



# THE CATHEDRAL OF THE NATURAL WORLD

A Sermon Delivered at  
First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist  
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Before he died last fall at the age of only 61, my good friend and colleague Forrest Church published one final book, *The Cathedral of the World*. With the subtitle *A Universalist Theology*, it expands on a chapter he first wrote twenty years ago for a book we wrote together:

“Imagine awaking one morning from a deep and dreamless sleep,” that piece began, “to find yourself in the nave of a vast cathedral. Like a child newborn, untutored save to moisture, nurture, rhythm, and the profound comforts at the heart of darkness, you open your eyes upon a world unseen, indeed unimaginable, before. It is a world of light and dancing shadow, stone and glass, life and death. This second birth, at once miraculous and natural, is in some ways not unlike the first. A new awakening, it consecrates your life with sacraments of pain you do not understand and promised joy you will never fully call your own.

“Such awakenings may happen only once in a lifetime, or many times. But when they do, what you took for granted before is presented as a gift: difficult, yet precious and good. Not that you know what to do with your gift, or even what it really means, only how much it matters. Awakening to the call stirring within you, the call of life itself – the call of God – you begin your pilgrimage. Before you do, look about you: contemplate the mystery and contemplate with awe. . . . Above all,” he wrote, “contemplate the windows . . . Each tells a story about the creation of the world, the meaning of history, the purpose of life, the nature of humankind, the mystery of death windows of the cathedral are where the light shines in.”

Each window, of course, represents one of the great religious traditions. Each has a truth to tell. “Many windows,” Forrest would say. “That’s Universalism. But behind them all, One Light: that’s Unitarianism.”

“I have one problem with the image of the ‘cathedral of the world,’” I responded back then.

“Within the cathedral, no one seems to be talking to one another.” If each group only

contemplates its own window on truth, what happens to interfaith dialogue? I continue to think that's important. Not just dialogue – but also shared work, which can help to make for dialogue. Work for peace, or for the sustainability of our shared home, this gorgeous, fragile planet.

But recently I had another awakening, or re-awakening, to that latter issue. It came to me, appropriately enough, at a place on the Pacific Coast of Costa Rica called *Punta Cathedral* -- Cathedral Point. It's a soaring, volcanic outcropping, 300 feet above the waves, covered with lush rainforest, that not so long ago in geological time was an island, very close to the land -- until tides and currents built up the sandy connection, creating a beautiful cove and beach. Now it's part of a national park. I was hiking there, after having been through the park earlier. Having encountered whole troops of monkeys; having been snorkeling among schools of spectacular tropical fish while snorkeling around other volcanic outcroppings just offshore.

The country of Costa Rica, about twice the size of Massachusetts, occupying less than 1/1000<sup>th</sup> of the surface of our Earth, has over 5% of our total, global biodiversity. I was totally awestruck. During my two week visit I saw literally hundreds of different species of birds, including the rare *quetzal*, turquoise in color, with two-foot plumes and a scarlet breast, called sacred by the Maya; butterflies like the huge, luminescent *Blue Morpho*; reptiles like the crocodile, iguana, and the so-called "Jesus Christ lizard," that is so fast that it can literally walk across the surface of water; rare mammals like the agouti, coati, sloth and puma; and cloud forests where more biomass grows on the trees – orchids, lichens, bromeliads, liverworts, plants with rope- like lianas dropping to the forest floor – than grows on the shaded ground itself.

Two thoughts struck me on Cathedral Point. First: "Why do we not care more about all of this?" Then I saw on a osprey, a fishing eagle, lift up a small tuna from the sea below. Earlier I'd see seeing a group of vultures, feeding on the carcass of a dead agouti. The news in Costa Rica had been full of a volcano erupting near the capital, reminding me that I was standing where the Pacific Plate of the earth's surface collides with the Caribbean Plate. A few days later, where the Caribbean Plate collides with the North American Plate, an earthquake in Haiti killed thousands. And I had been reading: "When it occurs to a man that Nature does not regard him as important," wrote the American writer Stephen Crane, "he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple and he hates deeply the fact that there are not bricks and no temple."

Ah, but there are! All around Cathedral Point, on the road from the nearby town to the park, up to our hotels, the condos, paving, development; all bricks being thrown at the Cathedral. “If this doesn’t stop,” said my snorkeling guide, “there will soon be no more fish around here, except those kept in ponds, cages, or tanks.” I remembered our own Thoreau saying so prophetically, “In wildness is the preservation of the world.”

But if Nature truly is indifferent to our species, and to each of us; if it’s useless to sentimentalize that fact, can we ever stop abusing Nature? – stop throwing bricks at the Cathedral? I have seen in my work as a minister how hard it is to stop children from being perpetually angry at parents whom they think were indifferent. I had also been reading, “The protection of creation and peacemaking are profoundly linked . . . If you want to cultivate peace, protect creation.”

