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**You Say Miracle; I Say Wondrous Phenomenon**

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By Antonia Won

First Unitarian Fellowship of Nanaimo

Greetings to you all. I'm sorry not to be with you as planned this morning. It's always a pleasure to be with you.

It has been a couple of years since I preached here, and I've been away working in the US most of that time. In 2008, I spent 6 months at a very large church in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and last year I worked for a fellowship in rural Montana. These experiences have highlighted the differences in the two countries as far as religion goes, and yet we too deal with the same issues if usually in smaller, milder ways.

New Mexico is a fascinating place, a place out of time in the United States. The barren landscape is in reality a window on the history of the Earth with volcanoes, fossilized dinosaur bones, uplifted lake bottoms, remains of human settlements of ages gone by. The past is still alive through the tribes of native Americans such as the Navajo, the Zia and the Zuni. Ironically – at least to me – it was in New Mexico that I personally encountered Creationism for the first time. Creationism is the belief that the Earth was created by God in a matter of days, about 6000 years ago. It is a view held by people who hold the Bible literally and who tend to impose it over the world we live in today.

On a beautiful day last April, my friend Bruce took me to a wilderness area named Ojito, a few miles northwest of Albuquerque. I was impressed as we drove deep into a landscape where the layers of Earth's time were laid bare in their raw antiquity and power. I felt the almost oppressive continuum of history, and my own existence as such a tiny moment in the vastness of time. It was absolutely magical to be lost in the earthen waves of the universe's unfolding. The sense of vastness and one's insignificance grew upon the discovery that we had blown not one, but two tires on the truck and were stranded many hostile miles from civilization. Help finally turned up a few hours later in the form of two men in a jeep. Like my friend, Bruce, they were entranced with the area, knew it inside out, and had enjoyed a glorious day of fossil hunting. They had a guidebook to the area that one of them had

written. He proudly showed it to us. It was one and a half inches thick and filled with aerial images from Google Earth...and excerpts from the Bible – Genesis, Ezekiel, Isaiah and on and on. The surreal quality of the day turned bizarre as the author revealed he was a prison chaplain, and both compassionate and generous men were dedicated evangelicals and Creationists. These two rock hounds and amateur paleontologists believed that the Earth was created 6000 years ago, by direct acts of God.

Bruce, a scientist and atheist, gently and respectfully exchanged opinions with them while I stood by, dumbstruck. With my theological tail between my legs, I retreated to the sanctuary of the broken truck, hoping the men would get on with solving the problem of fixing it.

My experience of conservative Christianity in Montana contrasts with the respectful exchange in New Mexico. I was in Northwestern Montana, in the Flathead Valley just east of the Idaho panhandle. It's the most densely populated part of Montana at 9 people per square mile. The most common sight along highways in the Flathead is large road kill.

The second most common sight along the highways is a sign shaped like stone tablets that Moses brought down from the mountain, emblazoned with the Ten Commandments. The Flathead Valley is statistically the most conservative part of Montana.

Conservative Christianity has asserted itself there, and claimed the valley as its own. Teachers in public schools face the religious bias of principals. A young man I know was harassed and followed 10 miles out of town because of the liberal bumper stickers on his pick-up truck. Homosexuals live in secrecy for fear of their safety.

After a year of living in the US, especially in the year of the presidential election, I have determined that perhaps the largest difference between Canada and the US is the place of religion in society.

Religion is a much larger and much louder conversation in the US than in Canada. The staking out of ideological or theological territories impacts areas of the public domain there, where Canadians make a greater distinction between their personal positions and what should be acceptable in society. The religious debate sounds quite raucous in the ears of Canadians, like a family argument spun out of control.

As one who has lived my whole life in the socialist democracy of Canada, I've viewed the extremely conservative Christian element of American society as a curious and isolated phenomenon born of unexplained ignorance. Now of course, the phenomenon has gained a political voice and it has crossed the border into my own country where a curious little incident happened recently.

Today the ruling party in Canada is predominantly conservative Christian. And if we Canadians have seen the lines between religion and politics so blurred before, I don't know it. Theologians traditionally refer to Canada as the "ice belt" due to our reserved ways of being religious.

Last year, you may remember, there was a dust-up when a reporter asked the federal Minister of Science and Technology if he believed in evolution. The minister in question, Gary Goodyear, declined to answer. The minister responded by saying, 'I am a Christian and I don't think anyone asking a question about my religion is appropriate.' The scientific community that depends on the minister's research funding was aghast that their financial fate might be in the hands of someone who didn't understand the basis of much of scientific thought.

Later that week the Conservatives held a closed-door caucus on how to deal with reporters 'laying such traps for Christians,' believing that the media will do 'anything to make people of faith look dumb.'

