Swirling Chaos, Dancing Stars

An Intergenerational Sunday Service for the New Year

created by Rev. Ruth Gibson, First Universalist Church of Denver and performed in 2 Sunday services on January 2, 2005

One must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star.

— Friedrich Nietzsche

The womb of stars embraces us, remnants of their fiery furnaces pulse through our veins. We are of the stars, the dust of explosions cast across space. We are a part of the great circle of humanity gathered around the fire, the hearth, the altar. We gather anew this day to celebrate our common heritage. May we recall in gratitude all that has given us birth.

— Joy Atkinson

For every child born, there's a morning star rising That sings to the universe who we are.

We are our grandmothers' prayers.

We are our grandfathers' dreaming.

We are the breath of the ancestors.

We are the Spirit of God.

— Ysaye M. Barnwell

Reflection

(service leader to create their own; here is Ruth Gibson's)

The celebration of the New Year is traditionally a time for looking back—and looking ahead. We look back to understand how we got to where we are, we look ahead to strengthen our good intentions, so that we can do our part to make a good year.

It is our tradition here, to consider what we want for ourselves, for our friends and loved ones, for our world—and to look at our thoughts and actions, to see if we have gotten stuck with or any attitudes or habits that get in the way of our being as good as we want to be, and doing the good we want to do. Sometimes we find we are bothered by scared or angry feelings that won't go away—or maybe we're holding on to them for some reason. If we see anything in ourselves that's getting in the way of goodness, anything that we don't want to bring into the New Year, we get rid of it. This is how we do it: we write some words or make pictures about this stuff that gets in the way of our goodness, this bad stuff, on a piece of paper—usually it's paper that was going to be thrown away because it has a mistake of some sort on one side.

Then we crumple up the paper and throw it in this metal trash can. At the end of the service, we'll go singing out to the Peace Pole, where we'll burn all the bad stuff.

Today, as we look back, it may be hard to remember the ways we've changed or grown in the past year. It may be hard to remember all the things we've worried about, been mean about, been angry or scared about, or felt badly about. The earthquake and tsunami in Southeast Asia have been so terrible, it probably makes most of our troubles and most of our wishes seem very small.

An 8 year-old girl named Natalie once told of her dream for the word "good":

I dream of meeting our Hopi ancestors and we will sit together and talk about the time that will come—the time when all the people are sitting in a huge circle and they are brothers and sisters, everyone!

That's when all the spirits will dance and dance and the stars will dance and the birds will swoop up and down and they'll dance, and all the people everywhere with stand up and dance...in a big circle, so huge you can't see where it goes...and everyone is happy. No more fights...Fights are a sign that we have gotten lost, and forgotten our ancestors, and are in the worst trouble. When that day comes, we're all holding hands in the big circle, not just us Hopis, everyone—that's what the word good means.

This week I remembered Natalie's vision. The tsunami disaster has been more devastating than we can fully understand. But in response to it—look what we human beings are doing: All over the world, people are reaching out in compassion, even if we do not know the names of any who have died, or who are now trying to find a way to stay alive. Even people who were busy fighting wars against each other are finding ways to work together. If only for a moment, we have joined hands in the great circle.

There have been other moments in human history when people all over the world have reached out across divisions to dance together. Sooner or later, the old fights begin again. Or new ones start. But it's important to remember how it is to be joined in a big circle with a common, compassionate purpose.

So pay attention. Remember. Talk about it. Tell stories and sing songs about it. It will help us, and others learn that this is how we and all the people, not just our own people, can be happy.

Today's service is also about swirling chaos and dancing stars.

Science tells us that Earth and everything on it, including ourselves, is made of the dust of stars. All through the galaxies, particles, planets, and clouds of gas swirl, collide, and explode, in an ongoing process of creation and destruction. The elements released in those explosions became rocks and mountains and dust; they became clouds and water, rivers and seas. On our blue and green planet, the elements combined in myriad marvelous ways to become living beings. Some of those beings became human, and perhaps will evolve to become more humane.

Thinking about the stars, and about what's going on in the world, and in our own souls, how can we not be amazed! And why should we be afraid of our own inner fires, or of any chaos or confusion in our lives? Only recognize what needs to be destroyed, and what released, so that you may be dancing star — radiant and shining, sending new elements into the great dance of creation.

Gifts from Ancestral Stars

(to be performed by service leader and 10 Readers, each of whom carries a prop and places it on the altar)

SERVICE LEADER:

Did you know that everything now upon the Earth and within our own bodies was once part of a star, swirling in the skies? And the very same energies that molded the galaxies and set clumps of simple matter ablaze are present still in each of us—in our dreams and imaginations, in our loving and our longings for transformation. In the beginning, at the very start of everything, there was a Great Radiance. Then was a time of chaos—a time when all there was, were clouds of gas with tiny tiny particles—atoms, we call them. Some of the atoms that were swirling about sort of clumped together and became burning stars.

