

“An Indifferent Universe”

A Sermon by the Rev. Terry Sims
Unitarian Universalist Church, Surprise, Arizona
January 24, 2010

Reading: from Psalms 8, 22, and 27

“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” (from Psalm 8)

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. . . . In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame. . . . [I]t was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother’s breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God. Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.” (from Psalm 22)

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? . . . Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident. . . . For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock. . . . If my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up. . . . Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord! (from Psalm 27)

Responsive Reading: # 666, “The Legacy of Caring” by Thandeka

Despair is my private pain, born from what I have failed to say, failed to do, failed to overcome.

Be still my inner self, let me rise to you, let me reach down into your pain, and soothe you.

I turn to you to renew my life. I turn to the world, the streets of the city, the worn tapestries of brokerage firms,

Drug dealers, private estates, personal things in the bag lady’s cart.

Rage and pain in the faces that turn from me, afraid of their own inner worlds.

This common world I love anew, as the life blood of generations who refused to surrender their humanity to an inhumane world courses through my veins.

From within this world my despair is transformed to hope.

And I begin anew the legacy of caring.

Story for All Ages: *The Three Questions*, based on a story by Leo Tolstoy, written and illustrated by Jon J. Muth

“There once was a boy named Nikolai who sometimes felt uncertain about the right way to act. ‘I want to be a good person,’ he told his friends. ‘But I don’t always know the best way to do that.’ Nikolai’s friends understood and they wanted to help him. ‘If only I could find the answers to my three questions,’ Nikolai continued, ‘then I would always know what to do.’

When is the best time to do things? Who is the most important one? What is the right thing to do? . . .

Nikolai hiked high up into the mountains where [Leo,] the old turtle lived all alone. When Nikolai arrived, he found Leo digging a garden. The turtle was old, and digging was hard for him. ‘I have three questions and I came to ask your help,’ Nikolai said.

‘When is the best time to do things? Who is the most important one? What is the right thing to do?’

Leo listened carefully, but he only smiled. Then he went on with his digging. ‘You must be tired,’ Nikolai said at last. ‘Let me help you.’ The turtle gave him his shovel and thanked him. And because it was easier for a young boy to dig than it was for an old turtle, Nikolai kept on digging until the rows were finished. But just as he finished, the wind blew wildly and rain burst from darkened clouds. As they moved toward the cottage for shelter, Nikolai suddenly heard a cry for help.

Running down the path, he found a panda whose leg had been injured by a fallen tree.

Carefully, Nikolai carried her into Leo’s house and made a splint for her leg with a stick of bamboo. The storm raged on, banging at the doors and windows. The panda woke up. ‘Where am I?’ she said. ‘And where is my child?’

The boy ran out of the cottage and down the path. The roar of the storm was deafening. Pushing against the howling wind and drenching rain, he ran farther into the forest. There he found the panda’s child, cold and shivering on the ground.

The little panda was wet and scared, but alive. Nikolai carried her inside and made her warm and dry. Then he laid her in her mother’s arms. Leo smiled when he saw what the boy had done.

The next morning the sun was warm, birds sang, and all was well with the world. The panda’s leg was healing nicely, and she thanked Nikolai for saving her and her baby from the storm. . . . Nikolai felt great peace within himself. [He had wonderful friends. And] he had saved the panda and her child. But he also felt disappointed. He

still had not found the answers to his three questions. So he asked Leo one more time. The old turtle looked at the boy. 'But your questions have been answered!' he said. 'They have?' asked the boy.

Yesterday, if you had not stayed to help me dig my garden, you wouldn't have heard the panda's cries for help in the storm. Therefore, the most important time was the time you spent digging the garden. The most important one at that moment was [I], and the most important thing to do was to help me with my garden. 'Later, when you found the injured panda, the most important time was the time you spent mending her leg and saving her child. The most important ones were the panda and her baby. And the most important thing to do was to take care of them and make them safe.

'Remember then that there is only one important time, and that time is now. The most important one is always the one you are with. And the most important thing is to do good for the one who is standing at your side. For these, my dear boy, are the answers to what is most important in this world.

'This is why we are here.'