The Globe and Mail, whose reporter asked the offending question, carried on the dialogue by interviewing highly educated scientists who are also avowed 'people of faith.' The scientists spoke eloquently of the struggle to reconcile their work with their faith beliefs and the enrichment they experienced in the process. In the words of one, "People have to come to terms with what is real and true in science and what may be deeply true in other ways.'

Another scientist spoke glowingly of a book titled "*Thank God for Evolution*" written by a Unitarian Universalist, evolutionary evangelist Michael Dowd.

Michael and his partner, Connie Barlow, a UU minister, travel the continent to share with people many awe-inspiring examples and stories of life unfolding over millennia.

As free thinkers, UUs have insisted that reason must be part of our faithful understanding of reality. The current situation makes me wonder if we have

taken evolutionary theory for granted; whether we have used our love for Earth and nature to proclaim ourselves as people of faith as much as we might have. Do we have a role to play in our communities to proclaim the unity of Creation and the beauty of evolution?

At the same time, I wonder whether perhaps the rise in fantastical or fanatical religion is partly because rational thought and statistical probabilities have overwhelmed the Western world, leaving little room for stories of the soul on which we depend as spiritual beings. I wonder if fanatical religion is a reaction to a diminishing sense of mystery in the world.

The reality is that most of us do not get to see much of the incredible magic of life processes that scientists get to witness, nor do we understand all of the methods of thought that the field of science has developed. Are there enough opportunities for young people to be drawn into a dialogue about how we know what we know about Earth, life and the Universe? How do we talk about belief and knowledge with our young ones? How we can support ourselves in the religious landscape in which many of us find ourselves, and have something to offer others who seek a faith that allows for their rational understanding of the world, and their sense of the invisible forces of life.

In our UU circles, there is much hand wringing about our lack of definition and how best to proclaim ourselves in the cacophony of society's voices, religious and secular. There are concerns that we have become too political in supporting anti-racism, gay rights, and similarly liberal positions on other social issues; that we can't really claim our theological turf because we accept and affirm diversity of belief, that we do not have a single religious story that we espouse as the Christians, Jews and Muslims do. But is this in fact true?

The Rev. David Bumbaugh, Professor of Ministry at the UU Meadville Lombard Theological Seminary recently pointed out that although we claim theological diversity, we UUs are in fact more homogenous than many religious groups. As such, we UUs can be clearer about who we are, and what promise we serve as UU's.

Bumbaugh suggested that a clear statement of our common ground could gel our sense of ourselves as religious free-thinkers. It's been done before in both of our traditions without either falling into the trap of creedalism. I

don't know whether it was in response to the increasingly shrill voices of Christian fundamentalism or not, but Bumbaugh recently posited a basis of belief he sees as common in our UU circles. Here is my paraphrase of his Statement of Faith for Unitarian Universalists:

First of all, we UUs *believe in the evolution of the universe and life within it*. We believe that all Earthly life is a product of this evolutionary process. We believe all living things are members of a single community of life, and we consider the *intricate unfolding of life to be a sacred process*.

We believe that human life is dependent on the wholeness and health of the interdependent web of life, and we are called to serve the processes of life on the planet.

We believe that the well being of one can't be separated from the well being of the whole.

We believe that the universe within us and the universe beyond us are one, and therefore our dreams, hopes, ambitions and efforts are those of the universe itself. Our drive to understand life and find meaning is the Universe's drive. *Therefore we hold the human urge to learn, understand and find meaning as sacred*.

In a similar way, the human call to justice, mercy and compassion is in our natures, and so also is a reflection of the Universe, of Creation.

We believe that although we don't and can't understand all of life, the fact that we are aware of the interdependent web of life means we have special responsibilities to keep it healthy in the long term.

We believe that people on the margins of mainstream society have important contributions to make to the community of life, and that in some way we are all on the margins.

*We believe that anything that divides us from one another and from the interdependent web must be resisted or challenged* in the name of a world fully alive, fully embodying the mysterious and miraculous process that 'called us into being, that sustains us in being, that transforms us as we cannot transform ourselves, that receives us back to itself when life has used us up'; that process of life unfolding which although we don't know how it ends, we trust it, we rest in it, and we serve it.

Living in the most conservative part of Montana I found reading this statement a breath of fresh air. A breath of fresh air that I never imagined I would need. I have held these ideas as common sense, the premise on which all Western society was based. I grew up in the country and awe of nature was my daily bread. I grew up in a Unitarian family in which belief in

evolution and belief in a Creator God were not mutually exclusive, although anything beyond that was up for serious challenge.

My grandfather was an evolutionary biologist. Evolution was understood as a theory that described a basic process of life's unfolding beyond reasonable doubt. Anyone who did not think this was ignorant.

