

Evolutionary Faith and Awakening New Hope

A Sermon by the Rev. Makaanah E. Morriss

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Evolution...do you remember when you first learned about evolution? Can you recall any images or feelings that you had as you heard this perspective on how life developed? Did it tap something deep inside you or was it just an interesting idea?

Who taught you and what did they say? Were you taught that it is an important and helpful scientific concept or that it is a dangerous heresy?

Most of us probably had some sort of introduction to evolution in our elementary or junior high schooling although how the concept was presented or included in our classes may have varied widely.

In my public school in Connecticut, evolution was taught as an important scientific finding. This coincided well with what I learned from my science loving family at home. In elementary school I remember my parents taking my sister and I into New York to see the Broadway play "Inherit the Wind," the story of the Scopes trial in Tennessee where a court decided a teacher could not teach evolution. I believed that such a misguided decision must belong to some historical past.

However, in my first ministerial settlement at the First Unitarian Church in Richmond, Virginia, I learned that evolution was no longer being taught per se in many of the public schools in the Richmond area. In the late 1970's and 1980's teachers needed to be very careful about how they presented the work and findings of Charles Darwin.

I was amazed. It had not occurred to me that in the last part of the 20th century the evolution controversy was still alive and kicking.

At the time the Unitarian Universalist Association had two multi-media curricula for upper elementary students, one on evolution and one on cultural evolution which were very popular and were part of our religious education program. I had wondered when I first took the job at First Unitarian why these subjects would be taught in a church school. I quickly learned why.

Our liberal approach to religion honors the findings of science as one of several important sources of wisdom and understanding. Over the centuries ours has been a movement which has been open to seeing how science and religion might interface. We pride ourselves on being open to the newest in scientific insights and to a variety of religious and spiritual perspectives.

And in our openness, we are also aware that scientific beliefs and findings are always changing – evolving, revising, opening new windows of possibility.

However, we like many others have struggled with how evolution and theology could interface.

Diarmuid O’Murchu, a social psychologist, author and priest has written of this in his book *Evolutionary Faith*. It is a fascinating book, filled with solid scientific history and current findings as well as insightful perspectives on how and why the story of the continuing evolution of our universe is important.

He begins by sharing his “Evolutionary Creed.” As you listen to his beliefs, see where your poetic and mystical and scientific soul might agree. He writes:

- “I believe in the creative energy of the divine/sacred, erupting with unimaginable exuberance, transforming the seething vacuum into a whirlwind of zest and flow;
 - I believe in the divine imprint as it manifests itself in swirling vortexes and particle formations, birthing forth atoms and galaxies;
 - I believe in the providential outburst of supernovas and in the absorbing potential of black holes;
 - I believe in the gift of agelessness, those billions of formative aeons in which the paradox of creation and destruction unfolds into the shapes and patterns of the observable universe.
 - I believe in the holy energy that begot material form and biological life in ancient bacterial forms and in the amazing array of living creatures;
 - I believe in the incarnation of the divine/sacred in the human soul, initially activated in Africa over four million years ago;
 - I believe in the “I Am Who Am,” uttered across the ages, pulsating incessantly throughout the whole of creation and begetting possibilities that the human mind can only vaguely imagine at this time.”
- (O’Murchu, p. 2)

O’Murchu carefully defines three key terms – evolution, co-evolution and e-mergence. “Evolution” indicates the gradual emergence of species over time largely determined by the survival of the fittest as outlined by Charles Darwin. In popular writing evolution usually refers to the unfolding of cosmic and planetary creation over billions of years. (O’Murchu, p. 9)

“Co-evolution” is a concept that was introduced in 1965 by American biologists Paul Ehrlich and Peter Raven. It refers to the view that cosmic evolutionary development is governed primarily by innate, self-organizing processes, and not by external mechanistic forces.

“E-mergence,” spelled ‘e’ hyphen ‘mergence’ is a term developed by the Santa Fe Scientific Institute in New Mexico. An ‘E-mergent’ phenomenon occurs when whole systems at one level of organization merge to become parts of the systems of a new organizational level.

