

Four Faiths (Part 2): Naturalism

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Meditation from *The Immense Journey* by Loren Eiseley

I had sat down to rest with my back against a stump. . . the sun was warm there, and the murmurs of forest life blurred softly away into my sleep. When I awoke, dimly aware of some commotion and outcry in the clearing . . . there on [an] extended branch sat an enormous raven with a red and squirming nestling in his beak.

The sound that awoke me was the outraged cries of the nestling's parents, who flew helplessly in circles about the clearing. The sleek black monster was indifferent to them. . .

Suddenly, out of all that area of woodland, a soft sound of complaint began to rise. Into the glade fluttered small birds of half a dozen varieties drawn by the anguished outcries of the tiny parents.

No one dared to attack the raven. But they cried there in some instinctive common misery, the bereaved and the unbereaved. . . They fluttered as though to point their wings at the murderer. . .

And he, the murderer, the black bird at the heart of life, sat on there, glistening in the common light, formidable, unmoving, unperturbed, untouchable.

The sighing died. It was then I saw the judgment. It was the judgment of life against death. I will never see it again so forcefully presented. I will never hear it again in notes so tragically prolonged. For in the midst of protest, they forgot the violence. There, in that clearing, the crystal note of a song sparrow lifted hesitantly in the hush. And finally, after painful fluttering, another took the song, and then another, the song passing from one bird to another, doubtfully at first, as though some evil thing were being slowly forgotten. Till suddenly they took heart and sang from many throats joyously together as birds are known to sing. They sang because life is sweet and sunlight beautiful. They sang under the brooding shadow of the raven. In simple truth they had forgotten the raven, for they were the singers of life, and not of death.

Reading from *The Sacred Depths of Nature* by Ursula Goodenough

As I witness contemporary efforts to generate global understanding, I see some high-minded and idealistic people attempting to operate within an amalgam of economic, military, and political arrangements, and I find myself crying out "But wait! Where is the religion? What is really orienting this project besides fear and greed? Where is the shared cosmology and the shared morality?"

That we need a planetary ethic is so obvious that I need but list a few words: climate, ethnic cleansing, fossil fuels, habitat preservation, human rights, hunger, infectious disease, nuclear weapons, oceans, ozone layer, pollution, population. Our global conversations on these topics are, by definition, cacophonies of national, cultural, and religious self-interest. Without a common religious orientation, we basically don't know where to begin, nor do we know what to say or how to listen, nor are we motivated to respond.

My agenda . . . is to outline the foundations for such a planetary ethic, an ethic that would make no claim to supplant existing traditions but would seek to coexist with them, informing our global concerns while we continue to orient our daily lives in our cultural and religious contexts.

Any global tradition needs to begin with a shared worldview – a culture-independent, globally accepted consensus as to how things are. From my perspective, this part is easy. How things are is, well, *how things are*: our scientific account of Nature, an account that can be called The Epic of Evolution. The Big Bang, the formation of stars and planets, the origin and evolution of life on this planet, the advent of human consciousness and the resultant evolution of cultures – this is the story, the one story, that has the potential to unite us, because it happens to be true. . .

It is [my goal] to present an accessible account of our scientific understanding of Nature and then suggest ways that this account can call forth appealing and abiding religious responses – an approach that can be called religious naturalism. . .

A global ethic must be anchored both in an understanding of human nature and an understanding of the rest of Nature. This, I believe, can be achieved if we start out with the same perspective on how Nature is put together, and how human nature flows forth from whence we came.

Sermon

Today we continue our series of sermons on the four faith paths laid out by the Rev. Fred Campbell in his book, *Religious Integrity for Everyone*. A couple of weeks ago we tackled Humanism. In coming weeks we'll deal with Mysticism and Theism. But today, we pause to take a look at Naturalism as an approach to religion – what Ursula Goodenough called, in our reading this morning, Religious Naturalism.

Just to put things into the context of the ongoing series, let me start by reminding you of Fred Campbell's basic definitions of religion, and of naturalism as a religious path. "Religion," he says, "is how human beings live within that which transcends them," – that is, that which is larger than themselves. Naturalism, as a religious orientation, "understands human living as participating in and dependent upon the natural world as the transcendent reference system of meaning. Naturalists draw all their values from and find their religious identity within this system." In fact, for them, nature is all there is. What is taken by others to be supernatural is, at most, a part of nature we don't yet understand.

