



THE EPIC OF EVOLUTION

The Epic Infusing Traditions

This issue of the Epic presents two examples of how the Epic of Evolution can be integrated into worship services. Significantly, both services were conducted at the turn of the millennium—truly an Epic event! It is our hope that the scripts published here will seed many more such occurrences.

It is one thing to talk about infusing the Epic story into religious traditions; it is quite another to do it. Ron Felt (Lutheran) and Nita Penfold (UU) have taken this bold step. They did so by thinking globally but acting locally—creating religious services appropriate to their traditions and intended to serve their own congregations. We hope the templates they offer here will inspire others to continue this kind of Great Work.

Part I is a Lutheran service created by Ron Felt and conducted at his church in Oak Park, Illinois, this past New Year's eve. Part II is a Unitarian Universalist Service by Nita Penfold and Nick Page, conducted at their church in Arlington, Massachusetts, on the first Sunday of the year 2000. (You will learn more about the authors in the sidebar interviews.) Both services were written with the millennium in mind, but they can easily be adapted for future use. Because of the star theme in each, Winter Solstice would be an

appropriate time to restage these services. Both highlight "gift" as another theme, making them appropriate around a season of giving. Earth Day is another possibility, as both celebrate human intimacy with Earth and our living relations.

The Epic of Evolution Society learned about the two services when Ron posted a synopsis of his service on our Cosmogen list-serve and Nita responded with hers. The Lutheran service calls for two readers, a singer-soloist, a dancer, and musicians for flute, bell, tympani, and organ—plus lots of candles. (Ron says his job during the service was "to flip the light switches.") This service incorporates congregational singing of traditional hymns and concludes with the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

The UU service calls for two readers, who also serve as singers, plus musical accompaniment. This service also offers several forms of congregational participation, including singing. Four altars are prepared in advance, with symbolic objects and written suggestions to aid individual contemplation before or after the service. In keeping with UU tradition, the service opens with the Lighting of the Chalice.

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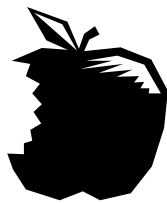
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Part I Spirit and Nature A Lutheran Worship Service

BY RON FELT



This service was created by Ron Felt and conducted on the evening of 31 December 1999 at United Lutheran Church in Oak Park, Illinois.

SETTING: The congregation gathers in the dimly lit sanctuary. Each person has been given a small unlit candle and a printed program that lists the main components of the service, including the sequence of hymns. The unlit Christ candle stands three feet tall in the center aisle before the chancel. Six unlit pew candles (to be lit sequentially during the service) are arranged at the front of the worship space in the configuration of an inverted “V”. The apex of the “V” is not complete at this point, but will be later when the Christ candle is moved to the top of the altar.

KEY PLAYERS: A narrator called “Nature” will speak the parts of the natural world, while “Spirit” will voice the biblical and faith interpretation. There is a singer-soloist, a dancer, and musicians for flute, bell, tympani, and organ. Accolytes stand ready to light the candles in sequence. Worshipers are instructed that the brightening of the nave lights signals a congregational hymn.

The pastor introduces the program, calling forth the characters of Nature and Spirit, then stepping aside, returning at the end to conduct the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Nature and Spirit enter, with Nature speaking from the lectern and Spirit speaking from the pulpit.

Spirit: On this the dawn of the third millennium, we are acutely aware of the passing of the ages. It is a good occasion to boldly survey time from the point time began, at the instant of creation. We can view this passage as one grand epic. Not until this century did we have an adequate grasp of how the universe actually came to be. The story is more than fascinating—it is astonishing. And for believers this new understanding meshes remarkably well with our faith tradition, revealing a universe lovingly designed and infused with purpose. Let us gather in this service to celebrate mysteries of faith and nature by the Word of God, from the moment of creation, through our emergence as sentient beings by that same Word, our redemption by the Word made flesh, and unto now, on this the dawn of another thousand years.

Interlude: A handbell is rung, followed by an unaccompanied soprano singing the first verse of “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” (Lutheran Book of Worship 42)

Of the Father’s love begotten,
Ere the worlds began to be,
He is Alpha and Omega,

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An Interview with Ron Felt

Editor’s note: Ron Felt describes himself as “a middle-aged, never-been-married, semi-retired dentist, who probably has too much time on his hands.” By avocation he sculpts ecclesiastical art in wood and copper for churches. His household includes four parakeets, a cockatiel, and a soon-to-be hatched cockatoo. When not restoring smiles, crafting art, or tending flock, one might find him ruminating on the meaning of life.

CB: Ron, what moved you to create this Epic service for your Lutheran church?

RF: I have been drawn to the Epic in part because of its spiritual implications for me as a believer (realizing also that it can provide a sense of the sacred for non-theists as well). This fascination culminated in a desire to plan a worship service incorporating Epic themes. The new millennium provided that opportunity because, as a measure of time, it could be correlated with the chronology of how things came to be.

CB: Did your church approve of your effort?

RF: Yes. The script I wrote was approved with only minor changes by my pastor and by our minister of music.

CB: How about the congregation?

RF: The service was well received by the congregation. I was particularly pleased with the reactions of children. Several junior high boys remarked that they were learning about “that stuff” in science class, and some parents told me that the service held the attention of their younger children, even though most of the material was beyond their comprehension.

CB: Were you surprised by the positive reaction?

RF: I realized there was a risk in doing something like this. I feared cries of heresy from one side and accusations of scientific misinterpretation from the other. However, the prospect of bringing the Epic to the public arena was just too compelling. I believe that the majority of Christians (my frame of reference is Christianity, but this applies to other religions as well) accept the scientific understanding of how things came to be, but put this understanding in a tight compartment—fearing that it would conflict with their religious beliefs. People of faith need to know that there is an alternative to fundamentalism.

