

Naturalistic Theism

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship
October 30, 2016
Rev. Paul Beckel

Arguing over whether it was God,
 evolution, or
 the self-organizing dynamics of
 emergent complexity
that brought everything into existence makes
about as much sense
as debating whether it was me,
 my vocal cords, or
 the electrical impulses of
 my nervous system
that caused me to utter this sentence.

Michael Dowd

WELCOME

Today I'd like to share a few thoughts about naturalistic theism – an understanding of the cosmos itself as divine, an unfolding entity to which or to whom we might express not only awe, but gratitude and devotion.

As we explore this topic, we acknowledge that we dwell alongside ancient rivers and forests...among creatures great and small...within a biosphere of life-giving water, land and air...and as neighbors to ancient tribes who have long honored this sacred web of creation.

GATHERING SONG *Lady of the Seasons Laughter* #51

CHILDREN'S FOCUS *Becoming Me*, by Martin Boroson

KIDS' CHOIR

HALLOWEEN COSTUME PARADE

ANNOUNCEMENTS

READING "Religious Experience" Will Saunders

I have always liked to look at stars. But when the first stirrings of a midlife crisis were undermining my youthful dreams, my experience of the starry night sky changed unpleasantly. Since my teens, I had gloried in this experience in a sort of romantic, adolescent way, feeling gigantic while gazing at distant worlds. But two years before my 40th birthday, the starry sky seemed horrific, for what I felt was how utterly overshadowed and expendable I am in the grand scheme. My own eventual death was viscerally unacceptable to me, and the fact that in the vastness of time and space we are unimaginably small only brought home the fact that I would someday be extinguished forever.

A midlife crisis takes [the reality that you are small and that life is short] and knocks you around with it until you are beaten up and, if you are lucky, you finally cry “uncle.” And when you cry “uncle,” you stop saying, “My existence is nothing,” and you start saying, “Existence is everything, and I am incredibly blessed to take part in it. Death is one of the terms of life. So be it.”

You look at the night sky, and you concentrate not on how you feel but on how utterly amazing and wonderful it is. And all that exists begins to seem sacred, or, more precisely: single, particular realities beyond your poor shaky self begin to seem miraculous simply because they do exist. This, I think, is a religious experience.

RESPONSIVE READING “Out of the Stars” #646

SILENCE (3:00)

REFLECTIONS, Part 1

Is there a part of you that helps you to notice *your connection* to the sacred web of all existence? For me it’s the eyes that unite me with choppy blue-grey waters, and the islands within those waters, and brilliant sunsets behind the islands.

But that’s as far as my eyes take me on most days, so another part of me—through which I notice my unity with the sacred web of all existence—is my mind, which offers *memories* of travel beyond the sunsets. My mind also knows where to find maps—maps charting lands I’ll never visit, and planets too, and beyond these: my mind can enjoy—even if I don’t fully grasp—magnificent equations describing infinity and beyond.

Also my ears, nose, and tongue...my heart, and whatever else it is inside that enables me to get the shivers...these too remind me that I exist within a universe of beauty and suffering and hope...freedom and inescapable reality...browning leaves and new life beginning to germinate underground.

How do *you* experience *your* connection to all that is tangible / and mystical? Your connection to the past, present, and future? Your connection to all that is conscious, and that which is still to become conscious?

And how do you *name* this undeniable reality, this unfolding continuum, these endless cycles?

Giving it a name...giving the ALL, the *ineffable* a name, seems absurd, arrogant, impossible...but it’s awfully hard to communicate about our thoughts and experiences without names, or labels. So even though I’m uncomfortable with labels, especially religious labels, I find that I can roughly squeeze myself—or be squeezed by others—into quite an assortment of them:

I am a secularist, ordained within a religious tradition; I’m a christian who doesn’t believe in god the father or the son; I’m a skeptic who gathers an eclectic community for weekly services of worship.

