

WHY IS THERE SOMETHING RATHER THAN NOTHING?

This morning I will share with you my own existential search for meaning and encourage you to think about your journey, and encourage you to ponder your understanding of the universe and your worldview. According to the Existential worldview, Life has meaning because it must end. I alone determine the purpose of my life. In contrast to other living things, I am aware of my existence and know that people are born and die. I have the freedom to choose and the responsibility for my behavior.

Let's begin with the universe. Why **IS** there something rather than nothing? What former a RE Director, Jo Linda Stevens would have called one of the BIG QUESTIONS.

How many have ever seen our galaxy: the Milky Way? A path of stars across the sky on a dark summer night. When you have clearly seen and been awed by the Milky Way it is hard to describe the experience adequately.

<http://mashable.com/2015/04/22/hubble-anniversary-images-universe/> (last picture of field of apparent stars)

This is one of the most famous images in astronomy today: The **Hubble Ultra Deep Field**. This updated view used ultraviolet light, to reveal the view of the youngest and hottest stars and regions of star formation. Those small dots and dashes are actually distant galaxies. Every galaxy contains perhaps 100 billion stars, with possibly 100s of billions of planets taken between Sept. 24, 2003 and Jan. 16, 2004.

When I first saw this picture it blew me away. I tried to imagine a deity or god big enough to encompass a universe containing such astrological depth?

In his existential detective story, Why DOES the world exist? Jim Holt researched a host of philosophers no longer living and interviewed numerous current philosophers and physicists for answers to this question.

Quoting Holt: "Historically, when science has seemed incapable of explaining some natural phenomenon, religious believers have been quick to invoke [the] Divine . . . to fill the gap—only to be embarrassed when science finally succeeds in filing it in. Newton e.g. thought that god was needed to make little adjustments from time to time in the orbits of the planets to keep them from colliding. But a century later, Laplace proved that physics was quite capable of accounting for the stability of the solar system.

When Napoleon asked Laplace where god was in his scheme, Laplace famously replied, "I have no need of that hypothesis." (P 6)

Perhaps everything did just proceed from an initial explosion, but surely everything has a cause and God seems to many folks to be the most logical cause. But then you have to wonder, as my then six year-old grandson once asked, "if god made everything who made god?"

Scientists will tell you that "Why?" is not a valid scientific question. A better question is "HOW?" Why insinuates a purpose and results in endless repeats, as any parent of a three-year old knows. No matter your answer; their response is still, but why?

A well-known scientist (some say it was [Bertrand Russell](#)) gave a lecture describing in detail how the earth orbits around the sun and the sun orbits around the center of a vast collection of stars called our galaxy. At the end of the lecture a little old lady yelled from the back of the room.

"What you have told us is rubbish. The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise.

"And what is the tortoise standing on, Ma'm?" "

You're very clever, young man, very clever,"

But it's turtles all the way down!"

Well, Lawrence Krauss doesn't think so and neither do I. but as he states, the turtles are appealing because science is changing the playing field in ways that make us uncomfortable."

Now let's listen to an interview with Dr. Lawrence Krauss, a theoretical physicist and, the author of "A Universe From Nothing." Subtitled, "Why there **IS** something rather than nothing." Note the incredulous look of the interviewer as she attempts to reconcile what Kraus is saying with her worldview.

<http://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=how+can+something+come+from+nothing&FORM=VIRE2#view=detail&mid=A79BB3ABAFD3DA5A0B26A79BB3ABAFD3DA5A0B26>

(Cue: I'm not saying that there is no god. There is no evidence for god. You don't seem to need god to create a universe. In that sense I wouldn't personally call myself an atheist. Because I don't presume to say, there is no god. If anything I can declare myself an anti-theist. In terms of the world's religions I can say that I much prefer to live in a universe without one.)

Full disclosure— Google will reveal videos of naysayers who vehemently disagree with Krauss,.

Einstein once said, “The human mind is **not capable** of grasping the **Universe**.”

Humans **are** limited by . . . our weird perceptual abilities, brief lifetime, and lack of imagination. We look up and see the sky in the blue bowl above us; it is easy to assume that the stars are **UP** there in the heavens. We look at a cow, or a giraffe, or a great ape and can easily see that humans are very different from animals. However, we are limited by our inability to see both the micro and macro elements of the earth and universe with our eyes.

Over the millennia we have developed a pattern detection system to ferret out dangers. This detection system was necessary to discover tigers lurking among the wilderness. It is tempting to assign meaning to random events and patterns. It is not so helpful when the Virgin Mary appears on a toasted cheese sandwich.

There was a time when gods were necessary to explain rain, sunshine, storms, both calamities and blessings, even birth and death. Today scientists have unlocked many of those mysteries. In spite of this vast body of knowledge, many citizens of the earth continue to reject scientific explanations in favor of the obvious.

We are surrounded by certainty. I am certain that I understand who I am, and what my purpose in life is. You may be certain that no American landed on the moon, that JFK was murdered by multiple snipers, that blueberries cure Alzheimer’s, that Flying saucers visit the earth, or that a six-year old went to heaven and returned to tell his story.