CB: How difficult was it to weave the Epic into a Lutheran worship service?

RF: First of all, you should know that Lutherans are the largest protestant denomination in the world and we are represented by all hues of the religious spectrum. I belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), which is the largest Lutheran body in this country and less conservative than some of our American cousins. I don’t know that there is

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He the source the ending he,
Of the things that are, that have been,
And that future years shall see,
Evermore and evermore.

Spirit: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same [Jesus] was in the beginning with God”—John, chapter 1, verses 1 and 2.

Nature: In that Word was the mystery, the churning quantum foam of potentiality.

Spirit: “All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made”—John, chapter 1, verse 3.

Interlude: A brief silence is broken by the sound of tympani that reach a crescendo and then end abruptly.

Nature: Fifteen billion years ago our universe flashes into existence...

Spirit:... lit by the power of the eternal Word.

Interlude: In silence, the Christ candle is lit.

Nature: From the quantum foam is born the universe. Time, space, and energy are the gifts of existence. The universe expands and cools rapidly. Energy organizes itself into fundamental particles, new beings with new powers, and they in turn transform into atoms of hydrogen and helium. A billion years pass, and stars and supernovas emerge. Hydrogen and helium coalesce into enormous structures: the galaxies. A trillion stars pierce the darkness of space and overwhelm the senses with indescribable beauty.

Interlude: An acolyte ignites a torch from the Christ candle and proceeds to light the first pew candle. The acolyte then assists worshipers in lighting their candles from the Christ candle, who in turn light the candles of others. During this time, the musical introduction to the next hymn is played. When all the candles have been lit, the congregation joins in the singing of the hymn, the text illuminated by their candles.

Hymn: “O Morning Star How Fair and Bright” v. 1 and 3 (LBW 76).

O Morning Star, how fair and bright!
You shine with God’s own truth and light,
Aglow with grace and mercy!
Of Jacob’s race, King David’s Son,
Our Lord and master, you have won
Our hearts to serve you only!
Lowly, holy! Great and glorious,
All victorious, Rich in blessing!
Rule and might o’er all possessing!

Almighty Father, in your Son
YOU LOVED US, WHEN NOT YET BEGUN
WAS THIS OLD EARTH’S FOUNDATION!
Your Son has ransomed us in love
To live in him here and above:
This is your great salvation.
Alleluia! Christ the living,
To us giving Life forever,
Keeps us yours and fails us never!

Spirit: Let us pray: O God, you didn’t have to create the universe, but you did. And you created with such grace and grandeur! Not like a cosmic magician, snapping fingers and making all appear instantly. You let the universe evolve—expanding from a point no larger than a dot to now, billions of light years across and still expanding, still evolving, obeying your immutable laws elegantly described by mathematics. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Nature: For billions of years the universe continues to expand and cool. . . Please blow out your candles, as we are moving from the light to the matter phase of Creation. . . Within their galactic homes stars are born, live, and expire. Some stars transform their hydrogen and helium into heavier elements. Many of these stars cool slowly to become dark tombs. But the larger stars in their death throes explode, becoming supernovas, blasting out to the cosmos their precious gifts of selenium, boron, lithium, iron, along with the elements essential for life—carbon, oxygen, nitrogen.

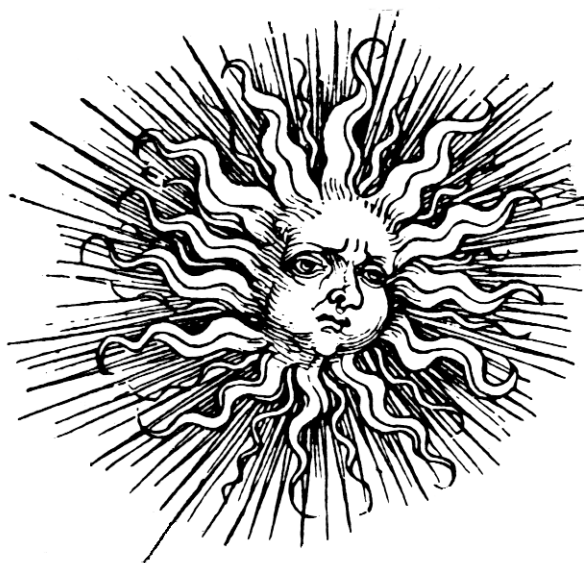
Spirit: The earth and all creatures on it, including us, are made from these elemental gifts of the Lord. The book of Genesis speaks of the dust from which God fashioned us. Indeed, we are the dust of stars!

Nature: Five billion years ago, our Solar System begins to form. The Sun, the planets, and the moons of our solar family emerge. Meteors and comets pummel the planets, building up the inner, stony ones, like Venus and Earth, from mere particles of dust, while plunging into the gaseous shrouds of the outer planets, like Jupiter and Saturn. Four billion years ago, the great bombardment of the Solar System comes to a close. The once-molten Earth cools for the final time.

Interlude: The second pew candle is lit. Nave lights are turned on.

Hymn: “Let All Things Now Living,” v. 2 (LBW 557)

His law he enforces, the stars in their courses
And sun in its orbit obediently shine;
The hills and the mountains, the rivers and fountains,
The deeps of the ocean proclaim him divine.
We too should be voicing our love and rejoicing;
With glad adoration a song let us raise
Till all things now living unite in thanksgiving:
“To God in the highest, hosanna and praise!”



Nave lights off

Spirit: Let us pray: O God, how could you wait so long for interesting things to happen—billions and billions of years? But lo, you created time; you who resides outside of time and space—transcendent over all. Yet we experience you here and now as well; we feel your presence at this time, in this space. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Nature: Four billion years ago, the first living cell emerges.

