

Our Place in the Scheme of Things
Part Two
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Remembering those we loved is good.

But we ought not to stop with remembering. Indeed, when it comes to living a full life, it seems to me that we fail to fully honor those we loved if we stop with only remembering.

Think, to begin with, of Jesus or the Buddha. Do we fully honor their lives if all we do is remember the grandeur and challenge of their lives and their teachings? Do we justly honor their lives if all we do is bow down in worship before an image of wood or stone?

No, I would say that actually it's almost a desecration of who they were and how they lived and what they taught *only* to remember, *only* to worship.

Instead, we fully honor Jesus or the Buddha or Mohammed or Socrates or any of the great teachers of humanity when we learn from their teaching and when we strive to live according to their teaching and their example.

And so it is with those we love more personally.

My father, for example, was an honest and compassionate man. But if I praise his honesty and his compassion and lie, cheat, and steal, I have hardly honored him or his legacy to me and to the world.

So, you know what I'm talking about here, and by now I expect you all have brought to mind those in your lives who have gone before, yet who still live in your memories, and also in your hearts, *and* also in your lives as you strive to live your lives.

There are cultures, as you know, who more intentionally than we encourage the honoring of one's ancestors. We could too. And who ought to be included among our ancestors?

We usually think only of those long gone as our ancestors. But we could say that anyone who has died has become an ancestor. So near us in time, if our grandparent or parent has died, they have become an ancestor. Farther back in time, those whose lineage we trace a dozen generations or two dozen generations into the past are of course our ancestors. Yet further into time's recesses and we have come to know that our ancestors also include our non-human forebears. And, in the spirit of my sermon last week, yet further – as in billions of years further – and we can say that in the Great Story of the universe our ancestors include the exploding stars that seeded our solar system with the elements necessary to life: oxygen, nitrogen, carbon, calcium, and on it goes. Ancestors all! And *all* our ancestors, from parents to stars, are now part of us, both literally and metaphorically.

And... not only would we not be here were it not for all these ancestors – from the stars through early life on earth through the first humans through our own grandparents and parents – not only would we not be here without all these ancestors... we would not be here unless their deaths as well as their lives were part of the Great Story of the universe.

What a hard truth that is.

For we never want to lose those we love, those who have given us birth, those who have made our lives possible in various ways. Of course not.

So, what a hard truth. But a truth nevertheless.

This said, as the Unitarian Universalist scientist and self proclaimed UU evangelist of the Great Story, Connie Barlow, very nicely and directly puts it in her presentation concerning the story of cosmic evolution and the evolution of life, we are free to affirm (and science certainly teaches) that death is not a punishment, as the common interpretation of the Genesis story of Adam and Eve teaches; death is not a punishment... rather, death is an essential part of life.

On the cosmic scale, the death of stars, as I've just said, seeds new stars and solar systems, some of them with the possibility of sentient and even intelligent life.

On the evolutionary scale, the death of entire species through mutation and natural selection gives rise to new species, new growth, new possibility.

As the last leaves of autumn fall, we are reminded that each year, death makes possible the next rebirth of spring.

And on the scale of our human lives, hard truth though it is, without the deaths of the elders we love, without *our* deaths, there would be no new life. Put quite baldly, if we never died, there would be no room for the new life of children, for their fresh energy and creativity and wonder.

So then. What does all this say about "our place in the scheme of things"? It says, to begin in general terms, that though we have a place that can be described in a scientifically dry way, our place in the cosmic scales of time and space, our place in the story of evolution on earth... we also have a *choice* as to how we will understand and experience our place and how we will creatively express our place. It is a choice which has to do with the meaning or purpose of our lives.

I put it to us in as a series of questions:

Will we squander or will we honor the legacy of the 13.7 billion years since the "big bang" or "great radiance" as it is sometimes put, the 13.7 billion years that it took the universe to make us? Isn't that amazing – think of it: as I said last week, it took a whole universe and 13.7 billion years to make us. Not that we were necessarily the point – that, I suppose, is an open question. But the big bang and 13.7 billion years of stellar evolution and then millions of years of biological evolution were all necessary to make us. The rest of the universe (aside from us) is not incidental to us, just out there and only of academic interest. Rather, we are in it and we wouldn't be possible without it.

