

“But a Piece of the Expanse”

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City MD, Dec 8, 2019

Unitarian Universalist minister Victoria Safford writes, what if? What if there were a universe in which a world was born out of a smallish star? What if there were a world with red-winged blackbirds, and whales, and budding crocuses? With Mount Everest and coyotes and the moon above us? If such a universe existed, Rev. Safford asks, what would you do? What song would come out of your mouth, what prayer, what praises, what sacred offering, what whirling dance, what religion and what reverential gesture would you make to greet that world, every single day you were in it?

What if? Does not this world sound magical? Does not this world sound immense and beautiful and interconnected and steeped in wonder and awe? And in all of this awe, in all of this expanse, we are but a piece. A piece; called to be aware, called to celebrate, called to sing and pray and praise. But a piece, so small and seemingly insignificant, and yet, at the very same time, so overwhelmingly significant. All one needs to do is love someone to know that, however small we may be, as a piece of this universe, we are an eternity to those around us.

Reverend Safford writes, “What if there were a universe, a cosmos, which began in shining blackness, out of nothing, out of fire, out of a single, silent breath, and into it came billions and billions of stars?”

What if?

We are connected to this shining blackness that came out of nothing and from this nothing came the cosmos. And in these cosmos, in this universe, we have but a fleeting opportunity to

live and love and connect. In the midst of billions of stars, of this expanse, our life is so very fleeting. So very fleeting.

We are presented with a choice every single day – how to spend our brief and sacred time in this expanse.

We've spoken about this choice in the past. Where do we want to focus our attention? With what activities do we want to fill our days, our months, our years? What can we pay attention to, and to whom can we offer our love?

We need be ever so cognizant with what we spend our time worrying about, what we spend our time doing, where to center our energy and time. We are but finite beings, but a fleeting thought in the expanse of time and the universe, and yet we were offered this sacred chance, this holy chance, to be a piece of the infinite. We need make the most of this sacred and holy chance. As finite beings our lives will end.

And when this comes and when we return to the dust from which we came, will we be satisfied with our time here? What a powerful question. Will we be satisfied with our time here. Our time here, as but a piece of the expanse.

What if?

Reverend Kathleen McTigue reflects on her own experience with the expanse. She shares with us a story. After waking her children to view the midnight sky with her, Rev. McTigue writes, "Maybe this is all we can bear of the cosmic perspective on time, this little glimpse of eternity that lets us see our small lives connected to everything else on so massive a scale. My awe at

the immensity revealed in a clear night sky doesn't leave me feeling diminished or irrelevant. Instead it reminds me that if we can be present exactly in the moment we are living, we can step outside of time altogether. We live immersed in that eternity, after all – we just forget, until something like a starlight wakes us up to it again.”

Let us see our small lives connected to everything else on so a massive scale

And when I think about this profound connection we all share I think about all that has come before and all that will come next. This interconnection with the universe, and the interconnection of all living things, gone now or not yet here.

There is this cycle of life and decay of which we are all a part. We are born, we live, we die, and our atoms go from dirt to living to dirt yet again. This cycle connects all living things through this tangible thing that is science. This tangible knowledge of the recycling of our atoms. This knowledge that this cycle of death and rebirth connects us all to what has passed and what is yet to be. This inevitable cycle of life and decay; this cycle that will continue long after we have died.

While our time here is brief, the legacy we leave stretches through generations and reverberates throughout time. Every day we craft our legacy; we craft the impact we have on all of those in our interdependent web.

And through this connectedness we live on through each other. Through memories. Memories passed down through generations, one generation affecting the next, each life having an impact on those around it and thus living on through generations, generations affecting each other in way seen and unseen. Memories of overcoming hardship, memories of unconditional love,

memories of wisdom and guidance, memories of innocent joy. Memories that shape lives for generations.

We shape all that comes after us, just as our parents impacted us, and their parents before them. Just like each and every one of us has been affected by those around us – by friends or family or even acquaintances. How we are all affected by others in our lives; this carries those who have passed away through generations. Our legacy is a crucial part of this expanse. This is one of those ways we will live on for generations – what kind of memory do we want to leave? What is our legacy? Inevitably we will have an impact – let us be intentional in that impact; let us be intentional on what will pass on to those generations yet to come. Some piece of us was a part of this expanse and a piece of us will live on in eternity – whether atom or soul or memory or any combination thereof.

Rev. McTigue writes, “if we can be present exactly in the moment we are living, we can step outside of time altogether”

Step outside time altogether. This vast expanse is connected directly to the holy – something beyond all comprehension – something expansive and unknowable and eternal. Something that some of us have a personal relationship with. Something that some of us call science. Something that some of us depend on during times of struggle or celebrate with during times of joy. The holy – the uncomprehend able – that thing that connects us to our deepest selves.

