

The Cosmic Fire: Beyond the Religion and Science Debate

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Thomas Strauss

This morning I was up early and watched the incredibly beautiful sunrise. It was like a fire in the sky. It was cold and clear and a few crows were calling to me...I was amazed and stirred by the colors above me, low burning orange at the distant horizon, with pink and light blue flames licking out across the dark blue sky.

A fire in the sky, that's what our ancient ancestors saw, that's what they tried to understand.

Peoples old and modern have created stories, narrative, theories and myths to explain the world they see, and to explain the place of humanity within that world. Images of both the beauty and consuming devastation of fire are a constant and recurring theme in both science and religion.

For the world is on fire, all this is living burns, all living things unlock stored sunlight and turn it into heat energy. This morning I saw the sunrise and immediately I crafted a story about it, there was a fire in the sky.

This is how we humans learn, through creating stories and then waiting to see if they fit the reality we experience.

Stephen Hawking sought a unifying theory, he wrote. "we cannot distinguish what is real about the universe without a theory, it is no good appealing to reality because we don't have model-independent concepts of reality"

Science and religion share this fundamental starting point of making up a story or theory and then testing it. The story that both science and religion have been working on most recently is in response to the reality of global climate change. And they increasingly have been working together.

This morning I bring you some questions to ponder regarding this collaboration, I bring you questions regarding the myth that informs our thinking about climate change.

And I bring questions regarding the moral aspects of this crisis, for the stories we tell ourselves influence our action and our inaction.

First let me share a reading, that comes from science fiction author, Terry Bisson...it is a conversation between the leader of an interplanetary explorer fleet and his commander in chief...

"They're made out of meat.

Meat?

There's no doubt about it. We picked several from different part of the planet, took them aboard our recon vessels and probed them all the way through. They're completely meat.

That's impossible. What about the radio signals? The messages to the stars?

They use the radio waves to talk, but the signals don't come from them, the signals come from machines.

So who made the machine? That's who we want to contract.

They made the machines. That's what I'm trying to tell you. Meat made the machines.

That's ridiculous. How can meat make a machine? You're asking me to believe in sentient meat.

I'm not asking you. I'm telling you. These creatures are the only sentient race in the sector and they're made out of meat.

Maybe they're like the Orfolei. You know, a carbon-based intelligence that goes through a meat stage.

Nope. They're born meat and they die meat. We studied them for several of their life spans, which didn't take too long. Do you have any idea of the life span of meat?

Maybe they're only part meat. You know, like the Weddilei. A meat head with an electron plasma brain inside.

Nope we thoruth of that, since they do have meat heads like the Weddilei. But I told you, we probed them. They're meat all the way through.

No brain?

Oh, there's a brain all right. It's just that the brain is made out of meat!

So, what does the thinking?

You're not understanding , are you? The brain does the thinking. The meat.

Thinking meat! You're asking me to believe in thinking meat!

Yes, thinking meat! Conscious meat! Loving meat! Dreaming meat! The meat is the whole deal! Are you getting the picture?

So on to the beyond the religion and science debate.

Does humanity, does meat, have a soul, a conscience, a moral imperative?

When researchers test for moral and ethical responses in humans ...most test takers do what ever it takes to survive, to win, to emerge unscathed. Morality seems always to be situational. Survival tops compassion.

And yet, to organize ourselves on this planet, which gets exceedingly complex and crowded...we must, I think posit a soul, a conscience, a moral imperative. We must convince more and more people that their survival, their winning, their health, depends on moral action by a huge number of people. We must move beyond concern for the individual to considering complex systems and the relationships between them. It is not simple, but to do otherwise, is either suicide or worse.

Can we all agree that we are now in the global age? That any consideration of morality and demands of survival must assume a global venue? It is too late for nations, too narrow for cities, too selfish for neighborhoods or families...only global thinking will do.

Although it might well be that global thinking leads us to local solutions as in the area of food production and distribution.

After days of intensive reading, I offer my thoughts on the on-going conversation between science and religion...while trying to keep both morality and globalization as touchstones.

I had a problem with everything I read.

I have been bothered for some time that most current theological and popular science writing seems to come to the same place...the place of acknowledging the environmental disaster of global warming...and to one solution...we must see the earth and all life on our planet as sacred.

M. Scott Momaday calls it "reinventing the sacred." A Native American author, Momaday believes that the rise of science and the subsequent explosion of technology have precipitated a loss of the sense of life as sacred...and that has led us to abusing the planet.

The Gaia movement which followed humanity's first viewing of earth from space...offered a framework that posited that the earth, the whole earth, was a living thing. It was eye-opening to many of us to realize that the earth itself was alive.

Understanding something as alive and of sacred worth calls forth a moral response.

Book after book, whether written by theologian or physicist, or astronomer, or organic chemist...all seem to begin and end with the same analysis and the same solution.

The fate of the earth is in our hands...and we must see it as sacred in order to save it.

I couldn't agree more. And now what?

Most of us can speak of experiences of awe and reverence that flow from immersion in nature. We have felt the majesty of a night sky and the mystery behind the astronomy. We have arranged a bouquet of wildflowers and marveled at their variety and beauty.

We have held a newly born child or the hand of a dying loved one, and whispered a prayer of gratitude for the miracle of human life.

We return to the seashore and the riverbank year after year to participate in the eternal flow of tide, and the eternal silence of moving water. We watch the sun rise.

We love nature, we love the earth. We Unitarian Universalists relate to the sacred found in the natural world. It is for many of us an article of faith. Faith in abundant life, faith in evolution and change, faith in interdependence, faith in the truth of science, and faith in our own unique experience.

