

Life, Death, Salvation? Do UUs and Religious Naturalists offer any wisdom to help us face the looming environmental crisis?

This past week as I was grumbling out loud about preparing for this topic, my husband asked me why I had selected it. There are two reasons. First, when Janelle Gray introduced us to Ursula Goodenough and Religious Naturalism a couple of years ago, I wanted to hear more. Second, the urgency of global warming and habitat destruction is always on my mind, and I'm sure that's true for most everyone in this room. I don't have to convince you that there's a problem. Our nerves are already raw and I will proceed as gently as I can.

Let's start with the easy stuff: life and death. As you know, most UUs don't put much stock in the idea of an afterlife. I heard a UU sermon 25 years ago that was entitled "Life Without Warranty," and the phrase has remained in my memory ever since (and I can say that about few other things). UU don't accept the promise of future comforts that some religions offer, but search instead for our own unvarnished truths. No bargains, no carrots, no threats of eternal damnation, no compulsion to tithe. We're on our own, heaven is here on earth, and when our individual life is over, it's over. Although Christians see eternal life as the reward for accepting Christ as their Savior, UUs see life on this earth as the payoff, and the price we pay for it is our death. E. Forrest Church described religion as "our human response to the dual realities of being alive and having to die." And its corollary: "The goal of life is to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for." The fact that this life is what matters drives the UU ethic that everyone should have the best possible life. We don't have a personal god to turn to, asking Him or Her to level the playing field so that every one has a chance. Nor do we excuse our relative advantages by reasoning that everyone gets the chance they deserve. Instead, UUs believe it is up to all of us to look out for those who suffer from injustice, inequality, and the absence of compassion (our second principle). Our awareness of the interconnected web spreads our responsibility even

further. We share the fate of the whole biosphere (seventh principle) and seek the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all (sixth principle). We are the “keepers of the kingdom,” because we are the only creatures to have developed an intellect, a technology, and a moral system that identifies our unique responsibilities. The buck stops here on this earth, with each of us. Although UUs put no stock in an afterlife, I will return to the issue of salvation later in this presentation.

Our UU living tradition draws from six sources, including humanist and spiritual teachings. The humanist teachings counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit. Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature. These sources align us with many of the elements of Religious Naturalism. Thanks to science and our current understanding of the expanding universe, we have to accept not only our individual death, but anticipate the end of all life as we know it on this planet. If things go well, and we can turn around global warming and the extinction of species, scientists tell us that we might have another half billion years or so, but life on Planet Earth will not go on forever. Even though a half-billion years might seem like a good buffer, there are those among us—and we know who we are—with such advanced capacities for rumination that we will feel discouraged by the impending doom five hundred million years off. And that discouragement could get in the way of our salvation.

According to Michael Cavanaugh (a spokesperson for the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science), one of the goals of Religious Naturalism is to “formulate dynamic and positive relationships between the concepts developed by science and the goals and hopes of humanity expressed through religion.” As a follow up to Ronn Smith’s eloquent presentation last week, I’ll also mention here that Cavanaugh believes that a humble and

uncertain mind-set is a pre-condition for other religious values that Religious Naturalists affirm, such as awe and wisdom.

Another Religious Naturalist, Loyal Rue, has written on the subject of religion. He notes that religion is not about God, but is about us—our needs and aspirations. According to Rue, there are certain basic requirements for any religious worldview that is destined to last. The major religions that have endured for millennia all have the same characteristic: They start with a simple story that has to show what is, and then link what is to what matters. Put another way, the story has to show how a cosmology connects to a morality.

When these merge together, the latter acquires the force of the former. This process “renders the real sacred, and the sacred real.”

Successful religious traditions use five ancillary strategies to support their central myth (intellectual aesthetic, experiential, ritual, and institutional) and integrate it with their morality. These strategies insure that the individual encounters the myth and morality repeatedly, cementing them in the culture and individual consciousness.

Rue notes that our general culture has yet to develop the strategies to strengthen and reinforce the assertion of natural values without referring to realities outside of nature, but believes that eventually we will come to see nature itself as our object of ultimate concern. He writes,

“...naturalists universally accept that the real is natural and the natural is real, but *religious* naturalists will be known by their personal responses to Nature. It will be the work of ancillary strategies (those supportive structures to religion) to instill a pattern of eco-centric piety by shaping attitudes and educating the emotions. Religious naturalists will then be known by their reverence and awe before Nature, their love for Nature and natural forms,

their sympathy for all living things, their guilt for enlarging ecological footprints, their pride in reducing them, their sense of gratitude directed toward the matrix of life, their contempt for those who abstract themselves from natural values, and their solidarity with those who link their self-esteem to sustainable living.”

