

2005-3-13 At the Center of it All?

Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here

blossoming from the universe

like the crocus blossoms in late winter cold.

For the wonder of being able to say "I am"

on this small orb set amid all the stars of heaven,

we come together to worship, which means,

to breathe in thanks and humility; and so we say:

Living our lives with purpose and gratitude, moved by the beauty of the world and claiming justice for all who live upon it, we open our hearts to greater loving, healthier knowledge, deeper compassion and hope of peace.

Sequence

For the earth, forever turning,

as late summer breathes hot in Capetown

and cold cuts like a knife through Columbus;

for the earth, forever turning,

as men chant the Qur'an in Sfax, Tunisia by night

and women chant coming of age songs to their daughters in Kuching, Borneo by day;

for the earth, forever turning,

as the galaxy of Andromeda drops through

heaven silently with no knowledge of us,

and a star explodes in Fornax anonymously;

for the earth, forever turning,

as the last word in a language you and I have never heard of drops off the lips of a dying woman and as the first words are spoken by a child when his hands first learn French Sign;

For the earth, forever turning,

this, my call for peace,

this, my call for weighing grudges in a scale

balanced by galaxies and blue whales,
my call for a silence on earth
which is as wonderful as the silence of 99 percent of all space and all time.
A silence, if for but a moment,
of which this brief time is but an imperfect but welcome emblem.

silence

This, my call to remember, to recall
the soulful ties which bind us each to each,
love and frustration, longing and mercy,
grief and grace...by naming the people
who occupy our deepest heart within the
sanctuary of our private center,
or in this public sanctuary of safety and solace:

naming

9 AM This, my call to remember that the best silence is also a species of
music, the music of the spheres of which our own small planet is but one swift
note in a symphony so beautiful that all hearts open to it are sustained by its
beauty.

11 AM This, my call to remember that all things reside
in the bosom of the universe, against the pulse beating from
the heart, as we are rocked, rocked, rocked by a love whom
no one has ever finally or accurately named.

Readings

*The First Reading this morning comes from the first version of Bertholt
Brecht's famous play, Galileo. This speech is a soliloquy which Galileo utters
to his best friend, Andrea.*

Walls and crystal spheres and immobility! For two thousand years,
humankind believed that the sun and all the stars of heaven turned around
them. The pope, the cardinals, the princes, scholars, captains, merchants,
fishwives and schoolchildren all thought they were sitting

stationary, inside this crystal globe. But now we are breaking out of it, Andrea.

For the old age is through, and the new age is upon us.

Cities are narrow, and so are brains. Superstitions and plague surround us. But now the word comes “Just because it is so, doesn’t mean it has to stay so.” For everything moves, my friend.

On our old continent a rumor has arisen: there are other continents! And since our ships have sailed to them, the saying now circulates among these laughing continents “The great, much dreaded ocean is just a puddle.”

And now we are taking great pleasure in figuring out why things happen: why the stone falls when you drop it, and how it rises when you throw it into the air.

Every day, something is discovered. Even the very elderly find the young shouting into their ears today’s list of new finds. Much has been found already, but the future will bring more. The old teachings, taught for a thousand years, are at the point of collapsing. This, even though the teaching of the great Copernicus has not been finally proved. Nevertheless, humankind will soon be properly informed as to its proper dwelling place, the heavenly body which is its home.

For where belief has sat for a thousand years, today there sits doubt. All the world is coming to say “Yes, it is written in the books, but now, let us see for ourselves.”

And so it is that a new wind blows up gold brocaded cloaks of the princes and prelates, so that everyone can see for themselves that their legs are just like our legs, thick or thin. In the markets, people are speaking of all the new stars being discovered.

It was always said that the stars were fastened to a crystal vault so that they could not fall. Now we have taken heart and let them float in the air, without visible support, and they have embarked on a great voyage, just like us, who are also without support and embarked on a great voyage.

The universe has lost its center overnight Suddenly, there is a lot more room around here.

The Second Reading comes from the journal of Maria Mitchell, astronomer, professor at Vassar, scientist and Unitarian, back in the 19th century.

When we are chafed and fretted by (our) cares,
a look at the stars will show us the littleness of our own interests.

