

Water and Stardust

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD September 11, 2022

Our toes touch but a tiny piece of the expanse of the ocean when we wade into the crashing waves from the hot, off-white sand – experiencing a tiny piece of that mass of water that houses giant whales, that has the force of hurricanes, and that plummets to depths not yet explored. Not only is water awe-filled in its expanse, but, perhaps even of greater note, it serves, through rain and ponds and puddles, to sustain and therefore connect each and every living thing on this planet. It serves as the basis for that interconnected web of life we covenant to live by and protect. Expansive, necessary, interrelated, and so very improbable. Why improbable, you ask? Well – where on earth did it come from?

We will touch on this improbability in a moment, but first let us explore the significance of this expansive source of life for us today – during Water Communion. Today we each bring a sample of water that offers us meaning and join together as a sacred collective to share this with each other. Traditionally, through pouring our water into a common vessel combined with that of previous years, our waters intermingle and ultimately join with our ancestors. Our stories meld together as we celebrate community, love, and faith. In celebrating our joys, we realize that we belong to one another – and through this basic element of life, we belong to all living things, throughout millennia – past, present, and future. Our lives are but a blink of the eye when we consider the expanse of life on this planet. Water connects us; water sustains us.

With all of this held in acknowledgement, let us return to this theme of improbability. So much that we take for granted every day – not just the water we drink and that runs through our veins but the oxygen we breathe, the flowers that fill our hearts with delight, the tomatoes and bananas that sustain us, every one of our acquaintances and beloveds alike – each of these things is birthed from a planet created through such a massive array of chance happenings that its very existence is next to impossible.

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith September 2022

The creation of life as we know it is so unlikely and complex that I – with but a basic understanding of science – can only begin to comprehend or explain. The big bang was but fractions of a second and yet if the length of this event had shifted just a bit, the universe would have collapsed. The universe created stars which served both as a source of energy and as birthing ground of basic elements – helium and hydrogen – and only through their ultimate explosion did they create carbon – the basic building block of life. The creation of each of these elements took circumstances specific, unusual, and outstandingly unique. This whole process took fourteen billion years – enough time for stars to exist, to create the elements, to explode, and to exist again. We are stardust – we are the remnants of these massive, cosmic explosions.¹

Physics and theology and chemistry and so many academic disciplines – as well curious children and thoughtful adults alike – have offered many explanations for these curious occurrences. Today, we explore two of them: one of a creator being, and one of random chance. To me, each is as awe-inspiring as the other.

So we ask, what are the chances that there is a universe that can exist? What are the chances that the earth was created after stars exploded? That any form of life began and evolved? What about the mystery of consciousness coming into being? No scientist has yet been able to make sense of this – how conscious thought arose from inanimate matter. What is the chance that each and every one of us is here – together? This leads me to a question posed through poetry.

Mary Oliver asks us, “what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”² This improbability we have been exploring – this may make us feel so very insignificant. And yet I challenge this. Let us instead realize that the wonder of life calls us to make meaning in each

¹ *Quarks, Chaos and Christianity* by John Polkinghorne pgs. 39-43

² “The Summer Day” by Mary Oliver

moment – to marvel at the chance of life and bask in this improbability, creating the best life we can. And we are not alone – we are connected to all life in sacred ways.

The remnants of exploding stars held within us and all living things maintains the interdependent web of life that interweaves throughout all life and serves as a basic tenet of our faith. We belong to the cosmos – to all that ever was and all that ever will be. We are held within the depths of the ocean, the vastness of the sky, the grandeur of the mountains. Connected by that seemingly timeless water; held together by stardust and chance. Each of our lives – but a blink of the eye. Today, I use the term “God” when exploring the sacred. Know that there are so many ways of understanding and naming divine presence. I invite you to interpret this word in whatever way makes the most sense to you.

Let us examine creation through the question, “how?” How did all of this come into being? Theologian John Polkinghorne offers two suggestions. As I mentioned, the plethora of circumstances our universe underwent to create life is exceedingly huge and improbable. So, perhaps we are but one of innumerable universes, and we are simply the one universe whose physics and chemistry was able to produce life.³ What do you think? This is an awe-filled option, an option that expresses such a vast amount of space I cannot fathom. This is one offshoot of the random chance theory – and it is remarkable. All that we know – deriving from chance. Fractions of a second billions of years ago resulted in all we know of life. Somehow, from rock and lava grew consciousness. A network of complex life arose from that which was created in a cosmic explosion. And it all happened by chance! This is incredible! I remember as a young girl with no belief in any sort of deity trying hopelessly to figure how a caterpillar became a butterfly. Even this common experience – remarkable.

And, Polkinghorne offers one other explanation – that there is but this one universe, but that it wasn't chance that created life as we know it, but an unknowable entity – a creative force. This planet is “special and finely tuned for life” because an entity willed it to be so. Not chance –

³ *Quarks, Chaos and Christianity* by John Polkinghorne pg. 46

but holy and sacred intention.⁴ Our world can be explained through physics. However, this physics and chemistry and building blocks of life began because of intentional divine intervention. Is not either option awe-inspiring?

