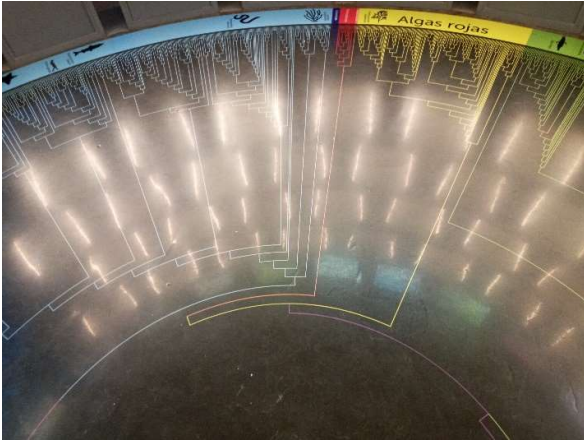


# *The Leviathan of Parsonstown*

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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One of the ways to look at the Lenten and Easter season is as a kind of bookend – and parallel – to the Advent and Christmas season, as we revisit the stories and practices of anticipation and revelation, all the while exploring themes of divinity in unexpected places that are far, near, and within us, as well as of resurrection and rebirth.

In the Christmas story, which we hear or retell in the darkest and coldest days of the year, we come across a set of mysterious characters – the original text calls them *magi* – we often call them the “wise men from the east”. But the people who study these kinds of stories aren’t always sure who these people were, what it was they did, or even how many of them there were. Where they kings? priests? sages? magicians? fortune-tellers? The sources aren’t very clear.

One thing that is rather clear, is that they looked at stars. I often call them *stargazers* in my dynamic translation of the text that talks about them. And in the story, this stargazing gives them surprising insight.

They weren’t the only ones. People in ancient times looked up at the heavens – a lot. Partly, this might have been because there wasn’t much else that they could do at night. I imagine that it also offered them a sense of awe to look at the uncountable stars and other heavenly bodies, and the mysteries they held, or the stories they sometimes offered. Also, looking at the sky in day and night, they found that... the sky spoke to them. It offered clues about the weather and how the earth would treat them at a particular time – it told them when to plant, grow,

and harvest food; where to be, and which places to avoid at certain times.

Many societies figured out that, by looking at the heavens in evermore systematic ways they could get very precise information – even if there always seemed to be more questions. The Maya civilization figured out how long the year was, down to fractions of a day. People in ancient Egypt, Greece, and India figured out that the Earth was round much earlier than the public imagination gives them credit for, and they came up with pretty good guesses as to how big it is. All by looking at the sky and its relationship to the earth... as well as some disciplined practice.

We still do that today! Maybe not as often in our regular individual lives... other things often catch our attention. But we do have entire sets of professional stargazers and skywatchers (and there are many amateur ones too). Meteorologists can give us a sense of what to expect weatherwise and about how the climate of our planet is doing – along with directives as to what we might do about that.

Astronomers look out deep into space, and we continue to get very interesting answers to things we have wondered about the place where we live – the universe! our planet! the ground that we stand on! All the while new questions emerge.

As people figured out the difference between the stars that appear fixed on the sky (at least, in the timescale of our lifetimes) and the planets that move around from night to night, they kept finding other things to pique their interest – unresolved questions.

In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, one of the big unresolved matters was the question of “smudges” in the sky. Things that were too fuzzy to be stars or planets. What were they?

The astronomers Charles Messier and John Herschel, and many others, pondered about these smudges. Some folks thought they were nebulous

clouds of gas in space – nebulae, they called them. Others thought that they were immense clusters of stars, what we now call galaxies, just like our Milky Way.

The technology at the time wasn't making things clearer – the telescopes weren't big enough, and the observations weren't conclusive. So, the 3<sup>rd</sup> earl of Rosse, William Parsons, along with many other people, set about to build a bigger telescope – the biggest one yet – a leviathan.

The Leviathan of Parsonstown had a mirror 1.8 meters in diameter – six feet (and over the past three years, we've gotten a sense of how heavy six feet can feel). And the tube that protected it needed to be held up by a kind of stone fortress that made the observatory look like a strange kind of castle.

When it was finished... they looked up the sky again. As science explainer Hank Green enthusiastically proclaims, it turns out everyone was right! Some of the smudges were clouds of gas – nebulae. Others were gigantic clusters of stars – galaxies.

Of course, there's a flipside to this. In a way, it also means that everyone was wrong – at least to the extent that folks might have thought they were the *only* ones to be correct.

This isn't the first or only time that something like this has happened in the story of people and in the story of science. For centuries, people who ask questions, and who seek answers, have wondered whether light is a particle or a wave. There have been intense disagreements and vigorous debates about this. And part of the search about this involved looking up at the heavens.

Turns out, everyone was right – we now understand light to behave both as a wave *and* a particle – a wave-particle – and the answer sometimes

depends on what kind of question you're asking about it. There are still some things we don't understand about light – the quest continues.

Eventually, we've built bigger – and bigger-er telescopes. Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, we've had the Hubble space telescope, as well as other kinds of radio, x-ray, and infrared telescopes on earth. Each of them offers interesting answers, and usually more questions.

We now have the James Webb space telescope – the biggest one yet, and we're beginning to get some interesting answers, which... are raising questions about how we've come to understand the universe and its story – our story. One of the early observations from the Webb telescope is that we're finding ancient galaxies – almost as old as the universe – that seem to be too big for their age. There's an element of mystery here, and that can be unsettling, and also exciting. This can bring up disagreements in how we understand the universe, though I wouldn't be surprised if there were more than one correct answer.

Of course, this doesn't mean that all answers are always equally correct. The search for truth requires disciplined practice, honesty, and diligence. It also requires a measure of humility – there *are* incorrect answers. But finding *one* correct answer does not necessarily mean that other answers are always wrong.

My friends, our tradition – itself a legacy of traditions – also tells a set of stories about espousing multiple outcomes. Both Unitarians and Universalists have come to understand that, in disagreements, presuming only one correct answer is too constraining, and it may indeed be one of the greatest mistakes.

Unitarians understood that recognizing a sense of divinity need not negate affirmation for the human spirit. Universalists understood that one individual's journey of redemption did not represent another one's

condemnation. More than one person, and more than one option, can be right. And that of course, can depend on the question that is asked, and it can include significant personal and spiritual work, a life-journey of searching, being open to surprising answers, and espousing a perpetually questioning mind.

My friends, our community of searchers thrives on this spiritual quest. There have been and there will be disagreements. And if we take our spiritual practice seriously, along with some humility, we may find more than one valid answer, as well as invitations to further exciting quests.

My friends, in this community, may we share a ministry of shared search, and shared insight.

So may it be,  
In the spirit of multiple answers,  
Amen

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*Suggested Hymns:*

### **Opening Hymn #145 As Tranquil Streams**

~)-| Words: Marion Franklin Ham, 1867-1956

Music: *Musicalisches Hand-buch*, Hamburg, 1690, adapt.

WINCHESTER NEW

### **Hymn #283 The Spacious Firmament on High**

Words: Joseph Addison 1672-1719, paraphrase of Psalm 19:1-6

Music: Franz Joseph Haydn, 1732-1809, adapt. *Dulcimer, or New York Collection of Sacred Music*, 1850, alt.

CREATION

### **Closing #335 Once When My Heart Was Passion Free**

Words: John B. Tabb, 1845-1909

Music: From *Kentucky Harmony*, 1816

PRIMROSE