“The capital ‘E’ stands for ‘energy,’ the primal substance theologically and scientifically from which everything comes into being; and ‘mergence’ denotes the mergers that forever are taking place whereby diverse wholes on one level become coordinated parts of new wholes on the next level.” (O’Murchu, p.9)

This concept of “E-mergence” is quite similar to co-evolution and I hunch most of us can think of human examples of co-evolution and e-mergence. The concept of an organization of nations, the United Nations, working for peace and cooperation is one such example.

The findings of the sciences are incredibly important to us. The work of researchers, astronomers, mathematicians, physicists, biologists, and all their sub-specialties have offered us windows of new understanding into the universe from the very small to the very large. And as these discoveries are made, what also is obvious is that mystery and the unknown still exist.

For instance, many scientists and ordinary people now embrace the Gaian life theory – that our planet as a whole is a living entity and is an interdependent, interconnected web of existence.

Scientist Elizabeth Sahtouris describes it this way:

“This is what we are learning to understand – that the Gaian life system has evolved in such a way that it takes care of itself as a whole, and that we humans are only part of it. Gaia goes on living, that is, while her various species come and go. We used to believe that we were put here to do whatever we wanted to with our planet, that we were in charge. Now we see that we are natural creatures which evolved inside a great Earth-life system. Whatever we do that is not good for life, the rest of the system will try to undo or balance in any way it can. That is why we must learn Gaia’s dance and follow its rhythms and harmonies in our own lives.” (Sahtouris, 1998, p.45)

Think back to our story for all ages this morning. That was a “story” of evolution, co-evolution and emergence and it most certainly had some comings and goings of species.

The story of evolution includes creation and destruction. No material form of energy lasts forever. Nothing we as humans can do will change this. Existence is ebb and flow, beginning, ending and new beginning. We morph and merge into something else.

That’s how we can each legitimately claim to be made up of some of the “stuff” of the dinosaurs and of the great spiritual teachers through the ages. It’s not fantasy, it’s fact.

Scientists are now discovering that nature operates as a subtle but powerful cooperative endeavor while engaging the creativity of several life-forms at any one time. Biologist Lynn Margulis is a pioneering voice for this developmental theory known as “symploysis” which is contrary to the Darwinian notion of different species competing to adapt and survive against alien environments.

The data now suggests that we need to recognize the many self-organizing systems throughout nature and the universe and find a “viewpoint which allows us to see that something interesting is happening on all possible scales, from the smallest to the greatest.” (Smolin, 1997, p.188) And in this way we gain an expanded understanding and awareness of the openness and ongoing process that is cosmic evolution.

Thus as O’Murchu writes, “our story is not about evolution, but co-evolution. It is a story with several actors and many intriguing plots. And most of the actors and plots long predate the human phase of participation. The hardest lesson to learn for the human participants is to realize that without the big and inclusive picture of this complex and intriguing landscape, we are in danger of misunderstanding our fundamental role within it. Consequently, we are in danger of misconstruing our engagement with it, with possibly deadly consequences both for ourselves and for the natural world we inhabit.

“The story of co-evolution is indisputably a story of cooperation and collaboration and this needs to be adopted henceforth as the primary thrust of social and political policy.” (O’Murchu, p.17)

Evolutionary theology is thus an approach to science and religion and mysticism which appeals to the liberal religious mind and soul. It is an approach that honors the intellect and the ability of the human to explore with reason and with creative spirit the matrix that is our universe and our planet.

O’Murchu uses the term “Originating and Sustaining Mystery” in place of a term like God or Goddess or even Creative Source – but as Unitarian Universalists we can each use a term that fits our individual cosmic perspective.

“Originating and Sustaining Mystery” appeals to me as it honors the findings of quantum physics and beyond as well as the mystical sense of greater awe and wonder we each know standing high on a mountain top, deep in the woods, or by the shoreline of an ocean.

In evolutionary theology we use our reason and our intuition, our sense of logic and our sense of transcendence. We share our perspectives as “story” in the very best sense of that term.

This morning I shared the book “Our Family Tree” and thanks to the words and the pictures, the scientific truths were able to join with our inner sense of connection with all that has been, is and is yet to be. We understood as a science lesson on one level but we also may have felt a deeper sense of connection and flow as it re-told the story which is the family tree of our energy source.

