

Dark Starry Night¹
Rev. Myke Johnson
December 19, 2010
Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Readings: From "Fragments on Nature" Ralph Waldo Emerson
Teach me your mood, O patient stars!
Who climb each night the ancient sky,
Leaving on space no shade, no scars,
No trace of age, no fear to die.²

We Are Listening, Part I³ (excerpt) Diane Ackerman
As our metal eyes wake
to absolute night,
where whispers fly
from the beginning of time,
we cup our ears to the heavens...
We are listening for a sound
beyond us, beyond sound,...
an electronic murmur
a bright, fragile I am...
through the longest night
we imagine, which dawns
between the life and time of stars.

Sermon

People have been fascinated by the stars since before our collective human memory began. Ancient peoples told stories about the stars, and grouped them into patterns, what we call constellations, naming them after their gods and heroes. They were especially fascinated by those stars that lay within the track of the planets and the moon and sun, what we call the zodiac. Many cultures told stories of ancestors who had come from the milky way. Different cultures told different stories—but they all had stories about the stars.

They also had incredible practical knowledge. The Mayan priests, for one example, "recorded astronomical observations and passed them down from generation to generation. The result was an extremely accurate calendar that predicted the coming of eclipses and the revolutions of Venus to an error of one day in 6,000 years."⁴ In all cultures, sailors used the stars to plot their course across the seas.

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2 From the collection, *A Grateful Heart*, edited by M.J. Ryan, p. 93.

3 From *Jaguar of Sweet Laughter*

4 <http://www.crystalinks.com/mayanastronomy.html>

We have lost a huge amount of that widespread common star knowledge. I remember how excited I was to learn that you could tell what time it was, by the rotation of constellations around the north star. I do know still how to figure out the directions by finding the north star. I wonder how many modern people can even do that.

In the Christmas story, we hear that Magi came from the east, because they had seen a special star that heralded the birth of a king. They were astrologers, who interpreted the movements of stars and planets. The ancient peoples saw omens and forces at work in the sky, that might shape our personalities and our destinies. Whether we believe in it or not, their ways of mapping and interpreting the sky have endured even into the present day. How many of us know our astrological signs? How many of us could find the corresponding constellations in the sky? Not so many.

In our time, though we aren't so intimately familiar with the night sky, we have seen wonders that the ancients did not even dream about. The Hubble telescope orbiting the earth has recorded images from almost the very limits of the visible universe, 13 billion light years away, and 13 billion years old.⁵ So we can see photos of nebulae, black holes, supernovas, and star nurseries, just by looking online.

This September, there was exciting scientific news with the discovery of a new planet that was in the right temperature zone to support liquid water. The planet orbits a red dwarf star *Gliese 581* that has five other known planets. The new planet is called *Gliese 581g*. One of its hemispheres always faces the sun, while the other hemisphere faces away from its sun—so half the planet is burning hot, and the other half is freezing cold, but right along the boundary where day meets night, it might be possible for life to exist.⁶

Now, this planet is over 20 light years away, and there are no plans to try to visit it soon—but the discovery lends further evidence to the likelihood that many life-supporting planets exist out there in the sky. It was only in 1996, only fifteen years ago, that astronomers first found evidence of a planet orbiting a star beyond our solar system. Now, astronomers have identified more than five hundred of them. With two to four hundred billion or more stars in our Milky Way galaxy, and one to five hundred billion galaxies, some estimates suggest that there are at least ten trillion planetary systems in the universe.⁷

Curiosity, wonder, vastness beyond imagining. There is something about our search for signs of life out there in the universe beyond our reach that is not so unlike the ancient hopes for a messiah or divine blessings from heaven. We dream, we hope, we want to believe we are not alone. The stars give us that. In many languages, including the ancient Greek of the bible, the word for sky is the same as the word for heaven.

5 <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/universe/howbig.html> and <http://hubblesite.org/>

6 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/not-too-hot-not-too-cold-could-the-goldilocks-planet-support-life-2093538.html>

7 <http://dsc.discovery.com/news/afp/20030922/universe.html>

When I let my imagination ponder the vast expanses of space, the billions of stars and planets, both seen and unseen, it just makes the top of my head fly off. Everything else that might be going on starts to seem so small. "We are just specks in the universe," as Lily Tomlin's character Agnus Angst remarks.⁸ And yet we are specks that can look at the night sky, and build telescopes to explore this vast beauty and mystery.

It is so beautiful, just to sit outside on a dark night, and look up. Can you imagine what it might be like if there were no stars to see? If the sky was just black and blank? How much would be lost of dreaming and wonder. How alone we might feel. But because the stars are there, people have been imagining through the ages that we are not alone.

This week, if we are adventurous enough to stay up late, and the weather is clear, we can see another wonder of the night sky—a total lunar eclipse. On Monday night after midnight—or Tuesday early morn actually, from 2:40 to 3:50 a.m.—the earth will pass between the sun and the moon and cast a red shadow on the moon. I think the last time I saw a lunar eclipse may have been the night the Red Sox won the world series. It was that kind of night. Moving from watching the game on TV, to standing on our front porch on Cape Cod, looking at the moon growing dim and then dark red.

I happened to take a look on the internet for what people were saying about this lunar eclipse, and found out that some folks are predicting a whole lot. Now, I didn't see the movie 2012, but it was based on the fact that the ancient Mayan calendar will be turning over into a new era, the 13th baktun, and the end of a great cycle of about 5125 years, on winter solstice in 2012. Some people think that 2012 will bring the end of the world, but most scholars say it is more like the year 2000—a lot of zeros showing up in the counting system.

