

Homily – September 16, 2012
To Be Mentored by the Sun
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The living tradition we share as UU's draws from many sources. The sixth source is: Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.

I had some fun imagining the committee that wrote that one. It's the only source that comes with a warning. I imagine the talk: yes we are gaining AMAZING knowledge from science, but don't forget, these are early days, there is so much more to know; more than we can ever imagine there is to know. Don't get too proud of ourselves just yet. And do not jump too far ahead and assume science is going to clear up all mystery either. Ultimate mystery may actually be, you know, ultimate. Heed the understanding of science and reason, but don't yet **Completely** toss out what has come before. We don't yet know what it's entirely safe to leave behind. Conserve the possibilities.

Even with the cautions attached, I appreciate the endorsement of reason and science as SOURCES for the development and sustenance of a spiritual life. Because that's what works for me.

In my blurb for this service I used the term *scientific mythology* (What could a scientific mythology give to our emotional and spiritual lives) which I realize probably made some of our science professionals cringe. But I used it purposely, as I am very interested in taking the facts of science (its supposed purview...fact) and making them popularly understandable through story. Including **SACRED** stories, teaching stories, a new mythology. Stories that can refine and strengthen our moral

values . (gasp!!! facts of science stay far far away from something as subjective as moral value)

Let me define a few terms.

Myths are sacred narratives, explaining how something (the world, humankind, a taboo or law or ritual) came to be in its current form. The term Sacred is correctly used to denote reverential devotion to purpose. (And reverence means to hold in the deepest regard) Unlike folktales or legends, myths are about the Forces in the Universe, much beyond the capacity of human endeavours.

So altogether **I** am looking for illustrative stories about that which we hold in deepest regard in order to achieve our highest purpose.

Myths are also ideology in narrative form. A *highest purpose* is not a one time event like the flaring forth of the Universe. It is developmental and particular to the conditions of time and place. Mythology conveys religious or idealized experience, seeking to establish behavioral models and to teach them. Thus ideology.

(Science in the service of ideology, the cringing continues. We have been there before and it does not work out well). But, then imagine mythologic stories with scientific accuracy. Ideology put forward only if consistent with scientific proof.

To learn continually about what is currently scientifically revealed and understood **IS** Sacred activity.

And language normally reserved for religion, for mystery, **IS** properly used as well in the activity of opening mystery to knowledge and understanding. But don't forget the committees warning about idolatries of mind and spirit.

((I am really looking forward to the Science and Religion curriculum for RE classes.))

A little more about mythology. WHY is mythology,(and religious doctrines for that matter), so important, so fraught, so primal?

Because of who we humans are in the Universe. There are many things we have believed unique about ourselves, unique in all the Universe. The things that make us human, different (and of course superior) from all other species:

That WE have consciousness, and then when proved wrong on that that we have self-reflective consciousness. And we are probably going to be proved wrong on that.

That we have language, and then that we have symbolic language. And we are probably going to be proved wrong on that.

There is a list of examples like this but there is one attribute of the human that may well be what is unique to us.

We are driven to create Meaning. We can not function without meaning. And we will make meaning out the flimsiest wisps of evidence and operate on that basis even to our own detriment.

That self-reflective consciousness and symbolic language we have? They never stop while our brain may function. And the major question they constantly address is WHY.

To come up with, to offer, a satisfying answer to appease that desperate question is to have the power to shape human behavior and to order human societies. That is why mythology is so important, so fraught. Do not underestimate the power of primal stories.

I am going to try and illustrate with my attempt at a new sacred story.

A myth about the Sun's love for the Earth,

Of all the billions of stars in the night sky, the one star nearest to us is never seen. That because the star that exists nearest the earth is the **day** star, the sun. our sun is a star of the second or third generation of stars the Universe has held and is probably created from material of several earlier generation stars (grandparent stars) having gone to supernova.

When those leftover gaseous clouds of the grandparent stars coalesced to such density that its own internal pressure ignited itself, the sun was born. And a tiny wisp of a plane in the gaseous cloud, too diffuse to ignite became the all the other bodies in our solar and planetary system. From that moment, five Billion years ago, the sun has generated energy and radiated it out 360 degrees, non stop, no hesitation.

Meanwhile, 4.5 billion years ago a lump of stuff, largely not gas, had gathered in the debris field and through continued accretion of more not-gas stuff cooled down and became our rocky planet, our water planet Earth. Perhaps as early as 4.2 billion ya substances in the water on the planet became chemically self replicating and then became biologically self regulating and so became LIFE. Life filled all the waters of the Earth, thriving on the energy of the chemical richness, their numbers growing, trying out differences in their structures, expanding their numbers, but all still living on the same compounds found in the waters. Live thrived, right up until the time when it didn't. Turns out the resources in the waters were finite, dwindling, and then diminished. Crisis in the vast populations of cyanobacteria. Fortunately that part about trying out differences in structures turns out to be a saving grace for the creatures, and the pressures of adaptation to changes in habitat (explained to us later by Charles Darwin as the theory of natural selection) led to the creation of the chlorophyll molecule. Perhaps no greater milestone for life on earth has happened than that SUPREME achievement. Everything alive depends on this molecule. Because what the chlorophyll molecule can do is

capture, hold, and metabolize the energy of the sun and then pass it on. The Sun changed everything that was possible for life. It made possible whole other realms of life, of which you and I are currently the end result. For the cyanobacteria are not our direct ancestors yet contributed mightily/generously to our creation. All gratitude to cyanobacteria and its genius for without hands, or eyes, or tools or even a brain they captured the photons of the sun. And it has only happened once.

