

“The End of Everything”

A Sermon by Terry Sims

Unitarian Universalist Church, Surprise, Arizona

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Responsive Reading: #557, “ A Common Destiny” by David H. Eaton

All living substance, all substance of energy, being, and purpose, are united and share the same destiny.

All people those we love and those we know not of, are united and share the same destiny.

Birth-to death, we share this unity with the sun, earth,

Our brothers and sisters, strangers,

Flowers of the field, snow flakes, volcanoes and moon beams.

Birth – Life – Death. Unknown – Known – Unknown

Our destiny: from unknown to unknown.

May we have the faith to accept this mystery and build upon its everlasting truth.

Reading: #530, “Out of the Stars” by Robert T. Weston

Out of the stars in their flight, out of the dust of eternity, here have we come,

Stardust and sunlight, mingling through time and through space.

Out of the stars have we come, up from time;

Out of the stars have we come.

Time out of time before time in the vastness of space, earth spun to orbit the sun,

Earth with the thunder of mountains newborn, the boiling of seas.

Earth warmed by sun, lit by sunlight: This is our home; Out of the stars have we come.

Mystery hidden in mystery, back through all time; Mystery rising from rocks in the storm
and the sea.

Out of the stars, rising from rocks and the sea, kindled by sunlight on earth, arose life.

Ponder this thing in your heart; ponder with awe: Out of the sea to the land, out of the shallows came ferns.

Out of the sea to the land, up from darkness to light, rising to walk and to fly, out of the sea trembled life.

Ponder this thing in your heart, life up from sea: Eyes to behold, throats to sing, mates to love.

Life from the sea, warmed by sun, washed by rain, life from within, giving birth, rose to love.

This is the wonder of time; this is the marvel of space; out of the stars swung the earth; life upon earth rose to love.

This is the marvel of life, rising to see and to know; Out of your heart, cry wonder: sing that we live.

Story for All Ages: Have any of you been afraid? What have you been afraid of? Were you ever afraid of the dark? I was. When I was a little older than Rachel and Cameron, I had a job at a college. I worked in the college library, putting away books other people had borrowed to read. It was a very big library. There were several floors. And there were rows and rows and rows of books. Some of the rows were pretty dark. And because of all the rows of books, I couldn't see very far. And sometimes I was the only one there after dark. I thought it was a pretty scary place.

Do you think there was really any reason for me to be scared? No, I didn't either. But that didn't keep me from being scared, especially when I had to go put a book away in a dark row. And I was too embarrassed to tell anyone I was afraid.

Have you ever heard the expression "whistling in the dark?" Do you know what that expression might mean? Well, if you whistle in the dark and you're afraid of the

dark, whistling might help you be brave. I had heard the expression when I worked in the dark library. But it seemed kind of silly to go around whistling to myself.

But I decided to try whistling anyway. I didn't think it could hurt. So I picked a tune I liked a lot. And I started whistling it softly to myself as I did my work. (This was a long time ago, before I-pods or even Walkmans were invented.) Do you think my whistling made it any easier to see? Did it make whatever I was afraid of in the dark go away? No.

But the whistling worked; I was less afraid. Why do you think whistling might have worked? Part of it was that when I whistled that tune I liked, I thought about it more than I worried about whatever I thought might get me in the dark. But whistling was also doing something I chose to do. I wasn't helpless, just waiting for something I didn't want to happen. I was doing something, even if it was just whistling.

Whistling in the dark didn't change anything in the library. But whistling in the dark still made me less afraid. I think that was because whistling changed me, my attitude. I felt better. Sometimes acting as if you're brave can actually make you braver. You just feel stronger.

So what I'd like you to remember is that sometimes when you're afraid of something, you might try doing something to take your mind off it. Sometimes you might want to do something. You might not feel like you're doing much that will change whatever is scaring you. But you might try acting just a little braver than you feel. You might just find out you really are a little braver than you feel. Being brave or courageous isn't about not being afraid. It's about doing something that's right even when you are afraid. Will you try to remember that this week? O.K., thanks! And thanks for being here this morning!

Sermon:

I might as well be candid with you right from the beginning. This morning I'm going to invite myself and you to face some mighty unpleasant facts and probabilities; things we may not think about very often. My goal is not to depress us. Goodness knows we see enough reasons to be depressed without looking for more. My goal is, as usual, to help us find joy and a deep meaning in life; a lasting spirituality that can sustain us no matter what happens. I want us together to find meaning in our lives that can stare down the worst facts of our reality and help us love life. The good news is that most of the unpleasantness is probably a long way off.

