

Significant

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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As Earth Day approaches next week, we set ourselves up to paying extra special attention to what it means to appreciate our planet – and our place in it.

This has also been a time when the season invites us to spend more time outside the home, and perhaps socialize a bit more, especially as we've been expectantly awaiting more in-person events, like our church lunch and auction – times when we can foster further connection as a community.

And we have more opportunities to spend time outdoors, even at night, perhaps inviting us to look up at the evening sky more often. And, if you do that, some strange feelings may come up...

As children, we began to learn just how unexpectedly large the world we stand on is. And perhaps that's when we began to get a sense of how small we might seem when compared to it. And just as we may have gotten used to how big the world is, we would have also been confronted with the reality of how small it is in turn, as we learned that there are things that are *even bigger* than our planet – the solar system, and the distances between our home star and its neighbours, the immense size of our galaxy and how small it still seems when set besides to the unfathomable scope of the universe – and that's just the parts of the universe that we know of!

This may have piqued our sense of curiosity, perhaps with some excitement for exploration, to get a taste of *what else* is out there. And... it may have also magnified that sense of how tiny our selves and our existence seemed in comparison.

That is the paradox of awe, and its double outcome, which can invite severe existential angst when reflecting on our apparent insignificance, but also a greater sense of connection with – and appreciation for – all that matters.

In an interview with the newly-selected crew for the upcoming Artemis II mission to orbit the moon, late show host Stephen Colbert, asked mission specialist Christina Koch about her experience of the “overview effect” – the sense of wonder that comes from seeing the earth, and all of us in it, against the backdrop of space. And Koch has become quite familiar with that experience, as she has spent over 300 days in space – more than any other woman.

It is often said that it is hard to replicate – or explain – that feeling if you’ve never been to space. This is still an impossibility for most of us (even though it is becoming increasingly feasible for some people to do that over the past few years). But I have a feeling that we’re all able to get a glimpse of that sense of insignificance and awe when we ponder upon the vastness around us, and we consider our place in it. I suspect that most of us – perhaps all of us – have had moments when one or both of those feelings have seized upon our minds.

Sometimes, it simply takes a moment to sit down and meditate, to sit with the moment and place at hand. Other times, it may be a matter of looking up some knowledge beyond what we already have. For some of us, a walk into other places may bring up unexpected opportunities...

Take Tom Turcich, who took this last option to an extreme, when he decided to take a walk around the world. The drive to do so came to him as a teenager, when a dear friend of his suddenly died. Seeing the reality of her death gave more immediacy to Tom’s own sense of mortality, giving him the urgency to seize the day and explore the world, before it was too late. He prepared for a few years and then took on the challenge, taking seven years to go around the world, by foot.

Along the way, he rescued and adopted a puppy, Savannah, who kept him company. And as he was completing his trek, he met his eventual girlfriend and life partner. And there's something else he feels he found along the way – the meaning of life.

Finding himself alone for much of the time, he felt the immenseness of the world he was walking around in. The loneliness of the desert or the forest, the darkness of the night and the abundance of the stars. He tasted the insignificance of his life.

And then, he met the people of the world. Strangers that would help him out and encourage him, talking with people who had vastly different life experiences than his, with their own challenges, and still a common sense of humanity permeating their shared lives. The relationships he built, the challenges he shared, all gave him a sense of meaning among his insignificance. Finding the love of his life, as well as a faithful companion, reminded him that, in the daunting vastness, there is ample possibility for beauty, inspiration, and joy. All this was, he concluded, of the most ultimate significance.

Not all of us have the ability to embark on that particular kind of journey. But we are all likely bound to find spots when we touch upon the absurdity of our existence among everything else, and yet we find connection with people, places, and moments that mean the world to us.

Sometimes, all it takes is a look within our home, our church building, or the sidewalk. A look at something as mundane as concrete – grey, hard, “boring” concrete.

