"The Sacred Universe"

Sermon by the Reverend Sarah Clark

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e-mail: uu@puuc.mv.com

"We are of the stars, the dust of explosions cast across space."

Cosmogenesis…The birth of the stars, the planets, the galaxies, from the heat and light of a magnificent flame of energy, the beginning of the evolution from stardust to one cell organisms to dinosaurs to birds, bears, elephants, apes, humans. From a barren world to one lush with myriad life forms. From creatures incapable of thought to creatures rife with thoughts, good and evil, and actions that can harm or heal.

"We are of the stars…" We no longer look up at the stars and see in them Orion or Diana, bears or dippers, except as useful words to describe what we know are masses of exploded material dead long ago whose light is only now reaching us. For some nontheists, people who do not believe in God, scientific knowledge robs the heavens of their mystery and makes life, the stars, the universe, and religion pointless. Nontheists who are religious naturalists also reject God as the creator, but they see the great burst of original light as a glorious Mystery. For the religious naturalist the fact that Life and Nature exist is the point. They look up at the stars with wonder and with questions and with acceptance of the stars as our oldest ancestors. From the stars our world came; into the stars our world will return when its pilgrimage in the universe is ended. In the meantime, we humans have invented religion as a way to respond to the universe. Religious naturalists value religion as a way to nurture the human need for spirituality, community, and morality.

At the Star Island conference on Ecomorality this summer, one of the speakers, George Fisher, said that when a fundamentalist Christian refutes the story of cosmogenesis, he asks the person: how does your Scripture story of the creation compel you to act in this world? In other words, if you believe that God created the world and saw that it was good and loved the world, shouldn't that compel you to nurture God's creation? His point was that it is really not important what religious story we believe, but rather how that story inspires us to act in the world.

A literal interpretation of Genesis is not disturbing looked at from that perspective. The scariest interpretation of creation is that of those who view the world as pointless, who look up at the stars with no sense of wonder. For if the world is pointless, if we lose our sense

of awe, then the world is a place to be used for our own gratification. We owe the world of nature nothing when we see no sacredness. We are free from morality in our actions to the ecosystem.

What we all need, theists and nontheists alike, is a perspective in which we can reverence the sacredness of the natural world, including all creatures great and small, sentient and nonsentient beings, rock, tree and amoebas. From that attitude of reverence, we can then act with a morality that nurtures rather than destroys creation. Religious naturalist and cell biologist Ursula Goodenough, in her book *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, writes: "Once we have our feelings about Nature in place, then I believe that we can also find important ways to call ourselves Jews, or Muslims, or Taoists, or Hopi, or Hindus, or Christians, or Buddhists. Or some of each." (p. 173) With this acceptance of a diversity and plurality of theologies, you can see why religious naturalism is a perspective particularly acceptable to Unitarian Universalists.

Religious naturalism is a religious response to the natural world. It engenders an attitude of reverence, an ethos of caring for all of nature, and a spirituality inspired by contemplation of nature. It is a way for all of us to unify our feelings about Nature. Today I am presenting an overview of religious naturalism as interpreted by Professor Goodenough. She begins her book by recounting her experience as the daughter of a Yale religion professor who started his undergraduate course, The Psychology of Religion, by telling his class, "I do not believe in God," (p.1) She then moves on to her own perspective as a scientist shaped by her spiritual journey in religious naturalism and as a member of a Presbyterian church. Parts of the book may be difficult for a non-scientist, but her reflections at the end of each chapter are clear, lyrical, and profound meditations on religious naturalism. These reflections are the inspiration and substance of this sermon.

Ursula Goodenough is one of the leading organizers of the Star Island Conference on Religion in an Age of Science. She is a brilliant scholar, who manifests calm humility, confidence, and gentle warmth in person — all of which come across on the printed page.

