

OF SUN & STARS & SPIRIT

A Service by Fritz Hudson

Presented May 2, 2004

Chalice Lighting

*Out of the stars in their flight,
out of the dust of eternity,
here have we come,
Stardust and sunlight,
mingling through time and through space.*

*Mystery hidden in mystery,
back through all time;
Out of the stars,
rising from rocks and the sea,
kindled by sunlight on earth arose life.*

*Ponder this thing in your heart;
ponder with awe: ...
out of the stars swung the earth;
life upon earth rose to love.*

*Out of your heart, cry wonder:
sing that we live.*

Robert Weston

Opening Song: "Touch the Earth, Reach the Sky"

Introduction

*Touch the earth, reach the sky
Children ask the reasons why ...
Life's the time left in between
To follow a star, to build a dream*

There was a time, in our country, when children were not always encouraged to ask the reasons why, to follow stars or build dreams, particularly girl children. 186 years ago, when Maria Mitchell was born, it was mostly like that, but not in her family.

Maria was born on an island called Nantucket, part of the state of Massachusetts in the Northeast part of our country along the Atlantic Ocean.

'Your Grandmother and Grandfather came across the ocean to Nantucket from England,' Maria's

father would say to her many nights at dinner. 'Every night, on the way over, they would examine the stars from the deck, before they had to go down into the hold where they slept. The stars gave them the strength to hope for a new life in our country. After we wash the dishes, let's go up and see what we can see in them.'

The Mitchell's house had what is known as a widow's walk on its roof - a small platform you could reach only by climbing a ladder through the top floor's ceiling - a place from which looking up all you could see was the stars spread out all around and the moon so close you swore you could touch it. Many nights up on that widow's walk Maria and her father would map the changes in location of the constellations they saw and try to find the mathematical description for their movement through the year. Many days, when Maria was at school, other children would ask her the reasons why the stars moved as they did and she would go home even more determined to learn the answers.

When Maria was 17, in 1835, she and her father mapped the progress of Halley's comet which comes close enough to be seen here on earth only once every 76 years. Very few girls went to college in those days, so Maria pursued the "reasons why" of stars by working in Nantucket's city library. She and her father built an observatory atop the local bank building where they set up a telescope, a larger version of what I have here. Several years later, Maria Mitchell became the first American, and the first woman, to discover a comet which could only be seen by telescope. It still bears her name.

Eventually Maria's work brought her to become the first woman given membership in the American Academy of Science. When Matthew Vassar created a new college to give woman an education equal to any given men anywhere, he chose Maria, though she'd never attend college herself, to be Vassar College's professor of astronomy. For the next 23 years, she helped girls grow from children barely brave enough to ask the reasons why, into women who knew how to find the answers.

Maria Mitchell spent her Sundays in a church named just as ours is here, a Unitarian Church. May her spirit be ours as we reach toward the sky.

Choral Anthem: "Heleluyan" as sung by the Muskogee People

Sermon

"In the life of the Indian, there is only one inevitable duty," wrote Ohiyesa of the Dakota Tribe in 1911. "One awakes at daybreak, puts on one's moccasins and steps down to the water's edge. Here you throw handfuls of clean, cold water into your face, or plunge in bodily. After the bath, one stands erect before the advancing dawn, facing the sun as it dances upon the horizon, and offers an unspoken prayer. A mate may precede or follow one in one's devotions, but never accompanies one. Each soul must meet the morning sun, the new sweet earth and the Great Silence alone."

In the American Southwest, among the most ancient traces of human habitation were left by the people called the Anasazi. They were the precursor peoples of those we know today as Hopi, Zuni, Tewa, or collectively as the Pueblo People. Scholars write that "Like those of many people, the cosmology of the Pueblos (their understanding of life's ultimate context) is headed by a supreme Sky

God, who is omnipotent and all-encompassing. It was ... he/she ... who initiated creation. But this god has retreated to the farthest reaches of the heavens, become abstract and inaccessible. The lesser gods, such as the sun, continue the world of the creator, interacting with humans and fueling the mechanisms of life."

