

“The Lives that Made Our Lives Possible”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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Reading “XI” – Wendell Berry

The need comes on me now
to speak across the years
to those who finally will live here
after the present ruin, in the absence
of most of my kind who by now
are dead, or have given their minds
to machines and become strange,
"over-qualified" for the hard
handwork that must be done
to remake, so far as humans
can remake, all that humans
have unmade. To you, whoever
you may be, I say: Come,
meaning to stay. Come,
willing to learn what this place,
like no other, will ask of you
and your children, if you mean
to stay. “This land responds
to good treatment,” I heard
my father say time and again
in his passion to renew, to make
whole, what ill use had broken.
And so to you, whose lives
taken from the life of this place
I cannot foretell, I say:
Come, and treat it well.

Sermon: “The Lives Our Lives Make Possible”

For the record, I’ve not actually been to Mars,
but I think it safe to say we got the better deal.

In recent years, with the help of the Mars rovers
that have been sent to the Red Planet,
we have, for the first time, found organic material—

and water, locked deep in Martian rocks.

On the planet that is, at once,
both so far away and so relatively close to home,
the building blocks of life have been discovered.

Gentry Lee, an engineer at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory
said, “When we look at Mars,
we have to wonder did life happen there as well?
[And if] so, what happened to it?”¹

He goes on to muse that, “If life evolved first on Mars,
what’s the possibility that life was [somehow] knocked off of Mars
and carried all the way to the planet Earth?”

If that is, indeed, what happened,
that, of course, actually makes all of us,
and every living thing on the Earth, “Martians”!

But, lest you mistake this for a sermon
on our being Martians, my fellow Earthlings,
it’s actually a sermon about grace
and the delicate thread of life.

About the awesome, staggering grace that gave us birth,
and about the grace that gives us birth even still,
with each new day, with each revolution,
of this magnificent blue-green ball that we’re on.

As I said earlier, we got the far better deal.

For starters, the terrain on Mars is notoriously rocky,
and the temperatures range from a balmy 35C
down to a very frigid -143C.

Sort of like a typical year in Toronto, but a bit worse.
The upside, though, is that there are no black flies.

But whether the “stuff of life” that was our most ancient ancestor
started out here or on Mars or someplace else,
that thread of life has had a remarkable journey
that has been nothing short of miraculous.

¹ <http://www.space.com/28054-mars-rover-curiosity-discovery-channel.html>

We would do well on this Day of Remembrance,
when we hold in our hearts those we've loved and lost,
to recall the magnificent set of circumstances
that have conspired from the dawn of time,
that we find ourselves, living, breathing, sentient beings,
alive today and gathered this morning in virtual space.

What an extraordinary stroke of luck we've had!

What an amazing break
that, from a Big Bang some 14 billion years ago,
life emerged and gave birth to the possibilities
we now know in our very bodies.

In the poetic words of Robert Weston:

Out of the stars, rising from rocks
and the sea,
kindled by sunlight on earth,
arose life.

Ponder this thing in your heart, [he says,]
life up from sea:
Eyes to behold, throats to sing,
mates to love. . . .

This is the wonder of time;
this is the marvel of space;
[that] out of the stars swung the earth;
[and] life upon [the] earth rose to love. . .

Ponder this thing in your heart, indeed.

When I hold a baby in my arms during a child dedication ceremony,
I say to the infant:

You have come with stardust in your hair,
with the rush of planets in your blood,
your heart beating out the seasons of eternity,
and with a shining in your eyes like the sunlight.

If you've witnessed one of these ceremonies,
you may know that that's the part where I am prone to get all weepy.

Because it's such a blessed thing to remind a newly-minted little human, and to remind us all, that we are children of the universe—each of us having come forth from the depths of time to live for such a precious moment upon this earth.

And what a wild and winding journey it has been for us all.

Bill Bryon reminds of us just how very contingent our lives are.

“Consider the fact that for 3.8 billion years...,” he says, “... Not one of your pertinent ancestors was squashed, devoured, drowned, starved, stranded, stuck fast, untimely wounded, or otherwise deflected from its life's quest of delivering a tiny charge of genetic material to the right partner at the right moment in order to perpetuate the only possible sequence of hereditary combinations that could result—eventually, astoundingly, and all too briefly—in you.”

