

## ***Why Are We Here?***

The Rev. Paige Getty

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia

Sunday, March 6, 2005

**Reading:** Carl Scovel, “He Went On Dancing,” Never Far From Home: Stories from the Radio Pulpit (Boston: Skinner House, 2004) 142-3.

### **Sermon:**

The Hebrew and Christian scriptures tell us that, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.” (Genesis 1-2a (KJV))

A Yoruban story from West Africa says, “In the beginning, there was only water and chaos.” (FMC)

A feminist Pagan creation myth says, “Alone, awesome, complete within Herself, the Goddess, She Whose name cannot be spoken, floated in the abyss of the outer darkness, before the beginning of all things.” (Bartlett)

Science tells us, “Life began more than 3 billion years before the Cambrian Period...” (PBS)

And then what? Then, somehow, eventually... humans came to be. Roaming the earth, claiming dominion over its creatures, asking themselves, “*Why are we here?*”

In the first chapter of Genesis, the Jewish and Christian creation story tells of the creation of the human: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’” (Genesis 1:26 (NRSV))

In the second chapter of Genesis—and the second creation story in that scripture—it’s slightly different: “...then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. ... The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.’” (Genesis 2: 7, 15-17 (NRSV))

Starhawk’s feminist Pagan myth continues, “As [the Goddess] looked into the curved mirror of black space, She saw by Her own light Her radiant reflection, and fell in love with it. ... She

drew it forth by the power that was in Her and made love to Herself, and called Her 'Miria, the Wonderful.' ... Their ecstasy burst forth in the single song of all that is, was, or ever shall be, and with the song came motion, waves that poured outward and became all the spheres and circles of the worlds. The Goddess became filled with love, swollen with love, and She gave birth to a rain of bright spirits that filled the worlds and became all beings." (Bartlett)

In the West African Yoruban myth, the creator is called Olodumare and is assisted by a lesser god, Obatala. "In the beginning, there was only water and chaos. The supreme being sent Obatala down from the sky to create some land out of the chaos. He descended on a long chain and brought with him a rooster, some iron, and a palm kernel. First, he put the metal on the earth and the rooster on top of that. The rooster scratched the metal and spread it out to create land. Then he planted the palm seed and from it grew the earth's vegetation. Olodumare named earth 'Ife' and the first city 'Ile-Ife.' Obatala created humans out of the earth and got Olodumare to blow life into them." (FMC)

And the explanation perhaps most familiar to many of us: "Life gradually diversified into a wide variety of single-celled organisms. About 570 million years ago, a number of multicelled forms began to appear in the fossil record, including invertebrates resembling sponges and jellyfish, and some as-yet-unknown burrowing forms of life. As the Cambrian Period began, most of the basic body plans of invertebrates emerged from these Precambrian forms. They emerged relatively rapidly, in the geological sense – over 10 million to 25 million years. ...

Since the earliest hominid species diverged from the ancestor we share with modern African apes, 5 to 8 million years ago, there have been at least a dozen different species of these humanlike creatures."

Over these millions of years, *Homo sapiens* have evolved as changes and mutations have occurred at the genetic level. (PBS)

To this day we struggle to explain the meaning of, and reason for, our human existence. Even on the comics page. In Friday's edition of the comic strip "Candorville," the main character Lemont says to his friend, "I can't believe it, Susan. Last night I dreamt of the perfect story. It captured the human condition with clarity and eloquence. It explained once and for all [humankind's] role in the universe. It explained the meaning of life. It was awe-inspiring. A masterpiece. But when I woke up in the morning and got my pencil, my story came out as meaningless, clichéd drivel... Stupid pencil." (Bell)

Cultures and religions the world over have their own creation stories. Their own attempts to explain the origins of our species, our role in the universe... trying to capture the human condition with clarity and eloquence. Many of the non-scientific creation myths describe a God who creates the human for an inherent, divine purpose in God's world. Implicit, if not explicit, in such myths is the understanding that the human, therefore, exists because of the will of God... to please God... to obey God. ('You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.') Implicit is a belief in a divine order... a belief in a powerful, creator God.

We Unitarian Universalists do not insist that one must believe in a creator God in order for human life to have meaning and purpose. But we do affirm that the human yearning for wholeness, a yearning for the holy and sacred in life, is the foundation of the religious quest. And we affirm that each of these myths is the creative work of the human hand and spirit... of the human wrestling with the meaning of existence. They are not meaningless, clichéd drivel.

Of course this quest for a meaningful existence has, in some ways, deteriorated over time, as we have—dare I say it?—*evolved* to a point of stubbornness in the effort to explain our existence. We in the industrialized West are not satisfied with the old stories, with using the myths as metaphors and tools for affirming a life that is in large part a great mystery. No, instead we must assert knowledge, verifiable certainty, about the sources of life.