"The Pueblos are ... agricultural people, needing a reliable calendar," these scholars go on. "They ... live in a marginal climate, in a harsh environment that needs to be monitored constantly. Sustained drought and killing frosts are ... serious (the Anasazi). (So) the eyes of both peoples were fastened on the heavens." (J.McKim Malville & Claudia Putnam Prehistoric Astronomy in the Southwest, p.25-26)

Are any of us here directly descended from the aboriginal people of this land? (two or three) Our Phoenix church included a few descendants of the Anasazi. Are any of us here the descendants of agricultural people, say in your parents generation. (twenty) Ginny, my wife, grew up on a farm in Illinois. Can anyone here say now that you are an agricultural person now. (one) With you as possible exceptions, clearly, most of us urbanites, I suspect fasten our eyes on the heavens far less than then did Anasazis. Sometimes, by the very light and particulates our urban life adds to the air, we can barely see the heavens at all. Are we missing something, something important?

A few years ago I began to feel like we were. So I began to try to retrieve it. I tried in several ways to break through the clouds within my head to really see what some call "the heavens." At church retreats I led a group service in which we all lay on our backs in a grassy clearing contemplating the night sky. On family vacations we visited planetariums. Once we stayed up until midnight to view the Pleiades stars through the same giant telescope which first focused on the planet Pluto. In our annual ritual night canoe ride to the middle of my parents' home lake in northern Wisconsin, my daughter and I would pause to take in the moon and the stars above and their reflection beneath and all around us. Even in the pool we swam at on summer nights, I found that a new pool toy, a floating styrofoam noodle, placed carefully under my back and legs, would let me float and drift, ears submerged in water, body wheeling with whatever subtle currents there were, while my eyes gradually found and fixed on the now familiar, but ever changing, starscape above. In these various ways I came to feel that my cosmology, my understanding of life's ultimate context, actually rested on roughly the same foundation as that of the Anasazi. I too find that the supreme power of the cosmos - that which is omnipotent and all-encompassing, that which seems to have initiated creation - seems to have "retreated to the farthest reaches of the heavens", and "become abstract and inaccessible." But even though I share this starting point with those who long preceded me on this continent, I find it a great struggle to follow their path into relation with their "lesser gods" in quite the same way.

My cosmology is schooled by the work of modern astrophysicists and astronomers, the heirs to the tradition of Maria Mitchell. It tells me that as I lie on my back on earth's earth, or float in its water, I and my fellow 5 billion current human inhabitants rest on the third planet orbiting a rather middling star. And that star, this tradition teaches me, orbits as but one near the edge of the 200 billion star Milky Way galaxy, in which it takes nearly four years for the light to reach us from even the nearest neighbor star of those 200 billion. This tradition further tells me that our Milky Way galaxy is but one in a cluster of about 2000 galaxies which rest in the part of the sky we associate with the constellation Virgo, my birth constellation, and that the light which comes from our closest neighbor

constellation Andromeda takes nearly two million years to reach our eyes. At the very least, even in the current moment, this cosmology gives me precious little basis for believing that my place in the ultimate context of life has anything I could call significance.

Beyond teaching me my infinitesimally small place in this current moment, my scientific tradition also attacks my sense of significance in time. It tells me that, having commenced in a colossal explosion known as the Big Bang, the entire cosmic system has moved outward from its point of origin at unimaginable speed gradually exhausting its original energy. While currently available evidence seems to suggest that this expansion might continue forever, part of the tradition also speculates that there may be a turning point in the expansion, that the now dispersing cosmic components may eventually re-coalesce toward an equally colossal implosion known as the Big Crunch, from which no trace of at least its more complex life forms can be expected to survive, if indeed existence itself survives. Moreover, the tradition seems to suggest, since the evidence for this progression comes from light waves which we are reading perhaps millions of years after the events they report to us actually occurred, we may only become aware of the passing of this tipping point long after it is crossed.

