

“The Staggering Grace of It All”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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Winter Solstice

Reading

“Adam’s Complaint” - Nicholas Biel

On the third day I was dust, ordinary common dust
like you see on a country road in a dry spell,
nothing expected of me,
me expecting nothing neither.
On the sixth day he comes along and blows.
“In my own image too”, he says,
like he was doing me a favor.
Sometimes I think if he’d waited a million years
by then I’d been tired maybe being dust
but after only two, three days,
what can you expect? I wasn’t used to being dust
and he goes and makes me into Man.
He could see right away from the expression on my face
I didn’t like it so he’s going to butter me up.
He puts me in this garden only I don’t butter.
He brings me all the animals I should give them names—
What do I know of names? “Call it something,” he says,
“anything you want,” so I make names up--lion, tiger,
elephant, giraffe--crazy but that’s what he wants.
I’m naming animals since 5 AM, in the evening I’m tired
I go to bed early, in the morning I wake up,
there she is sitting by a pool of water admiring herself.
“Hello, Adam,” she says, “I’m your mate, I’m Eve.”
“Pleased to meet you,” I tell her and we shake hands.
Actually I’m not pleased—from time immemorial nothing,
now rush, rush, rush; two days ago I’m dust, yesterday
all day I’m naming animals, today I got a mate already.
Also I didn’t like the way she looked at me
or at herself in the water.
Well, you know what happened, I don’t have to tell you,
there were all those fruit trees—she took a bite,
I took a bite, the snake took a bite and quick like a flash—
out of the garden.

Now I'm not complaining; After all, it's his garden,
he don't want nobody eating his apples, that's his business.
What irritates me is the nerve of the guy.
I didn't ask him to make me even dust;
he could have left me nothing like I was before—
and such a fuss for one lousy little apple
not even ripe (there wasn't much time from Creation,
it was still Spring), I didn't ask for Cain, for Abel,
I didn't ask for nothing, but anything goes wrong,
who's to blame?...Sodom, Gomorrah, Babel, Ararat...
me or my kids catch it,...fire, flood, pillar of salt.
“Be patient,” Eve said, “a little understanding. Look,
he made it was his idea, it breaks down, so he'll fix it.”
But I told him one day. “You're in too much of a hurry.
In six days you make everything there is,
you expect it to run smoothly? Something's always
going to happen. If you'd a thought first,
conceived a plan, consulted a specialist,
you wouldn't have so much trouble all the time.”
But you can't tell him nothing. He knows it all.
Like I say, he means well but he's a meddler and he's careless.
He could have made that woman so she wouldn't bite no apple.
All right, all right, so what's done is done,
but all the same, he should have known better,
or at least he could have blown on other dust.

Sermon: “The Staggering Grace of It All”

I've not actually been to Mars, but I think it safe to say
that we got the better deal.

Perhaps you heard the fascinating news this week
about the discovery by NASA's Mars Rover “Curiosity”—
the best name ever, in my opinion, given to a spacecraft.

For the first time, the rover found organic material on the Red Planet—
and water, locked deep in Martian rocks.

On the planet that is, at once, both so far and so relatively close to home,

the building blocks of life have been discovered.

Gentry Lee, an engineer at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory said,
“When we look at Mars, we have to wonder did life happen there as well?
[And if] so, what happened to it?”¹

He goes on to muse that, “If life evolved first on Mars,
what’s the possibility that life was knocked off of Mars
and carried all the way to the planet Earth?”

If that is, indeed, what happened,
that, of course, actually makes all of us,
and every living thing on the Earth, “Martians”!

(...not only are we the rare congregation in town that celebrates
Chanukah, Christmas, and Solstice,
but we also talk openly about possibly being Martians...
Without sufficient context,
I can just imagine how that headline would sound on the CBC:
“Unitarian minister claims from the pulpit, ‘We’re all Martians!’”)

But, lest you mistake this for a sermon
on our being Martians, my fellow Earthlings,
it’s actually a sermon about grace.

About the awesome, staggering grace that gave us birth,
and about the grace that gives us birth even still,
with each new day, with each revolution,
of this magnificent blue-green ball that we’re on.

As I was saying earlier, I think we got the far better deal.

For starters, the terrain on Mars is notoriously rocky,
and the temperatures range from a balmy 35C down to a very frigid -143C.

You know, sort of like the past year’s weather in Toronto, but a bit worse.
The upside, though, is that there are no black flies!

But whether the “stuff of life” that was our most ancient ancestor

¹ <http://www.space.com/28054-mars-rover-curiosity-discovery-channel.html>

started out here or on Mars or someplace else,
it's had an remarkable journey that has been nothing short of miraculous.

We would do well on this Winter's Solstice,
to recall the magnificent set of circumstances
that have conspired from the dawn of time,
that we find ourselves, living, breathing, sentient beings
sitting together in this room together.

What an extraordinary stroke of luck we've had!

What an amazing break
that, from a Big Bang nearly 14 billion years ago,
life emerged and gave birth to the possibilities
we now know in our very bodies.

In the poetic words of Robert Weston:

Out of the stars, rising from rocks
and the sea,
kindled by sunlight on earth,
arose life.

Ponder this thing in your heart, [he says,]
life up from sea:
Eyes to behold, throats to sing,
mates to love. . . .

This is the wonder of time;
this is the marvel of space;
[that] out of the stars swung the earth;
[and] life upon [the] earth rose to love. . . .

Ponder this thing in your heart, indeed.

