Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock
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"From Science to Ministry"

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When I was six years old, I discovered my life's destiny. It was to build machines that made chocolate chip cookies.

A lot of water has passed under the bridge since then. I still like chocolate chip cookies (perhaps too much), but I've found a rather different sense of purpose. This morning I'd like to share with you how that's come about. I'll also address the relationship between science and religion, since my journey weaves through them both. I'll say something of the antagonism between them — or, to be accurate, the antagonism between groups of people with differing and particularly strong views — but my personal preference is for reconciliation, so I'll tend to concentrate on that. The theme of food appears a few times too.

I grew up in the United Kingdom, a country with no separation of church and state, where public school includes classes in religious education. They were essentially Bible-study classes. We read the easier parts of the Bible and drew pictures about them. I remember that it was quite hard to draw pictures about some of the plagues that were visited on Egypt, particularly the last one involving the angel of death. We used up a lot of black crayons for that one. I understood religious education on the same level as history or geography, as an academic body of knowledge to be assimilated. When Latin classes came along and we learnt Greek and Roman myths — the most interesting part of Latin, in my opinion — the stories of gods and monsters and humans both heroic and tragic seemed to me to be of much the same nature as the Bible stories.

At that time I was also in the school choir, learning hymns and anthems for the school's morning assemblies and going on choir trips to various places at home and abroad. In 1981 we went to Italy and sang for the Pope in an Easter service at the Vatican. I have to admit that I was really in it for the music, though, and the words were secondary. Sometimes I didn't really like the words, but I could live with them. At about the age of seventeen, though, something fairly significant took place, even if I wouldn't recognize its significance until a decade or so later.

Our school choir would sometimes sing at local churches. One of these was a lovely old building, surrounded by the gorgeous countryside of that part of England, and it was at its best in the lengthening days of early Summer. What happened inside, though, was in stark contrast to that pleasant rural setting. I'm pretty sure I wasn't the only person in the choir to be shocked by the minister's sermon, which was about accepting Jesus as savior or suffering in hell forever, a *very* evangelical message by British standards. I knew then that I couldn't accept such a religion. If there was any merit to the idea of salvation, it had to apply to everybody. In other words, though it would be another ten years before I heard of Universalism as such, I became a Universalist. In any case, I can't say that Christianity ever really 'took' with me, and at college, away from schools with mandated chapel services, religion seemed pretty much irrelevant.

In the mean-time I had discovered science. My designs for chocolate chip cookie machines were left behind when I was introduced to chemistry. I remember a teacher trying to steer me toward novels and works of fiction when I kept choosing to read books about atoms and planets. My interest in science continued to grow, moving from chemistry to physics and eventually I came to the United States to study quantum mechanics in graduate school. Now it was nice to find out something about what makes the Universe tick, but I actually found myself happiest during the Summer breaks, working for one of the experimental research groups, building machines that actually did something useful. (Not make cookies, unfortunately.) Albert Einstein, perhaps the most famous scientist of all time, once said that for pure satisfaction, there's nothing like chopping wood, when the results of your labor are immediately evident.

After graduate school, I think I went through a sort of slow, low-grade identity crisis. A girlfriend and I had decided to go vegetarian, and during my last year in New Jersey I shared a house with five other vegetarians, discovering environmentalism — and joining the Sierra Club — thanks to the informal education I received from them. Now a case for vegetarianism had already been made to me by one of the Indians in my year in graduate school. He'd also told me about some of the ideas of that complex of beliefs known as Hinduism, and they intrigued me, possibly because I'd never heard much about any religion other than Christianity. Seeing statues and artwork in Indian restaurants triggered my curiosity, too. Coming across a copy of the Bhagavad Gita — an important Hindu scripture — I decided to buy it and read it. The book had an introduction to more Hindu ideas, and a number of them resonated with me. Not because of the Bible stories I'd read in school, but because of what I knew from physics. There's the concept of 'maya', for instance, which means illusion. This might be