Stars do not shine forever. The longest lived stars (like our sun) shine for billions of years, and for us that seems forever. But the shortest-lived stars may shine for only a few tens of millions of years. And so we now know something wondrous: There have been many generations of short-lived stars, lighting up and dying out, lighting up and dying out, since the Universe began!

Sometimes when a star comes to the end of its shining, it goes out with a great explosion. We call this a Supernova. When a star goes out that way, all the atoms that were crunched up inside come out so fast that they crash into each other. And sometimes when the atoms of star-stuff crashed into each other, new and different kinds of stuff were the result.

But just what is this star-stuff? One of the very first songs our children learn asks this question:

Twinkle Twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are. Up above the world so high like a diamond in the sky...

Reader #1 (with a bowl of WATER)

I am HYDROGEN, the simplest, lightest, and most abundant of all chemical elements in the universe. I was born before any other element— before carbon, before oxygen, before iron, before gold. I filled the universe with great clouds — long before there were any stars. From my simplicity, more and more complex forms came into existence. Now, my Hydrogen atoms reside in every cell of your bodies, and in every cell of every plant, animal, fungus, and germ in or on the Earth. I am in every bite of food you eat, in every sip you drink. And without me, there would be no clouds, no rain, no snow, no rivers, no oceans, no baths or showers, because water is mostly made of hydrogen. I am hydrogen.

Reader #2, (with a HELIUM BALLOON)

I am HELIUM, the first-born element of hydrogen. Long ago when the universe was young, hydrogen atoms sometimes collided into one another and I am the result of that fusion. Your own nearest star, the sun, is creating more of me this very moment, and when hydrogen fuses into helium it also produces a whole lot of heat and light.

Other elements, younger elements, often combine, but I am the first-born, and rather special. I would rather keep to myself. You can't see me, but I am lighter that the air

around your planet, and if you capture me in a balloon, you can see just how graceful and uplifting I can be. I am helium.

SERVICE LEADER: Now that you know how stars began, let's sing verse 2.

Twinkle, twinkle little star / now I know just what you are. Making atoms in your core / helium and many more. Twinkle, twinkle little star / now I know just what you are.

Reader #3, (with BURNT TOAST)

After hydrogen fused into helium, helium fused into CARBON. That's me! Helium doesn't become carbon unless it is captured deep inside the fiery core of a giant star. Even then I didn't get out and about until those stars exploded and sent me flying out into the universe. Here on your planet, I've become one of the most important substances for earthly creatures and I take many forms.

You can see me in the blackness of soot, of tar, of ink, of pencil, of burnt toast. When I combine with two oxygen atoms, we make an invisible gas: carbon dioxide. In that form, we make your soda bubbly, but more important, every time you humans breathe out, you send us into the atmosphere. The air brings us to the leaves of plants, and the plants pull me out and use me for their life-giving food. Then they breathe out the oxygen, which they don't need—and the air carries that back to you.

And can you imagine what I become when I get pressed really hard? A beautiful diamond jewel!

I am carbon.

Reader #4 (with CANDLE FLAME)

After hydrogen fused into helium and helium into carbon, I came along. My name is OXYGEN. I'm precious! No human being, beast of bird could survive for more that a few short minutes without me. (deep breath!) You use me to burn your food into energy, so your heart can pump, your muscles can flex, your eyes can focus. Without me you couldn't speak or sing. Fortunately, I'm not in short supply.

I'm precious but I'm powerful too. I would burn up every cell in your body, as I burn your food, if you didn't have antioxidants in your body to cool me down. I am oxygen,.

Reader # 5 (with a box of SALT)

I'm SODIUM. I was born from the belly of a giant star after Nitrogen and Oxygen. I'm the first one in the family of elements to be too heavy to ever spend any time as a gas up in the atmosphere. I'm solid. I get along well with other elements, and together we can be pretty creative. Later you'll meet my brother, Chlorine. Together, we make salt. You use me to flavor your food, to pickle your pickles and preserve your meat. I make your popcorn tasty—and you will also find me in the ocean, and in your tears. I am sodium

Reader #6 (with a SODA CAN)

After hydrogen fused into helium and helium into carbon, after oxygen and sodium exploded into the universe, I came along. I'm ALUMINUM. You'll find me in rocks. You don't use me at all in your bodies. But you have learned to make many useful things from me—the soda cans you recycle are made from aluminum, so is the bright, shiny foil you use in your kitchen. I can be made into the body of an airplane, because I am so light and strong—or maybe you are using

me as tinsel on your Christmas tree. However you use me, every atom of aluminum was born when a giant star exploded, long ago. I am aluminum.