Rue describes two chief crises that may get a faith in trouble: plausibility and relevance.

“Intellectual plausibility becomes a crisis when a people no longer take seriously a religion’s chief claims about how reality works. For example, a literal reading of Genesis, where God creates the world in six days, is no longer plausible for many today.”

“Moral relevance reaches a crisis when a religion’s claims about how we ought to live no longer function, or lead a people off a cliff. Without adequately encouraging sustainable living, many religious institutions are leading us dangerously close to an ecological cliff. What must evolve in days to come are religions that bias our goal hierarchies toward ecological integrity.”

It seems that UUs are well on their way to seeing nature as our ultimate concern while many religions have bogged down in implausibility and irrelevance.

I’d like to turn next to the work of Joel Primack and Nancy Abrams. Primack is a leading cosmologist and one of the principal creators of the modern theory of the universe. He and his wife have written two books, exploring the cultural and social implications of the scientific understanding of the universe, and to advance a view of humanity’s place in the cosmos. They explain that the book is not about science, but about us, and what we as a species need to do with the new understanding of where we are in time and space,

particularly as it concerns climate change and unsustainable growth. Although they don't use Rue's words, they express hope that their work can help create a transformation in the cultural understanding of our unique human place in the universe, resulting in a cultural shift that will impact our global future.

The last time Western culture shared a coherent understanding of the universe was in the Middle Ages. For a thousand years, Christians, Jews and Muslims shared the belief that the earth was the center of the universe and all the planets and stars revolved around it. On earth itself, God had created a place for every person, animal and thing. When Galileo and other scientists discovered a new reality, the cosmic hierarchy lost its credibility. The old organizing principle of the universe was replaced with the Newtonian picture: a universe of endless emptiness, randomly scattered with stars, and our solar system in no special place. Primack explains that this picture was not based on evidence but was an extrapolation from Newtonian physics. The physics accurately explained the motion of the solar system but not the entire universe. The modern world has so deeply absorbed this bleak picture that it seemed like reality itself.

The new picture that has been revealed to us more recently has changed dramatically, and the possession of this new picture is a gift so unusual in the history of humanity that most of us don't know what to do with it. Primack and Abrams exhort us not to minimize our extraordinary place in the cosmos or under-value the immense privilege it represents.

Most of us have grown up thinking that there is no basis for feeling central or even important to the cosmos. But with the new evidence it turns out that this old perspective is nothing but a prejudice. There is no geographic center to an expanding universe, but we are central in several unexpected ways that derive directly from physics and cosmology. This is not a made-up story—our

centrality in this story should cause us to think, and perhaps to hope, and change.

Here are some of the ways in which we are central:

1. **We are made of the rarest material**—stardust. All the stars, planets, gas, comets, dust, and galaxies that we see—all forms of visible matter—make up around one half of one percent of what's out there. The rest is Dark Matter (25% of everything) and Dark Energy (70% of the density of the universe). The trace bit of stardust associated with intelligent life is vanishingly small. Our kind of matter does not take up much space or contribute much to the total density of the universe, but it contributes out of all proportion to the richness of the universe.

2. **The size of a human being is near the center of all possible sizes.** If we were much smaller we would not contain enough atoms to be sufficiently complex, and if we were much larger we would suffer from slow internal communication (limited by the speed of light). We occupy the area in the size scales where gravity operates and electromagnetism works (so that chemistry works and our bodies function). This central position of all possible sizes in the universe allows for the development of a brain that can conceive of the universe.

3. **We are living at the midpoint of time in four different ways. How does our moment fit into the larger scale of cosmic time?**

a. **It took the cosmos billions of years to create the planet and billions of biological years of evolution before a species came along with science and technology enabling us to see the most distant galaxies.** Space is expanding. Never again will there be so many galaxies within view. We are in a sort of golden time in the history of the universe.

b. We live in the middle of the solar system's existence. The Solar system was formed about 4.5 billion years ago. In another 6 billion years it will be swallowed up. We are living at the very best time to exist near the sun (in a zone not too hot, not too cold, but just right). In another half billion years the sun (which continues to get steadily warmer) will burn off the water on earth.

c. Carbon Dioxide in earth's atmosphere has been stable over the past 2,000 years (at about 275 ppm). CO₂ level hasn't gone above 300 ppm for at least 800,000 years (now about 375 ppm). The total concentration of CO₂ has been doubling every 30 years since the beginning of the industrial revolution (about 1800). At present the amount that humans are contributing to the carbon level is shooting up almost vertically. Mankind now has an enormous effect on CO₂ levels, and levels will increase by a factor of 8 by the end of this century. Up to now, societies haven't grasped the immense length of time our present actions will affect.

d. Our generation is the first to know the REAL human origin story. Cosmology has given us a brand new multi-billion-year-old identity. Society now has the tool to understand the impact of our present actions. The key to visualizing the future is to realize the symmetry between the long-term past and the long-term future.