When I hold an infant in my arms during a baby dedication,
I say to the child:

You have come with stardust in your hair,
with the rush of planets in your blood,
your heart beating out the seasons of eternity,

and with a shining in your eyes like the sunlight.

That's usually the part where I get all weepy.

Because it's such a blessed thing to remind a newly-minted little human, and to remind us all, that we are children of the universe—each of us having come forth from the depths of time to live for such a precious moment upon this earth.

But, what a wild and winding journey it has been for us all.

Bill Bryon reminds of us just how very contingent our lives are.

“Consider the fact that for 3.8 billion years...,” he says, that “every one of your forbears on both sides has been attractive enough to find a mate, healthy enough to reproduce, and sufficiently blessed by fate and circumstances to do so. Not one of your pertinent ancestors was squashed, devoured, drowned, starved, stranded, stuck fast, untimely wounded, or otherwise deflected from its life's quest of delivering a tiny charge of genetic material to the right partner at the right moment in order to perpetuate the only possible sequence of hereditary combinations that could result—eventually, astoundingly, and all too briefly—in you.”

It's good to be reminded that each one of us is a project billions of years in the making—born of the very elements of the universe that have danced their way through time and all of living history to take shape in the body that we each know, here and now.

When we take that in, when we truly take in this astounding fact, it should be more than enough to make us pinch ourselves for wonder that so much effort and such good fortune have gone into creating each and every one of us.

Now, of course, it's tempting to behold this magnificent journey and just chalk it up to a really long running streak of terrifically good luck.

That's certainly one way to look at it.

Others look to this story and see it, obviously,
as the hand of God or providence moving through history.

In fact, there are many, particularly among those who believe
in the arguments for God from what's called "intelligent design,"
who see an anthropic principle at work
in the many cosmological constants that have made human life possible.

They find proof for God in the stunning series of narrow conditions
that are required for life to have taken hold and survived to this day.

A few degrees this way or that, and we'd all be frozen or fried.
Same thing, if the tilt of the earth were different,
or if we were spinning around much faster than we do.

It's a compelling argument, and I can appreciate its appeal.

But where others see luck or see God, I simply see grace.
Amazing, astonishing grace.

For me, grace is defined as that
which we don't "earn, or expect, or even deserve."²

Gifts that we've not had to ask or work for.
Gifts that simply are.
Gifts that simply are ours, to make of them what we will.

My friend Aaron White reminded me this week
that this is how the universe works.³

That the universe that has given us birth
doesn't demand merit on our part in order to impart its gifts.
The gift of life is ours—for the taking.

Aaron calls the universe a self-giving economy of grace.
Because it doesn't require that we, or any living thing,
be worthy—or be sufficiently good—

² With thanks to Scott Tayler.

³ Aaron is a dear friend and colleague from seminary, and serves as Associate Minister at the First Unitarian Church of Dallas, Texas.

before bestowing its gifts upon us.

The gifts are simply given—or, better, were given so very long ago in the marvelous unfolding of the universe that didn't demand that we, we who have come into this vast inheritance of life, be deserving of any of it.

That doesn't mean it's been easy along the way.
And it doesn't mean that everyone starts out in this world on an equal footing.

To quote Hobbes, life for far too many has, indeed, been “brutish, nasty, and short.”

And any news report bears witness to the countless ways we routinely squander our inheritance and disregard the value of the great gifts we've been given.

Still, the gifts set forth at the dawn of time were given unconditionally, without any regard to how deserving or how grateful any future recipients might prove to be.

On one hand, we find ourselves in a place not unlike the mythic garden in which Adam and Eve found themselves.

Surrounded by beauty, yet grumbling about our having to do our chores and take some responsibility for the place.

In this Eden, though, it is we who banish ourselves from the garden, as we spoil what came to us by grace—and what we, arguably, are required to pass on, as the continuation of that grace, to others.

It turns out that what came to us humans so unconditionally has developed, over time, I think, to bear one obvious condition: that we are morally obligated to ensure that the grace of life goes on and on.

That means that what has been so freely given is not completely free.

The first of the six sources of Unitarian Universalism states that

we draw on “Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life.”

For ancient peoples, that renewal and openness to such forces involved paying very careful attention to the sun’s movements.

Watching it grow dim and disappear as nights grew long.
Watching its steady return and the lengthening of daylight.

The story goes that people would build large fires in winter to entice the sun to return.

That through their efforts to build fires, the sun would come back, bringing heat and light to all that had grown cold.

I have my doubts about that story.
I can imagine it happened once.
Maybe even twice, or three times.

But even in a distant part of human history,
when people read changes in the weather
as the favour or punishment of the gods,
I have to think that someone eventually realized
that the sun would return, whether they built a big blazing fire or not.

I don’t know that that person would have called it grace at the time.
But that’s what it was, and what it remains—
a gift that we have done nothing to deserve,
but a gift that comes all the same, with stunning regularity.

As we head into this, the longest night of the year,
we would do well to embrace this gift and the life it sustains
with all the gratitude we can summon.

And to ask ourselves what part is ours to play
in the unfolding grace of this world.

Especially since we now know that Mars is not really an option. . .

Our future, as it always has been, is here, together.

At this, the great gate of winter,
as we look up to a Solstice sky,
and behold the dance of the stars, swirling across the cosmos,
let us pray for peace on this planet.

Let us give thanks for the grandeur and the grace
that has created and upholds our life, and all of life,
on this good green earth.

Amen, and Blessed Be.