

Because We Are Finite

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

Life, death, the cosmos – immersed in mystery, doused in awe, steeped in miraculous wonder. All we need to do is peer into the night sky – those balls of light and fire suspended in velvety darkness – and ask – Why? How? When? As modern science would have it, there was nothing – nothing at all – until 13.7 billion years ago – when a bang – a huge bang – a bang that lasted but “a hundredth of a billionth of a trillionth of a trillionth of a second,” began all that has ever been and all that ever will be.¹ Stars formed and exploded and formed again, creating in those massive eruptions the carbon that gave birth to all life – creating the first forms of life which shifted and molded and evolved and created us – each of our lives a mere flicker of existence in this massive history billions of years in the making. We – and each thing that makes its home on this planet – each thing in the universe – an utter miracle. In the moment of awe that I experience when I think of these wild inevitabilities, I appreciate the reflections of author Anthony T. DeBenedet, “Wonder makes you feel smaller. Not insignificant but smaller, in the sense that you are a piece of a greater whole.” DeBenedet continues, “You realize that you are part of a greater symphony of things. You have a greater place and purpose in the world.”² I like this idea of a symphony – no work of art complete without each flute, each violin, each viola, every instrument with that purpose of creating harmony and beauty, working together as each individual sound culminates into all that is. Or a puzzle – each puzzle – even if we stretch our imaginations and wonder of a puzzle compiled of billions of pieces – the puzzle is entirely incomplete without every piece fitted and snapped together. Our lives – our minute, improbable, precious lives – each one necessary in the grand whole that is existence. We each play a role in eternity – held together by stardust – held together by love – held together by generations past and future. What legacy can we leave – what imprint can we each make – in this vast array of time and space?

¹ <https://www.space.com/13320-big-bang-universe-10-steps-explainer.html>

² From *Soul Matters 2022-2023 Worship Series*

In pondering this I think of the reflections of generations of theologians. Life is a mystery – how are we to make sense of it? How do we craft and maintain spiritually fulfilled lives? I reflect on the words of prominent Jewish theologian Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.”³ To be spiritual is to be amazed. In each moment, feeling the air that fills our lungs giving us the breath of life, the sunlight pouring from the sky above, the love we hold in our hearts for our beloveds – that’s what connects us to the divine. Or ancient Christian theologian St. Augustine, who offered the sentiment, “People go abroad to wonder at the heights of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of the rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motions of the stars, and they pass by themselves without wondering.”⁴ We think of the wonders of the world that bring awe – towering mountains, the plummeting depths of the ocean, skyscrapers reaching to the clouds above. What about the wonder that is each and every one of us? What about the awe that is every individual life? These theologians reflect on life – on each of our lives. Each theologian ties our lives intimately together with awe and wonder.

We cannot reflect on life without reflecting on death. We can only live because we will die. We only die because we live. I believe this is interwoven with the greatest mysteries that penetrate our lives – mysteries of life, of death, of the universe, of the realm of the sacred, of our ancestors. While we can understand enough of this realm to craft our lives, what lies ahead is a mystery. To me, there is some sort of other realm, connecting life and death through the presence of what I call souls – our inner core, our light of love – traversing from one realm to the next. As curious, meaning-making beings, we may question what happens after that inevitable moment of death. In acknowledging the mystery, I acknowledge a personal fact – some of the most profound moments of my life occurred when I felt the presence of a beloved who had left this realm. Was this simply the power of memory unexpectedly, overwhelming,

³ From *Soul Matters 2022-2023 Worship Series*

⁴ Ibid

filling me with awe, or perhaps a moment of sentimentality as I reminisced on those I missed, or was it some sort of interaction with the essence of my beloveds?

I walked along a rocky beach, to my left a vast pool of water reflecting the afternoon's puffball clouds and the piercingly blue sky, to my right towering trees ascending a steep hill. I felt the cool wind on my face, and the crunch of small stones beneath my feet. Suddenly, without any warning, Emily arrived – one of my childhood best friends who died years prior from leukemia. Emily's voice became the wind, her body became the trees, and in that space, I met, again, my treasured friend. She was there, walking with me, just as we had walked together for decades before her death. She was there for no other reason than for her to simply say, "I love you," and for me to echo the sentiment back. Or the ritual my family composed eight years ago on the tenth anniversary of my aunt Nancy's death, where we joined together on the beach under the glittering night sky and wrote Nancy personal notes of love. We attached our notes to paper lanterns arising to the sky through the heat of a candle, and released each of them to the heavens, where the slowly disappearing flames mingled with the night sky. I knew those notes had reached her, and that she missed us deeply, and that we missed her, and that in that moment, we were together again. These two moments stand out as two of the most profound and precious moments of my life. Was I connected to the beyond, to a realm after life, or was I simply overwhelmed with memories? I'll never know.

