

Unitarian Society of Hartford
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Who Are We –Really?
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Who are we? It's a big question that people have been asking themselves since they lived in caves.

And it's a terribly personal question. I suspect that the biggest question for most of us isn't "Who Are *We*?" but rather "Who am *I*?" After all, Descartes didn't say, "We think, therefore we are". Instead he said, "I think, therefore I am," and he called it "an explanation for everything".

What about you? When you ask yourself "Who am I?" what kind of a question are you asking?

Sometimes, "Who are we?," is a philosophical question, sometimes it's psychological or sociological or even existential. But today I'll start out talking about, "Who are we?," as a scientific question ... maybe, "What are we?" is a better way to put it ... and then at the end we can think about some of the religious or spiritual implications of the answers provided by science.

I'm going to talk about who or what we are by telling you a fanciful story about interviews I had with six people ... a chemist, an astronomer, a theoretical physicist and three spiritual leaders. During the interviews, I asked each one, "Who are we?"

My first interview was with the chemist. She told me that between 65 and 90% of our weight is water (H₂O), while a significant part of us is made of carbon-containing organic molecules. Oxygen atoms therefore contribute the majority of our body's weight, 65%, followed by carbon, 18%, and then hydrogen, 10%. However, since hydrogen atoms are so light, most of our atoms are hydrogen.

She also told me that almost every atom in the universe lasts forever. The only time an atom is made or destroyed is in a nuclear reaction, like in a star or in an atomic bomb, a nuclear power station or the big bang at the beginning of the universe. So I said, "If my atoms have lasted for ever, where did they come from and where will they end up?" She said, "I don't know. Why don't you ask an astronomer?," So I did.

The astronomer started the interview by asking me a question, "You know that everything in the universe is made up of atoms, don't you, Bill?" "Everybody knows that", I said. "Every atom is made of only two kinds of sub-atomic particles that weigh very much; protons and neutrons," he said. "Since every proton and every neutron in the universe today was made 13 billion 760 million years ago during the first tiny fraction of the first second our universe existed, all of yours were made then too. So, believe it or not, in that sense you were made at the same time the universe was made."

I had no idea I was so old and it took me a while to recover from the shock of hearing that, but when I did I asked him about my atoms themselves. When were they put together? What he told me was equally mind boggling. It made my knees wobble. Smiling sweetly he said, "Your hydrogen atoms were made in space only a few hundred thousand years after the big bang but the rest of them were made in a star." "You mean they were made in the sun?" "No, no" he said. "Your atoms were made in stars that were big enough to blow up when they died. They're called supernovas." Now I was into it, "When did the star that made half of me blow up?" "Oh, I don't know, perhaps billions of years ago. And your atoms were likely made in many different supernova explosions, not just one."

Now that I knew that every atom in my body was made either at the very beginning of the universe or in an exploding dying star, with some trepidation, I said, "OK. What will happen to my atoms after they're no longer part of my body?" "They'll end up in the sun." "In what! It's 93 million miles away. How would they get there?" "They wouldn't have to get there; the sun would come to them. You see, our sun is middle aged. It was created about four and a half billion years ago and about four and a half billion years from now it will use up all of its fuel and start to die. It's too small to blow up in a supernova but it's big enough to become what we call a red giant. At that time the earth including every one of your atoms will be inside of the sun which by then will be huge."

Having heard that, I decided it was time to end the interview with the astronomer and I went to talk with the theoretical physicist. I asked her, "Who are we ... really?" "Concentrations of energy in space and time", she said. "We're what!" "Let me explain", she said. "There are lots of atoms in your body ... more than you can imagine. You have about 1 followed by 28 zeros atoms to be exact. That's 10,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 atoms. But your atoms are just another form of energy. Like any matter, under the right conditions they can be transformed into pure energy by Einstein's famous formula: $E = mc^2$. Therefore, as I said, your body is just a concentration of energy. The entire universe has, on average, about five atoms in the same amount of space that's occupied by your body. So, compared to the average density of the universe, the 1 followed by 28 zeros atoms in your body make you a huge concentration of energy. That's what you are." "Oh, I see." I said even though I was still trying to take that in.

One of my heroes, Albert Einstein, who I'll talk with later, led me to a fascination with trying to figure out how the universe works – the study of cosmology.

I always knew where he stood in relation to “God” — it was shorthand for the mystery and rationality of nature, the touchstones of the scientific experience. “Cosmic mystery,” Einstein said, “is the most beautiful experience we can have, the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of true art and true science.

“He who does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement,” he continued, “is as good as a snuffed-out candle.”

A few years ago, I had a thought. What if there was a level of reality deeper and more fundamental than atoms? What if everything in the universe was the same thing? Physicists know that there are really only three things in the universe ... energy, space and time. It occurred to me in an epiphany that all three of them might be different ways of looking at just one thing. If so, the entire universe and everything in it, including you, me and this Meeting House might be the same thing. I called it energyspacetime or EST for short.

I know it sounds crazy but, amazingly enough, after thinking about it for the last several years, I can't think of a single law of physics that would be violated or a single experiment that's ever been done that contradicts the existence of EST ... the ultimate reality. A basic principle in physics says that anything that's not prohibited by the laws of physics will happen ... so why not EST?