Sermon

Some of you who have heard a few years-worth of my sermons and services have probably figured out that I am totally enamoured of the word “star.” It is found throughout my hymns, my prayers, and my sermons.

Why? Because the stars bowl me over. Ever since I was a child, the merest glance up at the Big Dipper at night, or even at a single star, always results in what I often call “instant religion.” My knees grow weak, my breath burrows deep, my skin trembles into gooseflesh.

A couple of years ago, I got up early in the morning and climbed up to the roof deck of my loft building to see a potentially spectacular meteor shower. It was a very cold November, at about 4:30, and so I wrapped myself in blankets and quilts, and lay down on one of the benches and waited. Soon I saw my first meteorite. It was, to my complete surprise, bright green. And its trail glowed across heaven, phosphorescent, for over five seconds. Then I saw another. And another. Within twenty minutes, the sky was striped with green lines. Suddenly, I saw what appeared to be a blinding camera flash in the sky...and my shadow lengthened across the deck to the north. It was a bolide, something I had never seen before. The bolide was a meteorite no larger than a grain of sand which exploded silently above me. Then another flashed. And another. Flash after flash. It was incredible.

Suddenly, behind all the fireworks exploding above me, I caught sight of one of the three stars which make up the constellation of Orion's belt. They were serenely setting in the west. And the sight of those stars, so many billions of miles away, sent me into what I can only call a state of ecstasy, which pulsed in me for about ten minutes. I had such a sudden sense of how small my life is in the life of the larger universe, that I could barely breathe.

When I first entered a Unitarian Universalist church, I did so because I was looking for a community where I could tell such a story without shame or embarrassment. Not because I was looking for other people who had known ecstasy under the stars, but because I wanted to find a community where I didn't have to name that experience by the fragile, brittle words of received theology. And in my first church I did find such a community.

I know very well that people come to a place such as this because they follow other stars. Not my beloved stars in the sky, but the beckoning stars of inspiration that guide them down paths of social justice, music, community, friendship, intellectual challenge etc.

For 65 years, the lit candles of all these stars have shed their bright light onto the people of this congregation. First, onto a small circle sitting in a house near the campus, no more than 20 worshippers. Then, onto a cement brick garage fitted with a pulpit, no more than 100 attending. Then onto to a white stucco building of the modern age, with 400 members, and finally to this post-modern pyramid set near a lovely garden, and surrounded by this present maze of new rooms running with children and staff and volunteers, with over 550 members. This church has been on the move under its stars for a good long time. And sixty-five years hence, it will still be changing and moving. Because, here's the story: nothing stays the same. It's simply not possible in this world.

Everything, but everything, moves. Even the so called fixed stars. They move too. When I look up at the north star, I call it Polaris, a faint point of light. But when the Egyptians were building the pyramids, they looked to the north and saw bright Vega. In just a few thousand years, even the stars appear to have moved across the sky. And they will keep on doing so forever.

Oh, I know. Change may be the way of things, but it's not always easy, these moves, these changes. For the changes which time brings can be both positive and negative, and that means they can sometimes feel very uncomfortable and even worrisome. Believe me, I know this in my own flesh...just last week I visited my optometrist and he told me I was developing cataracts. I almost bolted from the office in shock. He told me not to worry about them until I was 80, but I assure you, the change he outlined in my life did not bring me great pleasure.

But when I think of how change can be upsetting, I am think first and foremost of the great Polish astronomer, Mikolai Kopernik, whom we usually call by his Latin name Copernicus.

He was a remarkable man, Copernicus, a physician and priest as well as an astronomer. Lots of schooling there. Smart. He was also a very compassionate man, offering free medical care to the poor in his church clinic. But, he was also a practical philosopher who well knew that Christian Europe would not welcome the change in worldview he was proposing with anything like open arms. So although he was entirely convinced that the earth did indeed travel around the sun, and that the sun itself moved, he sensed that this idea would deeply frightening to a populace who felt, by simple observation, that the sun and all the stars were revolving around them. He knew many people would actually feel nausea and fear when this story was told. All the crystal spheres which had held the stars and planets in neat orbits around earth would lie shattered and sharp on the ground, destroyed by the stone of astronomy. He knew he could very well wind up at the stake as a heretic, since the Scripture, the Rock of Ages, had it that the sun went around the flat disc of the earth, and that everything was under the firm control of the Almighty.

