

MYSTICAL NATURALISM:
CONTEMPLATIONS ON A COSMIC GOD/DESS

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It's wonderful to be able to visit Unitarian Universalists here in Paris. Paris is known all over the world as one of (if not THE) most beautiful cities in the world. We were advised to be sure to walk around at night to see the lights shining on the buildings and the river (and it is very beautiful).

My husband and I have lived in Arizona for most of our lives. It's in the southwestern part of the United States, known for the Grand Canyon. Mostly people think Arizona is desert, because that's what the photographers like to focus on, and scare people with, and a lot of it is desert. But a lot of Arizona is crossed by mountains and high country that is a great contrast to the deserts. There's also a lot of open space, and dry air, so

Arizona is home to some of the great telescopes of the world: Kitt Peak near Tucson, and Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, just southeast of the Grand Canyon.

Most of my ministry has been with Unitarian Universalist congregations in Arizona, and I spent the last sixteen of them (or almost last) in Tucson, about forty miles from the border with Mexico. It's a dark-sky city, meaning we are supposed to not leave bright lights on at night, in support of the work of the astronomers. We lived on the northern edge of Tucson, where you could see stars at night.

My last three years of ministry were spent in Flagstaff, Arizona. Flagstaff is one of the great dark-sky cities of the world, in support of Lowell Observatory. It's at an elevation of 7000 feet, about eighty miles from the Grand Canyon. We lived ten miles outside that city where we could see the Milky Way Galaxy from our driveway, and it was so beautiful. Now we have moved to New River, a town just north of Phoenix, and though we tried to be far enough away from the city lights, we will probably have to drive further north to see the stars again like they were in Flagstaff.

Stars are one of the many reasons we love to go to camp. In the mountains east of Phoenix is our Arizona UU wilderness camp, which we call SAWUURA, an acronym for Sierra Ancha Wilderness Unitarian Universalist Religious Association. It's about a hundred miles from Phoenix, and even though you can still see the faint glow of the city in the west, it's dry enough and far enough that the Milky Way shines on a clear night. I'm always stunned, I don't know why, by the countless stars that surround us. My husband, Curtiss is president of the Sawuura board, and he goes up there a lot to work on the hundred acres of the old homestead which we've turned into our camp.

Looking at the stars over the years I've found that my binoculars are actually better than our little telescope. I lean against the roof of a car or the rail of a fence to steady my arms, and I'm amazed at what I see. One year up at SAWUURA, one of the adults pointed to the southern horizon where the Milky Way almost touched the tops of the ponderosa pine trees, and said that was the center of the galaxy. I aimed my binoculars and discovered a deep, mysterious vastness that pulled me and astounded me. I ran around dragging everyone to the car so they

could balance their arms against it and see this wonder of our universe through our plain old binoculars! Really, really awesome!

The words “mind-blowing” are a fitting description of these discoveries of our world. It’s as if my mind cannot comprehend, cannot grasp the beauty and infinity of what we are so fortunate to see or to touch every now and then in life. Star Trek, the old version, is just a cartoon compared to what I saw in that one experience up at SAWUURA. And so, my mind envelopes this image of the center of our galaxy, which really isn’t the center, but just a vision of the doorway towards it, an image so foreign to me as a human being that I still feel shocked by it, and moved, and struggling to place it in my mind-map of life and meaning.

Needless to say, I love Hubble. I’ve had a poster of the Hubble Space Telescope image of the Eagle Nebula, titled “Birth of Stars,” since 1995, and in 2000 Curtiss bought me a poster of Edwin Hubble and the stamps that came out with Hubble photos of galaxies on them. They’ve hung in my home office for years, so I could see them every day and contemplate supreme beings

in the context of these discoveries of our universe, so new, so amazing. And I wonder if people will ever allow their concepts of gods and goddesses to expand enough to embrace this larger universe, this universe of potential life beyond earth.

The other side of that question, of course, is whether we can ever let go of the concept of the god or goddess, assuming it is a human concept, not necessarily a cosmic one. What might take its place? As we discover more about this existence, about the origins of the universe and the possibility of life on other planets, what mind, what consciousness, what power might there be? And why would humans be the privileged form of life, the chosen, the touched?