It's good to be reminded that each one of us is a project billions of years in the making—born of the very elements of the universe that have danced their way through time and all of living history to take shape in the body that we each know, in the here and now.

When we take that in, when we truly take in this marvelous fact, it should be more than enough to make us pinch ourselves, for wonder that so much effort and such good fortune have gone into creating each and every one of us.

Now, of course, it's tempting to behold this magnificent journey and just chalk it up to a really long-running streak of terrifically good luck.

That's certainly one way to look at it.

Others look to this story and see it, obviously, as the hand of God or providence moving through history.

In fact, there are many, particularly among those who believe in the arguments for God from what's called “intelligent design,” who see an “anthropic principle” at work in the many cosmological constants that have made human life possible.

They find proof for God in the stunning series of narrow conditions that are required for life to have taken hold and survived to this day.

A few degrees this way or that,
and we'd all be frozen or fried.

Same thing, if the tilt of the earth were different,
or if we were spinning around much faster than we do.

It's a compelling argument, and I appreciate its appeal.

But where others see luck or see God, I simply see grace.
Amazing, astonishing grace.

For me, grace is defined as that
which we don't "earn, or expect, or even deserve."²

Gifts that we've not had to ask or work for.
Gifts that simply are.
Gifts that simply are ours, to make of them what we will.

My friend Aaron White has reminded me
that this is how the universe works.³

That the universe that has given us birth
doesn't demand merit on our part in order to impart its gifts.
The gift of life is ours—there for the taking.

Aaron calls the universe a self-giving economy of grace.
Because it doesn't require that we, or any living thing,
be worthy—or be sufficiently good—
before bestowing its gifts upon us.

The gifts are simply given—
or, better, were given so very long ago
in the marvelous unfolding of the universe that didn't demand that we,
we who have come into this vast inheritance of life,
be deserving of any of it.

That doesn't mean it's been easy along the way.

² With thanks to Scott Tayler.

³ Aaron is a dear friend and colleague from seminary.

And it doesn't mean that everyone
starts out in this world on an equal footing.

To quote Hobbes, life for far too many has, indeed,
been "brutish, nasty, and short."

And any news report bears witness to the countless ways
we routinely squander our inheritance
and disregard the value of the great gifts we've been given.

Still, the gifts set forth at the dawn of time were given unconditionally,
without any regard to how deserving or how grateful
any future recipients might prove to be.

On one hand, we find ourselves in a place not unlike the mythic garden
in which Adam and Eve found themselves.

Surrounded by beauty, yet grumbling
about our having to do our chores and take some responsibility.

In this Eden, though,
it is we who banish ourselves from the garden,
as we spoil what came to us by grace—
and what we, arguably, are required to pass on,
as the continuation of that gift of grace, to others.

It turns out that what came to us humans so unconditionally
has developed, over time, I think, to bear one obvious condition:
that we are morally obligated to ensure
that the grace of life goes on and on.

That means that what has been so freely given is not completely free.

The first of the Six Sources of Unitarianism
states that we draw on
"Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder,
affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit
and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life."

On this day of remembrance,
as leaders from around the world gather in Glasgow
to debate how best to mitigate the worst effects of climate change,
we would do well to embrace this gift and the life it sustains
with all the gratitude we can summon.

And to ask ourselves what part is ours to play
in the unfolding grace of this world.

Especially since we now know that Mars is not really an option.

Our future, as it always has been, is here, together.

We are connected across millennia
to ancestors we can scarcely begin to comprehend.

We are, in the days that are ours to live,
in the words of David Rhys Williams,
“the indispensable link between the world that was
and the world that is to be.”

Let us give thanks for the grandeur and the grace
that has created and upholds our life, and all of life,
on this good green earth.

And let us do what we can to pass along this great gift
to those generations still to come.

Blessed Be.

Benediction

Our benediction comes, again, from Wendell Berry:

If we will have the wisdom to survive,
to stand like slow-growing trees on a ruined place,
renewing, enriching it...

If we will make our seasons welcome here,
asking not too much of earth or heaven,

Then a long time after we are dead
the lives our lives prepare will live here

Their houses strongly placed
upon the valley sides.

May it be so.