

**Busy Being Born**  
**The Rev. Beverly Boke**  
**June 15, 2008**

**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock**

**Welcome and announcements**

**Lighting of the chalice #451**

**Sharing joys and sorrows**

**Hymn No. 38 "Morning Has Broken"**

**Reading**      *The Great Explosion*    Robinson Jeffers

The universe expands and contracts like a great heart.  
It is expanding, the farthest nebulae  
Rush with the speed of light into empty space.  
It will contract, the immense navies of stars and galaxies,  
dust clouds and nebulae  
Are recalled home, they crush against each other in one  
harbor, they stick in one lump  
And then explode it, nothing can hold them down; there is no  
way to express that explosion; all that exists  
Roars into flame, the tortured fragments rush away from each  
other into all the sky, new universes  
Jewel the black breast of night; and far off the outer nebulae  
like charging spearmen again  
Invade emptiness.  
No wonder we are so fascinated with  
fireworks  
And our huge bombs: it is a kind of homesickness perhaps for  
the howling fireblast that we were born from.

But the whole sum of the energies  
That made and contain the giant atom survives. It will  
gather again and pile up, the power and the glory--  
And no doubt it will burst again; diastole and systole: the  
whole universe beats like a heart.  
Peace in our time was never one of God's promises; but back  
and forth, live and die, burn and be damned,  
The great heart beating, pumping into our arteries His  
terrible life.

He is beautiful beyond belief.  
And we, God's apes--or tragic children--share in the beauty.  
We see it above our torment, that's what life's for.  
He is no God of love, no justice of a little city like Dante's  
Florence, no anthropoid God

Making commandments,; this is the God who does not care  
and will never cease. Look at the seas there  
Flashing against this rock in the darkness--look at the  
tide-stream stars--and the fall of nations--and dawn  
Wandering with wet white feet down the Carmel Valley to  
meet the sea. These are real and we see their beauty.  
The great explosion is probably only a metaphor--I know not  
--of faceless violence, the root of all things.

## **Silent Meditation**

### **Offering**

#### **Sermon: *Busy Being Born***

I've always been a big Bob Dylan fan, and lines from his songs tend to pop into my head as I'm going about my daily life. You know how a bit of a song seems perfectly appropriate in certain circumstances, such as when someone asks who will take out the trash and you sing, "It ain't me, babe..."

One of Dylan's lines that comes to me often is from his long rambling song, "It's All Right Ma, (I'm Only Bleeding)". The line is, "He not busy being born is busy dying."

I first heard that song when I was teaching Sixth Grade at TASIS England. I had a small room in a great old manor house, where our senior girls shared beautifully appointed suites that had been fitted for movie stars and other jet setters to stay in during the 1960's. The school took the house over when the original property across the street no longer sufficed to house the boarding students. I was the dorm mother for a dozen high-spirited 18-year-olds, all who could drink legally in the UK. Keeping up with them and my own teaching duties was an enormous challenge, and my down time consisted of being on duty in my room waiting for someone to need me. We – other faculty members who had become friends and I – played canasta, drank tea and coffee, and played a lot of Bob Dylan music. The line was popular among us Expats; when it came up we all sang along, feeling like we were very much alive and that Bob Dylan would approve of us living on the edge there at an American boarding school in England. We were, we thought, busy being born.

When I have decisions to make – and not always big one, usually the small ones like should I take a nap or go for a walk – I often ask myself, "okay, am I being born or am I dying here?" It serves to focus my attention on the things that matter, and helps me let go of my attachments to things that are not useful in the long run.

I was thinking of that song just a little while ago when I looked at some pictures from NASA. They show various star nurseries in deep space – the crab nebula, the horsehead nebula, the pillars of creation, and The Cat's Eye nebula - a planetary nursery – these photographs always move me profoundly. It was a long time ago I gave up on the idea of

god watching me from the sky, but to the extent we can call all of space the sky, I go with Robinson Jeffers on this – God is all of that out there. Dan Wakefield said, “God is an earthquake, not an uncle.” More than an earthquake, I think as I imagine what those nebulae would sound like if their activity were happening in an atmosphere like ours. What noise! The human senses would be shattered to hear it.

Birth and death – these two events that form the parentheses around our days – are all we know for sure about human life. We are born. We die. Forrest Church says religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die. But when we look out into the universe – our home, our immense and terrible surroundings – and when we listen to what the scientists are saying about this universe, we realize that everything is in a constant state of decay and creation. And, paradoxically, that gives me great peace of mind.

Robinson Jeffers, who wrote the poem I read to you earlier, said, “I believe that the Universe is one being, all its parts are different expressions of the same energy, and they are all in communication with each other, therefore parts of one organic whole. This whole is in all its parts so beautiful, and is felt by me to be so intensely in earnest, that I am compelled to love it and to think of it as divine. It seems to me that this whole alone is worthy of the deeper sort of love and there is peace, freedom, I might say a kind of salvation, in turning one's affections outward toward this one God, rather than inwards on one's self, or on humanity, or on human imaginations and abstractions--the world of spirits.”