These moments bind me together with history and with the ancestors. We are held together with all that was as we reminisce on treasured memories. We are held together with all that was simply by living, as lessons derived from our ancestors impact each decision we make, each thought we engage with. In the same way we affect all of those to come. Generations of legacies – what do we want to leave behind? And we are woven together in other ways, as well. Our web of life connects us not only to each other as finite beings within the realm of the tangible. What I call a soul connects our own living self to the ghost of our existence after death. Memories connect us to those who have passed. Wonder and beauty and the atoms and elements in our body connect us to all life – and stardust connects us to literally everything in

this universe. And it goes deeper when we connect this realm and whatever else there may be to the idea of the sacred. Process theists posit that we are held in the eternal body of God after death – that we are part of the divine – and that our actions and our memories impact all who will come after us. We are each a legacy. Panentheists believe in an intimacy with God, connected to this entity, which is both transcendent and immanent, a force coming from beyond and also held within each flower, each cloud, each snowflake, each breath of wind – God and all creatures and that which is beyond interwoven in beautiful ways. I think of connecting through prayer. Can we converse with nature through a moment of simple, intentional gratitude? Can we converse with our ancestors through words of love? Can we connect with our sacred simply by silently being? These are all offerings of prayer, to me. I think the most profound, sacred, and strongest thread in our web of life is that of love. Love surpasses memories, surpasses a soul, surpasses the elements, stardust, and the sacred. Love. Love connects all that ever was with all that ever will be.

I have a picture hanging on the wall in my dining room of my sister and me as young girls. The black and white picture captures a moment when I appear to be around two or three and my sister several months old. She sits in front of me between my legs and I rest my chin on her chubby head. This simple picture connects me to so much love. There is the love between sisters that is captured. And yet to me, in my heart, this picture has captured so much more. I feel love for that image of young me and for all the hope and potential and joy held within her. When I was a teenager, I kept this picture close, and every time I wanted to give up, I looked at it and connected with that little girl. I kept going because I loved her so and wanted to give her the best life possible. The young girl cultivated determination and meaning. Love connected me to memories of myself in years past and gave me revitalized strength.

I want to lift up in this moment a piece of a prayer written by Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Joan Javier-Duval,

Here we are

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith December 2022

Living, breathing creatures
with minds that wonder
and hearts that feel awe
we face questions that we know can't be answered
and tragedies that we know can't be explained⁵

We each have unanswered questions, unexplained tragedies. And we wonder, and we feel awe. I think the most profound questions touch on these themes of wonder we've been exploring – last week's delve into the sacred, today's exploration of life and death. I think of my own questions – why did Nancy die? Why did cancer take the young life of Emily? I have wondered about beloveds I know who faced addiction or devastating mental illness, again, asking why? Questions that can't be answered. Or trying to craft meaning for those whose lives would be forever altered after an awful accident – unexplained tragedies. I saw so much debilitating physical illness as a hospital chaplain – and people asked me, “why?” and I brought these questions to the sacred in that intimate hospital chapel. Awe-eliciting questions that beg a response from the sacred – or from stardust. What do you think? In my heart, I do not believe that anything happens for a reason. What I do believe is that we are called to make the best life we can, no matter what we experience. And when we ask, “why hardship?” I invite us to also ask, “why love?” I invite us to inspire curiosity in the wonders and delights and beauty of this orchestra of life in which we each play a vital part – this puzzle we are immersed in. Why love? It's something intentional. I wonder, sometimes, if we were all created by an entity that is eternal love. If so, perhaps this being of love crafted us for that basic, innate desire to be loved in return – we were created so that we could love.

Rev. Javier-Duval's prayer ends,

May the living, breathing creatures that we are
feel the breath of life

⁵ From *Soul Matters 2022-2023 Worship Series*

moving in us
and through all things
bringing us into greater union
with the mysterious universe of which we are a part.⁶

The breath of life – stardust. That which connects all that was with all that ever will be. That which is felt on our breath when we ask, “why?” and that which seeks to answer. Our web of life – those strands of love – sturdier than any hardship we may face, binding us together through time and space. Held together in beauty, in awe, in wonder, to that mystery of which we are all a part. Life, death, and the cosmos – that which we were granted, that which we will all ultimately face, and that which ties it all together. When we live in awe, we invite the sacred into our midst. When we live in wonder, we still converse with those who have passed. When we live in fascination, we open ourselves to the greatest mysteries – love, life, death, and the sacred. May we cherish this. May we honor this. May we revel in this. May we all be in union with that mysterious universe.

May it be so, and Amen.

⁶ From *Soul Matters 2022-2023 Worship Series*