In a recent sermon, I talked about the universe being indifferent to us, rather than friendly or hostile; that it might just not care. I wondered with you whether we humans might be the only beings that can care in an indifferent, uncaring Universe. We considered the possibility that caring might be our unique gift to the Universe, a gift of purpose and meaning from humanity to everything that is.

In his book Death by Black Hole, astrophysicist Neil DeGrasse Tyson argues that the universe is not indifferent to us. He thinks the universe is hostile. Section 5 of his book is entitled "When the Universe Turns Bad – All the Ways the Cosmos Wants to Kill Us."¹

People are fascinated with the end of humanity, the world, and the universe. The Wikipedia article on "Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction" says: "The first centuries AD saw the creation of various apocalyptic works; the best known (due to its inclusion in the New Testament) is the Book of Revelation" "[T]he word 'apocalypse' . . . originated [from the Book of Revelation], meaning "revelation of secrets", which is

¹ Neil DeGrasse Tyson, Death by Black Hole and Other Cosmic Quandaries (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2007), pp. 359, 254.

replete with prophecies of destruction.” “Numerous societies, including the Babylonian and Judaic traditions, have produced apocalyptic literature and mythology, some of which dealt with the end of the world and of human society.” “Apocalyptic fiction [today] is a sub-genre of science fiction that is concerned with the end of civilization either through nuclear war, plague, or some other general disaster. Post-apocalyptic fiction is set in a world or civilization after such a disaster.”

The 1994 film “Nostradamus” was a highly fictionalized story of Michel de Nostradame, a young doctor in 16th century Europe who was burdened with intense dreams and visions. He foretold world wars, human space travel, and other momentous events, including the end of the world.

The recent film “2012” deals with the end of the Mayan calendar in 2012. The movie predicts that in that year, solar flares will bombard the Earth, heating its core. That will cause volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and megatsunamis, plunging the world into chaos. Los Angeles falls into the Pacific Ocean, the Yellowstone National Park caldera erupts. The main characters narrowly escape many catastrophes in an effort to reach ships in the Himalayas. This year you can also see “The Book of Eli” and “Legion.” They both concern disasters to human civilization, and interestingly, both have a religious theme.

In Death by Black Hole, Tyson writes: “One needn’t look far to find scary predictions of a global holocaust by killer asteroids. That’s good, because most of what you might have seen, read, or heard is true.”² “[A] 1908 explosion near the Tunguska River, Siberia, felled thousands of square kilometers of trees and incinerated the 300 square kilometers [around] ground zero. The impactor is believed to have been a 60-

² Ibid., p. 254.

meter stony meteorite. . . . The chart predicts collisions of this magnitude to happen, on average, every couple of centuries. The 200-kilometer diameter Chicxulub Crater in the Yucatan, Mexico, is believed to be the calling card of a 10-kilometer, that is, 10,000 meter, asteroid. With an impact energy 5 billion times greater than the atomic bombs exploded in World War II, such a collision is predicted to occur about once in about 100 million years. The crater dates from 65 million years ago, and there hasn't been one of its magnitude since. [A]t about the same time, Tyrannosaurus rex and friends became extinct, enabling mammals to evolve into something more ambitious than tree shrews.”³ “[N]early 70 percent of Earth's species were suddenly wiped out.”⁴

Tyson continues: “Sometimes it seems that everybody is trying to tell you when and how the world will end. Some scenarios are more familiar than others. Those that are widely discussed in the media include rampant infectious disease, nuclear war, collisions with asteroids or comets, and environmental blight. [But those disasters just wipe out humans.] What hardly anybody talks about are end-of-world scenarios that do, in fact, jeopardize our temperate planet in its stable orbit round the Sun. . . . Three that come to mind are the death of the Sun, the impending collision between our Milky Way galaxy and the Andromeda galaxy, and the death of the universe, about which the community of astrophysicists has recently achieved consensus.”⁵

“At an estimated age of 5 billion years, the Sun will enjoy another 5 billion years of relatively stable energy output. [But the Sun] will then exhaust its hydrogen fuel supply. . . . When that happens . . . , gravity wins, the inner regions of the star collapse, and the central temperature rises through 100 million degrees Our oceans will

³ Ibid., p. 258.

⁴ Ibid., p. 259.