So we stand at the edge of understanding the sacredness of nature and the imperative to save the earth. We embrace Karen Armstrong's categories, the logos of science and the mythos of Gaia. We believe in global warming and its coming devastations.

So what now?

An image that captures a good part of nature writing as well as theological writing is that cartoon image of a man walking along a city sidewalk with a sign that reads..."The End is Near".

Ah, here is an interesting intersection of science and religion. The phrase "The End is near" points to limits, finiteness, boundaries, doubt, truth, narrative, symbol, causation, interpretation, ambiguity- the essential nature of existence...destiny...all science, all religion.

"The End is Near"...is a message being transmitted to those of us living in the 21st century in many diverse forms, by many voices. And by the earth itself...as we begin to experience the effects of our neglect and abuse...our greed and our lack of responsible stewardship.

The End is Near. So what now?

Symbol and myth are powerful tools in both science and religion.

I submit that our current popular myth is not sufficient. Our inspiring symbol of the earth from space is no longer sufficient. It is a 40 year old photograph...though it took a decade or more to really take hold- it has done it's work of consciousness raising and now we need a new myth of greater and more active efficacy.

For lack of new inspiring myth, we have fallen into cultural icons of one disaster scenario after another, in books and movies...it is the wave that washes away NYC...it is the one road that leads through total devastation, it is the virus that invades city after city, it is the last child on earth...it is the shadow figure of the resurrected comic book hero that captures the imaginations and psyches of our young people.

The End is near, and we feel helpless...overwhelmed by disaster and helpless.

A book first published in English in 1923 helps us make sense of the two sides of sacred myth. Many of you may have read, "The Idea of the Holy" by Rudolf Otto. Its subtitle is An Inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational.

A sufficient myth must embody both aspects...the rational and the non-rational. It must make sense and carry emotion. The Gaia myth based on the photo of the earth from space...carried both aspects.

Some of the current sensationalist and despairing literature and movies also embody both rational and non-rational ideas and feelings. The scenarios are plausible, if not yet true.

Rudolf Otto wrote of the qualities of the sacred..."the holy is mysterious, it both attracts and repels, it has both a destructive element and a healing capacity...the sacred can carry a sense of the awful or uncanny, as well as exultation and awe...these feelings of awe and trembling are called "numinous".

A sufficient myth, like anything holy, would contain images of potential destruction and symbols of hope. It wouldn't be dualistic categories of good and evil- but a whole integral story embodying both. What narrative might we create to move humanity toward survival? Who will have the wisdom and the courage to open to new ideas, new paradigms, new horizons. How will we stir the soul of humanity to a global ethic?

The image of fire-life as fire, returns again and again.

Professor of astro-physics, Adam Frank, hangs his hope on human aspiration. The aspiration to know the source of experience, the True and the Real, emanates from encounters, experience with the world...unmasked, unadorned, unfiltered...that is when our encounters with the world, universe and cosmos appear sacred. We see the night sky and we want to know.

This aspiration is original and it is ancient. It is the fire, the constant fire, that defines our unique place in the hierarchies of life and being on this planet. Our search for the truth, our call to the truth is a living thing. We circle endlessly around it.

The desire, the impulse, the aspiration to know our place in the universe...is perhaps a saving grace...

Theologian Paul Tillich speaks of a gestalt of grace...which suggests a structure, a way of relationship with something larger...within a gestalt of grace...a grace that we cannot see. We just might find our way.

We/humanity cannot put ourselves at the center of our own quest. We must rely on the inbreaking of something larger than ourselves...

Knowing our limits...we need to look beyond, beneath, and within...where we have been looking.

Tillich reminds us that symbols that are genuine...point beyond the thing itself...

Looking at the earth from space is too small, too narrow, too much like looking in a mirror.

I believe, humanity's collective venture to save the earth will find energy, generative power from an ethic of Love...love as an ontological power as Tillich puts it. Love is part of our being...our human being.

We were made for Love...our covenant with the holy is a covenant of unconditional love. Like our love for trees, for rivers, for animals, for the sea...

Our covenant with the earth must be one of unconditional love...where else shall the sacred take us but to awe and to love.

And just loving the earth, may not be enough. We must see with greater depth, with wider vision...Look at the photographs from the Hubble telescope, look at the Hubble Heritage website...look at them once a week, as a spiritual practice...as a prayer... feel the awe, the tremor, the mystery of space... of the whole universe. Just look and you're know that yes, humanity has a soul, a conscience, a moral imperative.

And soon perhaps, a story will come to you, a narrative, an idea, an inspiration....welcome the gestalt of grace...embrace your ontological love...and imagine...

What if, in the near future...we were to encounter alien life...what if that life, that planet needed our help- needed our help to survive...would this be the inspiration we look for....the constant fire, not just of curiosity, but of human compassion...would this be the saving grace...the gestalt of love universal....what if...the way to saving ourselves was not to save the planet earth but was to save someone else. What then?

May we see the world on fire burning with life and understand our relationship, our dependence and our responsibility.

So May It Be/Amen

Reading...from Adam Frank "Constant Fire: Beyond the Science and Religion Debate"

Our search for the truth, our call to the truth, is a living thing. We circle endlessly around it.

Sometimes, we gain a glimpse of its totality in the poetry of the Psalms or the Bhagavad Gita. Sometimes that glimpse comes through a derivation of Einstein's field equations.

In all cases it is our lived experience that brings us to the boundaries of what is expressible and what cannot be fully framed in words or mathematics. How could it be otherwise?

We are born and find ourselves in this incredible world of wonders.

Science and spiritual endeavor are both gateways to understanding the mysteries of life. They are not the same. They are not equivalent. But together they arise from the same ancient location in our history and our being.

Together they define what is best in us.