

I have always been fascinated by the way that myths and legends express far deeper truths than modern scientific peoples were likely to give them credit for. But now it is science that is telling us that we humans have come from the stars. Not directly of course—that is for science fiction so far. And the young blue stars that comprise the Pleiades cluster have many UFO enthusiasts as well. But, the matter in our bodies, the chemicals that make up all of life, did originate in the stars. Scientists have figured out that the pressure and heat required to make most of the chemicals in our familiar periodic table of elements, can only happen in the furnace of a supernova—that last big explosion of a dying star. Therefore, all the elements that make up life on earth were created in those ancient stars.

Gerald Callahan compares it to the acorns placed in the hands of the dead, which grew to trees in the old cemetery:

Only in the clenched fists of these dying stars do pressures, driven by gravity itself, reach levels sufficient to gather the seeds of hydrogen and squeeze protons and neutrons into the stuff of life. Phosphorus, iron, oxygen, nickel, zinc. Each of us—clam, cricket, primate—an elemental acorn, carried, at the end, inside a star's wizened fist. Each of our elements risen from another's grave. Each of us, the last great wish of a dying star.³

And the cycle continues. These molecules born so long ago keep forming and dying and reforming, and so come to us for a time. And what is this "us?" We are a rearrangement: we are made of the same molecules that have been around for billions of years, but rearranged once again in a unique and new pattern. Like the great paintings of history—the artists keep rearranging colors and shapes to create ever new pictures of great beauty. It is never finished—there are always new ways to arrange colors and shapes and shades. Or like writers and speakers with words—there are always new sentences and ideas and stories. Creativity never runs out of possibilities here.

The world of nature is the original model of endless variation. The trees shed their leaves in a blaze of glorious color, and drop millions of acorns and others seeds to the ground. Some of those acorns sprout in the earth, and send out shoots and roots, and new trees are born. Each spring new leaves emerge, and grow to summer fullness. The acorns I brought for our service today were gathered from thousands more along the path I walk each morning. I heard a true story that blue jays take acorns from the forest, and carry them to the edge of the tree line, where they plant them in the ground for safe-keeping. Some they come back to eat, but others expand the forest row by row.

Religious language often calls us to a moment of stillness, but life itself seems never to be still. Life itself is constantly in motion. Re-making the world from moment to moment to moment, like a vast kaleidoscope turning in the hands of an invisible viewer. And here is a wonderful miracle: we are its viewers. We can watch the kaleidoscope turn and turn and turn again, with another round of beauty and mystery, even as we are a part of that turning. Even though the picture that is ourselves will eventually disappear to make way for a new arrangement.

³ From *Faith, Madness, and Spontaneous Human Combustion*, (Berkley Books, New York, 2002), p. 172-173.

And here is another miracle: we remember the turning beauty. We recall the times before this moment, and we can see the sequence of changes in motion from past to present. But we pay a price for our memories. We experience the pain of grief for all that has passed away. We do not let go easily. When someone we love has died, we feel as if a part of ourselves has died. And that is true. Because we are all one kaleidoscope, each person's death is a death of the beauty and wholeness we have been together. The cost of remembering is loss and grief.

Even though our atoms and molecules recycle, death takes away our human identity, our personhood, our unique pattern. I have thought a lot about death, and listened to the grief of many people. In the darkness of loss it takes time before we can see once again the beauty of the next turning. But as I consider this changing, recycling world we live in, I feel some comfort.

It says to me—if nothing is wasted on the material plane—if all of our atoms are rearranged into other parts of life, then it must be true as well on the personal plane. Nothing is wasted. Our consciousness, our ideas, our feelings, the ways we have grown and what we have learned, all of this matters, nothing is lost. And so it says to me, don't worry about death. All of this living you are doing, the growing and the loving will not be for nothing. Our little love goes back into the larger kaleidoscope of love.

And there is another miracle. We can also imagine the future of the kaleidoscope. And we are not merely witnesses, not merely ourselves part of the random unfolding of a constantly changing universe, we are also artists in its creation. We help to shape the next arrangement by how we live during this time of our lifespan. This miracle of our co-creation also has a cost—our worry and fear for the future, and our struggle with each other over the shape it will take.

I have been thinking about this in the anxiety that is filling our nation during these days leading up to the elections. In our nation, we are in deep conflict about the kind of future for which we hope. Everyone wants their own vision to succeed. But no one can control the outcome of the elections. Just like no one can control the next picture in a kaleidoscope. All we can do is add our colors to the mix.

When it comes to shaping a nation or a community—we can talk about our hopes, we can campaign door to door, we can make phone calls and drive people to the polls—and I know that many of you who care about this election are doing those things. And then the kaleidoscope turns, and it will include all the efforts we have made, and the efforts others have made. Nothing is lost. But the picture will be new—never quite just the way we imagined.

Everything keeps changing and recycling and coming together to create new things. The picture we are in today has been shaped by the people of earlier decades and centuries. So many people are discouraged right now by the vast divide in America—the way it is difficult for us to come together around a vision for our country. But this division is not meaningless. Our current conflicts are like aftershocks from the seismic shifts that occurred in the 1950s and 60s and 70s. African Americans added their hopes and dreams to the kaleidoscope. Women of all colors added their hopes and dreams to the kaleidoscope. Queer people also gave voice to their hopes

and dreams.

But every new thing is connected to the loss of other things. Change is painful for us as human beings, even though it is a constant rule of life. Things get turned around. Not everything comes out the way we hope. For some in America, the changes were felt as losses, and so we have witnessed strong reactions.

But we work for our best hopes and dreams of the future, and the kaleidoscope turns, and we can't control the outcome. There are always unintended consequences. There are always unexpected blessings. All we can do, to the best of our wisdom and ability, is to live in this moment to the melody and rhythm of our values and our hopes. All we can do is to be aware of the enormous influence we do have on the future generations. The Haudenosaunee Indians say that we should consider the impact of our actions all the way down to the seventh generation coming after us—those unborn descendants who will live on this earth.

So what is our hope, not just for this season, or next year, but for the twenty-second century? The twenty-third century? I want to see our children's great-great-great-grandchildren finding acorns in the forest, and watching the leaves turn to gold and red. I don't think human beings can live without trees. I want to see music and dancing and art and stories and exploration and curiosity and learning. I want to see respect and appreciation for all people and all beings and the great kaleidoscope of Life itself. I want to see cooperation and creativity and freedom.

I want to see the power of love unlocked in our midst, as in the words of Teilhard de Chardin: "[Humankind] can harness the winds, the waves and the tides, but when [we] can harness the power of love, then for the second time in the history of the world, [we] will have discovered fire."

Meditation

Closing Words

Our closing words are from Barbara Pescan⁴:

Because of those who came before, we are;
in spite of their failings, we believe;
because of, and in spite of the horizons of their vision, we too, dream.
Let us go remembering to praise,
to live in the moment,
to love mightily,
to bow to the mystery.

As we extinguish the flame of this chalice,
let each of us carry its light into every new day of our lives.

⁴ #680 in *Singing the Living Tradition*