it as long as you have known me. "We are all in this together."

Everything is all in this together. What we call inanimate particles change their behavior if we look at them because we are all in this together! Not only what we do but what we think

affects the cosmos. Everything we do actually matters. We may no longer say that God loves us, but we can say that the cosmos is different because we are here. Everything is different because each of us is here. Talk about the need for fidelity to principles! Each thought we have is a new creation in the world. The butterfly effect. We are engaged in the great dance of life; we are part of a system, a network, which includes everything else.

I know the time is short for this sermon. But I am spilling over with ideas. Ideas you've heard before but I didn't see them as part of a coherent creation story! I'll list a few. The new story is that we are all part of the system or network. Ethics and physics are intertwined. Treating all of creation as holy, including ourselves, will change the world. Realizing our selves, our truths, is our part of the great creation, and is the great work for us in this new era. Self-work matters but not as an end in itself. It matters because it is our responsibility to Gaia and the universe. The further along the path we go, the greater will be our compassion and the greater our desire to help others. Self-realization therefore doubles back into the world and is not about transcending the world. Seeing our connection feeds us. Alienation kills us. It is imperative that we move toward what is different. Not try to change it, but to learn about it. Power will come from building relationships. As we more deeply understand our interconnectedness, so our obligations to each other and the planet will become clearer. It is a holistic vision, a process theology. It is an essentially religious view. Our sense of purpose to each other and the natural world will define our morality.

As the astronauts left earth and could see our small blue-green planet, each one said, "It is so beautiful." The first day, as the globe of earth rotated in space, they said, "Look there is my country!" Then, "My continent!" In a short time, as their view widened, they said, "Look, there is our home, the Earth."

May we continue to grow in care for this earth which brought us into the story of creation. We are integral parts of this glorious, miraculous, bountiful, astonishing, cosmic creation story.

Blessed be.