What kind of divine being would create us, and why would we be created as we are? It may begin with what I believe – that God is love. God is love and love cannot be sustained and strengthened within an isolated, solitary being. Therefore, that first spark of the big bang was intentional – to create beings that could be loved, and that can offer love in return.

A companion to love is beauty. Beauty in the awe of the ocean or the reverence of a cascading waterfall or the appreciation of aquatic life sustained in a bubbling stream. In appreciating the wonders of the world, we are sharing in joy with the creator of all of it. Simply to notice the wonders and delights all around us in the wilds of nature is reason enough for us to have been created by the source of all that is holy. So, pause. Stop. Listen to the chirping of the birds or the landing of a raindrop. Smell the morning dew or feel the humidity before a rainstorm. Engage your senses with the beauty all around you – for this is a possible answer to the question – “why are we here?” To notice and appreciate and enjoy all that has been created on this planet we call home. We are sharing in the joy with the creator!

Whether our sacred is a divine being or our sacred is simply nature, is this reverence for the natural world not a religious experience? I know I never feel closer to my sacred than when I am deep in the woods, following a barely traveled path lined with new growth and the remnants of trees long dead. Polkinghorne calls these moments “encounters with the hidden divine presence.”⁵ I believe the divine could be hidden in the petals of a lilac.

Philosopher Allan Watts presents a different answer to the question, “why?” We’ll examine his theories – theories that might make sense to someone who believes in this multi-verse or

⁴ *Quarks, Chaos and Christianity* by John Polkinghorne pg. 46

⁵ *Ibid* 78

random chance hypothesis. He argues that we are simply here for the present moment. He posits that life is simply a dance – not pursuing something or fleeing something but turning mindfully round and round in the presence of any particular moment. Life is a dance. Watts understands that we are made complete with sensory organs – with eyes, fingertips, ears, a tongue – for a reason; that there is space and time and change for a reason – all of this simply exists for the present moment. He writes that, when we focus our attention on the present moment “The whole problem of justifying nature, of trying to make life mean something in terms of the future, disappears entirely.”⁶ We do not need to justify our existence or find some deeper meaning – we need simply dance with the present moment. I think of being a young girl with my sister Annie. In our early years we lived on a large plot of land in Pennsylvania, bordering a horse farm and our elderly neighbor’s expansive fields. Our favorite time of the year was summer, and one our favorite parts of summer was the evening. For what we consistently found in those summer evenings in rural Pennsylvania were fireflies – vast arrays of fireflies! The light of the sun fell below the horizon and as the sky darkened, the thick, velvety blackness filled with scattered, blinking lights as if by magic. Immersed in darkness and glitter and the wonders of nature we danced to the noise of chirping bugs and were immersed in nothing but that sacred scene! In that moment, we were dancing, and alive for the fireflies. Is that not sacred? Is that not holy? With a combination of mindfulness and a true appreciation for our lives and those simple bugs – dancing in improbability – we were perhaps closer to the sacred than we ever could be again.

I want to lift up another quote from Watts. The philosopher writes, “you will cease to feel isolated when you recognize, for example, that you do not have the sensation of the sky, but you are that sensation. For all purposes of feeling, your sensation of the sky is the sky, and there is no ‘you’ apart from, what you sense, feel, and know.”⁷ When my sister and I were dancing with the fireflies, we were that thick, night sky. When doubled over in laughter or mourning through tears, you are the smile, you are the heartbreak. We are interdependent in

⁶ *The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety* pg. 116

⁷ *Ibid* 109-110

sacred ways. We are – each of us, each living thing – composed of stardust, intimately connected to all that was, all that is, and all that ever will be. We have water running through our veins – the same water that ran through the veins of dinosaurs and froze in arctic glaciers. We are joy and sorrow; we are beauty and struggle. And the probability of our own existence – this is unbelievably minute. To me – in realizing this wild improbability – this calls me to live the best life I possibly can. To make the most out of each precious day that I am blessed to be alive – in the joy, and the heartbreak. For that is life. Life is wildly improbable. And that is why I brought you this sermon on Water Communion – the day when we honor that which sustains life; when we bring our multiple stories – our own individual drops – to become part of the story of our past, our present, our future – where we revel in the beauty of this simple, natural occurrence - water. And that is why I spoke this sermon when we introduce the theme of belonging, because today we celebrate all that we belong to: to the earth, to the universe, to that which is greater than ourselves, to each other in a sacred way, and to our holy which, to me, is love. And that is why I bring this to Ingathering – during the celebration of the beginning of a new church year. When we truly grasp the precious gift of our own being, we can make each day, each moment, each decision with intention – intention towards a life of love and joy and strength and meaning and fulfillment – for this one, flickering moment of life – these short years – are the only chance we get. This year we are journeying together through a path – a path that begins with the theme of Belonging and culminates in Delight. A path that we traverse as we work to make meaning and travel intentionally into our “complex, challenging, and hoped for future.”⁸ We will learn and we will relearn – together – with intention, held together by the bonds of stardust.

May it be so, and Amen.

⁸ *Soul Matters Worship Packets 2022-2023*