But I myself – like most of us - am not a scientist. And in examining this all more closely I realize that I in fact take evolution on faith. I believe in evolution, and I find inspiration and awe and wonder in the whole idea.

David Bumbaugh issued his statement of faith in the hopes of clarifying who we UU's are. He said that 'By refusing to define itself, Liberal Religion surrenders its ability to stand in judgment on the idolatries of our time.' I don't know what idolatries Bumbaugh had in mind but religion by definition must serve life-affirming purposes and draw us towards the largest vision of beloved community we can imagine.

There is a difference between theology that ignores reasonable thought, and religious bigotry grounded in violent representations of the Bible, but the occurrences where they are intertwined are unfortunately frequent. Our children are confronted in the playground. Our teachers face it in the public schools where they work. The vulnerable are exploited. As people of faith we should not fear to counter or provide alternatives to unhealthy theologies that promote bigotry and regularly invoke violence. There's no reason why we can't counter faith with faith, belief with belief, in peaceful ways.

In that line of thought, I have another story to tell you.

A year ago, a young British writer named Ariane Sherine was traveling by bus to work. She was struck by an advertisement on the side of a bus that said, 'When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the Earth?' and a website address called 'Jesussaid.org.' Such advertising by evangelicals has been commonplace in Britain for decades. As the ad prompted, Sherine visited the website. There she found proclamations that all non-Christians are going to burn in Hell for all eternity as a measure of God's wrath against sin. She took exception to these ideas of Hell and damnation being used against segments of society who would be particularly vulnerable to them – children and weakened adults. In response, Sherine wrote a column for *The Guardian* newspaper pointing out that commercial advertisers would not be permitted to make such unsubstantiated and alarming statements.

Sherine surmised a way to counter the fear mongering of this fundamentalism would be to create bus ads with a rational view and a reassuring message in the hopes of bringing hope to those same vulnerable folk. The price of a bus ad was 11,000 pounds. On a lark, she proposed that if enough people contributed 5 pounds each, such a feat might be possible.

Sherine's column hit a chord with atheists and humanists across Britain who were thrilled to have a vehicle to hold up their beliefs. Richard Dawkins, author of "*The God Delusion*", put his support behind her project and shortly 150,000 pounds was raised. This past February (2009), 800 English buses rolled out with big red letters reading, 'There probably is no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.'

Sherine used the word 'probably' in accordance with advertising regulations that prevent unrealistic and unsubstantiated claims, and in contrast to the proclamations of the fundamentalist Christian organization. In doing this, she left open a window of possibility, a place for a differing point of view, and an opportunity for dialogue that is now spreading around the world. The word 'probably' inscribes the element of doubt that fundamentalist religion lacks. Rather than fight judgment with judgment, it introduces doubt and dialogue. The campaign has caught on and is being copied in a number of other countries. It is drawing discussion about 'belief' into the public domain in a new way, about the relationship between religion and scientific theory.

UUs have aimed to reconcile the premises of science with the revelations of faith, though not always successfully. In our congregations, it has been difficult for people to say that they believe in God. Many of our churches and fellowships have been unwelcoming of people who come to our doors seeking a way to reconcile their spiritual beliefs with what they know of the world, to define for themselves a reasonable faith.

As a society we need some common understanding of what constitutes our world, especially as we face the challenges of global climate change. However spiritual life is equally essential to and inseparable from human and planetary life. Rational thought must not deny or diminish religious experience or other forms of intuition and spirituality. This is the line we as UUs try to walk as people of faith.

We believe in the evolution of the universe and life within it, and consider the intricate processes of its unfolding as sacred.

Therefore we hold the human urge to learn, understand and find meaning as sacred.

We believe that anything that divides us from one another and from the interdependent web must be resisted or challenged in the name of a world fully alive.

While some may find a statement of faith claiming acceptance of evolutionary theory a statement of the obvious, these words may offer a touchstone for those of us who must take it on faith, hope for those of us whose children face proselytizing in the schoolyard, a basis for those of us seeking clarity about who we are as UUs, a grounding for those of us who appreciate a simple statement to hold on to in the face of religious fervor.

Perhaps it will be a jumping off place from which we can dive into deeper dialogue about our struggle with our spiritual experiences in a materialistic society, our intuitions as spiritual people, and our commitments about what it means to live as people of faith.

We will never know the answer to the God question. The reality is that we are all believers, atheist as well as theist.

The question is instead whether we are reverent in our ignorance, respectful in our difference, and loving in our communities. If we agree with the statement that we believe that anything that divides us from one another and from the interdependent web must be resisted or challenged in the name of a world fully alive, let us begin with ourselves.

For then, as it is written in the Book of Isaiah –  
The wilderness and dry land shall be glad,  
The desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
Like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly  
And rejoice with joy and singing.

May it be so.

By Antonia Wan