But according to some astrologers, this changing of the era is actually going to take place on December 21, 2010—in two days! Their exact predictions vary from website to website... one says lots of conflict, another predicts the rapture, or the end of the world; some say earthquakes, or startling new revelations... I just thought perhaps I should mention it.

So this is what the starry skies do to us—they inspire our speculation and dreaming, our deepest hopes and our fears. Still, it puts things in perspective. What if the world is going to end in two days? What would feel important to us? Where would we want to be?

In a way, that is what every December holiday season does to us. It focuses the intensity of our lives, bringing together family members, for good or ill, or spotlighting our loneliness, if we have been feeling lonely. It heightens our conflicts, challenges our budgets, and sometimes fills our hearts with extreme gratitude and deeper connection to loved ones. As if life were a vast game of musical chairs, and suddenly, the music pauses and we look around to see where we are sitting—or if we have a chair at all. Our ghosts arise from past and present and future.

⁸ In the one woman play: "The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe," written by Jane Wagner. First release 1984.

When I look back on the ghosts of my own Christmas pasts, I see the year that my marriage broke up—on Christmas day. Gary and I had been talking about ending our relationship, and even decided that I would move out after the holidays, leaving our Catholic Worker house and going into the student housing at Chicago Theological Seminary. But the pressure of Christmas precipitated a crisis, and I ended up leaving that very day. That was probably my worst Christmas.

There was another Christmas, when I went to stay with a friend who was losing her apartment; the lease ran out on December 31st. She was severely depressed, even suicidal, so I helped her find a new apartment, and move all her belongings, and maybe even helped her stay alive—all in the two weeks before and after the holiday. Still, we got to a good place, and found ourselves smiling with each other on Christmas, and that experience cemented a life-long friendship.

It was this same Yuletide intensity, in the Charles Dickens story, *A Christmas Carol*, that showed old Scrooge the trajectory of his miserly path—the ghosts revealed his broken and selfish life, and how it would end in ruins. These revelations opened him up to transformation—to a change of heart toward kindness and connection. After his long and scary night, he reached out to his nephew Fred, and raised the salary of his long-suffering clerk, Bob Cratchit, becoming a second father to Bob's son, Tiny Tim.

Some of you may know that Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* shortly after joining the Unitarian Little Portland Street chapel in London. He wrote to a friend, "I have carried into effect an old idea of mine, and joined the Unitarians, who *would* do something for human improvement, if they could; and who practice Charity and Toleration." Dickens himself worked tirelessly raising money for soup kitchens, promoting the idea of free education for poor children, supporting prison reform, hospitals and many other responses to social ills, along with his writing.⁹

I like that his ghostly predictions for Scrooge weren't cast in stone—but were able to be shaped by Scrooge's change of heart from greed to compassion. From isolation to community. That is what this time of dark starry nights is all about too. That we can look at our lives, and make choices. We can move in the direction of our better nature, our longing to be whole. There is always hope.

So if this lunar eclipse is somehow significant for our lives, I hope it may reveal to us our connections with one another. I hope we may find a way to move through the inevitable conflicts that spring up between human beings, and get to a deeper place of appreciation and wonder. We are all star people, after all. We are all part of the great processes of nature, the birth of the universe, the death of stars, the birth of other stars and planets. The elements that make up our eyes, for just one example, are 13 billion years old. The grand process of evolution created sight over the course of 600 million years—so we can actually perceive the ancient light that travels the vast distances of the universe. We can see stars in the sky. We are connected to these stars by this traveling light.

⁹ <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/2273.shtml>

We can see our own bright star, and feel its warmth on our skin. This is amazing. Franz Wright wrote a poem, called Fire.¹⁰ In it, he said,

Listen, I've light
in my eyes
and on my skin
the warmth of a star, so strange
is this
that I
can barely comprehend it:
I think
I'll lift my face to it, and then
I lift my face,
and don't even know how
this is done.

We are light-seeking creatures, and light-loving creatures. And now we are passing through the hard time. Remember that, and don't be deceived by the holiday commercials. This is the dark and cold time of the year. We join together to light fires and give gifts for a reason. If we can wrest some joy and gladness out of it, then we are blessed and lucky. Sometimes it is only by our determined choice that we make a celebration happen. If you are among the joyful, remember to share it with others who need it.

I am thinking these days of Vincent Van Gogh and his painting *Starry Starry Night*. He was a brilliant artist, but also a troubled soul. He spent time in institutions, and struggled with his life. He wrote once in a letter to his brother, "When I have a terrible need of—shall I say the word—religion. Then I go out at night to paint the stars."¹¹

We put stars on our Christmas trees, and stars on our houses. We put lights in our windows, and candles on our tables. The thing is—if it weren't for the darkness, we would never know about the stars. Annie Dillard writes: "You do not have to sit outside in the dark. If, however, you want to look at the stars, you will find that darkness is necessary. But the stars neither require nor demand it."¹² The stars are there all the time. They wait invisibly in the daytime. But in the depths of the night, they reveal themselves. They awaken mystery and wonder and hope and imagination. There is more out there than we already know. That is where hope comes from.

May the blessings of this week find you watching. Amen. Blessed Be.

CLOSING WORDS by Sarah Williams¹³

Though my soul may set in darkness, it will rise in perfect light.
I have loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night.

10 Excerpt from the poem "Fire," in *God's Silence*.

11 1888, Arles.

12 [Annie Dillard \(Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters\)](#)

13 "The Old Astronomer to His Pupil"