Spirit: The earth comes alive.

Nature: In the boiling waters of the infant earth, organic chemicals catalyze into life. This is an outrageously unlikely event and one of the great mysteries of science. One scientist compared the likelihood to a tornado passing through a junkyard and creating a jet plane. Yet it happened almost instantly in cosmic time—within a few million years!

Spirit: John, chapter 1, verse 4 reads, “In him was life.”

Interlude: The third pew candle is lit, then Nave lights are turned on.

Hymn: “Let All Things Now Living,” v. 1, LBW 557

Let all things now living a song of thanksgiving
To God the creator triumphantly raise,
Who fashioned and made us, protected and stayed us,
Who still guides us on to the end of our days.
God’s banners are o’er us, His light goes before us,
A pillar of light shining forth in the night,
Til shadows have vanished and darkness is banished,
As forward we travel from light into light.

Nave lights off

Spirit: Let us pray: Life—what a great idea, Lord! Chemicals combining, interacting with air and water and sunlight, and then recreating their own likeness in offspring. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Nature: As the eons pass, the resourcefulness of creation is demonstrated with spectacular results: Photosynthesis allows plants to reap energy from the sun. The plants in turn pass the energy on to hungry animals. Multicellular organisms emerge, as individual cells learn to cooperate and specialize. Meiotic sex shuffles the genetic deck, and the possibilities for varied life forms increase enormously. Six hundred million years ago eyes emerge in the great oceans of the world. Creatures begin to use this gift of sight to find food, to find mates, to find safety, to experience beauty.

Spirit: The earth sees herself for the first time.

Nature: Four hundred and sixty million years ago, creatures crawl out of the ocean and learn to live on land. There they discover the adventure of weather and gravity. Some two hundred million years ago, dinosaurs emerge and flourish for many millions of years. During this time, mammals emerge too, but they remain small and wary of the giants around them.

Spirit: The earth learns to nurture its young.

Nature: One hundred and fifty million years ago, birds emerge and take to the sky.

Interview with Ron Felt

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any particular Lutheran spin relating to the Epic, but I will say that the ELCA can relate to it with ease.

Martin Luther had one of the most brilliant minds of the middle ages. His strong intellectual, theological anchors have been an important part of our tradition. We are a thinking church, whose pastors are rigorously trained in seminaries like the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, where Phil Hefner has been on the faculty. Lutheran voices have been prominent in discussions on religion and science.

Furthermore, Luther was a musician. He wrote several hymns, but more importantly, he emphasized that congregational singing can inspire faith. This Epic service has a Lutheran flavor because cerebral stimulation supplied by the narrators is balanced with congregational singing to inspire the heart. A common phrase heard in our church is “Word and Sacrament.” The narrations provide that Word, culminating in an emotional climax in which we acknowledge our guilt in playing like gods in a creation we believed was ours to spoil. That leads nicely into the Sacrament of Holy Communion, where we meet Christ, whose redemptive act reconciles us with God and His creation.

CB: In the very first soliloquy, you have Spirit say that the new scientific understanding “meshes remarkably well with our faith tradition, revealing a universe lovingly designed and infused with purpose.” How important is it in your faith tradition and to you personally to interpret the Epic story as purposeful, in contrast to some scientists (notably, Ursula Goodenough and Stephen Jay Gould) who interpret the evolutionary saga in nonpurposeful ways?

RF: I am a Lutheran layman and cannot fully speak for my tradition—which, as I mentioned earlier, spans the gamut of spiritual belief. As for myself, my belief in a creator God, of course, is based on faith. I acknowledge strong counterarguments by the materialists. Yet faith grounded in reason is compelling, and I believe my faith tradition resonates better with reality. The Epic speaks of the universe, our planet, and life evolving over vast stretches of time, punctuated with incredible transformations, explosions, and suffering. Understandably, the biblical literalists get upset with the Epic. A literal interpretation of Genesis portrays God as the cosmic magician who brought everything into existence almost at once. From such a model we would expect instant perfection, with humans romping around in a world that is, in effect, a mere extension of its creator. If, on the other hand, we picture a loving God who set up the rules for a universe that would complexify and ultimately, independently, evolve into sentient beings like ourselves, this fits remarkably well. We, in our corner of the universe, and perhaps others elsewhere, are free agents in a creation that has become conscious of itself and capable of its own transformation. In the fifteen billionth year after the Big Bang, our purpose is to be co-creators in perfecting and completing God’s masterpiece. Along the way, our lives are imbued with meaning as we align ourselves with Him and revel in the quest for truth and beauty. ☺

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Spirit: The earth learns to fly.

Interlude: The fourth pew candle is lit; nave lights are turned on.

Hymn: “This Is My Father’s World,” v. 2 (LBW 554)

This is my Father’s World,
The birds their carols raise;
The morning light, the lily white
Declare their maker’s praise.
This is my Father’s world;
He shines in all that’s fair.
In the rustling grass I hear him pass;
He speaks to me ev’rywhere.

Nave lights off

Nature: One hundred million years ago, flowers bloom for the first time, seeking the attention of pollinators. Hills and valleys are awash in reds and blues and purples and golds.

Spirit: The earth adorns herself and invites the dance of insects and birds.

Nature: Sixty-five million years ago, a large asteroid or comet strikes the earth. A vast cloud of dust explodes into the atmosphere, blocking sunlight for so long that plants die and snow begins to fall. The dinosaurs perish. When the dangers subside, little mammals creep out from their burrows to claim the vacant landscape. Plants sprout anew from seeds sequestered in the soils and the earth once again grows green. The Cenozoic Era, the Age of Mammals, begins.

