

# Evolution

February 13, 2011  
Rev. Mark Belletini

We are here  
*with a welcome warmer week ahead of us,*  
to worship together faithfully, and in peace,  
*to celebrate both learning and those who learn,*  
teaching, and those who teach,  
*and to let our wonder before the river of time flow,*  
and flow freely, that we might be refreshed.

**And so, we pledge to journey together along the ways of truth and affection,  
as best as we can name them now, or may learn them in days to come; that  
we and our children may be fulfilled, and that we may speak to our world in  
words and lives of peace, justice and goodwill.**

## **Teacher Thanksgiving:**

**Jolinda:** *(introduces the new FDA's and then Mark explains)* Religious Education governance is moving from spending time in meetings to doing and sharing ministry. Our three Faith Development Associates, along with Jolinda, our Director of Religious Education, spend their volunteer hours working directly with children, youth, parents and teachers. By the end of our three year process we will have several more Faith Development Associates for children and youth, and several more for adult faith development. They will receive special training in anti-racism and in other excellent ways that will help all of us...of every age...to go deeper in our religious knowledge and practice. This morning we enter into formal covenant with them.

Carolee and Marla, recognizing that our ministry with children, youth and their families is sacred and brimming with community and promise, do you affirm and agree to support the faith development of each child, youth and teacher with whom you are in relationship? Do you affirm and agree to prepare yourself with training, and to enter into this three year commitment with love? If so please say, "Yes."

**Carolee and Marla:** Speaking for ourselves and for our partner Deb Baillieul....Yes!

**Mark and Eric:** As the elected ministers we welcome you in this special role in the shared ministry of the congregation. We agree to support you, to be there to listen, to help, and to welcome your gifts and labor as we move together to fulfill the challenge of our mission and vision.

*[To the congregation]* Will you, the gathered congregation of First Unitarian Universalist, join with us in pledging encouragement and support for our Faith Development Associates? If so, please say Yes Yes!

**Congregation: Yes Yes!**

**Jolinda** *(to the children:)*

The adults have agreed to help one another. These Faith Development Associates have promised their special care for you in Sunday School. Do you agree to care for them as well, to be honest with them? If you will, please say, "**Yes, yes, yes.**"

**Children: Yes! Yes! Yes!**

*At this point the FDA's and Jolinda will call out categories of volunteers and ask them to come forward to receive their gifts. So we'll say "will all committee and council members come forward?" etc. We will refer everyone to the list in the order of celebration.*

**Jolinda:** Therefore, ever mindful that, in our fullness, we each live with experiences and understandings from every stage of our lives;

**Marla:** and mindful that a congregation in its wholeness weaves the spiritual lives of all ages and stages into a radiant and wonderful whole;

**Carolee:** and mindful that learning how to live with questioning, loving spirits, in a wondrous, amazing and tough world, is a joy as great as love itself,

**Jolinda:** we thank each of you for opening the gate to such joy. We know this is the work of a lifetime.

**Mark:** Blest are those who dare to teach; *(clap onetime)* blest are those who dare to learn; *(clap twotimes.)* and blest are those who know that they are merely the lead learner in a community of learners. *(clap three times)*

**Children and Youth** (led by Jolinda)

We thank you for taking this journey along the river of life with us *(wave hand along the air like a river)*, for living out the great questions with us *(lift arms up above head)*, and for seeing those questions and asking them *(put palms on either side of eyes)*. We thank you for being good examples of what it means to be Unitarian Universalist *(hold up thumb & index finger on each hand, forming U's)*. We learn from you. Thank you.

*(applause, one and all)*

**Sequence:**

The river Nile flows past the tombs of history. It moves through Cairo now, past the present tumult, past the young people that will shape the future. The thing is, the river flows. It does not stay still. The river Rio Grande flows, at least when it is not dammed and siphoned off. It forms a barrier that many cross and many patrol, and yet it flows. It does not stay still. And even where the water is gone, the dust itself blows in the wind and flows.

The river Scioto flows through parts of Columbus. Once it was wide and navigable, but now it is little more than a shallow waterway in most places. Sometimes it is frozen, at other times it floods. Once it did not exist, and there was a great sea here, with creatures called trilobites everywhere. Now there is no sea, just a river. One day the Scioto River may disappear again. But right now, as the ice melts, it flows. It flows. It does not stay still.

