

Unitarian Society of Hartford
Sunday July 22, 2007
Starry, Starry Night

© Marye Gail Harrison

(No Part of this document may be reproduced except
for individual ease in reading without the written
permission of the author.)

Starry, Starry Night July 22 2007

COSMIC PRAYER

Cosmic Consciousness
shifting deeply to belly womb place inside
where we wait for birth unfolding in its own time –
help us be ready
to catch the baby when it comes.

Gestation. Patience. Trust the process.

Not like the useful headwork we did for a living –
projecting outcomes and strategic plans into space like rockets,
steadily action stepping our way from here to there
across the gap analysis in linear precision.

No, this process is more orgasmically cosmic,
as out of chaos, attractions form the unpredictable.
The most creative star nursery people
wait in calm alertness,
knowing they are the stuff of stars,
one with all
from the big bang beginning 15 billion years ago.
We call out our passions to You, Great Field of Possibilities,
now unfolding connection by connection.

Marye Gail Harrison 3/15/02

Hymn #1—“The hymn is number 21” – For the Beauty of the Earth

Reading I: SHOOTING STAR – this is a true story about the influence of the stars on
my family and me.

In the beginning I am reading an old letter to my eighty-year-old mother that she
had saved from her mother:

“Had our first frost last night. I went out before day this morn to see the stars, and were they beautiful. Knowing all the brightest ones and the constellations makes it so interesting. Saturn and Mars were nearly over head, Jupiter in the east, Orion in the west – my initials W. V. H. are in the western sky at the early morning hours. The W. of Cassiopeia, the V of Taurus and Orion makes a perfect H. So I should love the stars, having my name in the sky.”

Strange, I thought reading my Grandmother Winnie’s letter written in Texas in 1945 to my mother, that I resonate so with this woman I never knew. She was viewed with distain as I grew up as she had not raised my mother and her younger sister. Winnie, WVH, was obviously bright and had educated herself. She loved nature. I had always heard that stated with a bit of ridicule. She loved birds and the stars. My mom did too but in loyalty to her father’s TN kin who raised her, as a child, she never followed her mother’s leanings.

Another generation and a three-day drive away in Connecticut, I was freer to follow my own interests, including the bird and stars Grandmother Winnie loved.

After my dad died, mom moved up here to CT near me. When we read Winnie’s letter in mom’s old photo box, I wasn’t surprised when she said she’d like me to take her out to a dark field and look for the stars her mother spoke of. A few weeks later when I picked her up for an evening with me, I said, “Let’s look at the stars tonight. “ It wasn’t very cold for January in CT and the sky was clear. She agreed but I sensed some tension.

“What am I going to be looking for?”

I found a star guide I had and began explaining Orion the hunter. “You know that one.”

“No, I don’t know anything about the stars. I never learned,” she announced somewhat defensively.

I thought the hurt about her mom was probably surfacing. I tried to be positive as I gave her a quick star finder lesson, trying to attract her natural curiosity, which I knew was there. She knew the big dipper she said. “Did you know the pointer stars on the front of the cup, point to the north star? That’s how the run away slaves found there way north.” She said she had heard about that but didn’t know which stars on the dipper were involved before. Lesson over, we put on warm hats, gloves and winter jackets to go out to the car. In the front yard I looked up through the bare oak branches and saw Orion.

“See Orion right there to the right of the basket ball hoop? The three stars of his belt are in a straight row.”

“No, I can’t. I can’t see it good at all. Maybe I can’t do this.”

Mom had lost her vision in one eye. She had come to live near me because she was afraid someday she'd be blind. I hoped her good eye would let her see the stars. I wanted her to have this connection with her mother. So I pointed out that the trees were blocking part of our view and we were getting too much light from the house. The field would be better.

As I turned around there was a graceful arc disappearing across the sky. A shooting star is always a thrill to see, not common this time of year.

"Mom! Did you see that shooting star?"

"No, where?"

"Over the house. Well, that was certainly unexpected! Let's go to the field."

We drove to a big dark field halfway between our house and her apartment. I pulled well off the road in a place without ditches. Mom fumbled getting out in the dark and steadied herself on the car.

The sky was crystal clear and we had an excellent 360-degree view. It really was beautiful. I could see why her mother had loved to go out before dawn to see the stars. A power line overhead helped guide mom to Orion. She began to get enthused as her confidence grew that she too could find the constellations and see the H. Then we found Taurus the bull's V shaped horns. Turning around she saw the big dipper standing on its handle.

