

Thoreau Woods UU Church – Worship Service
Life Is A Miracle!
December 4, 2011

Prelude

Chalice Lighting

We light this candle

For the light of truth and reason

For the warmth of love and friendship

For the flame of strength and action

And for the vision of tolerance and justice.

Announcements

John Pepper

Visitors, Welcome! We are happy to have you here.

(Pause)

If you would like, please sign our guest book on the table in the entryway and give your address or email if you want to receive our newsletter. If you would like to become a member, we have an application form also on the table you can fill out and turn in when you are ready.

Next week our own Judy Shofner's talk will be titled "I Can't Believe I'm Agnostic: One Woman's Search for Answers."

Our special collection this month is for the UUSC. Please make your checks out directly to the UUSC.

Today we will be going to eat at Los Pericos, near Walgreens on 11th street. Please, by a show of hands, who plans to go so that we can get a big enough table?

Are there any other announcements from the floor?

Thoreau Woods UU Church – Worship Service
Life Is A Miracle!
December 4, 2011

Opening Words

John Pepper

Please join with me now in a spirit of worship.

We are the ones who keep Christmas. Christmas is what we want it to be.

Christmas is loveliness, happiness, singing, laughter, giving, and sharing, if we will make it so.

May this season be a time of rebirth and renewal, a time of happiness and joy.

Let there be light and warmth, and let us be their bearers.

Rejoice Together, p23, Jeanne H. M. Bell

Hymn

Please join me standing as you are able singing our opening Hymn No. 238 “Within the Shining of a Star.”

Joys and Concerns

John Pepper

As an expression of our connectedness and community, you are invited to come forward and share a joy, sorrow or concern as you light a candle. Or you may choose to light a candle without comment. Visitors, you are also encouraged to participate.

Please form a line to my left.

(Pause)

I will light one final candle for all those joys and concerns left unsaid.

Offertory Statement

I do believe in Miracles. This place, this congregation, is a miracle. You have come so far and accomplished so much in such a short period of time, it has to be a miracle. So that this miracle will continue, the offering shall now be given and gratefully received.

Offertory Music

Story for All Ages – *It's a Small World* by Richard and Robert Sherman

Thoreau Woods UU Church – Worship Service
Life Is A Miracle!
December 4, 2011

Reading

My reading this morning is from *The Tao of Physics* written by Fritjof Capra.

I see science and mysticism as two complementary manifestations of the human mind; of its rational and intuitive faculties. The modern physicist experiences the world through an extreme specialization of the rational mind; the mystic through an extreme specialization of the intuitive mind.

The two approaches are entirely different and involve far more than a certain view of the physical world. However, they are complementary, as we have learned to say in physics. Neither is comprehended in the other, nor can either of them be reduced to the other, but both of them are necessary, supplementing one another for a fuller understanding of the world.

To paraphrase an old Chinese saying, mystics understand the roots of the *Tao* but not its branches; scientists understand its branches but not its roots. Science does not need mysticism and mysticism does not need science; but man needs both. Mystical experience is necessary to understand the deepest nature of things, and science is essential for modern life.

What we need, therefore, is not a synthesis but a dynamic interplay between mystical intuition and scientific analysis.

So far, this has not been achieved in our society. At present, our attitude is to *yang* – to use again Chinese phraseology – too rational, male and aggressive. Scientists themselves are a typical example. Although their theories are leading to a world view which is similar to that of the mystics, it is striking how little this has affected the attitudes of most scientists. In mysticism, knowledge cannot be separated from a certain way of life which becomes its living manifestation. To acquire mystical knowledge means to undergo a transformation; one could even say that the knowledge *is* the transformation.

Scientific knowledge, on the other hand, can often stay abstract and theoretical. Thus most of today's physicists do not seem to realize the philosophical, cultural and spiritual implications of their theories. Many of them actively support a society which is still based on the mechanistic, fragmented world view, without seeing that science points beyond such a view, towards a oneness of the universe which includes not only our natural environment but also our fellow human beings.

I believe that the world view implied by modern physics is inconsistent with our present society, which does not reflect the harmonious interrelatedness we observe in nature. To achieve such a state of dynamic balance, a radically different social and economic structure will be needed: a cultural revolution in the true sense of the word.

Thoreau Woods UU Church – Worship Service
Life Is A Miracle!
December 4, 2011

The survival of our whole civilization may depend on whether we can bring about such a change. It will depend, ultimately, on our ability to adopt some of the *yin* attitudes of Eastern mysticism; to experience the wholeness of nature and the art of living with it in harmony.