Sermon:

I remember a girl I knew in high school. She was my friend, and we were close enough to share secrets and confidences with each other. During our junior year, she confessed that she had a terrible crush on one of the boys in our class, Bruce Johnson. I already knew that. Lots of people did. Bruce was the most desired guy in our high school. He was absurdly handsome and athletic, but he was also smart and genuinely kind. One of those people who seemed to have everything going for him. When my friend told me she liked Bruce, I encouraged her to look for ways to let him know that.

She looked at me like I'd lost my mind. "He doesn't care about me," she said. "He doesn't even know I'm alive."

I think many of us know what it's like not to be cared about by someone we care about. I know I have felt that longing for some special person to care about me, followed by an awful realization that he or she didn't. We can't stand to be insignificant. Do you know how it feels to make no difference to someone else? To be dismissed as unimportant? The need to be cared for is fundamental to human beings. Without others to care about and for us, terrible things happen.

My step-sister, Patti, and her husband, Keith, are foster parents. They recently agreed to have Danny come live with them while he is waiting to be adopted. Danny is 6 and emotionally disturbed.

Danny came into the foster care program when someone called Child Protective Services. He was found as an infant in a motel room with several adults, all of whom were using drugs, and none of whom was related to him. His mother, herself addicted to drugs, had left him there and had not come back for him for 3 days. Danny's mother did eventually show up, got clean for a while, and went through the family reconciliation program to get Danny back. But then her addiction took over again, and she was on the run with Danny for a year. During that time, as CPS and his doctors know, he was not properly cared for. They had no home of their own. Danny's mother clearly neglected him, not meeting his physical or emotional needs. And his social worker suspects she abandoned him more than once. From his marked tendency to hoard food even now, CPS workers conclude that he was often hungry. Danny witnessed domestic violence. There was little hugging or affection expressed physically in any way toward him.

My step-sister, Patti, now Danny's foster mother, recently attended a class concerning the effect of trauma on child development, particularly brain development. When a baby's needs are met by his or her parent or other caregiver, the baby's brain is bathed in serotonin. Emotional connections are made between the baby and the caregiver; bonds of trust. But physical, neural connections are also made within the baby's brain. Those pathways must be reinforced repeatedly to establish them securely. Love and trust are learned as brain patterns of connection are made.

But babies can develop in harmful ways, too. When a baby's needs are not met, stress builds up physically in the child's brain in the form of the hormone cortisol. Cortisol is related to the fight or flight reaction. The need to stay safe overrides everything else, all other learning. So cortisol interferes with the neural pathways needed for normal brain development, the development that enables us to trust and love. The brain and the personality cannot develop normally.

Danny can be a sweet little boy. And then there are times when he's angry, intractable, violent. He can't be soothed. He screams and bites and hits, sometimes for an hour or more. He lashes out at a world that didn't care about him, even against people who do now. He has been terribly damaged. When a child's physical and emotional needs are not met, according to the neurologist teaching the trauma and child development class Patti took, the child asks, "Does anyone know I'm alive?" "Does anyone care?" "Am I here?"

Raul, one of the main characters in Dan Simmons's science fiction novel, *The Rise of Endymion*, (p. 662) says: "[I wanted] to find her child and to help in any way I could as the boy or girl came of age, to help protect it in a universe of sharp edges." I

was struck by the truth and beauty of that description. The universe is indeed one of sharp edges. We never outgrow the need to be cared about. People who don't get the caring they need from others become desperate. It matters that we matter . . . to someone.

At some point in the development of our species, *sapiens sapiens*, maybe even our genus, *Homo*, and maybe very early, we began to wonder. After we felt caring for each other, we began to wonder not only whether we mattered to other people, but whether we mattered to what is larger than we are. Does the Creator, the Ground of Being, or Life Force, what some people call God, care about us? Do we matter, individually, or as a species, to the Universe?

I've always found Plato's and Aristotle's and others' argument for the existence of God persuasive, to a point: How did Someone or Something, or anything, come to be from Nothing? It all had to start somewhere, somehow. It must have started with God. That's called the cosmological or "prime mover" argument for the existence of God. But the "prime mover" argument only gets you so far. How did God come to be? At some point, one must assume a Cause for everything else, something that is not itself caused by anything else; an Uncaused Cause. All we know for sure is that the universe is. We do not know at present, at least based on science and reason, whether the universe was made by a Creator and exists by design.