And so Copernicus prudently waited until he was literally almost dead before he published his treatise; better to die on a soft pillow in his bed than in the choking fire rising from green wood. And turns out he was right to be afraid. Not long after he died, an Italian named Giordano Bruno who had merely written that there were other worlds besides the earth was burned alive in a piazza of Rome.

Copernicus called his work *De Revolutionibus Orbis Caelestium* or, *On the Revolution of the Heavenly Bodies*. Our English word “revolution” comes from the title of his book. Copernicus, of course, was speaking of the orderly orbits of the planets. But in our day and age, the word has taken on new meaning, so that when anything moves socially, politically or in the world of ideas, it is also called a revolution. We speak of the sexual revolution, of the 60’s, for instance, or the present computer revolution; the women’s movement, the black power movement, and the gay rights movements were all called “revolutionary” in their day.

“For everything moves, my friend” says Galileo to his friend Andrea in Brecht’s play on the life of the great astronomer. Revolution, he is saying, is built into the very fabric of existence. There is no way NOT to have a revolution, no way to avoid significant change over time. Traditions, customs, scorn, shame, fear and even reactionary politics or religion may attempt to pull the brake on revolutions, or temper even slower growth and change, but ultimately, as history reveals at every juncture, no such efforts come to any good.

And frankly, this idea of *inherent* change fits really well with Unitarian Universalist practice. I for one *expect* each member of this congregation, long time or new, to change over the years, to grow and deepen. You can change your theological expression a lot, after all, and not be kicked out of the church. That is the beauty of a place like this. In Brecht’s words “There is a lot of room around here all of a sudden.”

For example, an agnostic Unitarian Universalist can discover the joy of Buddhist practice and still be part of the team. An atheist can read the books of the Jesus Seminar and suddenly take up reading the Christian gospels in a new light, and doesn’t have to be embarrassed or called a fool. A person with Jewish roots can take up Muslim Sufi dancing in a church like ours and deepen spiritually with joy.

That is because Unitarian Universalist practice is based on the Copernican metaphor. This is a place where the Copernican revolution can keep on turning...and turning. Here, it is ok to join Copernicus in saying “we are not the center of the universe, we are only part of it.” This means that no matter how we express ourselves theologically or religiously, we are doing so, not

from a place of entitlement, but rather from a place of humility. And all that means is that here we can recognize that the ground, the humus if you will, on which we humans walk is made of the exact same stuff as we are. We are not above the cosmos, below it, or along side of it. We are squarely within it, and all of us together. No one can claim to be the center, since Copernicus proved that the earth is not the center, and we are of the earth. Therefore, no one who accepts their smallness in the grandeur of the universe can expect everyone else to go around him or her like planets and stars in the pre-Copernican system. A person who recognizes that that they are a mere dust-mote in the infinite cosmos might fret less about their position because they realize that in a universe such as ours, no one and no thing is the center. We're all very tiny compared to everything else. Even our sun is at the edge of a disc of stars, out in the sticks, as they say, and it's not much of a sun to begin with.

The whole image of there being no center any more might be scary at first, but in the end, I find it liberating. And frankly, as I see it, most of the trouble in this world seems to be an example of the pre-Copernican system still holding on, where everything goes around a fixed center. This wrong-headed metaphor leads to the terrifying leaders in the world thinking they are the earth and everyone goes around them...the Mussolinis, Hitlers, the Stalins and Pol Pots. These are grand examples, of course, the obvious ones, but there are homelier examples of how the pre-Copernican metaphor hurts us. Anyone who feels entitled, or who manipulates others to gain control, or who claims special and arbitrary privileges is living in a pre-Copernican system. In the pre-Copernican system, control and order alone are the operative words. In the Copernican system, the word order, not bad in and of itself, is joined by the ideals of interrelationship, communication, sharing and equality and openness to change and movement. "For everything moves, my friend."