"See the pointer stars?" I said.

"Yes, I do."

"Follow them over to the wires overhead. The W is there, also turned on end." I waited.

"Yes, I see it, too!"

"You know, mom, if you turn the W over, it's an M. You and I are M's. We're also both H's. Our MH initials are in the sky, too."

"That's true. We can find our initials in the sky if we want to."

"Your mother would be pleased, don't you think?"

"Yes. You know the shooting star was a coincidence....but if you believed in that sort of thing...well."

Yeah, I thought to myself, if she could have signaled us tonight, she would have.

A true story by Marye Gail Harrison, copyright, 1996

Hand Ritual Greeting and Contemplation

Before we shake hands and greet one another this morning, let's consider this reading about our hands:

“My hand.... it is at least 15 billion years old! It has taken this long for such a magnificent part of creation to develop. Everything since the beginning has shaped it... All protons in my hand were formed in the intense heat of the primal fireball. The atoms of my hand once were part of the smooth vast clouds that filled expanding space. These burst into stars. In the explosion of one star, Earth was formed....every atom of my hand was there! All that has happened in the story of the earth is contained in my hand. The emergence of simple bacteria from Earth's seas, the formation of rocks and forests, the developments in worms and mammals have all affected the development of my hand. Millions of years of trial and error have contributed to the formation of my hand. To tell the story of my hand is to tell the story of the universe.

[From Pat Bergen, CSJ in “The Amazing Journey! The Universe Guide and Me, Discussion Guide”, edited by Global Education Associates Upper Midwest, 2004]

Please greet your neighbors, by lifting both your hands, palms out, so that the palms of one touch the palms of another. Greet persons around you saying as your hands touch, “Good morning, our hands are the hands of the universe.” or “The universe needs our hands.”

PRAYER -

“May gratitude for the development of these hands fill us.
May Holy Presence be experienced in all that touches these hands.
May Healing Presence embrace all the works of these hands,
today in this gathering and every day. Amen.” Pat Bergen

Reading 2

“If we are to deepen our understanding of the universe or of God, if we are to change our collective behavior and our destiny, Dowd and Barlow say, we need a new story, a story based in scientific discovery, but also relevant to the awesomeness of the universe. A better metaphor for the universe they say is a set of Russian nesting dolls, made up of levels of what they call nested creativity: subatomic particles within atoms, within molecules, within cells, within organisms, and so on. Each level is uniquely creative, that is, has the power to bring something new into existence. Stars create atoms; atoms create substances like oxygen we breathe; human cultures create art, religions, and technology. The largest nesting doll is God – or Allah, Adonai, Source of

Life, Ultimate Reality, Nature, The Universe, whatever name describes the divine whole for you, the ultimate creative reality that includes and transcends all other levels of reality. God is not outside of creation. God is an integral part of it – in fact, *is* it.

In this metaphor, we humans are nested within that divine whole. We are not plucked down here by a maker separate from us. Nor is our existence a meaningless evolutionary fluke. The basic elements that make up our bodies – carbon, calcium, iron – were forged inside of supernovas, dying stars, and are billions of years old. We are, in fact, made of stardust. We are intimately related to the universe. As early-twentieth-century British biologist Julian Huxley put it, “We are the universe becoming conscious of itself.”

Amy Hassinger, From UU World 2006 – “Welcome to the Ecozoic Era” – an introduction to the work of Michael Dowd and Connie Barlow, UU evangelists of cosmic evolution who spoke here at USH last November.

Hymn # Our next hymn is # 343 –A Firemist and a Planet

Sermon Starry, Starry Night July 22, 2007

My transformation by starry, starry nights may have begun began in 7th grade science when I had to stay up to record the lunar eclipse, going outside every 15 minutes and drawing what I saw. Maybe it was seeing the night sky while camping when my sons were very young. Maybe it was the H. A. Rey, author of the Curious George books, in his book “Find the Constellations”. I bought that book so I could teach my sons to find the constellations, which I didn’t know. I still have it over 30 years later. Maybe it began with the 1945 letter from Grandmother Winnie I read to you and finding our initials in the sky with my mom.