I read Jeffers and I get thinking about a theology of renewal or rebirth in the face of the simple fact of the primal violence that lies at the core of all we know – the Big Bang, the origin of the universe as we understand it. Always, the poem tells us, the universe is in the process of being born.

Some galaxies were formed, life arose on Earth, and before you know it you have self-reflective consciousness and human technology. Those things will pass, although it is very hard for us to think about that time, and we are often frightened by news items that suggest the end is nearer than we thought. But all things pass, everything decays and is reformed, reborn, into a new form. Matter is neither created nor destroyed; it's only ever rearranged. It ought to be a lesson we whisper in the ears of our newborns: *Welcome, new arrangement of atoms! We hope you like it here. We who are in human form now salute you! This will not last. Enjoy it while you can. Spend your time continuously choosing that which makes you come alive, again and again. That is the way of the universe. Every atom in your body will remain and has been here from the beginning; this special arrangement is quite a trip. Hold to it but loosely, and go your way knowing only that this – everything – is temporary. Choose to be born and born again and again.*

I am all in favor of developing a theology of renewal and rebirth that celebrates the fact that once upon a time every atom of our bodies was caught in the firestorm that started this universe, the one we now roam with our proxies, which send pictures back to us of galaxies and stars and nebulae.

Nothing has inspired me more than the first time I saw what is often called a “star nursery.” We were out at the Berkeley observatory with our friend Steve, back when he was squeezing out the final pennies from his post-doctoral work in astrophysics, and we were privileged to visit the great telescope on a clear night. We saw globular clusters, ring nebulae, Oort clouds. Ever since that night I’ve had visions of floating through space, past the Pillars of Creation, the Horsehead and the Crab Nebulae, the Planetary Nebula.

With all that we know about the universe, the old stories of creation and of humankind’s place in the grand scheme of things simply do not work - except as metaphors. They do describe the human condition at various points in our understanding of reality. But as that understanding shifts and we learn more about where we are – as our impossibly effective exploring machinery drifts through space – our metaphysics must expand. As our knowledge grows, so must our philosophy.

What would a theology of renewal based on the constant “systole and diastole” of the universe look like? What can we believe about the meaning, purpose, and grace of our lives?

Here are a few of my thoughts: Every Western religion has within its theology a way to redemption. My theology of renewal doesn’t depend on any set of beliefs about any god or religious practice. You don’t have to “walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.” You simply have to be willing to give birth to yourself again and again.

The great mythologist Joseph Campbell said that the real virgin birth is the birth of oneself in spirit - the birth *of* oneself *by* oneself - the birth of the self as a self-actualizing adult. Wherever you encounter the virgin birth story you can find a mythic character seeking spiritual truth and wholeness. You and I are those mythic characters, seeking wholeness and truth.

And I notice that we don't have an easy path to that wholeness, but as has always been the case, the path is difficult, with many obstacles. I don’t know why we torment each other and ourselves the way we do. Whatever else we might know or not know, I agree with Jeffers on this point with respect to any sort of god there can be, given our understanding of what’s out there: *He is no God of love, no justice of a little city like Dante's Florence, no anthropoid God Making commandments: this is the God who does not care and will never cease.*

Many light years away, star nurseries grow stars out of the same basic matter as that from which you and I are made. A little carbon here, some hydrogen and oxygen in the right proportions... and we are created. Out of stardust we are created. How beautiful!

It means that the little things I get all exercised about are totally meaningless in the grand sweep of things. I am a human being with feelings and appetites, with sensitivities and

opinions. I do live this life here, with you; I suffer pain and revel in joy; I have pride and greed and sloth and envy, I have lust and wrath and gluttony – all the so-called sins. And I have faith and hope and love – the virtues – too. But when I consider the reality of what must be true about any sort of God, given what we can see, I just stop worrying. I try to be alive to the day and all it offers me, and not be so concerned about the future. And I try to give myself room enough to grow in spirit and understanding, in love and compassion, self-control and forbearance.

It is said, in the *Gospel of Thomas*, "If you bring forth that which is within you, that which you bring forth will save you; and if you do not bring forth that which is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you."

Tying together our knowledge of our greater universe with our knowledge of the human experience, the only sure thing that arises for me is I am co-creator of my own life.

Luckily, I was born. After that, it's all up to me. So I offer for your consideration the possibility that we are called to give birth to our own true and wonderful selves. If everything in the universe is in a constant state of flux, "nothing is settled; everything can still be altered." Or, as Bob Dylan said, "he not busy being born is busy dying."

We can always, every day, retrieve ourselves and simply start our lives over again. As long as our hearts beat, diastole and systole, we can stay busy being born.

## **Discussion**

\***Hymn** No. 128 "For All That Is Our Life"

## **Closing Circle**