The majority of religions are founded on a Creator God who started everything. But many religions don't stop there. They typically posit a Creator God who has a personal relationship with each of us, who cares about each of us. Why is that? It

could be true, of course, that God exists and cares about each of us. I simply don't know.

If you're a theist, I suspect you believe that God cares about you individually, personally. I know this is asking a lot, but if we consider for a moment the possibility that there is no Intelligence, no Being, that started it all, where does that leave us? If the God claims in some religions are not true, if there is no Intelligence that created or controls the universe, how do we explain why religions exist? Given our psychological needs, would we not have invented a God who not only started everything but cares about us, about what happens to us? The need and desire to be cared about, to be loved, is so strong in us that things go terribly wrong when that need is not met. Various religions make claims about God that seem to conflict. But I suggest this morning that unless the God claims are true in important respects, we invented God. Unless God exists, our idea of God arose from our own need to be cared about, to be loved personally by the Ultimate Being, the Creator we created.

There is a lot of evidence that the Universe, or if you like, the Creator of the Universe, does not care about us. The famous French Impressionist painter Claude Monet became nearly blind in the last decade of his life, as did the astronomer Galileo Galilei. The brilliant composer Beethoven was deaf by age 30, 27 years before his death, and suffered from bipolar disorder. John Wesley Powell, the explorer who led an expedition down the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon in 1869, had already lost his right arm just below the elbow during the Civil War. Actor Christopher Reeve was paralyzed in a horseback riding accident in 1995. And as we all know from the earthquake week before last, natural disasters happen consistently.

But that does not mean the Universe or its Creator wants to harm us, either. Wilma Rudolph not only survived polio when she was 4, but went on to become an Olympic athlete. Peng Shulin's body was actually cut in half by a truck in 1995. People said it was a miracle that he even survived. Recently, doctors at the China Rehabilitation Research Centre in Beijing devised an egg-like casing with two bionic legs. That allows Peng to walk on his own again.

When I was in high school, one of my summer jobs was driving for a man in his mid- to late-20's. He was a salesman, but could not drive because he was a quadriplegic. When he was in high school, he told me, he and some friends went to one of their houses where there was a swimming pool. He dived in and somehow hit his head on the bottom of the pool. His friends pulled him out and kept him from drowning. But he had broken his neck and he was paralyzed from the shoulders down.

Years later, just before I came to Arizona to start practicing law here, I took a trip to Hawai'i with my brother, Randy, and Jim Lyddane, a friend of ours. We had all been body surfing and having a great time. They went back to our rented car before I was ready to stop, so I was in the ocean by myself without anyone near. I noticed that the waves were getting bigger; I'm guessing about 4 feet. What I discovered was that a 4-foot wave can throw you onto the beach pretty hard. And sand does eventually compact. But I was still having such fun and enjoying myself so much that I didn't want to stop. I rode a particularly big wave in and was tumbled and turned by the force of the water. I ended up under the wave and became disoriented. I remember running out of air and needing to find the surface. Just then the wave hurled me onto the beach in a twisted position and with such power that I thought, "If I'd been turned just the wrong

way, I could have broken my neck just now.” I remember thinking that it would have made no difference to the Universe and the great play of forces if I had broken my neck and been paralyzed like the salesman I’d driven for so long ago. But the universe also did not care that I’d experienced exhilaration and unalloyed joy in riding the waves. The universe was indifferent, utterly.

The same universe that brings me the rose brings me the scorpion and the viper; the beautiful river sometimes floods our homes; the consuming volcano creates the beautiful Hawai’ian Islands; a typhoon rises from the peaceful ocean. We know meaning as well as the depths of despair. We feel joy for the newborn and grief at the loss of a loved one.

Harald Anderson, summarizing Albert Einstein’s ideas in Anderson’s essay, “Reinventing Failure, Designing Success,” wrote “the most fundamental question we can ever ask ourselves is whether or not the universe we live in is friendly or hostile.”¹ I think it is likely neither. There is too much undeserved unhappiness in the world to convince me that the universe cares about each of us and takes an active interest in our welfare. And there is too much undeserved joy to conclude that the universe is out to get us. It’s not malevolent. It’s not benevolent. Those are human motivations. We cannot reasonably ascribe them to the universe, at least not the inanimate aspects of it.

