

Many Stories, One Story, Our Story

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Meditation

This moment... like every moment... is the only moment...

May we be present for this moment...

Present with our breath, with our neighbors in the nearby pew,
in this house...

present this moment in the midst of revolving,
evolving earth... cosmos...

And within this present moment, may we hold in our hearts and minds those in
need of our compassionate care and concern... those we love who are sick or
struggling in whatever way... all who are in need of healing, helping care...

This moment...

Readings

There's a joke among cosmologists that romantics are made of stardust, but cynics
are made of the nuclear waste of worn-out stars. Sure enough, the complex atoms
coming out of supernovas can be seen either way, but these atoms introduce into
matter the possibility of complexity, and complexity allows the possibility of life and
intelligence. To call them nuclear waste is like calling consumer goods the waste
products of factories. A cosmology can be a source of tremendous inspirational and
even healing power, or it can transform a people into slaves or automatons and
squash their universe into obsession with the next meal or with trivial entertainment.
The choice of what attitude the twenty-first century will adopt toward the new
universe may be the greatest opportunity of our time. The choice between existential
and meaningful is still open. —Joel Primach and Nancy Abrams

from *The View from the Center of the Universe*, 2006

Isaiah 25:6-8

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow,
of well-aged wines strained clear.

And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;
he will swallow up death forever.

Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the Lord has spoken.

Sermon

Anyone have pumpkin pie this past Thursday? Pecan? Apple?
Carl Sagan once said that it takes the entire universe to make an apple pie! The entire universe; think of it:

Yes, that apple pie on your Thanksgiving table required about 15 billion years of cosmic evolution, including the five billion years of evolution on earth. Though a very tiny (though tasty) speck on the already small speck of our earth, that pie would not exist were it not for the big bang and everything that has happened since.

Thank you big bang! Thank you whomever or whatever made the big bang possible! Thank you evolutionary processes!

And of course thank you also to the more immediate baker of the pie, that remarkably complex and beautiful collection of millions of cells that sliced the apples, rolled the dough, mixed and baked just so. Thank you!

It was a very good pie, and worth all 15 billions years it took to make it!

So, we eat our pie and the rest of Thanksgiving dinner; we give thanks for whatever measure of abundance is ours. And perhaps for that day at least we give the morning paper only a glance, ignoring for a day anyway the reminders in the daily news that our situation on the planet today – this one planet, this home we share – often seems dire: Divisions, walls, wars, hatred, environmental destruction... abound.

Yet it *is* one planet, one home we share. It *is*, with all of the diversity of our religions and histories and customs, it *is* just *one* cosmic story of life we share, however many interwoven plot lines, it is one story that has made everything from apple pies to baklava, from turkey to falafel, possible.

When will we get it? When and how *will* we ever learn.

Well to begin with, it can't hurt, it seems to me, to tell over and over again this *one* story, this great cosmic story that weaves together all the others.

Nor can it hurt to find ways to *experience* these many stories *as one story*, so that we might get it not just in our minds as an abstract truth, but into our bones, into the way we see ourselves, into our felt sense of who we are as human beings. Fortunately, there are many ways to *experience* the reality that the many stories are actually one interwoven great story.

For example.

There is a cemetery, Pere Lachaise, the oldest cemetery in Paris. It has long been a place of pilgrimage for those who would honor not only their personal loved ones and ancestors, but also various luminaries from the past: Heloise and Abelard, Chopin, Proust, Edith Piaf, Balzac, Oscar Wilde... it's a long list, more recently including legendary American rock singer Jim Morrison.

And it feels truly like a city of the dead, since most of the graves are in the form of tombs, eight or ten feet high, one after another like cottages in a resort village – though this of course not for a two week holiday...

Then, as you stroll the winding cobblestone paths, you are gradually struck by the diversity of humanity buried in those tombs and graves. Etched on many of the more recent monuments are Chinese and Arabic as well as French; and in addition to Christian

crosses, many a Star of David is engraved as well. Clearly people from all over the world, from hugely diverse religious and cultural backgrounds have been laid to rest in this ancient place; many stories, part of one story which for each soul here ended amidst the peaceful stones and arching trees, under this French sky.

Ah, but easy enough, you say, to have peaceful coexistence in a city of the dead. What about the city of the living?

Well, when you leave the cemetery you enter the neighborhood of Belleville; and if it is market day in this densely populated neighborhood, within a few blocks you become part of a slowly moving river of humanity between the rows of covered stalls occupying for a day the median strip of this city boulevard.

And the complexion of this river of humanity? At least as diverse as those you've left behind in the cemetery: Asian, Middle-Eastern, African, as well as European; accented French, but many voices of many other languages pierce the air as well: Hawking, haggling, selling, buying... Buying what? From where? Clementines from Israel, vegetables from all around the Mediterranean, fish from local rivers and lakes and seas, shoes and clothes from all over the world.

And one can only begin to imagine the stories of each of the people in this river of humanity, many of them no doubt immigrants or only a generation removed from their nation of origin.

Do they always get along as it seems they do on market day?

Probably not – we have all read of the eruptions of tension and sometimes violence when it comes to the challenges of immigration in the countries of the European Union, France very much included. But on market day, in the midst of the vividly present diversity of our human stories, a vibrant, energetic peace reigns. It can be done!