For sure my transformation by the stars began in NYC in late August in 2001 at the Museum of Natural History Rose Space and Science Center in what used to be the Hayden Planetarium. It was my 60th birthday celebration. I knew I wanted to go to NYC. I knew I wanted to go to the planetarium. The planetarium show blew my mind.

Imagine the scene: We relaxed in our chairs, heads back and supported as the lights slowly went out. We blasted off from earth seeing it as the astronauts do a beautiful blue and white jewel in a sea of vast black. We passed our neighboring planets in our solar system, as the space probes do. We journeyed out of our spiral galaxy – seeing in this instance the telescope picture of another spiral galaxy about the size of ours, we exited from one arm in the suburbs of our Milky Way. From there we passed the few galaxies in our local cluster including Andromeda 2,650 thousand light years away, again based on actual Hubble photos. On we went into the universe, back into time as we followed the trail of telescope photos, which scientists have amassed. They go deeper and deeper

into space, farther and farther back into time. One billion light years, 5 billion light years, 10 billion light years ago, 13 billion light years ago. More than 80% back to the beginning that was almost 15 billion years ago. Then quickly turning we spun home to earth again.

As the light s came up, what amazed me was the wonder of being alive at just the time in universe, at just the place in the universe where beings had evolved who could take pictures and view pictures of the universe's history- that I was so fortunate to be alive and see this. If an incomprehensible number of events had been the slightest bit different, I would not have. I was filled with joy at the delightfulness of my life on this planet, in the solar system, in this moment.

Less than 3 weeks later it was 9/11 in NYC and I forgot the wonder....

Until I saw a course at a retreat center offered by Irish cosmologist Diarmuid O'Murchu on the Universe Story. There I read Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry's book "The Universe Story".

I was called again by starry, starry nights. I was increasingly concerned about environmental damage which seemed all the more tragic in that we are doing irreparable damage just as we are discovering our intimate connection with the universe – that we are stardust, that we are the direct product of all that has gone before us. That the continued creative unfolding of consciousness here on earth is dependent on what we do and how soon. Creation here is in our hands. Creation here is in our hands. I was filled with wonder and despair. My heart opened to great love and great sadness.

Maybe it broke my heart because shortly after I had open-heart surgery. So I forgot the deep call of the stars again distracted by life events. However, I kept reading books about deep space cosmology and ecology. Then in November 2006 Michael Dowd and Connie Barlow arrived here with a morning and evening of science and sacred understanding of the cosmos.

I was on fire with desire to help them tell the universe story, to help people understand that it is up to us NOW to save the creative environment of earth and enable it to once again be a sustaining creative home for all life forms that have evolved here with us. They encouraged me to read a book by Joel Primack, the scientist who discovered invisible dark matter and invisible dark energy, called "View from the Center of the Universe." Dick Edwards is offering a class here in the fall using this book.

Primack says these invisible qualities, dark matter and dark energy, comprise an estimated 25% and 70 % respectively of the universe and they hold everything we see that is visible together. Joel Primack also says our consciousness, whether or not it has developed elsewhere, is overall a rare thing in the universe. He portrays our consciousness like the eye on top of the pyramid on the back of

the one dollar bill, the pyramid representing all else in the universe including the dark matter and energy. We are the universe being conscious of itself. That is what I experienced in the planetarium! We are the conscious eye of the universe as well as its hand. Primack, a non religious scientist, says through environmental destruction, **we are in effect poking out our own eyes and in doing so we are blinding the universe- poking out our own eyes, blinding the universe!!**

This is the angel I wrestle with. How do I respond to this great love of the universe and joy in my place in it as well as to this terrible, overwhelming responsibility for fixing the environmental damage we have created? How do I live with my initials written in the stars, knowing they truly are my ancestors? How do I act as big dipper pointer stars marking a True north star that can guide people to a better way to live? One way is telling the universe story over and over –including that we are the hands and eyes of the universe. Can we develop human consciousness to a stage where it is good for earth that we humans have consciousness?

One great gift in Unitarian Universalism is the freedom, one might say the mandate, to integrate our reason with our spirituality –to integrate the objective with the subjective both individually and collectively.

One great appeal for me in Michael Dowd's talk was his integration of Ken Wilber's model of reality into his own presentation on evolution. Ken Wilber, a brilliant contemporary philosopher and Buddhist, has a four quadrant Integral theory of everything. You might think of the quadrants as subjective I and We on the left and objective individual and collective it on the right. Wilber includes personal experience in his big picture reality even though science can't study it or verify it; he also includes scientific knowledge, of course.