The river of time is all around us. We are currents in its flow, which never ceases, never freezes, never pools. Those who built the tombs of Egypt, and those who shall one day sail on the currents of space to the far stars, flow in that river along side us. In witness and wonder of that magnificent river, may we keep silence for a time.

### *silence*

The river of time in which we flow is filled with faces young and old, some in the past, some growing into a future we cannot know, but present in our hearts. May we bring them into our communion of hearts right now, by naming them within our hearts or sounded aloud as we wish. For we are all flowing together in the river of life.

### *naming*

The river of life flows eternally through this time of worship. May we set down our rage and defenses by its shoreline. May we feel the stars crowning our heads as we wade into it. And as St. Gregory once prayed, may we find in its silver, watery flow, a healing, saving sense of humility. (Music: 9:15 Prayer of St. Gregory 11:00 Down By the Riverside)

**The First Reading** *this morning comes from a letter written by Albert Einstein in 1941. This letter is often edited by people in such a way as try to make Einstein say something that would please them better, but this is the whole section of the letter that people sometimes fraudulently edit.*

“I was barked at by numerous dogs who are earning their food guarding ignorance and superstition for the benefit of those who profit from it. Then there are the fanatical atheists whose intolerance is of the same kind as the intolerance of the religious fanatics and comes from the same source. They are like slaves who are still feeling the weight of their chains which they have thrown off after hard struggle. They are creatures who—in their grudge against the traditional ‘opium for the people’—cannot bear the music of the spheres. The Wonder of nature does not become smaller because one cannot measure it by the standards of human moral and human aims.”

**The Second Reading** *is a most excellent poem by Lucille Clifton, published 19 years ago.*

i am accused of tending to the past  
as if i made it,  
as if i sculpted it  
with my own hands. i did not.

this past was waiting for me  
when i came,  
a monstrous unnamed baby,  
and i with my mother's itch  
took it to breast  
and named it  
History.  
she is more human now,  
learning languages everyday,  
remembering faces, names and dates.  
when she is strong enough to travel  
on her own, beware, she will.

### **Sermon**

I was backpacking many years ago in Yosemite National Park with my friend Ken. We were ambling on a narrow path along the Merced River, which was incredibly beautiful, leaping like molten silver next to us. As we moved past huge rock outcroppings, we suddenly chanced on the most amazing sight. Above us, a flat curving shelf of granite was jutting out about twenty feet from a steep rocky cliff. The shelf appeared to be about five feet thick or so.

Now, growing *underneath* that shelf was a pine tree. The pine tree had grown *upside-down* out of some little crack in the rock. Tender white roots must have found some nutrients there, enough to grow a sapling downward for a few years. Then it hit the sweet-spot where the morning and afternoon sun made it past the shadow of the shelf. From that time on, the little pine trunk curved so that the tree grew out toward the sunlight. And now, there it was above us, larger by far than any Christmas tree I have ever seen, its U shaped trunk at least five inches in diameter, growing out of a shadowed rock, but now green and bright in the daylight. Both Ken and I just shivered with wonder at the mysterious sight. How tenacious and stubborn life is, we said. How strong and insistent! How impossible to hold back!

For Ken and me, this amazing sight was a wondrous natural occurrence, like all of life...flora and fauna, in the vast history of evolution. Volcanoes erupt, storms destroy, and now and then, an asteroid strikes the earth, wiping out a million species or two. Yet life defies the horror, rises through the smoke and clouds, adapting, adjusting, and taking on new forms and new faces. For a few hundred million years, trilobites everywhere. Now, not a one. And now, for but a few million years, creatures called human beings have been becoming themselves, changing, growing taller, stronger and smarter. Will we humans last as long as the trilobites?

I don't know. I know that we are here right now.

I know more intimately that *I* am here right now. And I know that *my* capacity for wonder and amazement at this mystery of life stubbornly growing, developing, evolving through the age is central to my mysterious life. Absolutely central. Its fountain, its source.