And though market day in Belleville may be a particularly bracing example of our potential for peace amidst our human diversity, there are neighborhoods all over the world, certainly all over our increasingly multicultural nation, where you can have a similar experience. And we *need* that experience, that reminder of what is possible, since we also know all too well that there are all too many places where the counter-forces of tribalism and fundamentalism are ascendant.

For we have a kind of dual genetic and cultural heritage, don't we. We human beings have evolved on the one hand to cooperate with one another so that we might be able to meet common challenges and accomplish shared tasks; and on the other hand we have also evolved to join together against "the other" – outsiders and outside forces that threaten our lives and our communities.

Our job then is clear, our task for this era calls: To grow and strengthen our cooperative instincts as we strive to weaken and transcend our tribalist/fundamentalist instincts. It *can* be done. It is a political and social task. It is also a religious and spiritual task. And it can be done.

On November 9 twenty years ago the Berlin wall came down, as Soviet communism was collapsing, all with a speed that was dizzying. Walls can come down! Bridges built in their place.

It can be done. It *must* be done.

For as Palestinian Omar Shaban, quoted in a recent New Yorker article (p. 53

11/9), noted sadly, as he reflected on the increasing barriers between Israelis and Palestinians: “You can fight someone you don’t know; but you can’t make peace with him.”

Well we once again we enter a season of varied stories from varied traditions – which means stories that may *seem* to divide us... but which can unite us if we understand them aright. On the Christian calendar it is Advent. On the Jewish calendar we approach Hanukkah. Muslims have gathered in the millions for the annual Haj. And on the cosmic, seasonal calendar we approach solstice.

So... may we know *this*, and know it well: The various stories of the season do not need to be experienced as competing with one another, or as mutually exclusive. They are only so if we “literalize the symbolic,” as theologian Harvey Cox puts it, if we fail to understand that the world of story and myth is not a world of primitive, poorly informed science, but is rather simply one of our human ways of reaching for meaning, of trying to understand our place in this mysterious universe through the language of myth, poetry, story.

Most earlier cultures knew this, even as many of us (both fundamentalists and literalist atheists as well) have forgotten it. One example: Karen Armstrong notes in her most recent book, *A Case for God*, that many cultures “had several creation stories, each of which had its own lesson to impart, and people thought nothing of making up a new one if their circumstances changed.”

Just as we have been unfolding yet another creation story in our time, the universe story as science has been not so much making it up but unfolding it, a story that itself too is not in contradiction to all the other stories of humanity, but which rather embraces them, this new cosmic story which many are now calling the Great Story of our still-evolving universe. Yes, the universe which gave us that apple pie, pumpkin too, which gives us all the food on our tables, the shelter of our homes, which gives us one another in all our diversity, our compassion as well as our contentiousness, our kindness as well as our cruelty, all of our stories... which are part of one story, our story.

So as we enter into whatever particular story is “our story” this season – whether for us it is the story of Christmas or Hanukkah or Solstice, or the pilgrimage of Muslims – or all of these woven together – may we allow each particular, unique story to remind us not of all that *divides* us, but of so much that *unites* us. For example:

The hope we re-discover in the Christmas story of a child born in a stable – that child who grew into a man who welcomed *everyone* to his table.

The courage we re-discover in the Hanukkah story of brave resistance to religious persecution, so that that *everyone* might have such freedom.

The beauty we see as millions – of *all* races and nations – gather in prayer in Mecca.

And the wonder and mystery of the turning season itself, light to dark, dark to light, circle of creativity holding and sustaining us *all*...

Finally, then, back to the pie, and then back to the baby we dedicated earlier in our service this morning. The pie: With every taste of a seasonal pie, may we be reminded of the Great Story we share and the Great Work that is to be done: reminded because the pie reminds us of all that made the pie possible, sources near or far on our

planet, sources in the deepest reaches of time and space which have brought the pie to us, and us to this moment...

...that we may come to know more deeply not only the newly revealed truths of the scientific creation story, but the ancient wisdom of all the religious traditions, which for all their diversity teach us at least one thing in common: that in the end all barriers of ego and self, of tribe and nation, are as nothing, embedded as they are in the deeper sacred mystery known by many names: Tao, Brahman, God, Cosmos. So that, paraphrasing Black Elk, who presciently and hopefully said, perhaps we will soon learn that we are, after all, all sisters and brothers.

So yes, may each of the many stories, may the one Great Story, may our story inspire us to live more kindly, one with another, with the Earth and all life, this season and always, that the violence and hatred of our time may someday be recalled as the birth pangs of a new and higher unity and peace, a new way of being on this earth, that the shroud of violence, in Isaiah's language, be lifted from humanity.

So that – no trivial example:... - this child we have dedicated this morning might grow into a world of greater peace, justice, compassion, and love. What other kind of world would we want for this child and all his sisters and brothers.

So may it be.

Benediction

As the days shorten and the light around us dims,

May the light within and among us shine ever more brightly:

Light of love, light of freedom, light of compassion and peace.

May the light shine for us always.

May we be the light for others.

So may it be.