I suspect he is a UU at heart –trying to integrate it all.

While he honors subjective truth as part of the whole truth, he differentiates a STATE of consciousness, which is a momentary experience of insight, from a STAGE of conscious development, which is an ongoing experience of a perspective. In the stories I have told you –I experienced a temporary state of conscious understanding in the planetarium. However, I seek an ongoing stage of conscious development where I could sustain that understanding and live moment to moment from it.

Spiritual enlightenment for Wilber is a STAGE of conscious development of constantly being awake to the deep reality of life, to experience the silent Ground of being, which in his experience and some others', under girds everything including the entire universe and all time- the largest nesting doll in Dowd's metaphor, the Great Field of Possibilities my opening poem called to.

To move from one stage of consciousness to another, Wilber looks for ways to create replicable personal experience. Hence his attraction to the practices and dharma of Buddhism. Like a scientist he is interested in the ability to repeat the outcome in matters of spirit as well as science, in culture as well as in systems.

This raises the question of whether we could move the evolution of human consciousness forward by collectively developing our stages of consciousness, moving metaphorically to the next doll in the nest. What we need is replicable results in our spiritual life that would keep moving us to a new stage. Could we assist consciousness development in adults to benefit the whole planet just as we now support a child's development to live more fully in the world? What would a spiritual Head Start look like?

My hope is I can get to a stage of consciousness where I can maintain my commitment to new ways of sustainable living. This is what a religious community might offer us – “tools to support you where ever you are on your spiritual journey”. Like many other UUs I go outside UUism to learn practices of meditation and deep reflection, yet I can bring them back into the USH community and be welcomed and affirmed. I am pleased BJ has begun to offer meditation practice here because meditation has been shown to accelerate consciousness development; it can produce replicable results. Because UUism embraces both reason and spirit, inner spiritual development and service with justice, we are by our UU principles, to use Ken Wilber's model, a Four Quadrant or Integral religion. There is always more to do individually and collectively, nonetheless, I am encouraged by this.

I do wonder if people come to UUism when they have moved into a new stage of development and feel they have out grown the former ties. But once we arrive do we keep developing? Do we actively seek the creative edge of the next stage for our lives, both individually and collectively?

While momentary insights come to me, as at the planetarium or in the Michael Dowd lecture, to move to another stage of development takes a discipline that I find hard to maintain. To sustain change, I find I need the support of a group to help me. It is like my trying to maintain a healthy weight after being overweight most all my life. The old habits of an earlier stage keep grabbing me and pulling me back from new practices and newer habits. My Weight Winners group keeps me on track.

Likewise for us to live in a way sustainable on this earth, to maintain an environmental standard that supports us and other forms on earth, we need individually and collectively to move to another stage of development. Even as I wrote this sermon, I planned to bring bottled water to have on the podium. Then Amy pointed out that our sexton, Peter Magistri, said, “No bottled water”. A refillable glass of water is better for our world – less packaging and energy used.

Of course he is right –why didn't I think of that? Obviously, sustaining a stage of continual awareness is not easy for me. I trust you understand.

Want to take one small action step? If you do, you might sign the Live Earth Pledge- info about it is in the order of service. It is a way of stating your intentions to protect the interdependent web of which we all are a part.

What might sustain us in living the Pledge? I've told you what inspires me to make the effort– starry, starry nights still do –and the big picture the Hubble telescope brings to me. Pure wonder at my integral place in things, somewhere in this nested order, moving from one stage of consciousness to another in my own nested development affirmed by this liberal spiritual community. My initials are in the stars. My experience, our experience, the earth's history and tragic current events, spiritual truths and scientific knowledge – I wrestle with all these to find my way.

The stars' sheer scope, offers me hope... and inspiration to keep on heading True north, like an escaped slave, which maybe I am, to freedom from this mess we're in now. May you find a perspective as big as a starry, starry night that will guide you too and a practice to sustain you on the path.

Hymn # ___ The closing hymn is # 363 – Alleluia! Sang the Stars

Benediction

“Beauty is before me, and beauty behind me,
above me and below me hovers the beautiful.
I am surrounded by it, I am immersed in it.
In beauty it is begun. In beauty, it is ended.”

Thus said the Navajo Indians. Amen.