The iconic Albert Einstein constantly asserted a similar idea. In fact, it amazes me how much time this scientist took from his other work to write about his religious views. For example, in 1930 he wrote: *I maintain that the cosmic religious feeling is the strongest and noblest motive for scientific research.* (9<sup>th</sup> November 1930 New York Times Magazine)

Wow. I understand him suggesting that his inner sense of religious wonder has actually served as his principle diving board, the place from which he dove into the deep waters of scientific study and theory.

Now, Dr. Einstein seems to have intuited that some folks were going to give him a hard time for using the word “religious,” since many of the researchers he spent time with associated that word with rigidity, cruelty and mindless credulity. Yet he insisted, and relatively late in his life, “*I have found no better expression than ‘religious’ for confidence in the rational nature of reality as it is accessible to human reason.*” (Letter to Maurice Solovine, 1 January 1951)

And just so *that* wouldn’t be misconstrued, he penned the following very clear words in a letter to a freethinking questioner a short time later: “*The idea of a personal God is quite alien to me and seems even naive. However, I am also not a “Freethinker” in the usual sense of the word because I find that this is, in the main, an attitude nourished exclusively by an opposition against naive superstition. My feeling is religious insofar as I am imbued with consciousness of the insufficiency of the human mind to understand deeply the harmony of the Universe which we try to formulate as ‘laws of nature.’ It is this consciousness and humility I miss in the Free-thinker mentality.*” (Letter to A. Chapple, Australia, February 23, 1954)

But Dr. Einstein, as the first reading made clear, got clobbered from both sides. Einstein himself works with the surprisingly strong verb “to bark,” in fact. “*I was barked at by numerous dogs, who are earning their food guarding ignorance and superstition for the benefit of those who profit from it.*” He is referring to the fundamentalists of his era who berated him for daring to talk about religion in a way they didn’t like. These controlling and reactionary religious people, he boldly accuses, were not only *guarding their own ignorance*, but were *profiting* from it. (If the dogs were barking at him in 1954, think of what they would do to him in 2011, the sad era of Prosperity Preaching!)

But poor Dr. Einstein got it from the other side too. His *fanatical atheist* critics, as he put it, were clearly from the Soviet Union of Stalin, because he describes them as hiding behind the Marxist phrase *opiate of the masses*. These critics really got to him. They were so frenzied with the idea that all religion is evil that they ridiculed Einstein for maintaining, as he did all of his life, that the *cosmic religious feeling preceded and supported* his scientific endeavors. Oh, I have to suspect that the undercurrent of anti-Semitism which oozed through Stalinist Russia may have intensified this critique of Einstein, but nevertheless, no one can deny that Einstein really got clobbered from all sides.

But he was hardly the first person to describe a *cosmic religious feeling*. He was hardly the first person to link it to reason and a rational exploration of the harmonies of the universe. The famous Pythagoras (of the Pythagorean theorem you may have memorized in school) expressed

the same ideas. He considered his reasonable approach to the universe entirely rooted in his own religious feelings. Einstein and Pythagoras had several things in common. Like Einstein, Pythagoras praised and practiced vegetarian eating practices. Like Einstein, Pythagoras went so far as to suggest that everything in the cosmos was connected in ways that could be described best mathematically. But Pythagoras went further. He said that everything in the cosmos was connected the way the notes and intervals, when connected, make music, create a song. Pythagoras's most recent biographer explains the scientist's famous phrase "The Music of the Spheres" this way: "*Thus, (he said) 'the planets and stars moved according to mathematical equations, which corresponded to musical notes and thus produced a symphony.'*" (Christoph Riedweg, *Pythagoras: His Life, Teaching and Influence*, Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2005)

Einstein, you may remember, quotes Pythagoras's exact phrase in his letter, insisting that his fanatical atheist critics suffer because they cannot "bear" the "Music of the Spheres." He is saying that, because they put Party truth before all else, they allow themselves no personal sense of wonder, no inner feelings, thus refusing to listen to the beautiful harmonies of the cosmos. This leaves them as arrogant and as rigid as the most fanatical fundamentalist.

Now Charles Darwin, the great scientist (who was born, by the way, 202 years ago yesterday) didn't use the word "religious" in the way that Einstein did, or Pythagoras. Oh, he understood that he had been raised *in a* religion, the Anglican religion; and he realized that his wife was raised in and practiced the Unitarian religion of the famous Wedgewood family in England. But he himself was not religious in the sense of either religious group. Nor was he given to the kind of imaginative, almost mystic feeling which grounded both Einstein and Pythagoras.