In his book, On being certain, Dr Robert Burton (a neurologist) calls it the “feeling of knowing.” He suggests we consider the plight of a delusional Schizophrenic patient who “KNOWS” that three-legged Martians are taping his phone and reading his thoughts. **WE know** that his brain chemistry is **seriously** messed up. Because as Burton says, “His false sense of conviction has arisen out of a disturbed neurochemistry.” Yet it is difficult to challenge our own certainty – our own feeling of knowing.

Do you recall where you were when Kennedy was assassinated, or perhaps more recently when the Challenger exploded?

Within 24 hours of the Challenger explosion a psychologist asked his class of 106 students to write down exactly where they were, what they were doing and what feelings they experienced. When interviews were conducted two and a half years later, 25% of the students' accounts were very different. More than half had significant errors, while less than ten % had all the details correct. Before seeing the original accounts, most students believed their memories were intact. When confronted with the difference, many were still confident their false memories were correct, one even stated, "That's my handwriting, but that's not what happened."

As a result of such examples, Dr Burton offers this premise of his book.

"Despite how certainty feels, it is neither a conscious choice nor even a thought process. Certainty and similar states of "knowing what we know" arise out of involuntary brain mechanisms that, like love or anger, function independently of reason." (pxiii)

Many researchers, including Toronto psychologist Michael Persinger, discovered that by merely stimulating certain brain areas they generated feelings of "sensing another presence," "oneness with the universe," and "another self" Some people report the presence of Jesus or Mohammad depending upon their religious backgrounds.

Various psychedelic experiences have been reported ever since ancient times. Peyote, mushrooms, and LSD have all induced mystical experiences. When I was 12 years old recovering from anesthesia, I felt myself being propelled through a long tunnel towards an extremely bright light at the end. And I wasn't dying or even near death.

Such amazing descriptions are very similar to those who report "near-death experiences" following a cardiac arrest or anesthetic reaction. There is a known brain mechanism. When insufficient oxygen is delivered to the brain, the neurotransmitter glutamate is released. Glutamate normally binds to NMDA receptors. However, in excessive amounts it is neurotoxic and leads to the death of neurons. In order to survive such cell death, the oxygen-deprived brain releases protective chemicals to block the effect of glutamate. This blocking of the NMDA receptor is believed to be responsible for NDEs.

Neil deGrasse Tyson said, "I . . . recognized that a real god would not require animals to be sacrificed for his gratification or demand that people who work on the Sabbath be put to death, . This god is nothing more than a reflection of the men who wrote the Old Testament

Nowhere in the 10 commandments is there a condemnation of slavery, genocide, child molestation, or cruel treatment of homosexuals . . . but it does suggest that a wife is the property of the husband (Commandment #10). It is apparent that the morality of modern civilization has surpassed that of the Bible, but if God were the author of these commandments, it begs the question: are we today more moral than God?

"The atoms of our bodies are traceable to stars We are biologically connected to every other living thing in the world. We are chemically connected to all molecules on Earth. And we are anatomically connected to all atoms in the universe. We are . . . literally stardust." --Neil deGrasse Tyson

Galen Rose, a blogger who calls himself the Wized sage says, "If there is a god who actually interferes in any way in human affairs, say by answering prayers, then I believe that science would have identified that fact by now. Man has identified and correctly described all sorts of invisible things, from electrons to gravity, dark matter, dark energy, and so forth. It seems very likely that if there were a god-force at work in our world, it would have been detected by now as a force, which acts to temporarily suspend the laws of nature. No such force has ever been positively identified. And, incidentally, whenever prayer has been tested with the rigorous standards of science, it has failed to show that it works [in spite of claims to the contrary].

So here is my testimony: after 30 years identifying as a Humanist and 20 plus years with the UUs. Although I profess to be A-Theistic, I prefer the more positive descriptor of Humanistic.

Today, like Krauss, I see no need for a god to explain the universe or my existence. A god with human emotions doesn't represent the level of perfection needed to be god of the universe.

Furthermore, it seems to me that even believing in a supreme being that set the universe in motion and then got out of the way is merely an attempt to personify an impersonal universe.

I have watched two people I care about lose their mental acuity due to dementia and aneurism; both resulting in loss of personality, which lasted until their deaths. So when their brain -- the master control -- ceased to function properly and then stopped . . . there was nothing left to survive death.

Is there a hell where a loving god who created our world would send sinners to burn forever? And the most puzzling to me is why would an all-powerful god of the universe require a primitive blood sacrifice, from his own son – no less, to forgive the sins of the people he created.

There are surely many things we do not understand yet. However, in the meantime I am quite satisfied living my life without dependence on any of the numerous gods invoked by others. If there is a distant superpower somewhere, it will surely appreciate that I spent my lifetime treating others with love and respect and attempting to be the best that I can be.

As Stephen F Roberts said, “I contend we are all atheists, I just believe in one fewer god.

Here at this UU church we start by welcoming you whatever you believe and whomever you love. We don’t all believe alike. But we care for each other. We can share openly what we think and believe in honest dialogue. We can listen respectfully to each other.

We are called to recognize the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and to accept one another, while encouraging spiritual growth (or not) in our congregations, and join in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Could it be that what you do, how you treat each other . . . is more important than what you believe?

Presented: by Dawn F. Harris, Ed.D. 5/1/16 to Unitarian Universalists of Benton County, Bentonville, AR