Reader #7 (CHLOROX BOTTLE).

I'm CHLORINE –remember me? When I work with Sodium, we salt your food. But by myself I'm a deadly poison! That's why you pour a little bit of me into your swimming pool, or use me in spray cleaners— I kill bacteria. If you put me in your laundry, I can bleach your clothes white. And every atom of chlorine everywhere on Earth was formed in fiery belly of a giant star. I am chlorine.

Reader #8 (with a BANANA)

I am potassium. Lots of other elements came before I did—all the ones we've mentioned and quite a few more. I came along late but I am very necessary especially for creatures like you. You will find me in lots of fruits, and I'm abundant in bananas. Like Sodium I'm too heavy to ever be a gas, I stay in the soil and in rocks like granite. I dissolve in water, so I don't stay in your body very long. Your brains can't function without me. So be sure to eat lots of fruit, and remember—before I was in the banana, before I was in the rock, I was deep in the belly of a burning star, a star that exploded long ago. I am postassium.

Reader #9 (with a SHELL)

After hydrogen fused into helium and helium into carbon, after these things changed into nitrogen and oxygen and sodium, into magnesium and aluminum and silicon, into phosphorus and sulfur and chlorine, and yet again into potassium, I came along. You know me—I am CALCIUM. I am what makes your bones good and strong — and I make strong eggshells and clamshells, too. You can find me in milk, and in plants such as figs and broccoli. But remember: Every atom of Calcium was first forged in the hot belly of a giant star — and set free when that star exploded. I am calcium.

Reader #10 (with a huge MAGNET, and some BOLTS AND KEYS)

IRON—that's me! You take me from rocks, and use me to make me into steel. You use the steel for bridges and beams, and for nuts and bolts and needles and pins, for spoons and forks and lots of things.

I am heavy and gray and strong — but when I'm' exposed to oxygen in air I flake away into reddish-orange powdery rust. You need me in your body, too—I'm what makes your blood red! More important, I pick up the oxygen in your blood and deliver it to each and every cell in your body.

I am so heavy, I can't easily be turned into anything that makes heat or light, so once I got formed in the bellies of the stars, they began to burn less and less. The more I grew inside the stars, the heavier the stars became, till finally they collapsed and the weight of me created intense pressure on the core of the star, such pressure that when a star finally exploded, it was incredible. The explosion—you call it a supernova—created a fire brighter than all the other stars in the galaxy, and in that fire many more amazing elements were formed—heavy metals like nickel and copper and silver and gold, powerful elements like arsenic krypton, radium and uranium. After millions of shining years, the star's dying supernova lasted only a week or two. But in that short time, all the elements that had been created inside the star were released into space. I am iron.

SERVICE LEADER: (Please rise for this responsive reading:)

We are the breath of the ancestors,

CONGREGATION: We are the dust of the stars

SERVICE LEADER: For all that we are made of, everything we are ...

CONGREGATION: ... was born in the fiery bellies of once-giant stars

ALL: Stars that exploded long ago, ancestors from afar.

SERVICE LEADER: Please be seated.

Reader #1: Remember me? Hydrogen, the very first element of all? After a supernova explodes and the star dies, the elements that have been released into space may float into one of my vast swirling clouds. I swirl all those particles round and round, and sometimes the swirling creates a hot ball of burning gas — a whole new star — like your sun. The heavier particles turn into planets, like your Earth — circling the nearest star, and reflecting its light.

(Hydrogen leads other readers to their stations for the Stardust ceremony)

Do you see how it is? Every atom of every element of everything that is anywhere on Earth — except for me, hydrogen — came into being within the fiery bellies of giant stars — stars that exploded long ago somewhere in the sky — exploded and then died.

Do you see how it is? The power and brilliance of supernova explosions sent forth the elements, the precious substances which combine to form new stars, surrounded by planets, in the circle dance of orbits. And on those planets are rocks and mountains, pebbles and dust, winds and clouds of gas. On your planet, water and sunlight and the elements combined in wondrous ways to create living beings. On your planet, some of those beings developed minds that could wonder, ask question, search for answers, tell stories, and even think of new ways to combine the elements around them.

Each atom of your body may once have been part of a cloud, part of a tree, part of a rock or a river. The atoms that form your body and your brain right now were long ago parts of flowers and fish, birds and butterflies, even mighty dinosaurs!

And long before that, those very atoms were formed in the bellies of burning stars. Oh yes, you and you and you and you are all made of star stuff. All beings are related, because all share the same ancestors: the stars!

SERVICE LEADER: Friends, knowing this, how can we begin a new day, a new year, with anything but wonder and awe?

[continue with "Cosmic Communion", stardust (glitter) ceremony]