⁵ Ibid., p. 263.

come to a rolling boil as they evaporate entirely into interplanetary space [along with our superheated atmosphere.]”⁶

“And if an interloping black hole comes too close to us, it will dine on the entire planet, first crumbling the solid Earth into a rubble pile by virtue of its unstoppable tidal forces. The remains would then be extruded through the fabric of space-time, descending as a long string of atoms through the black hole’s event horizon, down to its singularity.”⁷

And “[w]ith or without warp drives, the long-term fate of the cosmos cannot be postponed or avoided. No matter where you hide, you will be part of a universe that inexorably marches toward a peculiar oblivion. The latest and best evidence available on the space density of matter and energy and the expansion rate of the universe suggest that we are on a one-way trip: the collective gravity of everything in the universe is insufficient to halt and reverse the cosmic expansion.”⁸

“Trillions of years into the future, when all stars are gone, and every process in every nook and cranny of the expanding universe has wound down, all parts of the cosmos will cool to the same temperature as the ever-cooling background. At that time, space travel will no longer provide refuge because even Hell will have frozen over. We may then declare that the universe has died – not with a bang, but with a whimper.”⁹

Now, some people believe in a God who is eternal and a heaven that is everlasting. How comforting it would be if they are right. At least it would be comforting if you qualify for the reward of eternity. But the rest of us are faced with a much bleaker

⁶ Ibid., p. 264.

⁷ Ibid., p. 278.

⁸ Ibid., p. 266.

⁹ Ibid., p. 267.

prospect – the eventual end of absolutely everything. Nothing lasts forever, apparently not even the universe itself.

When I go to apocalyptic movies, there is almost always a moment when the main characters are faced with the “end.” It looks hopeless. In those moments, I almost always ask myself what I would do if faced with imminent annihilation. The answer is always the same. I would spend my final moments with those I love. I would tell them how much I love them, how important they’ve been to me. I would tell them how grateful I am that they made my life worth living. And somehow I know that even when my life ends, I will feel that it has been worth living.

Of course, each of us is going to die an individual death. It’s hard enough to find purpose and meaning in spite of that unpleasant fact. But there is, I think, a comfort in the assurance that although each of us will die, our genes, our families, our love, and our influence will continue. It really does give us sufficient reason for going on, for having children, for loving. To let our DNA, our human evolutionary experiment, and our kindness continue, for our Earth and its life to survive. To see what happens; where the universe goes from here.

But even love, humanity, and the universe only last for a while, even if a long while. How do you find some meaning in living when not just we, but everything will end? I mean, really, what is the point of anything when absolutely nothing is permanent; when everyone we know dies, when humanity dies? What does anything matter when our Earth and our Sun die, when our Milky Way galaxy and the universe die?

The “end” can mean death, of course. But there is another meaning for the word “end.” As in the question, “to what end?” What is the purpose, the goal? As UU

minister Forrest Church reminded us in his book Love and Death, “Death is just life’s terminus, not life’s goal.” What is the end of things that end? In other words, what is the purpose of temporary, mortal things we know will not last forever? Especially when that includes everything? Is the whole universe some very long-lived accident that will simply die some day very far in the future, with nothing to show for all those trillions of years? Why bother?

Let me tell you a story that I think helped me gain a new insight on why anything, even the long-lived universe, matters. I remember my Aunt Edna fondly. When we were growing up, she was always kind and understanding and supportive. And she loved to sing. Later in life, long after I had moved several states away and didn’t see her that often anymore, she developed Alzheimer’s. She and her family suffered with that condition for years. One year, my dad’s older brother, my Uncle Ward, his wife, Aunt Edna, their eldest daughter, Donna, and her husband, Alan, drove out to visit my dad, Joe, and stepmother, Erma while they were staying with me in Phoenix. The four of them, Ward, Edna, Donna, and Alan, drove from Kansas to Phoenix.

I remember that visit well. First, the other three were very glad to get here. When they did, Donna, out of Aunt Edna’s earshot, told me what an exhausting and frustrating drive it had been. Aunt Edna would ask, “Why are we driving?” Donna, or one of the other two, would tell her, “We’re going to visit Joe and Erma.” “Do they live far away?” “Yes, remember, they stay with Terry during the winter.” “Where is that?” “In Phoenix.” In a few minutes, if it took that long, Aunt Edna would ask again, “Why are we in the car? Are we going home?” “No, Mom, remember, we’re going to visit Joe and Erma and Terry.” “Where do they live?” And the whole series of questions and

answers would be repeated. This happened more times than Donna, Alan, or Uncle Ward could remember, every few minutes during two long days of driving.

My first thought was how hard that had been for everyone. My next thought was that Aunt Edna's traveling companions were in desperate need of a break. And it was my turn to visit with Aunt Edna. About the sixth time I had answered the same question, I thought that I was ready to do about anything else than keep talking with her. And I wondered to myself, "How does this end? What purpose does it serve?" Aunt Edna clearly had no memory that we were repeating the same conversation over and over.