Now, there are at least a couple of different basic ways of relating to and with nature. One is to experience it, and the other is to understand it. Loren Eiseley, in our meditation this morning, spoke of the direct experience and apprehension of nature. He's out there in the woods, watching and listening to the unfolding drama of nature. On the other hand, Ursula Goodenough speaks about understanding nature, about generating a coherent scientific account.

So which approach more accurately characterizes religious naturalism? I will suggest that it is not a matter of either/or, but of both/and. Eiseley conveys the awe and wonder he finds by being immersed in the midst of a natural scene unfolding around him. But in his work life, he is a man of science – observing, investigating, seeking to understand the workings of nature.

And Goodenough focuses in on the workings of nature, and the attempt to understand them, as a means of balancing the more emotional and aesthetic responses to nature. She writes:

To be sure, the *beauty* of Nature – sunsets, woodlands, fireflies – has elicited religious emotions throughout the ages. We are moved to awe and wonder at the grandeur, the poetry, the richness of natural beauty; it fills us with joy and thanksgiving. Our response to accounts of the *workings* of Nature, on the other hand, is decidedly less positive.

But for her, it's not a choice between awe and wonder on the one hand, and understanding on the other. In fact, as understanding grows, and uncovers ever deeper mysteries needing to be understood, she and others like her experience deep awe at how life works. Comparing herself to the more traditional view of a religious person with bowed head and bended knee, she says, "As a religious naturalist I say 'What Is, Is' with the same bowing of the head, the same bending of the knee. Which then allows me to say 'Blessed Be to What Is' with thanksgiving."

William James once wrote that, "At bottom, the whole concern of religion is with the manner of our acceptance of the universe." For religious naturalists, that acceptance is based on both understanding and appreciation of the universe and how it works. It's more than just a touchy-feely, romantic fascination with nature. And it's more than simply a coldly rational, scientific quest to ferret out the facts. Religious naturalism incorporates a scientific mindset, dependent on empirical evidence and inquiry, but also the capability of responding to the ever-present transcendent mystery of life with appropriate awe and wonder, part of which arises from the oft-repeated lesson that the more we learn, the more we realize we don't yet know.

In thinking about how religious naturalism fits within the framework of Unitarian Universalism, there is actually a fairly clear point of connection. Two of our seven principles, in particular, speak to the sensibility I've been describing. The "free and responsible search for truth and meaning" certainly encompasses the scientific quest for understanding how the world works. And "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part" addresses that transcendent reality within which we try to find our place.

In fact the inclusion of that seventh principle reflected the rise of religious naturalism as an identifier among Unitarian Universalists back in the mid-eighties. There was a theological survey around that time in which people were asked to select statements that reflected understandings that were important to their faith. One choice - "The natural world is a web of interdependent connections, of which we are inescapably a part" – was selected by over 90 percent of respondents, across all demographics.

Explicit interest in religious naturalism has accelerated in the decades since, and in 2004 the UURN, or Unitarian Universalist Religious Naturalists, was founded in order to create a community for those religious naturalists, scattered through our congregations, who would enjoy being in touch with others of like minds.

I'd like to share with you their description of themselves from their website:

We find our sources of meaning within the natural world, where humans are understood to be emergent from and hence a part of nature. Our religious quest is informed and guided by the deepening and evolving understandings fostered by scientific inquiry and by the mindful understandings inherent in our human traditions, including art, literature, philosophy, and the religions of the world.

The natural world and its emergent manifestations in human creativity and community are the focus of our immersion, wonder, and reverence, and our common naturalistic orientation generates our shared sense of place, gratitude, and joy.

We find fundamental components of religious response in: apprehension of our mortality and transience combined with gratitude for the moment of existence that is ours; awe that we and all that surrounds us exist at all; an understanding that we are embedded in an incomprehensibly immense whole that pre-exists us, will continue after us, and does not depend on us, but in which we have a role to play; an understanding that we share our existence and our fate with all other creatures on Earth, with whom we are deeply related. . .

We acknowledge as well a shared set of values and concerns pertaining to peace, justice, dignity, responsible freedom, the richness of ethnic, cultural, and ecological diversity, and planetary sustainability. We are committed to furthering the realization of these values and are convinced that the naturalistic perspective has much to offer in this process.