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John Dewey wrote that there is no such thing as “religion.” Though there are, of course, “religions.” In this sense then, it is probably a mistake to use overly broad labels like “christianity,” or “humanism” or “atheism,” none of which exist in any composite form (though there are christianities, humanisms, and atheisms in abundance).

If you pay attention to your words, you could probably (without a great deal of effort) remove the singular noun form of these words from your vocabulary. I encourage you to try. It might lead to some interesting conversations, especially at upcoming holiday dinners with family.

Subtle variations in religious language can make a *big* difference in our religious perspectives. In fact, even a subtle variation in grammar can make a crucial point about the nature of god. For example, in process theology (tho I suppose I should say process theologies, for there are as many variations as there are disciples). Anyway a key aspect of process theologies can be made with a simple grammatical twist in a phrase that could fit on a bumper sticker: *God is a verb.*

Process theologies are among a cluster of religious perspectives loosely related to naturalistic theisms. Among the many additional worldviews one could throw into this collection are pantheisms, panentheisms, deisms, feminist theologies, and Gaia hypotheses. I’m going to describe these perspectives now very briefly. Each one is rich with complexity if you want to explore them further.

All of these perspectives take issue with classical theism in one way or another. Classical theism holds that God, being perfect, is timeless, unchanging, and unaffected by the world. The more liberal, naturalistic perspectives don’t equate perfection with un-changeability; they tend to see the divine as a process rather than an entity, evolving rather than static.

So if you just don’t resonate with the idea of God as a noun, a *being* of some sort, how about the divine-dynamic-*becoming*?

Classical theism describes God as all-good and non-material—such that material existence is vile and ungodly. In contrast, naturalistic perspectives tend to *revere* the physical world, and identify God as equal to—or at least part of—nature.

One variation on the theme is called Deism.

During the scientific revolution of the 1600s, religious renegades came up with this idea of God as the creator who created by establishing the laws of nature, and then, through the laws of nature, the cosmos came to be. So Deists, many perhaps who sit among us today, understand god not as supernatural—not as a being or a force that intervenes on earth from time to time, but as the source of the natural world accessible through science and reason.

Another variant is called panENtheism. Broken down, the word means “everything IN God.” This view was championed by Charles Hartshorne, a 20th century theologian who affiliated on and off with UU congregations where he served as a guest preacher into his 90s. To sum up panentheism he said, “The world is God’s body.” That is, the earth, the cosmos, you and I, all of

our molecules and memories and experience, are the body of God at this moment. And in the next moment, that body will evolve into something more.

Pantheisms still have something in common with classical theisms. That is: the understanding that there is more to God than God's body. There is a consciousness which extends beyond God's body.

This is somewhat different from pantheism, in which the universe and god are understood to be one and the same. In pantheism *the whole* is god. The whole is not just a loose collection of atoms and ideas, histories and hopes, but the totality: god is the whole acting as a whole: the synergistic whole—not the master of all of the separate parts.

So these are neat ideas, but why associate them with such grandiose words as “god,” or “divinity?” Why not just articulate all of this within the rubric of math or science? For me, again, grammar plays a role, as God becomes not just a verb but an interjection. Maybe even a wordless interjection like [open mouth/awe]. So to the extent that I use traditional religious language, I do so to translate experiences which, if they were described scientifically, would lose their punch, would lose their essence.

No, I don't *have* to use the word god, I often use “wow!” or “yes!” or “thank you!” These are all imperfect poetic attempts to convey something beyond words.

INTERLUDE

REFLECTIONS, Part 2

Feminist theologies were largely developed in the last 50 years. They are very diverse, but tend to imagine god as flowing, creative, bodily and relational.

Mainstream protestant theologies are also evolving and integrating aspects of process and images of nature into christian narratives and christian ethics. For example, a story—that blends divine interdependence with human potential and the natural world—describes Jesus as the guy who runs a seed store, offering packets of “peace-on-earth seeds,” and “reconciliation seeds.” None of which will grow, of course, unless planted and tended.