illustrated in the realm of physics by Einstein's saying that what we think of as reality is actually an illusion, albeit a very persistent one. Sometimes maya is taken to mean that the physical world is 'merely' an illusion, but I think that's an unfair caricature. Our sense of separateness and independence from the world is the illusion, not the physical world itself. Both graphite and diamond, for example, are different forms of carbon, but this deeper truth does not mean that graphite and diamond are any less real in themselves. (Jewelers know this, I'm pretty sure, since they don't sell engagement rings set with lumps of coal!)

So when I moved from New Jersey to California I was searching: searching for a world-view that made sense given what I had learned about science and religion; searching for a world-view that would help me make sense of where I found myself in the world. I consider myself fortunate to have found that in Unitarian Universalism, over a decade after I had become a Universalist in all but name. The local chapter of the Sierra Club advertised a weekend lecture and workshop on Voluntary Simplicity at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Diego, and after attending those I took part in the evening drumming sessions of the Earth-Centered Spirituality Circle. The church was difficult for me to get to on a Sunday morning, so when I later moved back east to Connecticut and found myself living just down the road from the Unitarian Society of Hartford, I wasted no time. I attended my first Unitarian Universalist worship service on Easter Sunday 2001. Finding a wonderfully friendly and supportive group of people, I became a member, joined the choir, got involved in adult educational programs and signed up with the social responsibility committee.

So there I was, a practising scientist, practically an atheist, doing something I never thought I'd do, namely join a religion! Looking back, of course, I wish I'd found Unitarian Universalism sooner, a faith where there is no intrinsic struggle between science and religion. After all, we might say, science is about how things happen, while religion is about why they happen. To put it another way, science helps us discover facts about how things are, while religion helps us develop ethical principles concerning how they should be. Problems then come from people who want science to do the job of religion, or vice-versa. There's "intelligent design creationism", for instance, because some people, on the basis of their religious convictions, insist that the world must work in a particular way. Our history also includes the evils of eugenics and "social darwinism" because some people, on the basis of how the natural world weeds out the sick and the weak, believe that humans should function the same way. Amongst the discussion, debate and argument concerning the events of 9-11 there were examples of extremists on both sides. Richard Dawkins, professor at Oxford University and militant

atheist, put the blame for 9-11 squarely on religion, calling faith "one of the world's great evils". Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, on the other hand, agreed that the blame was to be placed on the ACLU and the "rampant secularism" afoot in American society. (Robertson and Falwell subsequently apologized for their comments. I don't know that Dawkins did.)

Of course, science and religion only act in the world to the extent that people act in their names. They both have the capacity for good and evil in the same measure that we human beings have the capacity for both good and evil. So in my view we need both science and religion, partly to curb the excesses to which *people* are prone. For example, we need moral guidance in using (or not using) the technology that science has made possible. I think there can also be synergy between science and religion and, moreover, we need both for us to be fully human. Here's the third Einstein quote I'm going to give you this morning: "Science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind." Each without the other also tends toward arrogant self-righteousness. For example, Francis Bacon is credited with having said that the purpose of science is "to put Nature on the rack and torture her secrets from her." I find that attitude repulsive, but for a long time that's been our society's attitude, that humanity can be separate from Nature, either having dominion over it or acting as steward of it, rather than being an integral part of it, and with such an attitude it's not surprising that we're faced with today's environmental problems. Thankfully, that attitude is being challenged. Science itself, in the form of quantum mechanics, tells us that there's no separation between the observer and the observed, that any sense of separateness is an illusion. Religious groups concerned with environmental issues are arguing that we need to adopt a more reverential attitude toward Nature, whether one views it as divine creation or as divine in its own right.