To conclude that the Universe cares about us assumes an Intelligence, God; that some Being is looking out for us or is out to get us. The hardest thing we may have to accept is that the Universe is neither friendly nor hostile. Perhaps the hardest fact we must face is that the Universe is indifferent to us, utterly indifferent. It simply does not

¹ Harald Anderson, in the essay “Reinventing Failure: Designing Success,” loosely summarizing Albert Einstein’s ideas, attributed by online resource Wikipedia Quotations.

care. Not whether we live or die, prosper or wither, have joy and meaning or only pain and despair. If that is so, are we not all asking the question Danny and other uncared-for children ask, “Are we here?” Doesn’t that mean we do not matter, at least not to the inanimate Universe?

No, I don’t think that is the only conclusion. I think in our desperate human need to be cared about and feel cared for by the Ultimate, we have asked the wrong question. Instead of asking, “Does the Universe care about me?”, maybe the question we should ask ourselves is, “Do we care about the Universe?” For all we know, those of us on this planet are the only beings that can care in an indifferent, uncaring Universe. We humans may be the only ones that feel in an unfeeling universe. If you want to include some animals, that is fine with me. So let’s say Earth-based sentient life may be the only ones that can supply empathy, compassion, love, hope. If you want to include the likely intelligent life somewhere else in the Universe, let’s do that, too. That doesn’t take away the uniqueness of the gift of caring by anyone. There is an awful lot of existence that just is, and not much that thinks and cares, no matter how many intelligent beings there are. That may be the unique gift Intelligence in any form gives to existence, the existence of everything. Maybe we’re the only ones that can provide purpose and meaning to an unthinking, intentionless, indifferent Universe.

Think about that for a moment. We may be the only ones to provide purpose and meaning for the Universe itself. Without us, the Universe would only exist. We make it live! Think about that the next time you’re feeling small and insignificant. We can bring our intentionality, our purposeful caring, to the Universe that would otherwise be

meaningless and uncaring. Our unique gift to existence, to the Universe, is our ability to care when it cannot.

That's why it makes a difference what we do. Not just a difference to us, but a difference to Everything. The tutoring program for adults who want to learn English, hosted at this church on Thursday nights and in which many of you participate as tutors, makes a difference in an otherwise indifferent Universe. Our donations to the West Side Food Bank make a difference, too, because they show we care.

A mindless disaster struck near Port-au-Prince week before last in the form of a magnitude 7.0 earthquake. It did not care that at least 150,000 people lost their lives and 2.2 million were cast into desperate hunger, chaos, pain, disease, and panic. But people did. We did care. This is when we humans are at our absolute best. When we care. When we give what nothing else does or can. The people in this church alone donated more than \$2,000 last Sunday to relieve the suffering of the Haitian people. People we don't know and will never know, in the most impoverished and least-developed nation in the Western Hemisphere.

And, of course, we were not alone. Bruce Knotts, Executive Director of the United Nations Office, wrote, "This is when the UN shines. When war strikes, the earth shakes, the seas rise up to destroy communities, the UN moves into high gear. Emergency response teams are quickly mobilized. The World Food Program, UNICEF, and other UN agencies have seasoned emergency teams. [They] immediately take charge to guide the many national and non-governmental organizations that rush to the scene. It is the UN that often pulls all the efforts into a coherent campaign to save lives and rebuild broken communities. [At a UN briefing] on global poverty, a representative

of Haiti pleaded, 'I need your help.' He asked the assemblage to donate individually, and then he asked them to join him in a moment of silence in honor of those lost in Haiti. [O]ur international community . . . remains the world's best hope in a crisis like this."

Community remains the world's best hope. Everybody needs to be cared about. No one wants to live in his or her own, or anyone else's, uncaring Universe. We help create the Universe around us, because we have the ability to put caring into it when nothing else can. When we don't care, or act as if we don't, we leave it an indifferent Universe and rob ourselves of meaning. But when we care and act, we make all the difference there is. Whatever Universe we are creating, we are creating for all of us, at least on this planet.

Do you want to matter to the Universe? Do you want to be special, irreplaceable? I have good news for you. You already matter. You are already special and irreplaceable. Not because the Universe cares about you. But because you care about it. You can make the difference in an indifferent Universe. Amen.

Benediction: May we remember that we may be the only ones that can provide the only care there is in the Universe. "[T]he most important thing is to do good for the one who is standing at your side." "This is why we are here." Go in peace.