These and other forms of centrality have each been a scientific discovery, not an anthropocentric way of reading the data. Prescientific people always saw themselves at the center of the world, whatever their world was. They were wrong on the details, but they were right on a deep level: the human instinct to experience ourselves as central reflects something real about the universe, something independent of our viewpoint.

According to Primack, the widespread cultural indifference to the universe is possibly our biggest handicap in solving global problems. We can change quickly not by learning facts but by a spiritual awakening, which is possible and transformative. This is how people fall in love, practice recovery. The key to understanding our future is to understand the multi-billion year history of our existence. We have libraries full of creation stories and a culture of skepticism. Without a believable story to explain our world, people are unable to think about the big picture. Without it, we are very small people. We need mythic language to talk about the meaning of our universe. Shepherding ourselves through the changes happening on our planet will require tremendous creativity. An essential ingredient may be this cosmic perspective.

We live at a time where we have this great new creation story of how our earth was formed and how we ended up being a part of it. No one wrote it, but we have a role to play in determining how it will end. We are the intelligence of the planet that can see how we are fouling it and hastening its destruction. That's a pretty compelling plot, but how do we get enough people onboard to craft a new ending? Recall Jeffrey Lockwood's caution that we will probably not live long enough to see how this comes out. So the more appropriate question might be, how do we sustain our energy and efforts over the long haul when we won't see the results? And what does this have to do with salvation?

Alone, we get exhausted, lose hope, feel powerless. Together we are reminded of being part of a great tradition. In our work to bend the long arc of the universe toward stewardship, justice and compassion for all life on this planet, we will need to be in community to give one another strength and courage.

Where do we as a community start? Fortunately I think we're already underway. We've been doing this work for a long time, although in fits and starts. Let me give you a recent example of a rapid change right here at home.

In the past few months we've gone from a formal program every other Sunday to one every Sunday. The Worship Committee was the same size as usual, but two critical things happened:

1. Janelle said, "Why don't we just do away with the Alternate Sunday and do a regular program every Sunday?"

We eventually agreed to do it, but to make it work we needed one more critical element. And then,

2. Amy thought for a while and said, "What the heck, I'll do RE every Sunday."

After that happened, many people jumped onboard to take on some extra things—more music (we have our UU band, as an example). There was some grumbling, and we still have some problems to iron out, and some presenters to recruit but do you see a change? Does it seem like there has been a synergistic bump in energy in the past two or three months? Do we seem more like a presence in the community? I think we do.

We need to keep building ourselves to be a strong, resilient positive force for change and renewal. A place where people can come to network, plan, and launch their works for justice, equity, compassion and stewardship, and where they can return to rest and seek respite and comfort when they become dispirited. UUs have been at this work longer than many, and there will be

seekers who will need models for the patience, optimism and resilience that we have to provide.

I was touched by Jeffrey Lockwood's talk on "Accommodation and Defiance" two weeks ago, and his quotation of Dylan Thomas' "Rage Against the Dying of the Light." We are faced with a painful dilemma that threatens to diminish the moment-to-moment joy that life can offer. Together I think we can support and protect each other a bit from the harsh realities we face. We work toward something so far ahead we cannot see the outcome. We can imagine catastrophe all too easily, but we have to admit that Mother Nature is wily and unpredictable and the outcome can be affected by all sorts of things we can neither predict nor control. We just have to get onboard the team that makes the most sense to us. And fight the good fight, knowing that there are Jeffrey Lockwoods, Carl Sagans and others who have devoted their lives to the cause. It can't just be fighting, either. We must help each other see and celebrate the beautiful sunrise, the silent vista from atop a mountain, the glory of a night sky, without being brought back to our grief. A lifetime of grief will not give us the energy we need to make a difference. We must make room in our hearts and our daily lives for both the fears and the reverence. Our salvation is no longer about the individual, or even about the human race. Salvation is about the planet, its diversity and capacity to support life into the future, even if scientists tell us its lifespan is a mere half-billion years. We are part of making that arc of justice and stewardship over in one direction or the other, so let's take our rightful place alongside others who are pushing (to use Jeffrey Lockwood's words) in defiance, and resisting accommodation. Let us create together a place where others can come for solace and to bring their gifts in support of salvation of all life. Norman Cousins could have been speaking of that sort of salvation when he said: "If something comes to life in others because of you, then you have made an approach to immortality."