But this doesn't mean that I think Darwin's spiritual ear wasn't attuned. I just don't think he was listening to "the music of the spheres." I cannot find any evidence that he experienced any "cosmic religious feeling" as he set sail round the world on his famous voyages.

But I *am* convinced he indeed listened to something. I think that from the very time he was a child, he found himself listening, not so much to the music of the spheres, as to the great *symphony of humane justice*. Here's why I think so.

Just as Einstein, a European Jew, offered his theories in an age hostile to Jews and many other minorities, just as Pythagoras offered his ideas in an age of warring Greek city states, city states founded entirely on the institution slavery, so Darwin offered his understanding of the origin of species in an era when chattel slavery was rife, and when many were not embarrassed to profit from the sale of human beings as property.

And so, I say that Darwin heard movements from the symphony of humane justice all of his life. That's what moved him. It was magnificent spiritual music, but filled with passages of bitter dissonance. The dissonance, for example, of hearing the Unitarian author Harriet Martineau at his dinner table, reporting her horrified observations on slavery in the American South after her journey there. The dissonance of listening, with his actual ears, to the crack of whips, and loud screams from slaves in Brazil, in every port, as he made his way along the coast of Brazil. And

perhaps, worst of all, the dissonance of hearing another world-famous scientist, Louis Agassiz, proclaiming that Africans, Asians and Islanders all had entirely different origins from European people, and were inferior in every way.

But, in most great music I know, dissonances always move toward final resolution and profound harmony. So, I say Darwin also heard achingly beautiful themes in the symphony of justice as well...I think of Thomas Clarkson, the chief force behind the abolitionist movement in England. You can see him also sitting at Darwin's table, holding forth passionately on abolition... Darwin's stated life-long personal hero. I think also of Darwin learning so much from his dapper, well-spoken Hottentot guide while in South Africa, never daring to tell him that in England and America, he was not even considered entirely human by people like Agassiz.

I think even of Darwin taking abolition so seriously that he read children's book on the subject to his own kids, especially *Our Cousin in Ohio*, an 1849 book outlining the work of the Underground Railroad here in our own state, so far away from England. All of these beautiful melodies in the symphony of justice moved through the dissonance toward resolution. These themes in the spiritual symphony of justice moved through Darwin's days, strengthening him as he made his scientific observations that led to his famous book *Origin of Species*. Just as Christian abolitionists, like the great Wilberforce, were inspired by the story of Adam and Eve, the parents of *all* humankind no matter their color, so Darwin, in offering his well-documented understanding of the origin of our human species, recognized that a common ancestry meant equal *inherent* dignity, which precluded even the slightest support for malevolent institutions like slavery.

Einstein and Pythagoras heard the music of the spheres. Darwin heard the music of justice. Each of them, moved by either their emotional or thoughtful spiritual experiences, went on to do scientific research, perfect theories, and change the world. But not one of the three of them confused their religious, ethical or spiritual grounding with the scientific work they did. Neither Einstein's relativity nor Darwin's evolutionary theories are religious doctrines, but the words of science. For science is not a creed.

Darwin never offered something for us to "believe in," as if the idea of evolution was a tenet of some religion, as its fundamentalist, creationist critics insist. It is not. Einstein's religious feelings *preceded* his scientific study. Darwin's ethical commitments preceded his scientific scrutiny. My own religious life is preceded by feelings about the universe...wonder and awe...which are supported by observation... that beautiful river and curving pine at Yosemite, for example. And, yes, by my own personal delving into the majesty of evolution as Darwin and many other scientists have described it.

