

# ***"MY EVOLVING FAITH: HUMANISTIC RELIGIOUS NATURALISM"***

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## **READINGS**

By John Ruskin

There is religion in everything around us  
A calm and holy religion  
In the unbreathing things in nature....  
It is the poetry of Nature;  
It is that which uplifts the spirit within us ...  
And which opens to our imagination a world of spiritual beauty and holiness

By Wordsworth -- from "Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey"

... Therefore am I still  
A lover of the meadows and the woods,  
And mountains; and of all that we behold  
From this green earth; of all the mighty world  
Of eye, and ear -- both what they half-create,  
And what perceive; well-pleased to recognize  
In Nature and the language of the sense,  
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,  
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul  
Of all my moral being.

By Carl Sagan

A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science, might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later such a religion will emerge.

## **SERMON**

The red knot is a sandpiper that every year travels more than 18,000 miles from the Arctic islands of northern Canada to Tierra del Fuego, at the southern tip of South America and back again, stopping along the way on several Atlantic beaches. During their stay in the southern hemisphere, they replace their tattered feathers in a long molt, ensuring their flight equipment to be in top condition when, in February, they begin their journey north in flocks of hundreds or thousands. They stop on their way for food, always at the same beaches or marshes where they have fed for centuries. From the northern coast of South America they embark on a week-long, non-stop flight that takes them to Delaware Bay, just as horseshoe crabs are laying eggs by the millions. There they gorge themselves in order to be prepared to engage in the next leg of their long journey -- non-stop to the islands north of Hudson Bay. There in the long summer they mate and breed. By mid-July the female knots abandon their offspring and head south, and a few weeks later the males follow. The babies fend for themselves until late August when they, too, commence their 9,000-mile journey.  
(1)

Now here is the amazing thing: The young red knots, by the thousands and without adult guides or prior experience, find their way along the very same migration route of their parents, stop at precisely the same beaches and marshes for food, and join the others at precisely the same place in Tierra del Fuego.

How do they do it? How do they know where to go, along a route they have never traveled, to a destination where they have never been? Scientists can only surmise that the red knot's genetic inheritance includes a map for the journey and the instrumental knowledge to follow it, but saying that is simply to emphasize both mystery and the amazing nature of life.

Love of nature and feelings of reverence and amazement toward it are a long tradition in our Unitarian heritage, beginning in particular with Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose first major publication was his great essay on "Nature." Early in the essay he writes:

If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile.

The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible, but all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence.

Like Emerson, I love to go outside on a clear night and gaze at the sky, glittering with the lights of thousands of stars, most of them larger than our sun, and as I ponder the unimaginable vastness of what I am seeing and the incredible distances between the stars, I am overcome with awe and amazement and with a sense of how tiny the earth is and how infinitesimally small am I, and I am cleansed of pride and arrogance.

In recent years a religious perspective called religious naturalism has been experiencing a revival. Religious naturalism goes back at least as far as the philosopher Spinoza, but it is only within the last several decades that it has become more widely affirmed, and in fact there is a new UU group called UU Religious Naturalists that was formed as a result of the annual week on Star Island devoted to religion and science. The recent cover story in the *UU World*, entitled "The Wonder of Evolution," is a good example of religious naturalism and the interest of UUs in it.

Religious naturalism says two things. First, it holds that the natural universe is all there is. The supernatural does not exist. Second, it maintains that there is religious meaning and value in nature.

There are two types of religious naturalism -- theistic and non-theistic. They are united in their rejection of the supernatural and their belief that there is only one realm -- the natural universe. For at least 3,000 years western religion has taught that the natural universe is transient and not ultimate, but what is real and ultimate is the supernatural. Religious naturalism says, "No, there is no supernatural realm. This natural universe is all there is."

But religious naturalism does not necessarily mean atheism or agnosticism. It simply rejects the idea of a **supernatural** God. The Biblical understanding of God maintains that he is totally other than the world, although he may choose to act in the world from time to time, and he can communicate with human beings. When the vast majority of Americans say they believe in God, they have a supernatural deity in mind, a God who is thought of in popular terms as "the man upstairs," the "heavenly father," and is the deity baseball players point to when they hit a home run to give credit to something other than steroids.

The God of theistic religious naturalists is not a supernatural deity, but instead is a power or force within the natural universe. UU theologian Henry Nelson Wieman referred to God as the power of creativity. Others speak of God as the spirit of love that pervades all beings.

A few years ago, in conjunction with River Road's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Scott and I shared the pulpit one Sunday, and each of us gave a short sermon on humanism. I spoke from a non-theistic point of view, whereas Scott spoke as a theist, but what he said was typical of theistic UU religious naturalists. He gave a very fine summary of religious humanism and added that he agreed wholeheartedly with all of these, adding, "I proudly and passionately call myself a humanist." But he also calls himself a "naturalistic, mystical theist" because he also believes that something, which he calls the spirit of God, is animating the world and all living beings. He experiences this spirit of God as a "powerful spiritual presence ... of love, decency, joyfulness, and hope." But he does not regard God as a supernatural, authoritarian deity.

