

## **Beautifully Transient**

**By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD March 12, 2022**

Perhaps our questions about death are felt most poignantly when we find ourselves near that elusive veil between this realm and the next, between all that is and all that ever will be, between existence and nonexistence, between something and nothing. Perhaps our questions about death become far more urgent as we approach the bedside of one whose last breath is immanent, or when a near fatal accident changes our distant, theoretical ideas of death into something real, present, and urgent, or when we meet with old age and thoughts of death become an intimate companion. This is when we ask those poignant, pressing questions, those “what if” questions that help us examine the realities of life, that help us create our own understandings of faith and of existence.

What if there is no afterlife, what if our brief time in this realm is all we have?

Well, perhaps we live on through the memories of our beloveds, through our legacy, through our descendants.

What if humanity ultimately meets its own demise?

Well, we are held in the interdependent web of life that weaves throughout millennia, shifting and changing, each life and death a beautiful mystery adding to the sacred whole.

What if the sun explodes, taking our beloved, small, blue dot with it?

Well, we exist from stardust to stardust, held in that intricate tapestry of all that is, was, and ever will be.

What if the universe eventually ends and everything ever known returns to complete nothingness?

Well? What if?

Today’s worship topic was purchased at our church’s annual auction. Auction sermons feed my soul because I am offered the opportunity to preach on topics outside of my own theology. I have held in my heart for decades that there is another realm, that something about my

essence will carry on after I die, that there is no real goodbye because we will meet again once we have taken our last breath. In preparation for writing this sermon, I had to reexamine these questions that plagued me in my younger years. What if there is no afterlife, what if our brief time in this realm is all we have? Well?

How can our perspective on death affect our perspective on life? Can this sequence of inquiries traversing a path from life towards literal nothingness perhaps lead us to ask, “Well, why? Why are we here?”

The answers to this question may be as plentiful as the people who ask it. Perhaps our presence is a gift from a transcendent entity who wants us to share love with each other and with the sacred, who wants us to share in appreciation for all the beauty that has been created. This is somewhere along the spectrum of “we are here for no reason” to “we are here because of divine intent.” Further down the spectrum towards “for no reason” is author and theologian John D. Caputo. Caputo reflects, “Everything - God and love, earth and sky, living things and nonliving things - all are a gift given without why.”<sup>1</sup> When I read this, my theistic brain thought, a gift from whom? In reflecting on this theology, I think it’s a gift from nothingness. Why are we here? Renowned theologian and philosopher Meister Eckhart reflects, “I live because I live.”<sup>2</sup> That is it!

For some, this may imply insignificance. I invite us to turn this seeming meaninglessness into a celebration of the gift of our swift appearance in this timeline stretching from nothing to nothing. The series of “what if” inquiries we began with can lead us to reflect on life as painfully trivial – espousing this impending non-existence to a philosophy of life as inherently inconsequential. I offer the opposite. I invite us to see each life, each moment, each experience, as remarkably improbable and thus wildly significant, a “gift without a why”<sup>3</sup> – an

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<sup>1</sup> *Cross and Cosmos: A Theology of Difficult Glory* by John D. Caputo pg. 256

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

impermanence that calls us to shape and craft this gift of life to be beautiful, meaningful, and fulfilling. Our time is fleeting – our time is precious.

That final moment between existence and nonexistence, between something and nothing, changes everything. We will each face that moment – perhaps surrounded by beloveds or caught in a traumatic accident. That final, in-between, liminal moment. Those moments become the most precious and vulnerable of our time in this realm. Will we perish in regret of the life we have lived, or in celebration of it? Will we die in a panic of all we missed out on, or in the calm of a life fulfilled? We are invited, each day, to craft this final moment, shaping our precious time so that we can die fulfilled and content.

This idea of impermanence is in stark contradiction to a belief in an afterlife, and I invite those who espouse this theology of life after death, including myself, to ask some truly intimate questions: Does a belief in an afterlife make life in this realm somehow less crucial? Does the confidence that we will meet again after death take passion and urgency out of our relationships today? Theologian Don Cupitt writes, “to become fully naturalized citizens of ‘this’ world, we really do need to purge ourselves of such ideas [of another].”<sup>4</sup> In this theology there is no “other” world – no heaven or hell to anticipate nor prepare for, no transition into a realm of pure love to comfort us as we traverse the hardships inherent in life, no reconnection to those we love so deeply, ever.