I'd come a long way from chocolate chip cookies, but I discovered that I enjoyed exploring the religious sphere, both in its own right and also in terms of its relationship with science, particularly the effects of spirituality on people's attitudes towards the environment. I realized that I could have studied science and religion as an academic or I could have delved into matters of spirituality and the environment by working for the Sierra Club, but I discovered that the academic arena can be too theoretical for me while environmentalism tends to browbeat people into behaving a certain way out of guilt. I discovered that I wanted faith to be at the heart of my work, reflecting on science and religion for practical purposes and developing a way of really living an ecologically-minded spirituality. I felt an urge to compose blessings for everyday events, blessing such as those that exist in Judaism, expressing mindfulness and thankfulness for

everyday miracles. I felt called to develop my own faith and to work with the increasing number of people who are interested in following a similar path. So, I started taking classes at Hartford Seminary, beginning with Environmental Ethics and ending with New Testament Survey, a class which, after rejecting the RE classes of my childhood, I'd never thought I'd take! Then, in 2006, I transferred to the Iliff School of Theology in Denver, where I completed the requirements for the degree of Master of Divinity last June. Complementing the theoretical work of classes, I also learnt about pastoral care — and learnt even more about myself in the process — as a chaplain at the University of Colorado Hospital. I immersed myself in congregational life during a year-long internship at First Unitarian in Albuquerque, learning from the excellent example and outstanding mentoring of Christine Robinson, and finding my sense of myself as a minister. Having been a youth advisor at the Unitarian Society of Hartford, I continued my passion for working with youth by becoming the Mountain Desert District's chaplain for youth cons, then the district's Youth Ministry Coordinator, embracing an exciting new vision of ministry to and with youth. In late 2009, given what I'd learnt in classes and through practical experience, the UUA deemed me fit for ministry, clearing me to enter the search process through which I was called by the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Peninsula and, in December, ordained by them as their minister.

I am a Unitarian Universalist because ours is one of the very few faiths that is fully open to the results of modern science when it comes to developing religious views of the world. Our understandings of the "interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part" are thoroughly informed by physics, cosmology, biology and ecology, from the mysterious weirdness of quantum mechanics to the awesome creativity of evolution. I know that there are plenty of amazing sights to be seen under a microscope, but the everyday world can be a source of wonder if we just realize that it is. More people are familiar with the images seen through telescopes, and with the sky most of us can see with our own eyes just by looking up on a clear night. Over the years, many of the people who have ventured into space have commented on the sense of perspective, of the awe that it gives them. You may have heard what Sultan bin Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, the first Arab in space, wrote in 1985 on board the space shuttle Discovery: "On the first day, we pointed to our countries. Then we were pointing to our continents. By the fifth day we were aware of only one Earth."

We also have pictures of our planet from further out than near-Earth orbit, from the Moon and beyond. During the 1980s, Carl Sagan campaigned at NASA to have the first Voyager spacecraft, after it had swung past Saturn up and out of the plane of the solar system, glance homeward one last time and take a picture. It almost didn't happen

— a few project personnel claimed it wasn't "science" and the project's technicians were being laid off — but the NASA Administrator intervened just in time and so Voyager 1 took its photograph of the Earth. You may have seen that photo. Against an almost black background, a beam of sunlight, reflected off the spacecraft, slants across the picture. As if suspended in the light, like a tiny bit of blue dust, is our planet. Describing the photograph, Sagan wrote the following.[1]

"That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every 'superstar', every 'supreme leader', every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there — on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

Sagan continued. "The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors, so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds. Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.

And Sagan concluded with this. "It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known."

Unitarian Universalism embraces this cosmic perspective, and does so joyfully. Our Earth, our planetary home, is small, but special and so very precious. It is unique, and so are we. We are called to honor the Earth and to honor one another, to care for our only home and to nurture the irreplaceable spark of the divine within each of us.

Unitarian Universalism tells us that we are worthy, that we are worthy of life and love, and that together we will be well.

So may it be.

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1: Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (Random House, 1994)
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