As O’Murchu points out “the purpose of every story is to break open our conventional views of reality, to orient us to a larger reality with a more holistic aperture (opening) for truth. Every good story overwhelms us in a way. (O’Murchu, p. 15)

As liberal religious people, we will find ever new ways to tell the story of evolution, co-evolution, E-mergence. We will help ourselves and others to take human beings out of the center spotlight – we will not make it “all about us” for it is a story which is so much larger although we are an inherently essential part as are all the many other energy forms past, present and future. Anthropocentrism is one of the greatest dangers to our being able to learn how to dance in grace-filled ways the dance of Gaia, the dance of sustainable life on this planet.

The “Originating and Sustaining Mystery” is the source of limitless possibilities and this is truly awesome. Ours is a universe filled with the spirit of energy, a pregnant fullness of new options, even when we do not realize it.

Try this simple experience from physicist Brian Swimme:

“...cup your hands together, and reflect on what you are holding there. What are the contents cupped by your hands? First in quantity terms would be the molecules of air—the molecules of nitrogen, oxygen, carbon dioxide, and other trace gases. There would be many more than a billion trillion. If we imagine removing every one of these atoms we would be left holding extremely small particles such as neutrinos from the Sun.

“In addition there would be radiation energy in the form of invisible light, such as the photons from the original flaring forth of the universe...In order to get down to nothingness we would have to remove not only all the subatomic

particles; we would also have to remove each and every one of these invisible particles of light.

“But now imagine we have somehow done this, so that in your cupped hands there are no molecules left, and no particles, and no photons of light. All matter and radiation have been removed. Nothing would be left, no objects, no stuff, no items that could be counted or measured. What would remain would be what we modern people refer to as at the ‘vacuum,’ or ‘emptiness,’ or ‘pure space.’

“Now for the news: careful investigation of this vacuum by quantum physicists reveals the strange appearance of elementary particles in this emptiness. Even where there are no atoms, and no elementary particles, and no protons, and no photons, suddenly elementary particles will emerge. The particles simply foam into existence...Particles merge from the ‘vacuum.’ They do not sneak in from some hiding place when we are not looking. Nor are they bits of light energy that have transformed into protons. These elementary particles crop out of the vacuum itself – this is the simple and awesome discovery...Being itself arises out of a field of ‘fecund emptiness.’

“The ground of the universe then is an empty fullness, a fecund nothingness...the base of the universe seethes with creativity.” (O’Murchu, p.42)

This is the “Originating and Sustaining Mystery,” or the Source of All Life and Love or God or Goddess or the Great Unknowable – whatever name your spirit is most comfortable with.

And so what then is our task, our meaning, our purpose in this creative flow. Well it seems to me that there are several implications for us:

- 1) We need to express a sense of gratitude, of wonder and awe for this cosmic flow, this continuing shaping, re-shaping, merging and E-merging experience. The manifestation of life on our planet, the gifts which Nature offers us are extravagant, wondrous, and actually sufficient for an amazing lifestyle if we will accept and utilize them in sustainable and cooperative ways.
- 2) We need to honor our developing consciousness, our ability for wider perspectives without placing our human selves at the center as most important. We need to let ourselves watch the larger dance of creation and see how we can partner with it not try to control or restrict it – for this we cannot do.
- 3) We need to become gentler, more mindful, more compassionate and more courageous in our relations one with another and with all aspects of our interdependent web. The vast amount of suffering on our planet is due to human weakness in the form of greed, desire for power, and fear of acknowledging both the grandeur of the cosmic process and the need we have for one another. We need to find ways to support those who are the weakest and most in need so that they and each of us make experience a fullness of life which is possible.
- 4) We need to accept that the cosmic flow, including the geological and weather patterns on this planet, are bigger than we are. For sure there are ways in which our lifestyles as

humans may be impacting them and this is something we need to become more aware of and willing to change. But we will never be able to truly control nature and thus instead we need to develop better and better ways to respond when natural disasters hit.