Spirit: Let us pray: O God, in the unfolding of your cosmic plan, you create even by destroying. Help us to learn how we too can nurture goodness in times of terrible trouble. Amen.

Nature: The eons pass as section after section fills the orchestra and chorus to celebrate an oratorio of life. The whales and the parrots and the elephants evolve a remarkable intelligence that stands out from the rest of the choir. Even more remarkable is the tool-using intelligence that emerges among the ape clan. One day, an ape steps forth and moves to the front of the stage to sing the solo parts. The earth will never again be the same.

Interlude: A drum roll from the tympani.

Spirit: Let us pray: O God, we humans may indeed be just a little less than angels, but it seems we have plenty of kindred a hair’s width behind. Give us greater respect for all manifestations of life with whom we share this abundant earth, your temple. Amen.

Nature: One hundred thousand years ago modern humans emerge. The dexterity of our hands is a distinctly human talent, which, along with the phenomenal expansion of our cerebral cortex, increases our ability to survive and to transform the lands and waters at will. But more significantly, through the immense curiosity and wondrous sensitivity of humans . . .

Spirit: . . . the universe becomes conscious of itself.

Nature: We have learned by way of science that an early member of our species from even a hundred thousand years ago, if raised from birth in a contemporary setting, would be indistinguishable from us.

Spirit: Christ was asked, “Who is my neighbor?” He responded with the parable of the Good Samaritan. If we in this age ask the same question, and learn that a human being born a hundred thousand years ago could indeed be our neighbor, doesn’t that say something to us? Let us pray: O Lord, you teach us by parables and also allow us to teach ourselves through the scientific quest. Help us to love our neighbor—whether down the block, in Ethiopia, or on the streets of Baghdad. Amen.

Nature: The human mind acquires the ability to process symbols, which leads to the evolution of language.

Spirit: The universe learns to symbolize reality within the brain of an earthling.

Nature: Three thousand years ago, the roots of the great monotheistic religions begin to grow. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam come into being.

Spirit: Humans by intuition begin to recognize powers greater than and separate from themselves. Primal cultures experience these powers as a multitude of distinct forces and presences. Later, the Hebrew nation comes to recognize the spiritual Deity who is all powerful, all knowing, and who created the universe out of nothing. The universe comes to recognize its maker!

Interlude: The fifth candle is lit; nave lights are turned on.

Hymn: “Earth and All Stars,” v. 1 and 2 (LBW 558)

Earth and all stars! Loud rushing planets!
Sing to the Lord a new song!
Oh, victory! Loud shouting army!
Sing to the Lord a new song!
He has done marvelous things.
I too will praise him with a new song!

Hail, wind, and rain! Loud blowing snow storm!
Sing to the Lord a new song!
Flowers and trees! Loud rushing dry leaves!
Sing to the Lord a new song!
He has done marvelous things.
I too will praise him with a new song!

Nave lights off

Spirit: Let us pray: O God, you brought us into existence, the culmination of four billion years of life on this planet. You chose for us a great journey, launching life as single-celled creatures, then shaping us to your image by evolution. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Spirit: The Hebrews also recognize the need to be in harmony with God and nature. They use the word “sin” to describe a state of disharmony. They tell a story about a magnificent garden where the first humans, Adam and Eve, lived, and about a tree, whose forbidden fruit should not be eaten, under penalty of death. Adam and Eve are tempted by a beguiling serpent: This, from Genesis, chapter 3, verses 3 to 5: “But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die. For

God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' The Bible then tells us that Adam and Eve ate of the tree, were expelled from the Garden, and eventually died, but they indeed acquired wisdom.

Nature: Scientists interpret the acquisition of wisdom as the evolution of our brains, wisdom expressed in the triumphs of civilization. But the price has been distancing ourselves from nature and from God. We lost the enchantment, that oneness with the world...

Spirit: ... and with our Maker.

Nature: In fact, we thought we had become gods ourselves. We forgot our epic journey ...

Spirit: ... a journey charted by God ...

Nature: a journey beginning through the searing heat of innumerable giant stars exploding and scattering dust across thousands of light years of interstellar space, and later, through the mystery of life, organizing and becoming us and every kindred being. We forgot that we are truly children of the cosmos.

Spirit: God's voice grew faint. Prophets arose from within the Hebrew nation who heard the voice of God more clearly. They warned the people, but God's voice was too often ignored. Finally a man emerged, Jesus of Nazareth, who knew the voice of God with perfect clarity, whose life was completely resonant with the will of God—because he, in fact, is God. This from John, chapter 1, verse 14: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth."

Nature: This part of the Story is beyond the reach of science for...

Spirit: Through Jesus Christ, the earth experiences God face to face.

Interlude: The sixth candle is lit. Then the Christ candle is brought forward to the altar, where it forms the apex of an inverted V with the other chancel candles. The Christmas tree lights are turned on. The soprano, with flute accompaniment, sings the second and third verses of "Of the Father's Love Begotten" (LBW 42)

Oh, that birth forever blessed,
When the virgin full of grace,
By the Holy Ghost conceiving,
Bore the Savior of our race,
And the babe, the world's redeemer,
First revealed his sacred face,
Evermore and evermore.

This is he whom seers in old time,
Chanted of with one accord,

Whom the voices of the prophets,
Promised in their faithful word;
Now he shines, the long expected;
Let creation praise its Lord
Evermore and evermore.

Spirit: When sin scarred the world, God sent his Son to heal our ills and form us again into wholeness. Let us pray: O God, we are the fruits of your creation, a product of your love. Help us, through your Word made flesh, to restore the enchantment, our oneness with you and with nature. Truly, we are made from the dust of the earth, and before that the dust of stars. We are not lords but rather children of the earth, children of this vast and creative universe. Help us to realize that by harming this planet, we are harming ourselves. Amen.