Maria Mitchell's life speaks of the Copernican revolution better than most. As a young woman she stared at the stars with both awe and scientific curiosity, and discovered a comet, the Comet Mitchell. As a professor of Astronomy at Vassar, famous for her teaching methods, she championed the power of women to understand complex mathematics and astronomical calculation just as well as men. Think of her, if you like, as sort of a one person answer to the present President of Harvard who thinks women can do no such thing. Raised a Quaker, Maria actively attended the Unitarian Church at Nantucket. As the second reading this morning made clear, she understood the perpetual nature

of the Copernican revolution, and its spiritual significance. She is saying ‘Look at the stars, and then notice how small our concerns are. Are we fretting and worrying about our place or position in the world? No need to! When you look at the stars, the answer is clear: we’re not at the center. We are all out on the edges... together. Moving. Free. And constantly changing.

And so Maria, knowing that there can be no entitlements, no special privileges based on arbitrary claims to the center, joined largely male bastions like the Association for the Advancement of Science, and the American Philosophical Society. And, realizing that sometimes you do not wait for change, but you make it, she joined the American Association for the Advancement of Women. She wanted to aid in deliberately tearing down the ingrained systems here in the States which traditionally kept men feeling as if they were the center of things and with women and children in orbit around them.

Maria Mitchell looked at the stars. She felt wonder and awe, and knew the humility of being part, not all; the edge, not the center; the revolutionary, not the reactionary, frantic with panic and trying to keep everything from growing, changing and becoming more honest and inclusive. Maria Mitchell, like both Copernicus and Galileo before her, let the overwhelming grandeur of the slowly moving stars remind her of her place in the cosmos, one with every human, and every species that lives. She understood that astronomical wisdom had theological and social consequences, and she lived these out in her life.

But you know, it was easy for me to lift up the President of Harvard for his flippant statements, but where can I find pre-Copernican thinking among us? When people speak with a certain forcefulness and assumed authority, they are asking others to go into orbit around them. That is pre-Copernican. When someone takes their own personal experience and universalizes it, co-opting you into their orbit, they are acting pre-Copernican. Here’s how it looks. When someone tells you exactly what all those Christians think, be careful lest you enter into orbit around them and lose your own authority to think for yourself. And when someone insists to you that all Buddhists, or people who claim to be spiritual or some other group have no sense of social justice, tell them “I don’t know about that. I will have to ask questions and find things out for myself. Besides, I am not comfortable talking about *all* Buddhists since I have only met a handful of them. There are *millions* of Buddhist’s, right?” When people want you to join them in thinking that

anyone who believes in God is still a child who has never grown up, you might ask them why they think their own personal childhood experience of religion is the template on which all other lives have been cut? Or worse, *should* be cut?

These are a few of many examples. I am sure you can probably think of many more. But just because Copernicus died five hundred years ago doesn't mean that his theory has been exhausted. And just because Maria Mitchell worked so hard to achieve equality 130 years ago does not mean women acting with power these days have it much easier than she did. All things change, yes, but social systems, like the stars, move very, very slowly indeed, and require of us all the vigilance and passion of an astronomer, yes, like Maria Mitchell, steadily scanning the skies for a comet.

The stars really call to me. No question. Instant religion. My knees bend. My mouth opens in astonishment. The awe and the wonder. The sense of the littleness of my frets and cares.

But instant religion is my private joy. My *public* religious commitment is to the vision of this church. And as I see it, this church stands on the side of slow, systemic change in the world and in our theological language, careful, slow-motion attention to what we say and how we say it so that love and equality, not power and entitlement, is our goal. This slower religion, which moves with the elegance of the distant stars, is the reason why I give so much of my livelihood and life to this church. Why is it, I wonder, that you come here? Tell me about your private joys yes, but what prompts your generosity, and your passion here?

The ecstasy of this slower, more institutional religion may not be green and streaking across heaven, but it sure shines brightly enough in my heart that I can begin to face all the changes life brings my way. "For everything moves, my friend."

Offertory

Everything moves. And as the offering baskets move among you this morning, remember that your own religious journey has brought you to this center where you do not have to be embarrassed about even having a religious

journey. The offering for the strength and health of this powerful congregation of which you are a part as member, friend or guest is now received.

Grounded Prayer

On the ground rests the foundation of this building. On the ground of this planet rest we all... each grain of earth below us,
as much a part of our home
as the largest star pulsing red
on the lip of a distant galaxy,
each struggling crocus lifting its head
above the March snow, an angel ushering us through heaven's gates, the best heaven I can think of, enduring for an everlasting week.
O blest is the world: mystery, wonder, home.