Prayer

John Pepper

Please close your eyes, look out the window, simply relax in whatever way you center yourself for a time of prayer and meditation. (Pause)

O God, whom we know as Love, help us to recognize the love that surrounds us and in which we have our being. Help us to see ourselves as the loving people we are and can be.

In silence, now, we bring to our mind's eye the people who have loved us and continue to love us, people who are not here with us today, but whose love we carry with us, people who are there every day and whose love we sometimes take for granted, people who might be within our circle of love, could we but extend it a little further. In silence, now, we hold these people in our hearts.

(silence)

In returning from silence, we ask that our hearts may be opened to all whose names and faces have crossed our minds and that the love we share with the people in our lives may be our abiding teacher.

Amen!

Rejoice Together, p49-50, Wayne B. Arnason

Sermon – *Life Is A Miracle!*

Several days after the most recent tsunami, a small baby was discovered alive offshore. It was a miracle that this tiny baby survived amid all the destruction. My sister and I were talking about this amazing event and she asked if I believed whether or not it was in fact a “miracle.”

My immediate response was “yes” but I added a fairly major caveat to my statement. I said all of life is a miracle and that is exactly what I believe. I just don't believe all of life is a miracle in the mystical sense.

Webster's dictionary actually defines “miracle” in two ways. First, a miracle is an extraordinary event manifesting divine intervention in human affairs. The second definition says a miracle is an extremely outstanding or unusual event, thing, or accomplishment. I have a little difficulty with the “divine intervention” concept but no problem whatsoever with the idea that a miracle is simply a highly unusual or outstanding event and those events happen often and for no reason at all.

Thoreau Woods UU Church – Worship Service

Life Is A Miracle!

December 4, 2011

The fact that the baby lived was indeed a miracle, but once again, life itself is an unusual event, a highly unusual event and all of life, in whatever form it takes, is a Miracle.

To illustrate my point, I'm going to use an old technique found in the Hebrew Bible known as an acrostic. An acrostic is a poem or other form of writing where the first letter or word of each line, paragraph, or other recurring feature in the text spells out a word or a message. We often use an acrostic as a mnemonic device in order to remember something. Many of the books of the Hebrew Bible have acrostic features, but sadly the features are totally lost when they are translated from their original language to English. The word "MIRACLE" will be my acrostic this morning. Here goes.

"M" is for mathematical probability. What exactly is the mathematical probability of life existing on some other "Earth-like" planet?

"Infinity was invented to account for the possibility that in a never-ending universe, anything can happen. Life on other Earth-like planets, for example, is possible in an infinite universe, but not probable, according to a scientist from the University of East Anglia.

The mathematical model produced by Prof. Andrew Watson suggests that the odds of finding new life on other Earth-like planets are low because of the time it has taken for beings such as humans to evolve and the remaining life span of the Earth. Structurally complex and intelligent life evolved late on Earth and this process might be governed by a small number of very difficult evolutionary steps.

Prof. Watson, from the School of Environmental Sciences, takes this idea further by looking at the probability of each of these critical steps occurring in relation to the life span of the Earth, giving an improved mathematical model for the evolution of intelligent life.

His model, published in the journal *Astrobiology*, suggests an upper limit for the probability of each step occurring is 10 per cent or less, so the chances of intelligent life emerging is low – less than 0.01 per cent over four billion years.¹

So, the mere fact that we are here at all is a highly unusual and unlikely event – you might even call it a miracle!

"I" is for a seemingly Infinite universe where there are by one estimate 70 sextillion stars. That's 70 thousand million million stars, or it is a 7 followed by 22 zeroes.

¹ **Source**

URL: http://www.science20.com/news_releases/the_mathematical_probability_of_life_on_other_earth_like_planets

Thoreau Woods UU Church – Worship Service

Life Is A Miracle!

December 4, 2011

That's a big number or to give you a slightly different perspective, have you ever been to Galveston or seen a beach? Well, a beach is made up of grains of sand and if you could collect all the sand from all the beaches in the entire world and then count all the grains of sand from all the beaches, the number you would come up with is only $1/10^{\text{th}}$ of the number of all the stars in the entire universe. That is an awful lot of stars.

With regard to this unimaginably large universe, with an equally unimaginable number of stars, a very rare place, is a place where life exists. Most of the universe is empty and that part that isn't empty is mostly made up of stars. So, in the entire universe it is very unusual to come across life at all. It's almost a miracle to simply be in a place where life might exist.

Now let's go from the unimaginably huge universe to the very small world of an egg and a sperm – specifically a human egg and a human sperm. “R” is for Reproduction. Each of us is a unique creation and I would imagine we all take our very existence for granted – I know I do.

