

Rev. Nikki Williams  
Imagining Creation  
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What's your favorite dinosaur? Yes, it's you, the adults, I'm asking! A few months ago a meme circulated on Facebook – perhaps you saw it? The caption asked that same question: What's your favorite dinosaur? The picture was a cartoon of an adult holding a child-like crayon drawing of a dinosaur. Since our society says one of the jobs of growing up is to spend less time indulging in our imaginings about such things, I realized that I hadn't pondered this question for many a year.

I've always been partial to the stegosaurus. That might be because a very long time ago my grade school classmates and I helped make a one-third scale papier mâché model of a stegosaurus for our classroom. It was seven feet long. I could easily imagine this gentle herbivore clumping around in pre-historic greenery looking for lunch, occasionally glancing over his shoulder for lurking carnivores.

Why am I talking about dinosaurs on a Sunday morning, you ask? Early in January, probably during his first sermon on this month's topic of Imagination, Rev. Joe mentioned the creation story and that got me to thinking.

I don't recall making any effort in my early childhood years to integrate what I learned about dinosaurs in grade school into the Bible's creation story that was, at the same time, being taught to me at Sunday school. They were two different worlds.

As I matured in my education and ability to think abstractly, imagination and reality became a give-and-take that enriched both of these ways of seeing life. I eventually learned that understanding the Biblical account of creation as myth does not negate science, but transforms evolution into a relatable story with a lesson to offer. And I also realized that my education in the science of evolution left out an element that I couldn't help sensing belonged there. That

element came from the stirring of my spirituality, and persuaded me to include the notion of God in my beliefs about creation.

(By the way, I'm using the name "God" here to make things easy. What name do you use for whatever the concept of God may mean to you? My personal favorite is Spirit of Life.)

In my lifetime I've watched spirituality and science inch closer together within our sphere of knowledge. Notice I said spirituality, not religion. Spirituality and religion go together and need one another, but I do not use the words interchangeably. To me, religion comes to me from outside myself and is housed in my brain. It is the belief system that makes sense to me and that I choose –like being a Unitarian Universalist.

My spirituality, on the other hand, is innate, and I make use of the religion I practice to feed and nurture it. Spirituality is the heart centered pulse of sensing and knowing about love that beats within me, and can certainly be at odds with my brain and logic at times.

New knowledge – scientific and otherwise - has changed how we see the world and one another. Our discoveries about the mysteries of the immense universe that surrounds us here on our tiny planet usually produce answers that produce more questions, which we then try to answer. In so doing, we have come to a better understanding of the fragility of the earth, and have an increased recognition of the interdependence of all life. With this comes a stronger respect for the inherent worth and dignity of our fellow humans, as well as the other forms of life on our planet.

At the same time, we have developed an increased knowledge of and receptivity to the inner treasures offered by religions other than our own. We meditate, go on retreats, devote time to appreciating nature. We join discussion groups, we read, we access the Internet. Our willingness, and indeed desire, to explore these things has its roots in our personal spirituality. We have begun to suspect that religions and myths, even if different, all point to the same thing.

Mysticism, a connection with unseen and unprovable things, intersects all religions. A mystic, in my experience, is one who has had a perceptible encounter that suggests that the essence of God and the essence of the individual Self are fundamentally one and the same.

Physicist Stephen Hawking once said that mysticism is for those who can't do the math. Well, I have to take issue with that! I can't do the math – his kind of math, anyway - but it doesn't mean that I don't believe in science. I just don't have to examine or prove the spiritual nature of creation to believe it. I accept it as part of my reality, a reality that I can't justify with reason or intellect. The Spirit of Life is the living breath of the cosmos in which I “live and breathe and have my being.” I am non-dual with the breath of this God of many definitions.

Even if you don't call yourself a mystic, you may feel this inner tug, this inner identification with something beyond our corporeal selves, in a variety of ways. Music, art, nature, literature, dance – we reach out to these in service to our need to transcend our everyday lives and feed our souls, whatever the word soul may mean to us.

Mae Jemison, an engineer, physician, and the first Black female NASA astronaut in the early '90s said this: “The difference between science and the arts is not that they are different sides of the same coin, or even different parts of the same continuum, but rather, they are manifestations of the same thing. The arts and sciences are avatars of human creativity,” she said. And I will add that creativity begins in our imaginations.

It is only when human beings insist on creating a God in **our** own image instead of the other way around that problems between the creation story and evolution arise.

The phenomenon of creating God in the image of a person has been with humans for thousands of years. Sure, the Bible says we were created in the image of God, but assumptions about what that means have sometimes led us astray. There's a certain safety in defining God in the image of a human being. That makes it easy to claim that how we describe God is the correct and only reality. This God-in-the-image-of-humans must have opinions, lay down rules, love and sometimes fails at it, get angry, keep score, and even intervene directly to help us win football games.

The Council of Nicea that established what we now know as the Christian tradition starting back in the year 325 CE didn't have much science to draw from when the Council's participants decided to divide God into three parts: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Even if they had more science to consult,

would they have done differently? Being possessed of firm opinions about rightness and wrongness, and establishing institutions to back them up are very human proclivities. And yet we feel free to assign these characteristics to the amorphous God we have created.

One of the many things I love about being a Unitarian Universalist is that our God is not a trinity, a three-part God, but a Mystery that is One with a capital O. We are Uni-tarians. This lack of boundaries and compartmentalism in the concept of God is central to our tradition. Notice I said God's a mystery. And that's okay with us! We get to come to our own conclusions here, as long as we have done so with diligence and care and thoughtfulness.

UUs have named six sources from which we draw our faith. One of the sources is this: [We draw from] "Direct experience of that **transcending mystery** and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that **create** and uphold life."

Are we accidents of evolution or was a God involved? If we take the Bible's creation story very literally, how can we account for finding no traces of humans among the bones of the dinosaurs? And if we believe only in evolution, how do we account for spiritual and mystical experiences that are not imaginings, and are very real to us.

And then there's the question of how to know what's true about life. Is this how life should be? Our moral and ethical lives and leanings for instance: are they an accident of evolution? Or are they part of a grand design? Again I say: It's a mystery! Our questions are as important as our answers. They lead us to places we call sacred.

One thing the major religions seem to know and believe about humankind is that we need to learn and lean into love, agape love, the unconditional love that transcends and endures regardless of circumstance, going beyond just emotion to seeking the best for others. The word love is even some people's word for God.

In his book, "The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark" published shortly before his death in 1996, physicist Carl Sagan said this: "Science is not only compatible with spirituality; it is a profound source of spirituality."

He continues, “When we recognize our place in an immensity of light years and in the passage of ages, when we grasp the intricacy, beauty and subtlety of life, then that soaring feeling, that sense of elation and humility combined, is surely spiritual. So are our emotions in the presence of great art or music or literature, or of acts of exemplary selfless courage such as those of Mohandas Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr.” Sagan concludes with this: “The notion that science and spirituality are somehow mutually exclusive does a disservice to both.”

I love that whole passage. Sagan realized that **all** humans are troubled by fear and uncertainty, and struggle with our feelings of powerlessness in a complex and unpredictable world. We sometimes take away the pain by rooting ourselves in ideologies that seem to offer us certainty and stability. He also thought about how we can approach those who disagree with and even attack our beliefs. He suggests that we have “compassion for kindred spirits in a common quest.”

Rev. Victoria Safford, minister of the White Bear UU Church near St. Paul, Minnesota puts it this way, and I will leave you with this thought: “The goal is reconciliation, not to destroy your opponent, nor cast them out, but to stay in the struggle till **love** wins.” May it be so.