

Stellar Apple Pie

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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11 December, 2022



As we approach the middle of December, certain seasonal motifs become increasingly conspicuous. It will be common to see “indoor trees” in many homes (maybe even your own), and these are often decorated with a star at the top – as is the one we have in our church’s sanctuary.

Stellar Apple © 2022 Rod E.S.Q.

Stars, of course, are linked with the traditional Christmas story, which includes an account of a Star of Bethlehem, as a guiding light toward a mystical revelation. In Christmas, this mystical revelation is the power of cosmic divinity in a child.

Last year, I spoke about the *Posadas* tradition in Mexico, in which small communities look to re-enact part of the Christmas story, in which Mary and Joseph look for lodging while traveling far from home, so that Mary may give birth to her child (*posada* refers to “lodging”). At the end of this re-enactment, it is customary to smash a piñata, which is traditionally made in a “Star of Bethlehem” image, with many points adorned in paper ruffles and tassels. This tradition would start this week (it’s usually around the Dec. 16), so this feels like a good time to think about stars, and how they may continue to offer guidance in our lives.

Along with that, this is also a season in which many of us pay special attention to certain kinds of foods. This may simply be that some childhood favourites of yours are featured more often around this time of year. Or, you happen to be able to gather with friends or family who make special dishes. Or, perhaps *you* are the person who is keen on making these special dishes, either for others... or for yourself.

When gathering for special food – or when settling down on your own for some special treat – there is sometimes a debate on whether to get food ready-made or whether to start “from scratch” and make it all on your own.

Now, I should say that I find no shame in getting food ready-made. Depending on each of our individual situations, it may be the most realistic or effective way to get fed. I myself like to get certain meals made by the professionals, either because I might not have the time or inclination to make a meal at a given time, or because I know that, for some dishes, there are others who are better at preparing them than me.

But, if you’re up for the challenge, or find it personally enjoyable, there can be a certain feeling of achievement in making something from scratch – starting with ingredients that may be used for many other things, but then making them into an entirely new thing. It may take longer (and may sometimes even be costlier) than simply getting the finished product from the get-go, but going through the process of preparation can be its own payoff, and sometimes even offer a superior product – or, at least, one that is personally special.

Yet, as we gaze upon the stars, and ponder about their ancient wisdom, an inconvenient question might crop up – can we *really* make *anything* from scratch?

Scratch is a way of saying “from the beginning”, so that we may take some claim of responsibility – and credit – for creating a meal ourselves “all on our own”.

Most of us will understand that starting with typical kitchen ingredients, such as fresh produce, or plain spices and seasonings, might be enough to say we’re starting from scratch – that is, from the beginning. And from then on staking a claim that we’re making the thing ourselves.

Take apple pie. If we start with a few things like apples, flour, sugar, cinnamon, and a few other things, like butter, salt, and whatever your

secret recipe calls for, and then put them together and bake it, we can typically claim credit for having made the pie “all on your own”.

And to be clear, making an apple pie this way is, indeed, an achievement. And I know that some of you are particularly good at this sort of thing – so, this is not a commentary on your abilities or skill.

But going deeper, how much does this *really* represent making it “all on our own”? What does it *really* take to start “from the beginning”?

Very quickly, we realize that that particular claim is a bit of a fantasy. The apples didn’t come out of nowhere. They may have come from the orchard down the street, or been trucked in from a place further away. And they were grown from the ground, with water from the ground or the sky, with knowhow from a whole team of farmers and farm workers, and labour by people that live nearby or came from far away. They, too, make the pie that we bake. The beginning starts further back than our kitchen counter. The reality is that none of us makes a pie “all on our own”.

Same deal with the sugar, which most certainly came from farther away, not to mention additional processing by people and machines, at a factory. And the butter has a similar story, plus the life investment of animals that gave of themselves, in some way or other (even vegetarians have bees to recognize for their role in pollinating for fruits and vegetables). Many of you are involved in some of these kinds of industries, and will well appreciate the work involved way before a pie starts “from scratch”. None of us make a pie “all on our own”.

I could tell similar stories about any of the ingredients that go into a pie, way before we have a go at making it “all on our own”... “from the beginning”.

But let’s go a bit deeper. Because even before any of these ingredients get to look like anything we’d recognize as food, or the inputs for the food, we might consider what makes the stuff that they’re made of...

and that stuff was made a long, long time ago – possibly in our galaxy, but likely still far, far away.

I'm particularly fond of the way that the late astrophysicist Carl Sagan describes how all of the elements we're made of have had a long journey toward their creation. Most of them were made during the lives of stars... or as they died. And even though hydrogen, the simplest of the elements was not made in stars, it too could only be formed as the early big bang universe cooled down enough for it to come into being, at a time very close to the beginning.

In the vast furnaces of stars, hydrogen came together under immense pressure and heat to make helium... and eventually, other things like carbon, and oxygen, things that our bodies and the stuff we eat know very well. After enough hydrogen fuses together to make iron, then it is only through the death of some stars – in massive supernovae explosions – that we come about other elements we know, like gold, and tungsten, and... molybdenum. What we stand on, what we breathe, who we are, all came to be in another time and another space, in and by stars we'll never know about, and which we have never named.

My friends, we have spent much time and contemplation this year in honoring and recognizing the legacy of our ancestors, recent and historic. And just as we are the product of our ancestors, for whom we are grateful, we and these ancestors are the products of ancestral stars, whom we may honor and recognize as part of our creation – to whom we may offer credit in the creation of the carbon, oxygen, nitrogen, that make up the apples in a pie, forged inside stars and at their end, as well as the even more ancestral hydrogen, which may be nearly as old as our universe.

My friends, it is no small feat to make an apple pie in your kitchen, especially if you get to share it with loved ones – or with strangers you have yet to meet. And it does not diminish your achievement to share the credit with those who also collaborated in making the ingredients before they got to the kitchen, or with the ancestors who crafted the

knowhow and shared the knowledge, or with the stellar ancestors that made possible what we are and where we are.

My friends, we may never make a dish “all on our own”, but then, isn’t it comforting that we don’t ever do anything “all on our own”? as a cloud of witnesses collaborates with us in everything we do? (a cloud that includes, somewhere along the line, a literal cosmic cloud from a nebula of freshly-created elements)

My friends, it turns out that, to *really* make an apple pie from scratch may take longer than we might expect – 14 billion years, give or take a few million.

My friends, over this holiday season, or into the new year, if you come across a slice of apple pie, or apples, or pie, it wouldn’t be out of place to offer a prayer of gratitude and joy, to the people who made the final preparation “all on their own – but not by their own” (no small feat); a prayer of gratitude and joy for the people and animals who offered of themselves; a prayer of gratitude and joy for the stars whose lives continue to live within each of us; for our ancestors near and far; recent and from time immemorial; for the unfathomable forces and reach of time and space, which remind us that none of us is “all on our own”.

So may it be,
In the spirit of mystical connection,
Amen

*Suggested Hymns:***Opening #1051 We Are... (For Each Child That's Born)**

~)-| Words & music: Ysaÿe M. Barnwell, 1946- , © 1991 Barnwell's Notes Publishing (BMI). Used by permission.

Hymn #225 O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

Words: Latin c. 9th cent., trans. Composite based on John Mason Neale, 1818-1866, recast

Music: Adapt. by Thomas Helmore, 1811-1890, harmony by John Weaver,

1937- , harm. © 1990 John Weaver.

VENI EMMANUEL

Closing #1059 May Your Life Be As Song

~)-| Words: Jim Scott, 1946 -

Music: Yuri Zaritsky