But the fact that you, and not the product of some other combination of egg and sperm, ever came into being at all, is just a matter of chance and sheer luck.

Your current set of characteristics was only one option out of a potential of about 40 million possibilities, since that is the average number of sperm that a man contributes to the overall fertilization process at any one time. And since every act of fertilization does not result in a baby, you were likely the product of many attempts by hundreds of millions of sperm.

The actual likelihood that the specific combination of egg and sperm that is the you that came into being, is one in hundreds of millions, a very unlikely event – possibly even a miracle.

Let's wander for a minute in a totally different direction yet again, “A” is for the age of the Earth, which is roughly 4.3 billion years old. Life itself probably came into existence about 3.5 billion years ago and we just happen to be a form of life that is self aware and can often appreciate our own existence. For most of that 3.5 billion years however, self aware life was not around.

If you had a long sheet of paper say 165 feet long, over half the length of a football field, we could use that piece of paper to represent the age of the Earth. 135 feet of the total 165 feet would represent that period of time that life has existed on Earth.

Now think much shorter. Just 2 and $\frac{1}{2}$ inches would represent the length of time the genus *Homo* has been in existence and only $1/10^{\text{th}}$ of 1 inch would represent the length of time since humans started looking like

Thoreau Woods UU Church – Worship Service

Life Is A Miracle!

December 4, 2011

we do today, a little over 200,000 years ago. So, humans, as we know them, have been around 1/10 of 1 inch out of a possible 135 feet on our rather long sheet of paper representing life on Earth.

Of all the life forms that have existed over the past 3.5 billion years, the length of time humans have existed has been a small slice of that time, a limited and unusual event as compared to the entirety of time life has existed here on Earth. Once again, it's almost a miracle that we have existed at all.

Even though life exists here on Earth, not all planets are even capable of supporting life, at least not life as we know it. So "C" is for Capable – that is planets Capable of supporting life.

One estimate I found guesses that planetary formation around stars isn't all that common, maybe 1 planet in a million stars. The author of this particular theory then goes on to guess that for these few planets that do exist, maybe only 1 planet in a million planets is capable of supporting life.

If these guesses are even remotely accurate, habitable planets are few and far between. However, this is where the overall huge number of total stars in the universe helps out a great deal. Remember, there are likely 70 sextillion stars and because there are so many stars, even 1 in a million stars with a planet and only 1 in a million planets are habitable, this still results in 10 billion habitable planets in the universe.

Today we just happen to be lucky enough, or in the very unusual situation of finding ourselves on one of those rare planets capable of supporting life. Once again, could it be a miracle?

Yes, my acrostic sermon is marching towards its conclusion and right now I'm at "L" and "L" is for Life.

You and I are here right now at this particular time revolving around our particular star, on our particular planet Earth, which is very capable of supporting life. Earth in fact supports an abundance of life.

One estimate puts the number of species of life on planet Earth at 8.7 million species, give or take 1.3 million. Unfortunately the authors of this particular estimate are widely criticized because it may be a woefully low number.

For instance, one estimate for types of fungus puts their numbers at possibly as high as 5.1 million species.

Even so, it is fair to say that there probably are at least 8.7 million species on Earth and probably more. We humans represent only 1 of those 8.7 million species. Once again, we are very lucky to be the one species that can witness and attest to ours and all the other species existence. Out of the millions of species that exist here on this planet Capable of supporting life, there is only one very highly unusual species known as Homo sapiens. Yes, I realize this is getting redundant, but it is almost a Miracle!

In conclusion, "E" is for the End and I'm almost at the end.

Thoreau Woods UU Church – Worship Service
Life Is A Miracle!
December 4, 2011

Yes we exist and our mere existence out of the millions of combinations of humans which could have come from our parents, but which instead resulted in the unique you and the unique me, and the fact that we happen to be a self aware species out of the millions of species on Earth, and the fact that we were lucky enough to exist in the small fraction of time relative to all life on earth, and that we were fortunate enough to find ourselves on a planet capable of supporting life, in the vastness of the universe, these facts assure me that our very lives are indeed Miracles.

And since I'm talking about miracles and since we are each a miracle, and thus miracles happen each and every day, there is no reason to doubt that a small baby born almost 2000 years ago was also a miracle. His additional miracle was the primary message of his life, a message which still resounds after 2000 years and which resonates especially at this time of year.

His message was a message of Love – Love for the world and Love for one another. When he was asked what is the greatest commandment in the Law, the book of Matthew says Jesus replied, "Love the Lord Your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself."