Interlude: The flute softly plays one verse of "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence" (LBW 198), while Nature speaks the following:



Nature: We entered the thousand years of the last millennium in an epoch so full of fear and superstition that we now call it the Dark Ages. Since then, much of the darkness has been dispelled, to the great benefit of humankind. Our civilization experienced the Enlightenment that ushered in the modern age. Science has achieved a tremendous string of successes—both in our understanding of the world and in our technological ability to intervene. It was just a matter of time, we thought, until all physical processes would be known and all mysteries solved. ... And yet, the more we learn, the more wondrous the mysteries become! We know now that we live in a world in which time is not absolute, space is curved by gravity, matter manifests unpredictably, and

sunlight embraces the contradictions of wave and particle. Gödel's incompleteness theorem shows, in effect, that we will never have all the answers. The renowned physicist Sir Arthur Eddington concluded that we live not in a concrete reality but a shadow world of symbols.

The flute begins to play as Spirit continues:

Spirit: Remarkably, Eddington was simply restating what Plato had said more than two thousand years earlier, with his now-famous cave allegory: We are like dwellers in a cave, with our backs forever to the light outside. We see dark forms moving on the rock walls and assume they are the whole of reality—not realizing that these forms are but shadows of a far more wondrous world beyond our ken. T. S. Eliot, from his poem "Four Quartets," says this:

At the still point of the turning world,
Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards;
At the still point, there the dance is,
... and there is only the dance.

Interlude: The flute music intensifies, and a dancer enters. A spotlight projects magnified shadows of the dancer onto the back

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wall of the chancel. After a few measures, Spirit drives the imagery home, pointing to the shadows and saying . . .

Spirit: We, too, are cave dwellers, with our backs to the light of the world, seeing only the shadows . . . only the shadows. . . At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; neither from nor towards; at the still point there the dance is . . . and there is only the dance.

Spirit and Nature in unison: We have reached the still point. The domains of nature and spirit have met.

Nature: There is no science.

Spirit: There is no theology.

Unison: There is only the dance.

Nature: Of mystery.

Spirit: With God.

Interlude: The lectern light and all other electrical lights are turned off, leaving only the lit candles. The dancer, Spirit, and Nature all depart to sit with the congregation. Silence follows for one minute and then the soprano solo sings unaccompanied the first verse from "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence" LBW 198

Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
And with fear and trembling
stand;
Ponder nothing earthly minded,
For with blessing in his hand
Christ our God to earth descending
Comes our homage to demand.

Interlude: Organ continues to play the melody, while the congregation rises to sing the final three verses. The nave lights are turned on for the congregational singing; the pastor returns and prepares the sacrament.

Hymn: "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence," v. 2-4 LBW 198

King of Kings yet born of Mary,
As of old on earth he stood,
Lord of lords in human vesture,
In the body and the blood,
He will give to all the faithful
His own self for heav'nly food.

Rank on rank the host of heaven
Spreads its vanguard on the way;
As the light of light descending
From the realms of endless day,
Comes the pow'rs of hell to vanquish,
As the darkness clears away.

At his feet the six winged seraph,
Cherubim with sleepless eye,
With their faces to the presence,
As with ceaseless voice they cry:
"Alleluia! Alleluia!
Alleluia, Lord Most High!"

The Sacrament of Holy Communion. Note: The sacrament proceeds as standard, with The Peace, The Offering, The Offertory Prayer, The Great Thanksgiving, The Lord's Prayer, The Distribution, a hymn, The Post-Communion Blessing, The Post-Communion Prayer, The Benediction, The Dismissal, and a final hymn. The Epic infuses the sacrament during The Great Thanksgiving, when the pastor and congregation engages in this colloquy:

P: The Lord be with you.

C: And also with you.

P: Lift up your hearts.

C: We lift them up to the Lord.

P: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

C: It is right to give Him thanks and praise.

P: It is right to give You thanks and praise,
O Lord our God, Sustainer of the universe.
You are worthy of glory and praise.

C: Glory to You forever and ever.

P: At Your command all things came to be:
the vast expanse of interstellar space,
galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses,
and this fragile earth, our island home. By
Your will they were created and have
their being.

C: Glory to You forever and ever.

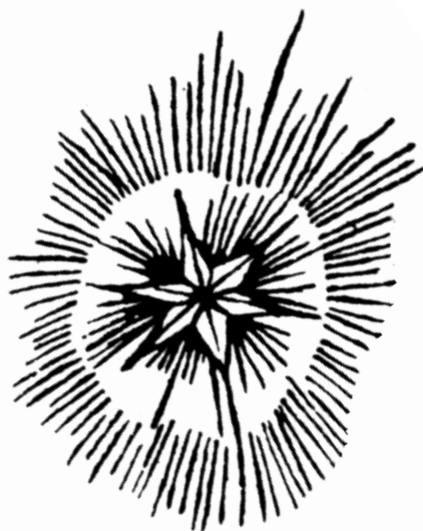
P: From the primal elements You brought forth the human race,
and blessed us with memory, reason, and skill. You made us the stewards of creation.

C: Glory to You forever and ever.

P: But we turn against You, and betray Your trust; and we turn against one another. Again and again You call us to return. Through the prophets and sages You reveal Your righteous law. In the fullness of time You sent Your Son, born of a woman, to be our Savior. He was wounded for our transgressions, and bruised for our iniquities. By His death He opened to us the way of freedom and peace.

C: Glory to You forever and ever.

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Part II: Gifts of the New Story A Unitarian Universalist Sunday Service

BY NITA PENFOLD



This service was created by Nita Penfold and Nick Page and conducted on the first Sunday of the year 2000 at the First Parish in Milton, Unitarian-Universalist (Milton, Massachusetts).