It's intriguing to me that the existence of EST also explains many of the things in physics, like quantum mechanics, that don't make any sense but that's another story. I called my idea, “A Theory of Everything,” and wrote it down in a paper.

Think about it. If my idea is right and EST is the only real thing in the universe then you and I are, in reality, the same thing. We're both EST ... the only thing in the universe that's real.

Mind you, it's wrong to think that we're both made out of EST or that we're both part of EST. In reality, we both are EST because everything in the universe is EST. Everything else that we think is real ... atoms, everything living and everything dead and everything that's never been alive, and most importantly you and I and this Meeting House are not really real. Only energyspacetime is real. It's eternal and never changes because change is meaningless when something is everything in the universe. Something that's everything can't change because anything that changes must change relative to something else and there *is* nothing else.

Let me quickly say that that my idea is almost certainly wrong because, if it were true, some bright theoretical physicist would have thought of it a long time ago. But wouldn't

it be fun if it were true? Then the answer to our question, "Who are we?," would be that we're all really the same thing ... we are all EST.

With this thought in mind, I ended my hypothetical interviews by sharing my idea with three great spiritual leaders ... Lao-tzu, the founder of Taoism, Albert Einstein and BJ.

Lao-tzu said, "Of course the entire universe is EST, Bill. As I said a long time ago, the Tao is everything and if you want to call it EST that's fine with me.

"Let me remind you of the first chapter in 'Tao Te Ching', my manual on the art of living.

"The tao that can be told
is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named
is not the eternal Name.

The unnamable is the eternally real.
Naming is the origin of all particular things.

Free from desire, you realize the mystery.
Caught in desire, you see only the manifestations.

Yet mystery and manifestations
Arise from the same source.
This source is called darkness.

Darkness within darkness.
The gateway to all understanding."

After that I decided it was time to talk to Einstein about my question and his spiritual beliefs. He reminded me of how he had once summarized Buddhism:

"The greatest achievement is selflessness.
The greatest worth is self-mastery.
The greatest quality is seeking to serve others.
The greatest precept is continual awareness.
The greatest medicine is the emptiness of everything.
The greatest action is not conforming with the worlds ways.
The greatest magic is transmuting the passions.
The greatest generosity is non-attachment.
The greatest goodness is a peaceful mind.
The greatest patience is humility.
The greatest effort is not concerned with results."

As long as I live I'll remember what Einstein said next. "I'm a spiritual scientist, Bill. I can't imagine one without the other. I think Buddha got it right.

"The greatest meditation is a mind that lets go.
The greatest wisdom is seeing through appearances."

Last but not least, I asked BJ "Who are we ... really?" and she said, "As I've said many times, Bill ... we are ONE and I'm really pleased to see that you've paid attention to my sermons."

So I leave you with the same question we started with ... "Who are you ... really?"

When you have a quiet moment this week, why don't you try to think of yourself the way you really are ...the way the people I interviewed think of you?

As the chemist said, you're really 90% water.

As the astronomer said, you were really created at the beginning of the universe and you'll last forever.

As the physicist said, you're really an enormous concentration of energy.

As the cosmologist said, you're really an incredibly tiny and totally insignificant part of our huge universe. By the way, personally, that's my favorite. Somehow, knowing how utterly insignificant and unimportant I am to the universe removed a terrible burden from me. I can now just be myself, whatever that is, and the universe and everything in it will just go on ... it doesn't care. For me, that's real freedom. It removed all of my "should's."

But, fortunately, as the spiritual leaders said, you're really you and you *are* significant and we *are* one. I like that too.

But what do *you* think?

Before you make up your mind, consider this.

Remember your 10 followed by 28 zeros atoms. When you walked through the door of the Meetinghouse this morning, you brought all of your atoms with you. But, when you walk out of the door in a little while you'll have lost some of your atoms and gained some new ones. Millions of your atoms will be new. Where did they come from?

You'll get most of them if you eat or drink something. But some of the new ones will come from everything you'll touch, or that touches you. Before you came in they were part of the hymnal you sang from. Or they were on the surface of the Order of Service

you read. Or they were part of the person next to you that you shook hands with or hugged or casually brushed against.

But most of your new atoms will come in as you breathe. Some of the atoms you breathe in go right back out when you breathe out but many do not. They become part of you. But where are those new atoms coming from? A lot of them came from other people in the sanctuary when they breathed out. In fact, it's almost certain that every person here this morning contributed at least a few of their atoms to you. But that's OK because you, in turn, gave some of your atoms to them. You might want to take a grateful glance around at some of your new atom donors.

During this service, we're all exchanging atoms.

Think about it.

Now do you have any doubt that we're one? I, for one, do not.

And, by the way, thanks for your atoms! I'll treat them gently.

And please take care of mine. I loved them when they were part of me and I hope you love them too.

Benediction:

Leave today in the capable hands of our 7 principles:

Respect

Compassion

Acceptance

Truth

Democracy

Justice, and

Interdependence