I am also quite aware that the evolution of life in its various species on earth is not cuddly and warm. I know that. Lucille Clifton calls this history "a monstrous unnamed baby." Apt metaphor, monstrous. After all, the death of whole species does not make me think of the word "cute." The plagues and catastrophes which have wiped out life are scary. But please, when Einstein and Pythagoras proclaimed the harmonies of nature, they knew all this. They were not uplifting soft-focus romantic harmonies ...mere elevator *muzak*...they were speaking of a great, complex and

profound symphony of life. Both of these people were grown ups...they knew the tougher sides of nature...the mauling by wild beasts, the fact of wars, or the explosion of star in the sky. But as Einstein put it in his letter to the Freethinker, he saw these harmonies as deeper than humanistic needs: *The Wonder of nature does not become smaller because one cannot measure it by the standards of human moral and human aims.*

Sadly, over forty percent of the citizens of our country utterly reject Darwin, and accept Creationist mythology as fact, confusing the religious literature of Genesis with hard science. Remember, religion is not science. And worse, they often accuse people like me, of arrogance, insisting that if I accept Darwin, then I have somehow overstepped my bounds, as if Darwin and I were supplanting every possible notion of God. Again, I find Lucille Clifton's words helpful: *i am accused of tending to the past as if i made it, as if i sculpted it with my own hands. i did not. this past was waiting for me when i came.* That's right. I am simply a new current dancing briefly on the surface of a stream of life that was flowing a billion years before I opened my eyes, and will be flowing, I hope, a billion years after me. I am part of nature, not over nature. I don't expect justice from nature, or soft-focus romantic responses to my human needs; but I am awed by it. And I stand in wonder before the vast procession of life. And that's hardly overweening arrogance, to think I am but a small speck in the mysterious vastness of things, but, I'd like think, an echo of a bit of humility.

But, personally, I am not embarrassed to say that I personally *need* the warm and cuddly side of things. I *do* depend on feelings associated with the wondrous beauties of the natural world, as well as loving relationships with others. And I do require visions of humane justice, which evolution simply does not offer me. So I choose to mine the spiritual languages of the various historic religions within the embracing context of Unitarian Universalism. I do that with a liberal hand, of course, and turn to the parables of Jesus, the tales of Buddha, Mirabai or Nanak, the poetry of mystical or prophetic poets, and even the letters of lovers, to give shape to my awe and wonder. And to give me the strength to get through my day. I am not like the Freethinker that Einstein pushed away...intent on scouring God from the English language as if that word could *only* be understood superstitiously, or as if there was demonstrably nothing else to religion but lunacy.

I have no problem if someone wants their deep liberal understanding of God, and the process of evolution, to be related. But I do have problems with people who not only reject Darwin's *Origin of Species* because their rather idolatrous vision of God demands it, but who then accuse the poor man of being the spiritual impetus to everything evil ever done by the Nazi Party in Germany. If you don't already realize this, the internet is jam-packed with this nonsense; and *that* folks, is lunacy for real. Lunacy that scares me at times.

Me, I'm not much of a backpacker anymore. Never was much of one to begin with, truth be told. So I'm much more likely these days to stoke my sense of awe and wonder by turning to the deep green, three-inch high shoots of some glorious spring flower (crocuses?) in the glassed-in courtyard down by our classrooms. Nothing so grand as the roaring Merced river, or U-shaped pine growing out of a rock. Just a simple song of coming spring that calls me to my deeper life, which Einstein dared to call "religious."



Maybe your most compelling music is a dream of justice, like Darwin's. Maybe the symphony you listen to daily is indeed the music of the spheres, like Pythagoras heard within him, or Einstein. To me, (and this is important) one is not *more* valid than the other, and we need all kinds of depth to build a humane world. I can think of many other songs, symphonies, or sonatas of spirit that might call you as well. But all of them, and each of them, I'm convinced, evolved within the nature that you and I are part of. And how wonderful is that?

### **Offering**

We give to share the responsibility for this place,  
its mission and its vision.

No one else is going to take care of these things.

No one else is going to change the light bulbs,  
repair the roof, or fix the copy machine,  
or impact the larger community on our behalf.

We are all in this together.

So whether we contribute behind the scenes, or on Sunday mornings, we celebrate that we share this beautiful responsibility.

### **Music of the Spheres: A Pythagorean Prayer**

Proportion of the planets, prostrate me to the ground.

Sonata of the stars, solitude me.

Jazz of justice, judge me.

Concerto of courage, console me.

Chant of challenge, cheer me.

Rhapsody of the river of life, restore me.

Lovesong of the meaning of life, light the long pathways of my liberty.

Song of spirit, spring me, and sing through me. Now.

#13 Songs of Spirit