What is it then to be a religious naturalist? Most religious naturalists do not believe in a personal God, although what Goodenough says about getting your feelings about nature in place and then simply adding the religious naturalist response to your own religion I take to mean that I can be a Christian religious naturalist or a Jewish or a Hindu, etc. However, the fact that most religious naturalists do not believe in a personal God (or goddess) means that those Unitarian Universalists who are nontheists can accept religious naturalism as a spiritual response to the universe.

Why is this important? Because such a response is life-affirming, rather than despairing. It turns the narrative of cosmogenesis from an intriguing but pointless story of a random creation to a thrilling tale of the miracle of Life's emergence from nothingness.

For example, the scientific rendering of the cosmic story recounts how the laws of physics and chemistry emerged after the great explosion. These laws are the building blocks for all life. Some people regard this emergence as proof that there must be a creator God. They cannot believe life could have evolved by chance. Professor Goodenough rejects the need for a creator and points out that indeed the world could have evolved by chance. Yet still the story of cosmogenesis fills her with joy and awe. As a religious naturalist, Goodenough explains, "I revert to my covenant with Mystery and respond to the emergence of Life not with a search for its Design or Purpose, but instead with outrageous celebration that it occurred at all." (pp.29-30)

Celebration — here is a religious response. Not dreary nihilism and a philosophy of pointlessness, but celebration. Life emerged. We can explain some of the hows. The whys are a mystery. As religious naturalists, we celebrate the mystery, we celebrate the facts, and we celebrate most of all the wonderful force of life itself. Goodenough writes, "Life does generate something more from nothing but over and over again, and each emergence, even though fully explainable by chemistry, is nonetheless miraculous." (p. 30)

Life is a miracle. We need to remind ourselves of that every day. The stardust from which we came became life. The mystery, the wonder, the reverence, the sacredness, the miracle of it all: religious naturalists each day celebrate the world, proclaiming What a Miracle!

It is not that life is perfect. A scientific understanding of life can at times lead to despair. Goodenough acknowledges fear of death and that sometimes she yearns to believe in a heavenly afterlife. However, for her such a belief is impossible. Religious naturalism provides her with a different answer. She writes:

> When my awe at how life works gives way to self-pity because it doesn't work the way I would like, I call on assent — the age-old religious response to self-pity, as in "Why, Lord? Why this? Why ME?' and then, "Thy Will be Done." As a religious naturalist I say, "What is, IS," with the same bowing of the head, the same bending of the knee. Which then allows me to say "Blessed Be to What Is" with thanksgiving. To give assent is to understand, to incorporate, and then let go. With the letting go comes that deep sigh we call relief, and relief allows the joy-of-being-alive-at-all to come tumbling forth again." (p. 47)

The religious naturalist accepts death as the price of life. Goodenough points out that the only creatures that do not die of old age are single-celled algae and fungi. She writes, "Death is the price paid to have trees and clams and birds and grasshoppers, and death is the price paid to have human consciousness, to be aware of all that shimmering awareness and all that love. My somatic life is the wondrous gift wrought by my forthcoming death." (p. 151)

And for life, for all the joy of consciousness, for all the variety of life that shares the universe with us, the response of the religious naturalist is not anger that we must die, but gratitude that we live.

"We are of the earth," celebrates Joy Atkinson (in our UU hymnal). "We breathe and live in the breath of ancient plants and beasts. Their cells nourish the soil: we build our communities on their harvests of gifts."

Gratitude for all the animals and plants and stones and seas and stars that traveled through earth's pilgrimage before the evolution of humankind, who prepared the way for us. Gratitude for the creatures living with us now, enriching our lives — whether by providing us with food and shelter, or with the inspiration that comes when we see the blue heron fly along the stream, the deer leap in the field. Gratitude for the water, the air, the earth, the rocks. Gratitude for this amazing planet Earth, and the amazing cosmos in which it floats.