SETTING: The meeting place or church sanctuary has been prepared in advance with four altars, preferably in each of the four directions. The altars are intended to give the congregation a concrete aesthetic form for the four paths of Creation Spirituality. Participation is encouraged by interactive parts at each altar. (See the Appendix on page 12 for details on the four altars.) Congregants are given a printed program upon entering, which includes the following, along

with as much of the titled components of the special service as space allows:

Gifts of the New Story

“The history of life can be understood as the creation of ever more sensitive creatures in a universe where there is always another dimension of beauty to be felt and savored. Think of yourself that way, as a supreme power of sensitivity surrounded by magnificence.”—Brian Swimme, *The Universe is a Green Dragon*, 1984.

Before and after the service, please feel free to visit and participate in the four altars representing the four paths of what has come to be known as Creation Spirituality. We ask that you honor this morning as a worship rather than a performance by withholding applause.

KEY PLAYERS: Two readers who are Celebrants of the Universe Story (here, Nita and Nick), along with singers and musicians.

The service begins per usual, with Greetings and Announcements, followed by the Lighting of the Chalice. The special service is then introduced in a way appropriate for the congregation.

Prelude - Variations on “More Love,” a Shaker hymn.

[Any piano improvisation will work here, especially if based on songs used in the service.]

Opening Words - written by Sr. Mary Goergen, O.S.F. from *Prayers for a Thousand Years* (E. Roberts and E. Amidon, eds., HarperSanFrancisco 1999).

Nita: We are about to enter the 15 millionth millennium of the universe.

Nick: We are about to enter the 4.5 millionth millennium of Earth.

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An Interview with Nita Penfold

Editor's note: Nita Penfold is a published poet, exhibiting artist, and Unitarian Universalist religious educator who tries to infuse soul into all she does. She is also a doctoral student at the University of Creation Spirituality, studying with Brian Swimme and Matthew Fox. Her husband, Nick Page, is a nationally known song-leader, author, and composer. Songs like “Bacteria Blues” and others are from his work-in-progress “MAGNIFICENCE,” a large-scale choral telling of the new creation story.

CB: Nita, what moved you to create this Epic service?

NP: My church in Milton is supporting me in my education at the University of Creation Spirituality. What I have been learning about the creation of the universe and its spiritual ramifications is awe-inspiring and fits well into the Unitarian Universalist context. I felt that the advent of the year 2000 was a good time to begin to bring my learning back to the church.

CB: What are the core concepts of UU that provided a scaffold for creating the service?

NP: Unitarian Universalists have no set creed—only principles that we affirm based on sources that we have found traditionally grounding. Two of these sources connect directly to the New Story: “Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life” and “Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.”

CB: Which aspects of the Epic (if any) were most challenging to infuse into the UU tradition, and which meshed easily?

NP: Most Unitarian Universalists are more comfortable with science than they are with spirituality, so the challenge was less to bring science in than to connect it to a sense of the spiritual through creating an atmosphere of awe and wonder.

CB: What was the congregant response to the service?

NP: I found that the participatory aspects of the service appealed to many of the congregation. They enjoyed a service where they didn't just sit and listen but were asked to participate, both in a public manner—singing and speaking—and in a private manner, interacting with the altars. The children especially enjoyed traveling around to the altars with their parents before and after the service and participating in the interactive ritual aspects. The service also accommodated their special needs by providing opportunities for them to move around and to sing.

CB: Are there other ways that you have been bringing the Epic back to your congregation?

NP: Yes, I have led the Cosmic Walk with our third through eighth graders and incorporated the four paths into the children's chapel. Next spring, our entire church school will be participating in a focus on Creation Spirituality. I am working on a Montessori

"The Epic Infusing Traditions"

(Continued from page 9)

Nita: We are about to enter the 4 millionth millennium of life.

Nick: We are about to enter the 2,600 millennium of humans.

Nita: We are about to enter the 3rd millennium of the common era.

Nita and Nick: We are who we are today because of all that has existed before us.

Nick: We carry in our bodies and spirits the struggles and changes, joys and sorrows, loves and hates that have occurred throughout all time.

Nita: We are called to live with the knowledge and awareness that we are a part of all that is and that our decisions have an affect on the quality of life for all beings.

Nick: We are called to live this connectedness that exists between all members of creation.

Nita: We are called to put our hands upon creation and speak to it in words and touch, telling it how lovely it is because it cannot remember.

Nita and Nick: We are called to remember loveliness for one another until each of us can remember, believe, and live in love.

The Laughing Buddha Ritual - by Nick Page

This is a call and response ritual, which Nick has conducted at many UU churches and at the UU General Assembly. First the congregation is asked to fall in love and voice love sounds (Ah); then awe sounds (Awe); then love-awe combined (Ah-Awe); then surprise sounds (Oh!); then love-awe-surprise (Ah-Awe-Oh!); then embrace sounds (Ooooo); then love-awe-surprise-embrace (Ah-Awe-Oh-Ooooo); then sharing the love sounds (Mmmmm); and ending with love-awe-surprise-embrace-sharing sounds (Ah-Awe-Oh-Ooooo-Mmmmm). The result is sort of a UU "OM."