The tragedy of Hurricane Katrina was much greater because of the inability of humans to plan adequately for when the big hurricane hit. There could have been adequate resources to evacuate most of those who suffered so much in being left behind. There is no excuse for what happened. The rebuilding of New Orleans in eco-sustainable and more just and equitable ways is a must. But so is the lesson we have all learned.

If a disaster struck Cheyenne, and we all had to evacuate, is there a plan in place to take care of those who do not have their own transportation. How would they leave? Where would we all go?

We as a human species have the knowledge and ability to provide food for all, education for all, sustainable shelter for all, health care for all if we decide to turn our resources in those directions. We are the ones who need to reorient our priorities so that all may enjoy a fullness of life albeit perhaps somewhat materialistically simpler but soul-wise more profound than we currently know.

The news of evolution, co-evolution and E-mergence is “good news” for you and for me and for all in the flow. No, we will not live forever. We are manifest here for our time. We will eventually return to the greater energy flow where we will be “re-cycled” or re-emerge in some other form. But the “Originating and Sustaining Mystery” is a wonder to behold and with which to dance.

Our ability to understand, to reason, to develop ways to connect, communicate, and relate with one another is a gift – a gift of Creativity, a gift freely given so that we may be more loving.

We are a species whose roots came from Africa – every single one of us. We are a species whose first sense of the sacred – that it is an energy inherent in all things – was and is correct.

And so I would like to close my sermon with another version of the story of evolution and co-evolution. A story which comes from the Dahomey people of Africa. It is entitled “Mother Mawu Wants Peace.”

“In the beginning, Mawu, Mother of All, made the sky and the earth. Way up in the sky, she hung the fiery sun. Then she called her Rainbow Colored Serpent to her and she climbed into his

mouth. Together they pushed up the mountains and carved out the valleys. She started the shining rivers winding their way down from the mountaintops and through the valleys. And the sky and the earth and the mountains and the rivers were a part of her because she carved them out.

“And in the beginning Mawu, Mother of All, made the animals. She took the clay of the earth and patted it and rolled it. In her mind she imagined all kinds of designs. There were long-legged giraffes and leaping gazelles. There were huge whales and tiny hummingbirds. She molded the clay into the shape of all the animals, and the animals were a part of her because she molded them.

“And in the beginning, Mawu, Mother of All, made people. She took some of the animals and had them stand up on two legs so that they could use their hands for all kinds of clever things. And when she finished the people, she breathed her own breath-spirit into them and gave them life. And the people were a part of her because they had Mother Mawu’s breath-spirit in them.

“And in the beginning Mawu said to her people, ‘I have breathed my breath-spirit into you, and because my breath is in each one of you, you must care for each other just as if you were caring for me. Go now and live together happily and in peace.’

“Now Mawu had a holy daughter named Gbadu. When Mawu was finished with all her creating, she left Gbadu to watch over the people. For a while the people lived in peace and they were happy. But as time went by, they began to forget what their Mother Mawu had told them. When Gbadu looked out over the people, she saw that the people were fighting and she saw much sadness.

“Gbadu decided something had to be done. She called her own children together and she said to them, ‘Your Grandmother Mawu gave each of the people her breath-spirit, and she wanted them to be happy and to live in peace. But look! They are fighting all the time and there is much sadness. You must go and teach them again how to live in peace.’

“So Mawu’s grandchildren went out over the earth to teach the people how to live in peace. Everywhere they went they gathered groups of people together and said to them, ‘Remember, it was Mawu who put her breath-spirit in you. Remember that because Mawu’s spirit is in each one of you, if you fight with another person you are fighting with Mawu. Don’t you know your Mother Mawu wants you to live in peace with each other?’

“Some of the time the people remember, and then they live in peace. But sometimes they forget, and when they do, they fight with each other. When this happens it is time again for someone

to remind the people that the breath-spirit of Mawu, the Mother of All, is in each person, and because of that they must care for each other as if they were caring for Mawu. When the people remember this they will be happy and they will live in peace.” (Moore, Mary Ann, *Hide and Seek With God*, 1994, p.72)

May we always remember and may we help all to live in peace.

Blessed be.