And so, will we squander or honor this amazing legacy of the universe?

In this same spirit, yet far more personally, will we, each of us, squander or will we honor the legacy of the love and care and teaching of all those – parents, teachers, friends, great exemplars of history – who helped us to be who we are, who set the example, who encouraged us, taught us, shaped us?

I think again of my father, as many of you might think of a parent. I thought the world of my Dad – I still do, these almost twenty years after he "became an ancestor." And because he was such a good human being, for a long time when I was younger I thought that the best way to be a good human being was to follow his example in every way – which meant, among other things, becoming a physician. So, as I've told some of you before, I was pre-med three times!

Until finally I realized that the way to follow in my father's footsteps was not to be like him in every way, but was rather to try to be as authentic to who I am as he was authentic to who he was. Yes, to carry forward his qualities of honesty and compassion as best I could; (yes, to learn some of the stories and jokes he told as best I could); and also to embody that honesty and compassion and humor as best I could in *my* life, in *my* way, and not in an imitation of his or anyone else's.

So *here* I am.

And still asking the question of myself in relation not only to my father, but in relation to other teachers and exemplars as well. Will I – and will we – squander or honor the legacy of those who helped us to become who we are?

Finally, here at Old Ship, will we squander or will we honor the legacy of those who raised these beams, and all the generations since who shaped a theology of freedom, a theology which affirms the good that resides within each person, a theology which has offered an ever wider welcome to all, a theology which encourages us to play our part, here and now in this time, to make the world a better place? I'll be talking more about this Old Ship legacy as we approach our final 325th celebration in January – but I put the question to us now, for us all to reflect upon.

Will we squander or will we honor the legacy of those who raised these beams, and all the generations who have worshipped here since?

So – our place in the scheme of things...

...is right in the midst of things, right in the middle of the Great Story of the universe *and* the personal stories of our lives *and* the shared stories of our communities and nation and world.

One further example, mundane in one way of looking at it, yet momentous too:

Our next shared opportunity to honor the legacy of the Great Story of the universe and of life and of all our ancestors, deep in the recesses of time and close to our hearts is this Tuesday when we vote.

Will we serve the creativity of life, the Great Story with our votes? With our support of this or that candidate or proposition?

Often we will of course differ in which vote we believe serves the Great Story we share. Of course. But we can share the same vision of life and of life more abundant even as we may vote for one or another candidate or say *yea* or *nay* to a proposition.

As for me, I try as best I can to discern how my vote contributes to peace, how my vote contributes to justice, how my vote contributes to the freedom to create healthy families of varied appearances, healthy couples regardless of gender, how my vote contributes to the health of the trees and fields and air and water and the very earth which sustains life, knowing that we are *of* the earth and not merely *on* the earth.

And then, however the election turns out, we can choose to recommit ourselves to living out the legacy of the stars, to living out the legacy of our ancestors, of our predecessors here at Old Ship, so that the future just might be as rich with possibility and creativity as the past was rich with the possibility of us.

Our place in the scheme of things?

Again, to end as I began and ended last week, with the words of cosmologist Brian Swimme:

When we deepen our awareness of the simple truth that we are here through the creativity of the stars, we begin to feel fresh gratitude. When we reflect on the labor required for our life, reverence naturally wells up within us. Then, in the deepest regions of our hearts, we begin to embrace our own creativity. What we bestow on the world allows others to live in joy.

(from *The Universe is a Green Dragon*)

What if the ultimate meaning of our brief lives is the way in which we enable the care that gave birth to us to extend out through human hands in the great work of building a vibrant, compassionate Earth community?

(from review of *Born with a Bang*, by Jennifer Morgan)

So may it be.

Benediction

Let the horizon of our minds include all people:
The great family here on earth with us;
Those who have gone before and left to us the heritage
of their memory and of their work;

And those whose lives will be shaped by what we do or leave undone.

(*Samuel Crothers*)

(In addition to the work of Brian Swimme, this sermon was inspired by the presentations of Michael Dowd and Connie Barlow (see www.thegreatstory.org) and also by the book *The View from the Center of the Universe*, by Joel R. Primack and Nancy Ellen Abrams.)