Star of Wonder Medley - text by John Hopkins

Nick led the congregation in a medley of song. For this segment of the program, the children were invited to come to the front to participate, each given a Star Stick (swizzle sticks with stars on the top.) The medley began with a two-part round; the first part of the round was the chorus from "We Three Kings":

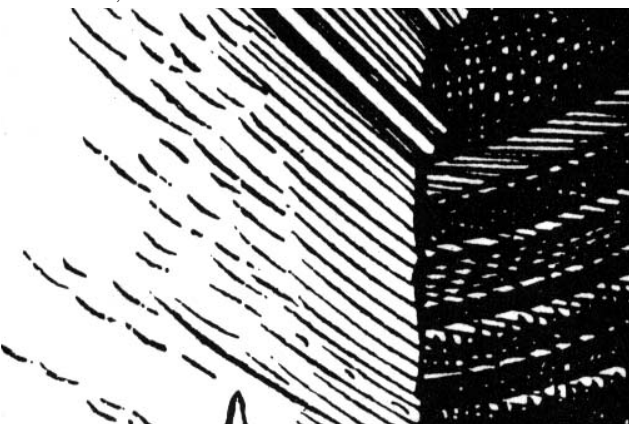
Star of wonder, star of night
Star of royal beauty bright
Westward leading, still proceeding
Guide us to Thy perfect light.

"Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" was then added to create the

round.

Following the round, the congregation was led in singing "This Little Light of Mine."

Creation Story - written by Nick Page



The children remained up front, as Nick told the story "A Creation Story for Children," published in his book, *Sing and Shine On* (Heinemann Press, 1995). Another version of the Universe Story can be found in the curriculum "Happy Birthday, Universe: A Cosmic Curriculum for Children" by Kim Farmer, published by True North Publications, 4400 Sycamore Hollow, Celina, TN

38551. Also in "The Blessing Seed," a children's picture book by Caitlin Matthews, published by Barefoot Books, 1998.

The children were asked to help with the telling of the story by using musical instruments. Preschoolers and kindergartners then departed for their own classes.

The Gift: Part I - text by Matthew Fox

Extracted from *Prayers for a Thousand Years*.

Nita: In the beginning was the gift. And the gift was with God and the gift was God. And the gift came and set its tent among us, first in the form of a fireball that burned unabated for 750,000 years and cooked in its immensely hot oven hadrons and leptons.

These gifts found a modicum of stability—enough to give birth to the first atomic creatures, hydrogen and helium. A billion years of stewing and stirring and the gifts birthed galaxies—spinning, swirling, living galaxies—created trillions of stars, lights in the heavens and cosmic furnaces that made more gifts through violent explosions of vast supernovas burning bright with the glow of more than a billion stars.

Gifts upon gifts, gifts birthing gifts, gifts exploding, gifts imploding, gifts of light, gifts of darkness. Cosmic gifts and subatomic gifts. All drifting and swirling, being born and dying, in some vast secret of a plan. Which was also a gift.

Offering

"In remembering the vast generosity of the universe, let us gift the church with our offering for the nurturing and sustenance of this community." The musical selection during the offering was "More Love," a Shaker hymn, which was sung as a duet.

Doxology

Give thanks today, Creation sings
And dances in eternal rings
And lives in us, we live in Thee—
Is now and ever more shall be. Amen.

[The words were created by Nick Page, to be sung to the traditional melody. In order for the congregation to participate, these

words must be printed in the order of service]

Healing Prayer - based on the spiritual, "Balm in Gilead"

Nick sang the verses, and the congregation hummed in between each verse, having been encouraged to call out during the humming the names of those who need healing.

Meditation - Holy, Holy

Nita: Meister Eckhart, a medieval Christian mystic, wrote, "If the only prayer you ever say is thank you, that is enough." Let us thank the universe, the Divine, and all that is sacred for its generosity to us by intoning the word "holy"—whatever that may mean for you.

Nita then demonstrated by singing Holy, Holy in various ways: slow, fast, one note, rising notes, falling notes, etc. She then began intoning and the congregation joined in. (This is a wonderful way to involve people in singing without pressure. Every time Nita has led this, sounds have emerged beautifully blended.)

The Gift: Part II - text by Matthew Fox

Nita: Gifts upon gifts, gifts birthing gifts, gifts exploding, gifts imploding, gifts of light, gifts of darkness. One of these supernovas exploded in a special manner, sending a unique gift to the universe, which later-coming creatures would one day call earth, their home. Its biosphere was a gift, wrapping it with beauty and dignity and just the right protection



from sun's radiation and from the cosmic cold. And eternal night. This gifted planet was set as a jewel in its most exquisite setting, the exact distance of 100 million miles from its mother star, the sun.

New gifts arose, never seen in such forms in the universe—rocks, oceans, continents, multicellular creatures that moved by their own inner power. Life was born!

Bacteria Blues - created by Nick Page

This is a call-and-response led by Nick, with piano accompaniment and congregation. Congregation response is signalled by "(Repeat)".

CALL AND RESPONSE:

Well a long long time ago - (Repeat)
We were swingin' in the trees - (Repeat)
And a long long long long long long time ago - (Repeat)
We were reptiles crawling on the earth - (Repeat)
And a long long long long long long long long time ago - (Repeat)
We were fish swimming in the sea. - (Repeat)
And a long long long long long long long long long long

long long long long long long long long long long long long long long long long long time ago - (Repeat)

We were great burning stars in a living universe. - (Repeat)

SOLO:

But to get from there to here,
We had to become, we had to become, we had to become:
Bacteria.

CALL AND RESPONSE:

(F) I'm a single cell Mama - (Repeat)
(Bb) I got the blue green blues - (Repeat)
(F) Well I'm a single cell Mama - (Repeat)
(Bb) I got the blue green blues - (Repeat)
(C) Don't think you're so superior - (Repeat)
(Bb) To this lowly mold bacteria- (Repeat)
(F) Cause I'm a single cell Mama - (Repeat)
(C F C F) With the bacteria blues - (Repeat)

SOLO:

So we say thank you to bacteria
From Alaska to Nigeria.

