

Grounded

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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Elephants in Clay © 2022 Rod E.S.Q.

The question of life has been around for a long time. It may well be where religion comes from. And that goes for the *questions* of life, and the questions that come *with* life and all that we ask *about* life.

Defining life has also been a tricky quest.

There are traditions that see *breath* as the mark of life, and the difference between the quick and the dead, therefore, is marked by the ability to breathe.

It is perhaps quite appropriate, then, that when scientists study life, one of the ways to consider whether something is alive is respiration – the exchange of gases with its surroundings, such as air and water, interacting with these surroundings, giving and receiving energy.

Indeed, like respiration, the very words for inspiration and spirit are all related to breath, as reflected in one of the creation stories in which God is described as blowing divine breath into the first earthlings – the

humans made from the ground. The Hebrew word that is used in Genesis is *ruach*, and it can be translated as breath, wind, or spirit. (There is also a pun between the name of *Adam* and the word for earth *adamah*.)

And so it is that we can consider the earth itself to show signs that are consistent with life. The ground exchanges gases, including ones containing oxygen and carbon – the very same ones that we exchange! Soil is composed of similar systems as us, as well as those of pretty much other living organisms. It can be helpful to consider the earth as a kind of meta-organism of its own.

Earth-based spiritual traditions have carried versions of this wisdom for centuries. And considering the soil, and even the very planet that it sits on, as a living being, is increasingly in vogue in scientific mindsets as well.

Categorization is a useful tool in both theology and science, as it helps in understanding how those things that are most similar to each other work, and it allows comparison to other things depending on their degree of variability, such as different species (“according to their kinds”). And... categorization can also be misleading, in that it can artificially separate certain concepts and organisms from their relationship with the larger web of existence. It is in the edges of these categories that things often get interesting.

Biology is sometimes called the science of exceptions. And while the way we most often use the label of *life* can be helpful in understanding certain processes, it is also on the edges of what we call *life* that we can sometimes see more similarities than expected... where we can see a deeper relationship.

Whether the things that are beyond us, or animals, or plants, or microorganisms, fit into a textbook description of life is an interesting question in itself. But another interesting thing is that even if – even

when – different things don't fit in all the categories we have assigned for what constitutes living, it is still worthwhile (it is still helpful) to consider the wider systems of the universe as living.

The earth, the oceans, the lakes, the atmosphere, even the social systems among different organisms – each of these can make more sense when we are open to seeing the hidden life in each of them.

And, as inquisitive minds (be it as spiritual seekers, theologians, or scientists), we are invited to explore that hidden life.

The Lenten season is coming to a close, with the impending arrival of Easter, along with its collective pageant of intentionally doing without, doing with less, or paying closer attention to what is essential. And is it does, we seek to hearken back to finding more life where we might not have seen it before. To resurrect our commitment to connect with the living spirit and celebrate it. To invite revelation, especially in unexpected places.

Astrophysicist Carl Sagan observed that all that we consider life today (as well as the things that we don't) all come from the seed of hydrogen atoms interacting with each other over long times and wide spaces. Hydrogen atoms, that became heavier elements in the furnaces of stars, throughout their life cycle, who themselves gave birth to other elements, often at their death in supernovae explosions. All of these eventually interacting with each other to make the ground – and from that ground... us! (and everything around us). And those hydrogen atoms themselves derive from the primordial source of matter, which is the energy that came from the beginning of the Big Bang.

Now Sagan was often seen as an exemplar agnostic or perhaps atheist, and yet it is difficult to read or hear his many works that contemplate the cosmos without hearing a pronounced mystical voice. The approach taken by him and many science communicators like him, is that the

eternal inquiry about the universe is inevitably conducive to an immense feeling of wonder and awe.

Whether your approach takes the more formal/methodical processes of science or the wider/intuitive approach of an earth-centred tradition, or the oral narrative tradition of a biblical story, the mystical truth that is shared along all these currents is that life is indeed connected, mysterious, and *sacred* in its shared origins and in its enduring links.

We pursue these questions with different approaches and drawing from many sources. Whether you find these in biblical texts or other sacred scriptures, in earth-based observances and practices, in YouTube videos that offer appealing visual narratives, in the many forms of meditation and contemplation, or in the act of engaging with the world, these are all spiritual works that invite us to connect with the truths beyond ourselves and to take action for sustaining what sustains us.

It is perhaps an open question whether scientific pursuits might ever “solve” the mysteries of the universe – but they don’t have to. Because in these pursuits, we continue to find new meanings to what life can do and what life can be. In this exploration, we continue to find new evidence of what life can look like, and how we are connected to all forms of life around us (and everything in between).

My friends, the knowledge and wisdom, or truths, or stories, or questions, that I’m sharing with you today aren’t all that novel or ground-breaking. You’ve heard me say versions of that before, and you’ve heard others say versions of that before me. *You* have quite likely expressed some aspect of these, or thought something along those lines. What I am here to do on days like these, is to reprise the invitation to consider all of these again. To remind us that these questions, observations, meditations, all matter. They warrant our renewed attention from time to time. And they invoke deeper exploration as we delve into the everyday living of our lives.

Why? Because it is easy to forget this interconnected web, and it is easy to overlook it, especially when other difficult stories in the world, and in our lives, draw us away from appreciating it.

My friends, our task as spiritual beings, and as a spiritual community, involves constantly re-committing to enhancing our awareness of these mysteries, and to reconnect to the invitation for us to engage in awe and wonder. To *ground* ourselves in the truths that come from remembering the earth that we come from, and the roots it shares with the rest of the universe.

And every once in a while, my friends, pursuing a review of these views, will offer fresh insight. It will invite a new sense of awe for the amazing power of creation.

So may it be,
In awe and wonder
Amen

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Suggested Hymns:

Opening Hymn #44 We Sing of Golden Mornings

~)-| Words: Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1803-1882, recast 1925, 1950, 1990, © American Ethical Union

Music: William Walker's *Southern Harmony*, 1835

COMPLAINER 7.6.7.6.D.

Hymn #301 Touch the Earth, Reach the Sky!

~)-| W & M: Grace Lewis-McLaren, 1939- ,

©1988 Grace Lewis-McLaren

TOUCH THE EARTH 6.7.9.8

Closing Hymn #207 Earth Was Given as a Garden

~)-| Words: Roberta Bard, 1940- , © 1992 Roberta Bard Ruby

Music: Rowland Hugh Prichard, 1811-1887

HYFRYDOL 8.7.8.7.D.