I think Scott's views are typical of UU theists. Every UU theist I know would describe his or her belief in God in a similar way which leads me to conclude that one of the major differences between liberal religion and the rest of western religion is that we liberals are naturalists, whereas the others are supernaturalists. I think this is a basic religious difference that few of us are aware

of, but I think it is a very important one. Whether theistic or non-theistic, most UUs do not believe there is a supernatural realm, and that is one of the things that makes us different.

It helps to explain a lot of things. A supernatural God, especially one who is symbolized as a father, tends to be authoritarian, issuing commandments, demanding obedience and extracting fear from his followers. Such a God tends to be strict, to have an unyielding moral code, and to punish those who disobey. And people who believe in that kind of God tend to have families in which the father's word is law, children fear their parents and are severely punished if they disobey them -- and the children can't wait to grow up and get away. People who believe in that kind of God also want a society with a strong military, one that punishes criminals severely, including the death penalty, a society in which a woman's place is in the home, and in which it is okay to discriminate against gays and lesbians.

UU theologian Sharon Welch has noted that belief in an all-powerful deity leads to authoritarian institutions, including governments, because it glorifies domination. The supernatural God is also depicted as male. This results in justification for a patriarchal society and for discrimination against women, who are regarded as inferior in every way. The fact that in this country women have been able to vote or hold political office for less than 100 years, that women are still under-represented in national political and business leadership, and are still underpaid compared with men in similar jobs, and that only in recent years have women been able to be ministers and rabbis, and then only in some denominations -- these facts are related to the image of God as a supernatural male deity. And, of course, in Islamic countries gender inequality is much worse.

A naturalistic theism, on the other hand, tends to symbolize god in more feminine terms -- like Mother Nature -- and hence in more loving terms, less punitive, less judgmental, more nurturing and caring. People who believe in this kind of God tend to raise their children in a nurturing, caring environment, characterized by dialogue and cooperation. They favor a society that emphasizes peace and justice and negotiation in international matters. We human beings are symbolic animals, and I think the symbols we associate with deity make a lot of difference.

Religious naturalism maintains that human beings are products of nature and natural causes. We are simply one of a prolific nature's multitudinous creations, each unique and special, and all part of one interdependent web. Naturalism also maintains that we human beings do not consist of a separate entity called mind or soul or spirit, temporarily dwelling in a physical body, but that human beings are a psycho-somatic unity. This acceptance of human mortality and transience leads religious naturalists to feel gratitude for life and a commitment to make the one life we have as meaningful and as joyful as possible.

I want to spend the rest of the sermon talking about non-theistic religious naturalism, or what I call humanistic religious naturalism. The book I have just completed, to be published by Skinner House Books in November, deals with this perspective. My book combines religious humanism and religious naturalism. The two go together very well because from humanism comes the emphatic conviction of the value of every human being, a belief in the worth and dignity of human beings, and an ethic that emphasizes love and social justice and opposes oppression in all its forms.

From naturalism comes a sense of awe and wonder and reverence and mystery in the face of life and the universe that provides a deep spiritual dimension that humanism by itself lacks. Moreover, humanism has been too human centered and needed a larger, more inclusive foundation, which naturalism provides, and humanism has been too cold and rationalistic, and that, too, is remedied by naturalism. And, every religion needs a story, and religious naturalism gives us a meaningful story, the epic of evolution. Thus, religious naturalism provides a foundation for a new, more open and inclusive humanism. In a word, humanism provides the values that naturalism lacks, and religious naturalism provides the religious and spiritual aspect that humanism has lacked.

One of the values of religious naturalism is its emphasis on the environment. Unless this country, as well as other nations, dramatically changes both our attitude and our practices with respect to the natural world, we will face catastrophes that will make what hurricane Katrina did to New Orleans look like child's play. As Ginger pointed out so well last Sunday, we need to stop using the earth's resources as rapaciously as we do, and we need to stop polluting the atmosphere and our lakes and rivers and bays. We also need to deal with our over-consumption and over-population. Religious naturalism has a strong environmental ethic.

Religious humanism affirms the intrinsic value of every human being; it maintains that all persons are ends in themselves and not means to another's ends. It holds that we human beings make our lives meaningful through service and through personal and spiritual growth and by optimizing the good and opposing that which is evil. It emphasizes personal freedom and the application of critical thinking and natural intelligence in making choices and guiding one's actions. It emphasizes life in the here and now and does not expect another life after death. It upholds intellectual honesty and rejects superstition. Since it denies the supernatural, it insists that we can rely only on ourselves to establish a better world. It is optimistic about the future although this optimism is

tempered by its understanding that human beings too often pursue their own interests at the expense of the common good. And it finds great value in human beings coming together in religious community to deepen their understanding, support and strengthen their values, celebrate life's passages, and work together for a better world.