Thanks to all things bacterial
But don't put it in my cereal.
The earth's a living system
The bacteria has risen.
Don't need old superstitiousness
Just need ol' photosynthesis.
The oldest living geezers are
The blue green bubblers and breathers.
We should build a crown imperial
For our ancestors bacterial.

The Gift: Part III - text by Matthew Fox

Nita: Life was born! Gifts that had taken the form of fireball and helium, galaxies and stars, rock and water, now took the form of Life! Life—new gift of the universe. Flowers of multiple color and scent, trees standing upright. Forests arose offering places for all manner of creeping, crawling things, things that fly and sing, things that swim and slither, things that run on four legs, and, eventually, things that stand and walk on two. With thumbs that move to make still more creativity—more gift-giving—possible.

The human became a gift, but also a danger, for its powers of creativity were unique in their potential for destruction or healing. How would humans use these gifts? Which direction would they choose? The earth waited for an answer to these questions, and is still waiting, trembling.

Teachers were sent, divine incarnations birthed from the soil. Isis and Hesiod, Buddha and Lao Tzu, Moses and Isaiah, Sarah and Esther, Jesus and Paul, Mary and Hildegard, Chief Seattle and Buffalo Woman, to teach the humans ways of compassion—and still Earth

(Continued on page 12)

waits to see if humanity was gift or curse.

Have you ever given a gift and then regretted it afterward? Earth wonders and waits. For the gift has been made flesh and dwells everywhere among us and we tend to know it not. And to treat it not as a gift but as an object. To be used, abused, trampled underfoot—even crucified. But to those who do receive it as a gift all is promised. All shall be called children of the gift, sons and daughters of grace. For all generations.

There's Honey in the Rock - an African-American spiritual

Nick Page led the congregation in singing this hymn. A comparable hymn in the UU *Singing the Living Tradition* is No. 368, "Now Let Us Sing."

Closing Words

Nita: Star of wonder, each of us is made of stardust.
Star of light, each of us radiant beyond measure.
Westward leading, Eastward leading, South, North,
Up, Down, Deeply Within—
Guide us, O Great Mystery, O Great Gift,
To our own gifts, our own generosity,
To our own perfect light.

Postlude

Nick Page on piano, playing and improvising from the musical notes added to our Via Creativa altar before the service. ☺

If you use or adapt this UU service for your spiritual community, please let the author know. Nick Page's songs are copyright protected but you may obtain permission to use them from him. Both authors would be grateful to hear from anyone who duplicates the service at penfold5@hotmail.com.



APPENDIX

Preparing the Four Altars

BY NITA PENFOLD

Matthew Fox speaks of the Four Paths of Creation Spirituality, basing them on his translations of Meister Eckhart. They are four ways in which we humans experience our lives spiritually.

Via Positiva is the path of awe and wonder, where we experience joy and excitement discovering that we are part of the fabric of the universe. *Via Negativa* is the path of working through and releasing the pain we experience when our reality is challenged or disrupted. We use those experiences of both the negative and the positive in the *Via Creativa*, where we express our visions and our truths through art, writing, dance, music, poetry, etc. The last path, *Via Transformativa*, is where we take what we have learned and challenge the existing structures, confronting evil and bringing about change in our lives and the lives of others.

These are not static paths but can be experienced as a spiraling experience, where we weave in and out of them—sometimes in the course of a day, sometimes over many years.

In our UU service, the altars presented the paths in ways that

would readily engage the congregation, both children and adults. For each altar, there was a black presentation board on a table. The board had photos or pictures and words describing the path represented, along with a list of the items on the altar so that everything was referenced. Rainbow candles were placed at each altar and lit before the congregation arrived. Most of the statues were found at local stores or from *JBL Sacred Source* catalog. It is not important to duplicate my arrangement, but to create an altar which represents that path for you, with symbols that will affirm and challenge your congregation's perception of that path. The important thing is to have a variety of images in an aesthetically pleasing arrangement. Each altar also had an interactive component that became part of the underlying ritual of the altar and the larger service.

Via Positiva Altar

Words on presentation board:

- The Paths of Creation Spirituality: Via Positiva
- Joy and Wonder, Blessing and Gratitude
- We are the Universe made conscious of itself
- The habits of the Universe: Differentiation (increasing complexity and diversity); Autopoiesis (self-organization, each being becomes itself); Communion (the need for relationship and community)

Symbols on altar (and named on presentation board):

- photograph of Earth from Space
- statues of Hagia Sophia: Wisdom (plaque icon, Constantinople, c 537 CE)
- Willendorf Goddess (Natural History Museum, Vienna, c. 30,000 BCE) as Great Mother or Gaia
- Celtic Green Man (c 1470 CE) as Renewal and Resurrection
- Oya (contemporary image, Ghana) as Warrior Goddess of the Wind who birthed 9 children
- a variety of elements of Earth: various rocks, shells, star, birch bark, and a crystal
- covering the table was a green cloth with the Yin/Yang symbol batiked on it, representing balance

Interactive Ritual:

I prepared a fish bowl (you can use any large glass bowl or container) containing written affirmations about our uniqueness and our power as human beings. Some of these were written from SARK quotes, others came from a page of affirmations in the UU curriculum, "We Believe." The affirmations were printed on colorful strips of folded paper. Participants were instructed, "Please take a spiritual vitamin from the bowl and wonder at your uniqueness."

Via Negativa Altar

Words on presentation board:

- The Paths of Creation Spirituality: Via Negativa
- Befriending the Darkness, Letting Go, Moving through Pain and Loss

Symbols on Altar:

- Hecate (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City) as Greek Goddess, Maiden, Mother, and Crone—all to help with difficult decisions at crossroads of our lives
- Pieta (Michelangelo, Vatican, 1499 CE) for Grief of Mary over