Throughout our lives in “this” world, we are journeying, some with more intent than others, some with more urgency than others, on a path from life to death. And I wonder if, while traversing this path, we can release ourselves of anxiety, angst, and fear by reimagining this moment of ultimate transition – death. Death in this culture is synonymous with decay, with a cold stiffness, with fear, with dreaded anticipation. Can we reimagine this final moment? Can we see death, not as an ugly, terrifying inevitability but as a sweet transition, a rest to be

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<sup>4</sup> *Solar Ethics* by Don Cupitt pg. 55

welcomed, a beautiful culmination of all we have ever been. A moment as sacred, precious, and celebrated as birth, when nothing to something returns to sweet nothing.

Let this transition us into the idea of beautiful transience. Transience – that which only lasts for a short time – shapes and molds beauty, gifts us anticipation, grounds us in gratitude, and holds us in awe. For are not the most beautiful aspects of this world transient in their very nature? Think of the magic of a shooting star, that beautiful streak of light we are gifted with when meteors enter our atmosphere, burning into nothing – those glimpses of far-away fire that feel magical and invoke wonder and awe. Or the hues of pinks and oranges and reds that briefly illuminate the sky each evening as our earth spins on its axis – inviting lovers and friends to sit in joy and simply observe together. Or the full spectrum of colors in a rainbow, briefly held in the blue-gray sky as light meets droplets of water. If shooting stars were constant, if the sky were permanently held in the hues of sunset, if rainbows filled the sky at every moment – if each of these things were immortal and eternal, would they still be a gift? Would they still be beautiful? Would they still elicit awe, and ground us in gratitude? So, too, is it with our beautifully transient lives.

Can theists with a belief in an eternal entity espouse this theology of beautiful, mortal transience? Our God of many names and of no names can still exist in this theology of ultimate nothingness. An everlasting entity, however, cannot. In this theology of beautiful transience, God, too, becomes mortal. God, too, feels the breath of death. Theologian John D. Caputo writes that God is “a nickname for a temporary, transient, and local process found here on Gaia but destined to eventually disappear, along with the rest of us.” Caputo offers that God is also a “nickname for the universe.”<sup>5</sup> God becomes the universe, expansive, entirely temporary, a life source that ultimately ends. I think of this in terms of pantheism, where God becomes the earth and every natural thing – animate or inanimate – that populates it. This theology is intriguing because it puts life and our daily experiences and transient, fleeting beauty at the

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<sup>5</sup> *Cross and Cosmos: A Theology of Difficult Glory* by John D. Caputo pg. 220

forefront of faith – not a belief in something greater and transcendent and beyond. A vulnerable, mortal, immediate, temporary God.

John Caputo offers us beautiful imagery of what he finds to be synonymous with human life. The theologian writes that life “is like a flower blossoming unseen in a stony mountain crevice, or like an exotic specimen of sea life on the floor of a dark and unexplored ocean beneath arctic ice.”<sup>6</sup> How precious is this, those hidden, never to be discovered, secret gifts of nature? No budding flower is meaningless, but a gift – a gift without a why offered from nothing, destined to return to nonexistence. All life, even that which is tucked away in hidden crevices of the universe, those secret pockets of eternity, all of that which is entirely transitory, is to be treasured, for no other reason than because it exists – even if just for a moment. “The story of the planet on a galaxy far, far away,” he writes, “where life flourished only to disappear without a trace will be our story.”<sup>7</sup> What is our meaning? What is our purpose? “I live because I live,”<sup>8</sup> reflected Meister Eckhart.

As Sheri read to us earlier, right now, we are on “sacred and holy ground.” Ground where that which will be lost for all of eternity is still present, where many of those we love are still within our grasp, and those who are not with us in body are still with us in spirit. We will lose everything – everything that seems permanent is fleeting and transient. But right now, joy is within our grasp; we are still here to cherish and embrace all that is, before it becomes all that was, never to be again.<sup>9</sup> We are here to accept and celebrate our own impermanence – our own transience – each breath, each moment, fully sacred, completely beautiful, filled with awe. We are on holy ground.

May it be so, and Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> *Cross and Cosmos: A Theology of Difficult Glory* by John D. Caputo pg. 251

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* pg. 252

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid* pg. 256

<sup>9</sup> “You Will Lose Everything” by Jeff Foster