A couple weeks ago, I spoke about the neat self-healing properties of Roman concrete, and how its recently-rediscovered ancient recipe allows it to heal itself in a way that modern concrete isn't able to do.

But Canadian-Australian science communicator, Dr. Derek Muller, has pointed out that our current “regular” concrete is quite remarkable in itself, not least because it represents a tangible connection – a concrete

connection, as it were – with our planet’s ancient past. The limestone that forms the basis for our concrete was formed from deposits of long-deceased marine life, whose exoskeletons now leave a legacy of calcium carbonate that we work with, to build our cities. The physical foundations of our church building, and likely parts of your own dwellings or places that you’ve been in, literally build upon ancient life from millions of years ago.

This is the same continuum of living chemistry that has been around for 27% of the life of our known universe, as science communicator Hank Green observes. He notes that there are different ways to measure our place in the universe – all it requires is a readjustment of how we perceive where we are in it. Sure, he concedes, our individual lives may *seem* like nothing when compared to everything else... until we consider our *relationship* with everything else.

We may be individual humans with exasperatingly short lifespans, but we are part of a human experience much larger than ourselves. Humanity may be but a sliver of life on earth, but life on earth has built upon itself for billions of years – a story that we are integral to – and a witness to.

The continuum of living chemistry that Hank Green describes goes far back enough as to represent 27% of the *life of the universe*. And we are part of that continuum.

Now, it may seem that Green is playing a pure numbers game... is 27% all that more important than 1% or 0.1%? How about when contrasted to the other 73%? Does it matter then?

I think he’s on to something else. Beyond the specific numbers is the reframing of the question – where are we on all of this?

You have often heard me speak of the wonder of our connection with long-dead stars. It is quite remarkable, that you and I are made up of the stuff that was created billions of years ago as we formed part of a

star's life. We may not have been aware of it then – but we are now, and that feels significant. Our story doesn't just go back to 27% of the life of the universe... it goes back all the way to the beginning. Parts of us, or their foundations, were there from the start. We aren't just a *part* of the universe... we *are* the universe witnessing itself.

And participating in this continuum doesn't require having offspring. Among our community, there are those of us without children, biological nor adopted, and that doesn't mean a lack of engagement with the generations of the universe. As the author Antoine de Saint-Exupery points out, "*We live, not by things, but by the meanings of things. It is needful to transmit the passwords from generation to generation.*" We all participate in bring up descendants of the world; we all become ancestors to the future.

My friends, as we consider our planet Earth, and its vastness, we may better appreciate our relationship with it when we remember that we *are* it. When we compare the Earth to the rest of the Milky Way, we may remark that it is not an isolated part of the galaxy... even among the vast distances, our planet *revolves* around the life of our galaxy. And everything in our galaxy comes from the same primordial beginning as everything else in our universe.

My friends, we are only insignificant when we consider *only* our individual selves and our selves only. My friends, significance arises when we answer the call to see a shrine in every casual corner... even at a church lunch, or a fundraising event. My friends, when we gaze upon the shared connection with the interrelated web in which we have participated for all of time, we may appreciate that it all matters.

My friends, our witness of each other today, embodies all that is significant.

So may we be,
In the search for truth and meaning,

Amen

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Suggested Hymns:

Opening Hymn #40 The Morning Hangs a Signal

~)-| Words: William Channing Gannet, 1840-1923, rev.

Music: William Lloyd, 1786-1852

MEIRIONYDD 7.6.7.6.D

Hymn #90 From All the Fret and Fever of the Day

~)-| Words: Monroe Beardsley, b. 1915

Music: Cyril V. Taylor, b. 1907, © Hope Publishing Co.

COOLINGE 10.10.10.10.

Closing #203 All Creatures of the Earth and Sky

Words: Attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, 1182-1226, alt.

Music: From *Ausserlesene Catholische Kirchengesang*, 1623, adapt. and harm. by Ralph Vaughan Williams, 1872-1958, music used by perm. of Oxford University Press

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