I'm sure to give us all a break from the strain of conversation, my dad suggested that we sing some hymns. Dad played the piano and we all joined in singing old hymns Aunt Edna and the rest of us knew by heart. And you could just tell that she loved singing those old hymns in our little group. I have every reason to believe that five minutes after the singing stopped, Aunt Edna didn't remember it at all. But I saw her face while she was singing. She was having the time of her life.

For four or five years before she died, Aunt Edna was in the dementia wing of the assisted living facility where she lived. Uncle Ward lived in his apartment across the street. And every day he went to visit Aunt Edna in the morning, did volunteer work at the facility, ate lunch with her, did more volunteer work, spent the afternoon and evening with her, and returned to his apartment to sleep. Every day for four or five years, even when she didn't recognize him, her husband of more than 50 years.

What purpose did his devotion serve for her? He remembered the string of yesterdays, but she didn't. But I'm guessing that sometimes in every one of those yesterdays, she was happy. For at least a moment or two at a time, she still enjoyed

life. There was a song in her heart. And then the moment passed, taking her memory with it.

Does anything that doesn't last really matter? Like events we can't remember, like our own lives, like the universe? The only answer I can come up with was set poetically by William Blake: "To see the world in a grain of sand, and a heaven in a wildflower, hold infinity in the palm of your hand, and eternity in an hour." If we think in terms of logic and longitudinal time, what the Greeks called *chronos*, it is absurd to talk about huge units being contained in tiny ones: the world in a grain of sand; heaven in a wildflower; infinity in the palm of your hand; and eternity in an hour. But the Greeks had another word for time in a different sense: *kairos*. It means the exactly right time, the best time; a moment containing the fullness of time.

I think of Aunt Edna's face in the moments she was singing. What difference did it really make whether she could remember those moments? They contained the time of her life in the *kairos* sense, the best time, the fullness of time. Eternity in an hour.

I've used this quotation before, but it bears repeating. Tennessee Williams, the playwright, said: "To snatch the eternal from the desperately fleeting is the great magic trick of human existence."

Individually, we share the same destiny all life and the universe itself do – extinction. Somehow, that makes me feel better. It really does, although I'm not sure why. And I think everything that exists shares the same end in the sense of purpose, too. Every moment well lived justifies its own existence. Eternity in the *kairos* sense, not the *chronos* sense. Nothing more is needed. Which is good, because there may be nothing more.

What difference does anything make if absolutely nothing survives? I have no better answer than my faith, or maybe just my desperate hope or need to believe that we matter, at least to ourselves and those we love. It makes a difference because it matters to us. The “end of everything,” its purpose, is to be, to exist, maybe just for us to appreciate. Maybe just so life can reflect on itself, as we humans do. Annie Dillard wrote: “We are here to abet creation and to witness to it, to notice each other’s beautiful face and complex nature so that creation need not play to an empty house.”

Keep on singing and dancing. Keep on wondering and being awe-struck and enjoying and being grateful. Keep on doing your best and doing what you think is right and loving everyone you can, in every way you can. Whatever happens to us, to everything, let’s embrace each other and every eternal moment in this life we have. Blessed be.

Benediction: “Ponder this thing in your heart, life up from sea: eyes to behold, throats to sing, mates to love. This is the wonder of time; this is the marvel of space; out of the stars swung the earth; life upon earth rose to love. This is the marvel of life, rising to see and to know; out of your heart, cry wonder: sing that we live.” Amen.

Many insects and flowers have very brief lifespans. Day lilies, hibiscus, and evening primrose all last only one day. The entire lifespan of a mayfly ranges from 30 minutes to one day. The lifespan of many microorganisms is just a few seconds. They are all examples of life. But what purpose can such lives have? And are we not like the mayfly in comparison with the universe?

According to the online resource “The Free Dictionary,” the expression “whistling in the dark” means “to be confident that something good will happen when it is not at all likely.” But I actually like the definition given by the website “Answers.com” better: “a literal attempt” “to summon up courage in a frightening situation, to make a show of bravery.” In his book Whistling in the Dark, Christian theologian Frederick Buechner says that “Faith is a kind of whistling in the dark, it seems to me” The funny thing is, if you can get past the logic that the whistling is just a show of bravery because it doesn’t change the situation, it works! It works because it changes your reality, your outlook. Whistling in the dark works because it changes you.

The reason we whistle in the dark is that we like the tune and it makes us feel better. It doesn’t make the dark and whatever dangers it conceals go away. Whistling our own tune is an act of defiance, defiance of the brute fact of extinction. A declaration that we live; that we are agents for creating good in this life, that we have what philosophers call moral agency; that we control what we do and how we do it; that we can be courageous in the face of adversity and an uncertain future, uncertain in all respects but one, which is that it ends. Whistling in the dark is a way of not letting the dark defeat us, no matter what comes. It is a way of shaping reality.