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But if stories like that are too imprecise for you, if you want nail down which of these is correct, and what's the difference between theologies and philosophies...I'm not going to be of much help. I might just throw at you something even more complicated, like “cosmologies,” such as those proposed by Steven Hawking and others in their attempts to define the origins of the universe. I do not know whether their cosmological theories belong to the world of philosophy or religion or science or mathematics.

And consider some even more complicated category crossers: Gaia hypotheses, which suggest that the earth, with all of its interdependent processes, could be a single living organism. Now

that's a vision with ramifications not only for religion and science but for history and politics as well.

And finally there's Religious naturalism—promoting not only respect for the natural world, but awe, gratitude, reverence, and hope.

These are my best attempts to describe what I see behind these various labels. You might not be surprised to learn that there is little consensus about what all of these super-sized words mean. None of them are owned by any particular religious institution.

The title of this sermon though, the phrase, “naturalistic theism,” is used on some surveys in UU congregations. The Unitarian Universalist Association's most recent theological survey listed it among an inevitably incomplete set of labels by which respondents could self-identify. This survey defined naturalistic theism as the view that: “The powers we have traditionally attributed to a supernatural god are inherent in the natural world. The natural world elicits our respect and devotion.”

“The powers we have traditionally attributed to a supernatural god are inherent in the natural world. The natural world elicits our respect and devotion.”

As defined this way it becomes an awfully broad category, not limited to any of those described so far today. So to some of us, the idea of naturalistic theism might be so broad as to be meaningless. For others, that vagueness may feel just right.

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What do *you* feel when you look at the stars, or feel the rain? Do you feel small, and soggy? Or grateful? Can you feel grateful *for both* the great vast beyond, and also for the tangible here and now? Are you refreshed and excited by what might occur *beyond your limited sphere*, even beyond your own lifespan?

My own experiences of transcendence have included sitting high in a rainforest tree and sitting quietly on an unmade bed. I have experienced the ineffable in relationships, in classrooms, in song, and in books.

I once thought I would have to give up on god when I found that I no longer believed in the supernatural. But I can't help it: I know that miracles continue to abound. And even if my definitions continue to fluctuate, I can continue to affirm that my role in life is to love god with all my heart, all of my mind, and all of my strength...and to love my neighbor as myself.

Even if I don't conceive of nature as having consciousness or its own will, I can still experience the Earth's divine wisdom, what It in a sense “knows” and can teach me. I can appreciate its presence, its generosity, and the grace of things undeserved, such as my own life.

And I can be held accountable—because even though my life has occurred at random and was in no way a necessity in the grand scheme of things...somehow I am here; I am now a co-creator. So my choices have consequences; this is a responsibility I cannot escape.

Yes, I can be held accountable—because even though my life has occurred at random and was in no way a necessity in the grand scheme of things...somehow I am here; I am now a co-creator. So my choices have consequences; this is a responsibility I cannot escape.

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And what do *naturalistic* religious views call us *to do*? What are the imperatives of these theologies?

The fairly obvious ethic of nature-based theologies is to honor the earth—both by taking the time to see it, and by taking care with the way we touch it.

I believe that our call as co-creators is to see the world as it is, and to touch the world with healing hands. Our call is to subvert cultural assumptions and political systems that dishonor the cycles of life.

And finally, naturalistic theism reminds me that the divine exists within relationship. And though I'm often tempted avoid the constant changes that make relationships difficult and full of surprises...life is better when I understand that there is more than just me, my body, and my mind. It's better to remember that I'm not alone.

I don't think it matters whether I *believe* any of this stuff. But when I allow myself *to dwell within these possibilities*, I more readily appreciate that even though I'm small, *I am* an ESSENTIAL part of the majesty of the universe. Whether my tenure on earth is an hour or one hundred years, and whether my life turns out to be heroic or average, I have to, and I get to, play a part.

So whether you find god in the mystery, the unknown before which you are humbled, or whether you find plenty to worship right here in the known world, so big, so ancient, so complex and creative, let's do this together.

And with the Navajos sing: beauty is before us, beauty is behind us, beauty to our right, beauty to our left, beauty above, beauty below, together we walk in beauty.