For the past several years, our annual General Assembly has featured a number of workshops sponsored by the UU Religious Naturalists, and I have attended several of them. Particularly notable was one presented by the Rev. Michael Dowd, a United Church of Christ minister, and his wife, Connie Barlow, a science writer. Dowd and Barlow consider themselves evolutionary evangelists. They have been continuously on the road for the past seven years, proclaiming the “Great News” of a sacred view of cosmic, biological, and human evolution. Among their audiences have been numerous Unitarian Universalist congregations, and they were featured a couple of years ago in an issue of the *UU World* magazine. Dowd and Barlow are true exemplars of religious naturalism.

Dowd recently published a book called *Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your Life and Our World*. I also have a Study Guide designed for use in a four or five session discussion course based on the book. If there is sufficient interest, I will be glad to lead such a course here in the near future. Please let me know if this is something you might be interested in.

Building on the work of people like Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, Dowd and Barlow are helping to articulate what they call The Great Story. Also known as the Universe Story, or the Epic of Evolution, the Great Story is a new telling of humanity's common creation story. It is the 14 billion year science-based sacred story of cosmic genesis, from the formation of the galaxies and the origin of Earth life, to the development of self-reflective consciousness and human technology, to the emergence of comprehensive compassion and tools to assist humanity in being a blessing to the larger body of life.

On her Great Story website, Barlow describes the Great Story as “a way of telling the history of everyone and everything **that honors and embraces all religious traditions and creation stories. It is the sacred narrative of an evolving Universe** of emergent complexity and breathtaking creativity and cooperation — a story that offers each of us the opportunity to find meaning and purpose in our lives and our time in history.”

She goes on to describe five unique characteristics of the Great Story:

1. The Great Story is **the story of the changing story**. Whenever a new discovery is made in the sciences, this creation story changes. Change is to be welcomed — not feared.
2. The Great Story is **a creation story that is not yet over**. Evolutionary change at all levels (cosmos, planetary, life, culture) will continue into the future, and we humans bear a responsibility for how the story will continue on Earth.
3. The Great Story is **a new creation story shaped with a planetary perspective** to which **all cultures contribute**. Because the scientific enterprise is now global in scope, this story necessarily has its origins and ongoing influences centered at the scale of the whole Earth — influenced by peoples of all ethnicities, all religious traditions, and hailing from all bioregions.
4. The Great Story is **radically open to multiple interpretations**. Because the empirical and theoretical sciences search entirely for material explanations of the world, whenever one ventures into the realm of **meaning** or into the realm of **spirit**, the interpretations necessarily go beyond the science. And yet, make meaning we must! Humans are intrinsically meaning-makers, whether we construe that meaning to be innate in the cosmos or created by the human mind.
5. The Great Story **manifests synergistic coherence between science, religion, and the needs of today's world**. Because the creation stories of classical religions and primary peoples were birthed well prior to the discoveries of an evolutionary universe, these stories can at best be reconciled with scientific awareness. In contrast, The Great Story grounds its celebratory creation story on

the contributions of the scientific endeavor, and the interpretations are nuanced to be empowering for today's concerns.

We're clearly talking here about reality-based religion. And while Michael Dowd is clearly theistic in his religious outlook, Connie Barlow is an atheist. And yet they share the same story, which transcends any particular conception of divinity. In fact, they have coined a single new descriptor for themselves, which each pronounces differently: he is a creathiest (cree-uh-THEIST) and she is a creathiest (cree-ATHEIST). They assert that this new word can bridge the theist-atheist divide because "It's not a belief system. It is based on what we know, not what we believe." From Dowd's theistic vantage point, "Facts are God's native tongue."

In a recent interview, Ursula Goodenough was asked about the two different camps within religious naturalism: the "God people" and the "non-God people." In her response, Goodenough pointed to a more important distinction:

There are two flavors of God people: those whose God is natural and those whose God is supernatural. Certainly there are a lot of people within religious naturalism who have no problem with God language – God as love, God as evolution, God as process. People see God as part of nature and give God-attributes to the part of nature that they find most sacred.

She goes on to say, in response to further questioning:

I don't have "God," but . . . I sense the power, beauty, improbability and fragility of nature, and how essential it is to keep this planet thriving. . .

Perhaps we should all settle down and think about what's good in the world and what we want to do here. If we find this planet and its history and its story to be sacred, let's preserve and nourish it, and then we can go home at night and say whatever prayers we choose.

So may it be.