Religious naturalism not only insists that the natural universe is ultimate. It also finds religious meaning in nature. For many people, myself included, nature evokes some of the same feelings a supernatural deity evokes in the adherents of traditional religion. The unimaginable vastness of the universe and the incredible complexity of life evoke awe and reverence greater than anything I experienced as a theist. As a religious naturalist, I feel wonder and amazement at nature's majesty, beauty, complexity, and power; I feel joy and comfort among its trees or by its waters and refreshed and rejuvenated from working in its soil or walking in its woods; I feel reverence when I ponder the incomprehensible vastness of the universe and the equally mind-boggling smallness of the sub-microscopic world. That the universe is, in the title of a book by physicist Freeman Dyson, *Infinite in All Directions*, beyond my ability to imagine. I find that the more I learn about the world from modern science, the more I am in awe. That the star Arcturus, which I can see in the night sky, is 216 trillion miles away absolutely boggles my mind; that other stars I can see with the naked eye are as far away as 10,000 light years leaves me speechless; that the DNA in a single cell in my body, that is so small I cannot see it, if stretched out, would reach from fingertip to fingertip of my outstretched arms, and that there are trillions of cells in my body, and that there is enough DNA in those cells to reach to the sun and back a dozen times, these facts fill me with wonder and astonishment. And the fact that the Milky Way Galaxy has a trillion stars, and that the universe contains at least 50 billion galaxies, and thus hundreds of trillions of stars similar to our sun, fills me with an amazement far beyond my poor power to describe. I am overcome with astonishment at the thought that my body consists of 10 trillion cells and that my brain contains about 100 billion neurons and 100 trillion synapses. And I am overwhelmed at the abilities of non-human creatures such as the red knot. Physicist Chet Raymo suggests that we can think of "all scientific knowledge that we have of this world, or will ever have ... as an island in the sea of mystery." The sea is infinite, and even as the island expands, it does not diminish the sea's infinite and inexhaustible mystery. In fact, I have found that my sense of wonder and mystery grows and deepens as my knowledge of the universe increases. Even the immense power of nature as exemplified in earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, and tornadoes is a source of awe. That nature's power can destroy human beings and human creations is reason for great sorrow, but it is not the result of malice, and certainly not "the will of God," as is sometimes said. We can use our ingenuity and creativity to do all we can to protect ourselves from nature's destructive power, but we will never be entirely successful. Nature is like the Hindu godhead that consists of the creator (Brahma), the preserver (Vishnu) and the destroyer (Shiva).

For religious naturalists living in a natural environment is a spiritual experience, or, as the naturalist philosopher Santayana notes, an object of piety.

Why should we not look upon the universe with piety? Is it not our substance? Are we made of other clay? All our possibilities lie from eternity hidden in its bosom. It is the dispenser of all our joys.... Since it is the source of all our energies, the home of all our happiness, shall we not cling to it and praise it?

Freed from supernaturalism, the religious naturalist can be devoted to a nature that nurtures and sustains. It is not incidental that people speak of "mother earth" or "our mother, the earth." Our ties to nature are deep and intimate.

Every religious vision needs to be anchored in a **story** that provides an account of how the world came into being, the place of human beings, and the meaning and direction of life, especially human life. The traditional stories that have sustained western culture for several millennia are no longer efficacious, but modern science has given us a new story with multiple layers of rich meaning. That story is the epic of cosmic evolution.

That story is a religious story because it calls us out of our little self-centered worlds and enables us to see ourselves as part of the great living system we call the cosmos. This story gives a larger meaning and a broader ethic to our lives. For the religious naturalist, our connection to nature is a profound spiritual experience that evokes awe, wonder and reverence.

The epic of cosmic evolution is the narrative that underlies humanistic religious naturalism and that provides the individual with a meaningful worldview and a sense of belonging to a larger process. The epic of cosmic evolution that begins with the big bang provides us with a vision of the universe as a single reality, one long spectacular process of change and development, an unfolding drama, a universal story for humankind -- our story. Like no other story, it humbles us as we contemplate the complexity of the cosmic process, and it amazes us when we try to imagine its magnitude. Like no other story, it evokes reverence as we feel its power, and awe and wonder as we visualize its beauty. Like no other story, it gives us a scientifically based cosmology that tells us how we came to be and what we are made of. "The basic elements of our bodies -- carbon, calcium, iron -- were forged inside supernovas, dying stars, and are billions of years old. We are, in fact, made of stardust. We are intimately related to the universe."

Like no other story, it teaches us that we are all members of one family, sharing the same genetic code and a similar history, and it evokes gratitude and astonishment at the gift of life itself and inspiration for responsible living. Like no other story, it gives meaning and purpose to human beings, as the agents responsible for the current and future stage of evolution, psycho-social evolution.

The epic of evolution is "everybody's story," but it is uniquely the story the religious naturalist claims. It is a story with a scientifically based worldview and values that are both scientific and morally relevant to the human situation. It is a story of the creative powers of matter-energy and of the changing and adaptive powers of living cells. It is a story of the growth and transformation of living beings. It is **our** sacred story.

The late Carl Sagan wrote: "A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science, might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later such a religion will emerge."

That religion has emerged among us, among Unitarian Universalists.

End Note: (1) Red knot story from Chet Raymo, *Skeptics and True Believers*