I remember vividly this stepping outside of time. My story, too, is connected to the night sky. I sat on the shore of a darkened beach – during a meteor shower. The sky above me was velvety black, peppered with countless stars, coming into my vision from millions of miles away. Every

so often, one of those tiny, bright lights would shoot across the sky. The waves broke around me; I felt the mist of the water on my face and the firmness below me of those millions of grains of sand. In that moment I was in touch with my sacred, my holy – living outside of time as I became part of the infinite all around me; a part of all that was before and all that was to come. That expanse of those tiny grains of sand, of those immense stars lightyears away, in that moment, all was one.

Remember. Joy Harjo writes, “Remember you are all people and all people are you. Remember you are this universe and this universe is you. Remember all is in motion, is growing, is you.”

This sacred expanse that connects us, this cycle of matter decaying and then becoming, this cycle that will continue to do so into eternity. Whatever connects us; the spirit in our souls or memories of loved ones or actions that reverberate through generations.

Remember we are but a piece of the expanse. Remember those who have shaped our lives – they are a piece of us. Remember each one of us will inevitably live on, just as each person does – whether through atoms or memory or soul. Remember you are all people and all people are you.

We heard the reading from *Gates of Prayer*, a Jewish prayer book.

“The universe was brought forth by an inexhaustible creative power. It pours out torrents of energy still. Awesome and wondrous and mysterious, it is the source of our being.”

What awe, what wonder does this elicit that we are a part of this expanse – but a piece – this universe of red-winged blackbirds, and whales, and crocuses. This creative power that is fully

beyond our understanding; this power that is full of awe. This power that is ultimate, that cannot be understood, the source of our being, the source of all that has ever been, and the source of all that ever will be.

The prayer book continues,

“The blazing stars, particles too small to see, the smile of children, the eyes of lovers, melody filling the soul, a flood of joy surprising the heart, mystery at the core of the plainest things – all tell us that we are not alone.”

All that surrounds us, all of this tells us that we are not alone, that we are never alone, we are constantly surrounded by this expanse that is connected to all that ever was and to all that ever will be. This great mystery, all the awe that we are surrounded by, we are not alone. To live in awe is to connect with this expanse. To live in awe is to acknowledge the infinite, to acknowledge our tiny piece, so seemingly insignificant and yet so fundamentally important. We are each a crucial part of this chain, this web, that trickles through eternity. We are surrounded by and connected to this eternity at every moment. We are never alone. No matter how isolated or unconnected, how sad, how lonely, however we feel, we are constantly connected to so much more. We are but a piece of the expanse.

Mary Oliver writes, reflecting on her own experience of loneliness,

I too have known loneliness.

I too have known what it is to feel misunderstood, rejected, and suddenly

Not at all beautiful

Oh, mother earth,

Your comfort is great, your arms never withhold.

It has saved my life to know this.

Your rivers flowing, your roses opening in the morning

Oh, motions of tenderness!

To this poet, the earth and nature calm her, connect her, soothe her. Those rivers and roses to which she is connected, this holy connection between the earth and our lives, this allows her to feel as if she is never alone. This nature, this expanse, soothes her soul. And for those who do not have this connection to nature, there is also this holy connection to other human souls, other human minds, other human hearts. Those souls or those atoms or whatever it may be that connects us to all of those before and those yet to come. We are never alone, and when we struggle with loneliness, let us remember this sacred fact.

Carol P. Christ, historian, author, and theologian writes, "How do we know the presence of Goddess/God in our lives? Though there is no absolute certainty or infallible truth in our lives, there can be a kind of open and flexible inner knowledge of the divine presence that arises from the body, experience, relationship, community, and reflection." An inner knowledge of the divine presence; whatever this means to you. An individual knowledge extending from this expanse, grappling with eternity and the finality of our lives. Christ continues, "I begin to find the divine presence and love in everything ... Feeling that my body and soul are connected to the sky and salty water when I swim far out to sea. Sensing that I am not alone when I light a

candle in a church.” This profound power of love and the divine in everything, connected to all that is around us. A sacred part of the infinite; a blessed piece of the holy.

Let us look to the sky. In those immense stars we see the infinite. Let us sit on the shore of a beach, and in those tiny grains of sand, see the infinite. Let us look down a city street, and know that we are but a piece, and yet let us look at someone we love, and know we are everything. Our time here is fleeting; our lives are finite. How do we want to spend this time? What legacy do we want to leave, to live on through the generations? How will we connect to those before us, and connect to those yet to come? May we live our lives with this profound and sacred understanding that we are but a piece of the expanse, called to be aware, called to celebrate, called to sing and pray and praise.

May it be so, and Amen