And for the last 4 billion years One Billionth of the sun's energy reaching the earth is gathered up to fuel most biological and physical spheres of the planet. (earth is so small it's surface can only take up 1 billionth) We are animals, we can't photosynthesis. We are totally dependent on the plant kingdom to create the very air we breath and any and all food we eat. And they do that by taking in the photons of the sun. You/we are the energy of the sun. Via plants, oxygen and nutrients become our metabolism, our bodies, our energy, our consciousness. We are expressions of the sun's energy. Every second the sun currently gives off 600 million tons of radiant energy. It gives because it is in its nature to give, it gives because it can. Its been doing so for 5 B years and will most likely do it for 5B more before it itself goes SuperNova. Even in its creative destruction it will give. Our grandparent stars gave out their energies, substances and new elements (carbon, iron, diamonds, gold) to allow the birth of our parent star. In its own cataclysmic final acts it will also give forth yet new material for the creating of another cycle, the birth of the next star.

The sun has been giving the energy of life to this planet for over 4 billion years, to all life before us. We are latecomers to the feast but are as welcome as any old friend. As long as we are a species on the planet we are free and welcome to enjoy the sun's unwavering, constant, generosity, because giving what it can as long as it can is in the nature of its being. The sun pays it forward. Having received all that it is from its parent stars it makes no demands about receiving in return. It fulfills itself in making use

of its abundant gifts for its own life needs, giving freely of what it can part with and doing so constantly. 5 billion years and counting.

How is that for the start of a myth, Human generosity is possible because at the center of our planetary system the Sun. We can in small ways be like the Sun.

How is that for a lesson in human value and morality . We can in small ways be like the Sun. We can appreciate the abundance bestowed on us, (and earned) and we can fulfill our nature as creations of the Sun through generosity given consistently and without conditions. We can fulfill our solar-given natures.

So if I can come up with that much just out of my own limited understanding just imagine how good it can get with deep knowledge, talented writers and inspired storytellers.

Now do I actually think the Sun knows, or cares about the energy reaching the Earth. No.

Do I think the sun **Intends** anything to any other celestial body its energy may reach. No.

Do I think that all of the energy coming out of the Sun is only benign to life on Earth . No

But in the sun being fully the sun, outcomes take place, that we as those meaning-making creatures of the Universe observe, compare to our possible behaviors, evaluate those meanings against what we know about the flourishing of human systems on earth, biologic or social, and we say, this is knowledge worth keeping. This is an example worth emulation. The story I find in this can help teach ourselves behaviors that support our particular flourishing as well. So, this is a myth, not a biology text. And myths as I defined earlier are: Illustrative stories about that which we hold in deepest

regard in order to achieve our highest purpose. Sacred stories are those that denote our reverential devotion to purpose.

Purpose. Spiritual practice

Spiritual practice is the disciplined habits we create to get our own attention.

Spiritual Practice is how we remind ourselves ENDLESSLY of our chosen priorities, and bring ourselves back to the fulfillment we get from focusing on those priorities.

We can easily build spiritual practices out of empirical knowledge with barely an effort if we turn our thoughts and hearts to it.

Purpose, priority, practice.

Consider the Sun. Open to your love for the sun. How can we not love what gives us every breath we breathe, gives every breath taken by every life we have ever loved to breathe. .

Imagine living out of awareness of the abundance given you AND earned by you, and then in turn having opportunity to pass all your capabilities outward, to give with ease as is within your ability to give, to radiate your gifts consistently, appreciate the accretion of small acts continually offered. Consider your priority. The recipients of your abundance may change over time, and what you can offer at different times will vary. Our adult friends know a baby takes precedence of time and attention. But loving friends also know that your priority hasn't changed. To fulfill the generosity, empathy, cooperation of our human nature is the priority (for those are the attributes now believed to be what has supported our species development).

Giving is the spiritual practice allowing that fulfillment. Time Treasure and Talent UU's say, but let's go deeper: attention, presence, openness, efforts to understand, listening, allowing, accepting. This is generosity, this is what we all long to both give and receive. The experience of being known by others is a

compelling need for we social group creatures. Known and accepted. It is the practice of generosity.

The Sun for all her magnificence does not know us, we are among her myriad children whom she provides for. The sun does not sustain us intentionally but only as a happy consequence of the sun being the sun. Let us emulate the sun in being fully who we are, the species of intentional generosity, cooperation and constancy. Moral values are verifiable in the natural world. We are all part of the sacred depths of nature.