If we would only follow his most profound teaching and actually love each other as ourselves and Love the World with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind, we would solve all our problems and it would be a Miracle!

Namaste!

Child Dedication

We have set aside a time in our worship service this morning to welcome a new child to the world. Could the parents and grandparents of Maryann please come forward?

Opening words

The Buddha said:

Her I call a Brahmin who is tolerant with the intolerant, mild with the violent, and free from greed among the greedy.

Her I call a Brahmin from whom anger and hatred, pride and hypocrisy have dropped like a mustard seed from the point of a needle.

Her I call a Brahmin who without hurting any creatures, whether feeble or strong, does not kill nor cause slaughter.

Thoreau Woods UU Church – Worship Service
Life Is A Miracle!
December 4, 2011

Her I call a Brahmin who utters true speech, instructive and free from harshness, so that she offend no one.

Her I call a Brahmin who takes nothing in the world that is not given her, be it long or short, small or large, good or bad.

(Pause)

Humanity is our responsibility; human beings are that part of the total universe that we can do something about.

Perhaps we cannot make heaven be so, but to our children we can give our love, our care, our respect.

(adapted from words by Kenneth Patton)

Reading

We stand for a moment, like those who pause upon a mountain path, and gaze downward to the valley they have left below and upward to the heights above that allure to further effort.

We have been brought to our present point by powers we know not of, but whether our feet shall ever stand upon those high and lonely levels depends upon ourselves.

We are like voyagers when the harbor dangers have been safely passed, the pilot dropped, and the ship heads out to sea. From now on, the voyage is our own: ours the task of making it a joy; ours to prepare to weather the unfeeling, destructive storm; ours to find in the pageantry of Nature and in comradeship with our fellows a sufficient inspiration.

(from *Words of Aspiration* by Arthur Wakefield Slaten)

Naming

What is the name of this child?

(Parents give name of child.)

Maryann Jain Moore we welcome you and we give you this name as yours forever.

You are unique. There is no one else like you in the entire world. Your parents and your family welcome you in all your uniqueness. We give you this rose, different from every other rose in the world, as a symbol of your uniqueness.

Thoreau Woods UU Church – Worship Service
Life Is A Miracle!
December 4, 2011

We welcome you to this community. Water is the stuff of life, water connects all living things, all of humanity. The rose is dipped in water to symbolize your essential connection with all of us in this community.

(Touch the rose to the child's forehead, and give the rose to the child.)

Prayer

Let us join our hearts together in the spirit of prayer and meditation.

We give thanks for this new life that has come among us. Each new child brings us new hope for a new beginning. We see the great potential that lies in every human life, and we know this child will bring her unique gifts to humanity, if we help her to do so. May we recognize and nurture the unique gifts of this child. And through all the challenges and joys to come, may this child's life be blessed with hope and courage and love.

Now, please join with me in our Litany of Dedication.

Litany of Dedication

Minister: Maryann Jain Moore we welcome you among us.

All: We give thanks for your new life, and for the new hope you bring.

Minister: We will appreciate your uniqueness, we will teach you and learn from you, we will love you and respect you.

All: We will delight in your accomplishments, we will share in your sorrows, we will encourage you in every way as you grow into adulthood.

Congregation: We promise to be always available for you and your parents in the journeys and adventures ahead, and we promise you our loving presence in your life.

Parents: We, your parents, love you with all our hearts, and dedicate ourselves to do all that we can to share with you the beauty and the goodness of life.

All: We will support you and your parents through all the experiences of life.

Thoreau Woods UU Church – Worship Service
Life Is A Miracle!
December 4, 2011

Closing Words

In closing, Ralph Waldo Emerson said:

Do not be too timid and squeamish about your actions. All life is an experiment. The more experiments you make the better.

[But] What if they are a little coarse, and you may get your coat soiled or torn?

What if you do fail, and get fairly rolled in the dirt once or twice?

[Just get] Up again; and you shall never again be so afraid of a tumble.

Closing Hymn

Please join me standing as you are able singing our final Hymn, No. 256 “Winter Night” and remain standing for the Benediction.

Benediction

John Pepper

May the love of this season and this day be with us through all the days of the year and give us strength and courage and faith.

May the peace of this season be ever in us and bring us comfort and hope.

May the light of this season shine in our hearts and bring us happiness and laughter.

May the joy that is in us be shared with others.

Amen, Namaste, and Go in Peace!

Rejoice Together, p135, Kenneth W. Phifer

Extinguish the Chalice

Postlude