Ursula Goodenough asks us to imagine that we are in a spaceship looking for a home, and that we land on Earth — a place perfectly suited not only for our survival but for joyous living. Goodenough writes: "This is how the religious naturalist thinks of our human advent on Earth. We arrived but a moment ago, and found it to be perfect for us in every way. And then we came to understand that it is perfect because we arose from it and are a part of it. Hosannah! Not in the highest, but right here, right now, this. When such gratitude flows from our beings, it matters little whether we offer it to God — or to Mystery or Coyote or Cosmic Evolution or Mother Earth."

What matters is that we are grateful. For Unitarian Universalists I see this response of religious naturalists as a great unifier. We may each ascribe gratitude to a different entity, but our gratitude is shared.

With gratitude comes also humility in regard to the rest of creation — an acknowledgment that we are not the rulers of the universe but a part of the web. Goodenough points out that for all our human accomplishments, we can not soar like the eagle or swim like the great whales. The response of religious naturalism is not to defer to God but to defer to all of Nature. Goodenough reminds us of the words of Oren Lyons, Faithkeeper of the Onondaga Nation, who in a

speech to the United Nations assembly said: "I do not see a delegation for the four-footed. I see no seat for the eagles. We forget and we consider ourselves superior, but we are after all a mere part of creation….It is our responsibility since we have been given the minds to take care of these things."

The religious naturalist takes to heart this Native American spirituality. We must defer and we must be responsible. We must see not only our own individual lives, but Life with a capital L., the whole of life that pulses on this planet. And we must care for that life.

Here is Joy Atkinson again: "We are a part of the great circle of humanity gathered around the fire, the hearth, the altar."

Another aspect of religious naturalism is that just as it honors the non-human creations of Nature, it honors the human. Religious naturalists celebrate human uniqueness, while affirming the ethos that humans must care for all of creation. Goodenough points out the special gifts of humankind: language, self-awareness, the ability to analyze and ask questions, to create art, and finally to be religious and pass on our religions to our children. The religious naturalist accepts that the special gifts of humanity are to be used to promote the continuation of life for all of Nature.

Goodenough cites a quotation from William James: "Religion is about the manner of our acceptance of the universe." From that acceptance, religions create meaning and purpose. (p. 47) For the religious naturalist that purpose is fellowship and community with all creatures and a dedication to what Goodenough defines as "a credo of continuation."

The purpose of life and of religion for Ursula Goodenough is to seek out ways to help life continue on earth for as long as possible. In a final profession of her faith as a religious naturalist, Goodenough writes:

> If we can revere how things are, and can find a way to express gratitude for our existence, then we should be able to figure out, with a great deal of work and good will, how to share the Earth with one another and with other creatures, how to restore and preserve its elegance and grace, and how to commit ourselves to love and joy and laughter and hope. It goes back in the end to my father's favorite metaphor. 'Life is a coral reef. We each leave behind the best, the strongest deposit we can so that the reef can grow. But what's important is the reef.' (p. 172)

.And that is the final humility of the religious naturalist, a humility that says it is not my personal salvation I seek, but the salvation of life itself. It is not me who is important in the end, but the universe.

When I take Goodenough's words to my heart, I realize that in acceptance of myself as a small, impermanent creature adrift in a magnificent creation, I can find peace. In responding to the beauty of the world and the wonder of life with joy, I can find peace. In reaching out to my fellow humans in all our uniqueness and ability for comforting one another, I can find peace.

But my peace is destroyed when I see the way humans mistreat the world of Nature and each other. To restore peace, I must take on responsibility. Small and temporal as each of us is, we can still for our brief moment in time have the power to contribute good to this world. As religious naturalists we must drink in the beauty of the stars and march in the streets for social justice; we must preserve the planet by planting gardens and by building schools. We must sow the seeds of beauty and justice. Only by doing both will we truly know the peace that passes understanding, the peace of being at one with the sacred universe.

REFERENCES: All quotations by Ursula Goodenough are drawn from her 1998 book, *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, Oxford University Press: Oxford and New York. Joy Atkinson is quoted from her reading, "The Womb of Stars" (#445) in the Unitarian Universalist hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1992.