Frankly, we have *de*-volved into such a bunch of hard-headed and argumentative contenders that it seems we've managed to escape from any engagement with real Life at all. I certainly am not proud that in my home state of Georgia, a school board has insisted on affixing labels to the covers of all science textbooks stating that “evolution is a theory, not a fact”... prompting scientists to a seemingly necessary position of patronization, where they have had to explain that such an assertion confuses the common use of these words with the scientific use. In science, theories do not turn into facts through the accumulation of evidence. Rather, theories are the end points of science, developed from extensive observation, experimentation, and creative reflection. They incorporate a large body of scientific facts, laws, tested hypotheses, and logical inferences. And so, in this sense, evolution is one of the strongest and most useful scientific theories we have. (NAS)

But I am no more proud of those among us who insist that science alone is sufficient as a source of real meaning, thus denying the value of myth and imagination and creativity in sustaining a meaningful life.

We could spend our lifetimes arguing which of these theories contains the greatest truth. Many of us have spent hours engaged in vigorous debate about why evolution is more acceptable than creationism, and alternatively why creationism is a necessary and inspiring explanation for so many. We will never know the absolute truth of these assertions.

I am most inclined to take a Buddhist perspective in this case. We can assume pretty safely that the Buddha would have taught that the question of the origin of the human species was an inherently bad question... that we cannot know the answer, and even if we could, it would be of no help to us in this lifetime. Therefore, he would say, the question itself is a wasted effort. How to live well *now* is far more important than knowing where you came from.

Our task as a religious community is to get at the heart of the question—literally. What does my heart, my spirit, seek in asking the question in the first place? It's not just a question about where I came from, but rather for what purpose do I exist? Not so much ‘Why am I here?’, but rather ‘What am I here *for*?’

It's a good time, I think, to remind ourselves of the opening lines of the famous Serenity Prayer, credited most often to theologian Reinhold Niebuhr:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
courage to change the things I can,  
and the wisdom to know the difference—

Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot *know*, the courage to *act on* the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference...

What are we here *for*?

To have any meaning at all, the answer to the question must find resonance in your spirit, in your soul. But yours is not a soul alone, isolated from other beings. We are communal, social beings... fellow members of the human species... siblings in God's family. We gather as adventurers and searchers on a spiritual journey, and our living Unitarian Universalist tradition does offer us some guidance as we struggle to understand what we are here *for*...

We are here to respond to God's love—the love offered to us—by loving our neighbors as ourselves;

We are here to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;  
and perhaps most importantly...

We are here to celebrate the sacred circle of life and to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

We are a life-affirming people in a life-affirming faith. In affirming Life, our faith demands that we be responsible and compassionate... affirming not only quantity of life, but quality of life. We are called, therefore, to *make meaning* of this life, to be compassionate, to seek peace and justice for all. We are called not to be exclusively self-centered, but rather to affirm Life in its wholeness, reaching out to others, as we are interdependently connected and sustained by one another. We may believe that only the fittest will survive, but we are prompted, therefore, to create opportunities for all to be fit.

We are here to make meaning. To accept the gift of life that was given unconditionally, and to respond in loving gratitude. It doesn't make sense much of the time, and it's almost never easy. But that's what acting in faith is all about.

There's a story told by Fannie Lou Hamer about an old man who was very wise. He could answer what was almost impossible for people to answer, so many people went to him. One day two young people went and said, "We're going to trick this old guy today. We're going to catch a bird and we're going to carry it to the old man. And we're going to ask him, 'This that we hold in our hands today. Is it alive or is it dead?' If he says 'Dead' we're going to turn it loose

and let it fly. But if he says, 'Alive,' we're going to crush it." So they walked up to the old man and they said, "This that we hold in our hands today, is it alive or is it dead?" He looked at the young people and he smiled. He said, "It's in your hands."

*In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.*

*In the beginning, there was only water and chaos.*

*She Whose name cannot be spoken, floated in the abyss of the outer darkness, before the beginning of all things.*

Then what?

Then he went on dancing. Honored the mysterious holiness that is Life. Held the bird in her hands... knowing that in that moment she alone had the power to sustain life, or to take it away.

The *meaning* is ours to make.

Amen.

### **Works Referenced:**

Delani Bartlett, "Faery Wiccan Creation Myth," 5 March 2005  
<<http://northernway.org/creation.html#Fae>>.

Darrin Bell, Candorville, March 4, 2005, 5 March 2005  
<<http://www.uclick.com/client/wpc/cand/2005/03/04/index.html>>.

National Academy of Sciences (NAS), "Introduction: Science and Creationism – A View from the National Academy of Sciences," 1999, 5 March 2005  
<<http://books.nap.edu/html/creationism/introduction.html>>.

Franklin & Marshall College (FMC), "West African Cosmogony Origin Myths of Mande, Yoruba, and Cameroon," 2004, 5 March 2005  
<<http://server1.fandm.edu/departments/Anthropology/Bastian/ANT269/cosmo.html>>.

PBS, "Evolution: Frequently Asked Questions – Where We Came From," 5 March 2005  
<<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/evolution/library/faq/cat02.html>>.