I am awed every time I read ancient texts that speak to this unfolding understanding of the universe. Especially the Tao! Here's what Lao-Tse said twenty-five hundred years ago, with no binoculars to see the galaxy:

Before creation a presence existed,
Self-contained, complete, formless, voiceless, mateless,
changeless,
Which yet pervaded itself with unending motherhood.

Though there can be no name for it,
I have called it the “way of life.”

Perhaps I should have called it “the fullness of life,”
Since fullness implies widening into space,
Implies still further widening,
Implies widening until the circle is whole.

(606, Singing the Living Tradition)

I thought of this reading while I was watching a Nova television program called “Hunting the Edge of Space: The Ever-Expanding Universe.” I thought of it when they talked about seeing the galaxies receding in all directions, that the universe was expanding like a balloon. Widening, and what will we be when the circle is whole?

I looked up another translation of the Tao Te Ching and found that it spoke not of widening, but of flowing, becoming remote, and returning. A universe that is change, that is round. And what do we know?

This last century, the 1900's, began with the belief that there was one galaxy, the Milky Way Galaxy, the stars that virtually everyone could see, would see, every night, weather permitting. That was our idea of the universe: just us within our solar system on an arm of the Milky Way. Our ancestors, without telescopes to view the stars, could not conceive of something like a galaxy. The starry sky had to be a roof, like the roof of a house, or a grove of trees. It was the roof of heaven, and gods and goddesses were very unique to every group of people who conceived of them. Our minds could not break through that roof, until we could see the stars three-dimensionally, and begin to discover their differences and their distances.

This past hundred years has blown away every concept and construct of the universe, over and over. It was in 1917 that a telescope on Mt. Wilson in California finally looked at the fuzzy clouds of light called nebulae (and there were thousands of them), and discovered that there were galaxies other than our own Milky Way. Edwin Hubble was an astronomer of that time, and he had focused on the Andromeda nebula and realized it was a galaxy. He found a way to calculate its distance from us,

setting it at 800,000 light years, eight times farther than the farthest stars in our Milky Way. As a people, we were beginning to touch the realm of seemingly infinite numbers, certainly unfathomable to us all.

Then Hubble found that dozens of nebulae are actually other galaxies. Today, they estimate there are 100 billion galaxies of 100 billion stars each, more than all the grains of sand on all the beaches and in all the deserts on earth. One astronomer on the Nova program said, "And just like that the universe became 100 billion times larger!"

I wonder what God would be if God were 100 billion times larger than anything a human being has ever conceived?

Next, Hubble examined the red-shift of galaxies. Spectroscopes split light into its colors, and the various wavelengths of light tell us if something is moving toward us or away - like the famous train experience, hearing the horn on a higher note as the train moves towards us and the waves are compressed by the speed until it passes and the horn's note lowers as the waves lengthen with the growing distance. Red-shift is what light does, and the compressed light of a star

moving toward us shows blue, while the light moving away takes on a red color. Hubble found that these galaxies were moving away, all of them, and those which were farther away were moving faster. His conclusion was that the universe is expanding, like a balloon where every point expands.

Hubble's discovery proved that the universe is not static, but growing bigger, and that space itself is expanding between the galaxies. The further question of what the universe is expanding from led to the famous theory of the Big Bang.

You know that we can measure types of light that our eyes can't see: x-rays, gamma rays, radio waves and microwaves. That in itself should give us pause to realize that anything we think we know now, or understand, is up for transformation in the future. Our senses, and our minds, are unequipped to understand the vastness of what is out there in space and time.

So when I think of the Divine, any concept, any description that I have inherited falls short of what I suspect might be the truth. I can more easily imagine beings of great intelligence and ability in the universe than I can a single god or goddess. And a

personal god, one who might listen to me, has no place among 100 billion galaxies.

The Hubble Space Telescope was launched in 1990, only twenty-five years ago. Its mirrors actually take digital pictures of visible light, creating those incredible pictures we get on the internet. In 1995 they turned the camera on one dark spot in the sky, and in ten days had recorded 10,000 galaxies. They titled the image "The Hubble Deep Field," and it was my screen saver for years. In 2009, the Hubble's upgraded camera revealed the oldest galaxies ever, estimated at being 600 million years after the Big Bang in a universe they estimate to be 13.7 billion years old. They do all this calculating with light.