Which reminded me of a conversation I’d once had -- with a much admired Catholic leader, Cardinal Arinze of Nigeria. We were at the 1994 Assembly of the World Conference on Religion and Peace. Founded by Dana McLean Greeley after he served as President of our Unitarian Universalist Association, the purpose of WCRP is to get leaders of different religious traditions not only into dialogue, but also into work together, for peace, justice, and the human future.

We had just heard a powerful speech by the head of a foundation, urging us as religious leaders to cooperate more on saving the environment. I went up to Cardinal Arinze – the Vatican’s head of interfaith relations – and asked him, boldly, if he didn’t agree with me that we would be held accountable by our Creator for every species we were given as companions in the creation that would become extinct during our lifetimes because of our failure to limit our human population. (That’s right; I asked a Catholic Cardinal whether opposition to birth control isn’t immoral!)

His reply was adroit. Yes, every time he returned to his village in Nigeria he was saddened to see how deforestation was depriving his nieces and nephews of seeing insects, birds, plants and animals that he had loved as a child. But, he said, there is also such a thing as spiritual ecology. In his part of Nigeria, Muslims; traditional animists, worshippers of the life force in Nature itself; and Christians all compete with secular materialism. Muslims, he pointed out, allow four wives. Animists put girls and young men through circumcision rituals because they believe in fertility. So Christian monogamy and sexual restraint, chastity like his own, may have a worthy message.

I could hardly argue. At least then! But More recently, other Western religious leaders like Rabbi Arthur Waskow have helped me ponder the whole evolutionary history of religion and culture. It's like the evolutionary dance of life that starts with the amoeba, he says. A two-step dance. First competition seeking control the environment; then cooperation in order for shared survival. Which in turn allows for new technologies and social systems that can be used competitively. Followed by learning again that, as our UU statement of principles puts it, we need to covenant together to defend "the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part."

This has been going on a long time. In his book, *The Ecology of Eden*, environmental historian Evan Eisenberg points out that the legendary Garden of Eden in the Bible was associated with the marshland delta of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, in what is today called Iraq. Back then, the Sumerian Empire, from which the legendary Abraham and his family emerged, developed irrigation, and mono-crop agriculture. Just as the United Fruit Company cleared rainforests in Costa Rica a century ago for banana plantations. The use of irrigation produced more food, but also more people, requiring more control, more soldiers, more wars. They also soaked the soil with salt, until their lack of self-restraint ruined the fertility of the very land they depended upon. But they weren't alone. Many historians suspect the Mayan civilization of Central America may have collapsed in a similar way; through over-taxing the soil with the corn they cultivated.

Back in the ancient Near East there were some who watched and tried another way of life. Western Semites, later called Jews, had small farms on rocky hillside, and moved as shepherds from pasture to pasture. Their spirituality declared that the whole Earth belongs only to God. "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof," sings the Psalmist [19:1] Though later they fell, like those who persecuted them, into idolatries of blood and soil, their original worldview urged self-restraint. "You may eat of all the trees in the Garden – except this one." It called for pausing every seventh day to ponder the miracle of creation itself, and not to work. For letting the land itself rest every seventh year, with a vision of Jubilee for those who work on it. Torah meant a new form of community that balanced self-restraint and control with cooperation and inter-being. And that's why it survived, says Rabbi Waskow. And then in Roman times, it was made available in a new and more universalistic form by a sect of Jews detached from the land who challenged Roman materialism and imperialism in the name of a Jew named Jesus.

What he promoted was compassion for human suffering. Just as the Buddha did, in a different context, with other stories that form another window in the cathedral of religious wisdom. Compassion of the kind needed and expressed so poignantly in the wake of the earthquake in Haiti. “In as much as you have done it for one of the least of these,” all our sisters and brothers, he taught, “you have done for me.”

But he also urged his followers not just to think of themselves as workers and consumers, worried about what to eat, or drink, or wear. “Consider the lilies of the fields,” he told them. “Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.”

Nature may, like the sun rising and the rain falling on the just and the unjust alike, indeed be indifferent to us; but we are not meant to be indifferent to it – to its beauty, fragility, creativity, and awesome power; or to one another. So when we work to bring ourselves and others back into more cooperative interdependence with Creation; when we work to restore the Garden we were given to tend and to keep, let us never forget to look around us, and awaken again. In this vast cathedral we share, called the natural world. Amen, and amen.

\*Hymn 207

*Earth Was Given as a Garden*

Bard/Pritchard

Earth was given as a garden, cradle for humanity;  
Tree of life and tree of knowledge placed for our discovery.  
Here was home for all your creatures born of land and sky and sea;  
All created in your image, all to live in harmony.

Show to us again the garden where all life flows fresh and free.  
Gently guide your sons and daughters into full maturity.  
Teach us how to trust each other, how to use for good our power,  
How to touch the earth with rev'ence. Then once more will Eden flower.

Bless the earth and all your children, one creation, make us whole,  
Interwoven, all connected, planet wide and inmost soul.  
Holy mother, life bestowing, bid our waste and warfare cease.  
Fill us all with grace o'erflowing. Teach us how to live in peace.