My favorite magazine is *Discover*. A while ago they asked everyone to join a world-wide project called Galaxy Zoo. I found the website, took their tutorial, and began to catalog the Hubble pictures of galaxies. Some were beautiful, swirling arms of stars, and others were barely-discernible blobs of blobs, very old, barely forming - at least to my eye. Then I moved on to a new program which measured the green bubbles and red splotches they're recording now.

In the December 2012 issue of *Discover*, they described the new Kepler space telescope as a giant camcorder aimed into the universe. Around the 170,000 stars they've been watching, Kepler had discovered about 3,000 planets, of which about 1500 are twice the size of earth or smaller, and that was two years ago. Based on their work, they estimated there to be at least 150 billion planets in our galaxy. *Discover* has an open invitation to everyone to go to planethunters.org and help identify the dips in light that indicate planets. (pp. 42-50)

Just last month, in February 2015, a video was posted on the internet of Laniakea, the latest rendition of our place in a universe that keeps expanding a billion-fold. If you go to vox.com, you can see the video that tries to explain this broader supercluster of 100,000 galaxies that they've named "immeasurable heaven" in Hawaiian. It shows how these galaxies are not just expanding, but also flowing around and contracting through gravity toward a point called "The Great Attractor." They are determining that our universe is composed of galaxy superclusters and voids that look, to me, like neurons in a gigantic brain. And I was reminded once again of the

flowing, the returning, mentioned by Lao Tse in the Tao Te Ching.

All this recent exploration, though, is being done within the range of visible light. But light is no longer considered the greatest in our universe. “Let there be light” is now passé. They have theorized over the last two decades that a mysterious force is pushing the universe apart, one that we cannot see, and because we can’t see it or detect it, they call it “dark energy.” They have calculated this energy at 72% of our universe. Then, there is dark matter, which is undetectable except for the effect it has on distorting images and bending light. Astronomers believe that 23% of the universe is this dark matter. So, along with Laniakea, the latest astonishing discovery of these past decades is that the universe we can see with our eyes and detect with our instruments, the universe of lightwaves, is only 5%. All those stars and galaxies, and superclusters—just five percent! (Nova)

Sometimes I get a little scared thinking about it all. Perhaps that’s how the gods and goddesses evolved. It makes sense to me that the Divine might be part of our biological

evolution, a part of us that gives support, a sense of connection, a sense that we are not alone or powerless. Not everyone relates to that, though. Perhaps some are encouraged to develop this sense, and others are discouraged from it. Perhaps we are biologically different from one another, subject to mutations, wired differently for a god-sense. I certainly sense god. But I don't believe in it.

I do believe god is created in our own image, based on our own planet, embedded in our own history. A cosmic god is simply inconceivable. In the way 100 billion is inconceivable. In the way that we cannot see 95% of existence, at least. And we don't see even the five percent available to our senses and detectors.

Good grief!

Or, we might say, good God!

When Curtiss and I lived in Tucson, our house was in the higher Sonoran desert, at the foot of Mount Lemmon, and I used to walk around my neighborhood with camera in hand. I loved to take pictures of cactus flowers. One of my favorites is of a prickly pear cactus flower I found growing beneath a mesquite

tree in the wash. When I first saw it, it was a bright yellow blossom glowing in the morning sun, vibrant and amazing. Then I zoomed in with my camera, and an entirely new perspective came into being. The flower was transformed into flowing colors of peach and tangerine, the swirling of petals and stamen. It was another world revealed through the lens, a world that is normally outside my perception. And that was just one flower! On one prickly pear! In one wash! In one neighborhood in one city on earth.

One in a billion billion, perhaps infinite, possibilities of existence! Hiding quietly under a mesquite tree.

Does the God/dess know the prickly pear blossom except through me?

One of these nights I will drive far from the city lights or go up to our UU camp, immerse myself once again in a vision of the center of the Milky Way, and ponder the cosmic Divine and my own puny, but beautiful, life! May you honor the amazing experiences in your own lives, and treasure the wonder of all existence.

**before the hymn, Judith and Jean Françoise will sing a song by John Dowland titled, "Weep you no more, Sad Fountains"