Even more than a century ago, Maria Mitchell could write, "We know of this motion (of the stars) at present only as a straight line, but the motion in the universe is curved, and cycles of time will doubtless curve this motion and reveal a point around which all motion sweeps ... These immense spaces of creation cannot be spanned by our finite powers; these great cycles of time cannot be lived even by the life of the race." In its truly ultimate context in time as well as in space, at least in our tradition, we seem fairly forced to accept that human life has no cosmic significance whatsoever.

When I was minister in Iowa City, cartoonist Berke Breathed (creator of the strip Bloom County) sometimes attended our church. Once, I think, Berke captured our spirit's temptation exquisitely, in his four line-drawn panels.

In panel 1 the boy Binkley is straining on a summer day to hand-mow his family's lawn. Opus, his friend the penguin, has just arrived and tells Binkley: "Oliver (their mutual boy-genius-scientist friend) "Oliver says that 'The Big Crunch' is coming."

In panels 2 and 3, Binkley is shown stopped from his mowing, staring at Opus in sweaty exhaustion. Opus goes on "He says the universe will fall back in on itself someday. Stars .. planets ... tofu hot dogs ... everything will squash together. ... AND THEN EXPLODE AGAIN IN A FIERY CATAclysmic DESTRUCTION!!"

In panel 4 then Binkley has moved to his family's living room, sagging, sweaty, facing his father who is relaxed in an easy chair now lowering his Sunday paper. Binkley says to him with finality. "Screw the lawn, Pop."

Isn't that our spirit's temptation in our tradition? The cosmos, by all we can tell, is ultimately going nowhere. How can our soul respond? Doesn't it, don't we, want to say, 'screw the lawn, to hell with our work, nuts to our friends and family. Forget it all. Just forget it' - as we will all and everything we know one day be forgotten?

The temptation is powerful, indeed, at least it is within me. And each year now - in my solitary summer quest to reconnect with my own search for truth and meaning, resting from trying to be part of your search as well - I find I must allow myself to fully feel that temptation to despair. I need to risk finding out again whether in my allegiance to truth I have lost my capacity for hope - which should be the death of any minister's professional pretensions. I need to find out again whether somehow still, in the midst of this strong suspicion of life's ultimate meaninglessness, there still rises within me, on top of this suspected truth, a primordial conviction that life nonetheless can be lived with meaning.

Though, as I said, I find my soul grounded in the same sense of lost contact with ultimate creative power with which the Anasazi began, I find it hard to follow them quickly into relationship with such "lesser gods" as the sun. The Anasazi built their great kivas, their subterranean room-sized vessels, as domed replicas of the universe they felt themselves within. They painstakingly and ingeniously sunk the four trees which supported the dome precisely at the four cardinal directions - east, south, west and north - to align themselves with the powers of the universe. They carefully tracked the annual solar journey south on the horizon to the summer solstice, and held ceremonies at the nearest new moon to call the moon's weakness to cool the sun's destructive heat. Then, after they tracked the sun's journey north again to the winter solstice, they held ceremonies at the nearest full moon to use its strength now to pull the sun back from the brink of death. Of course these rites have their analogue in those held at Stonehenge in Great Britain, home of my aboriginal ancestors. Still my grounding in the scientific tradition does not allow my soul to presume quite such power over even these "lesser gods," these nearer heavenly bodies.

And yet, I find, it does have another kind of power.

My colleague in ministry Barbara Pescan voices what I sense as the beginning of that power in these words:

*High above us the sun shines
and beyond the sun
the stars of night
hide in the day-time sky.*

*Below our feet the worms
out of their bodies
remake the earth.
and at the center
the earth still simmers
with its first fire.*

*Somewhere
between the stars and earth's core
we live
and weep
we ask
and laugh*

and answer

*Such wonders abounding --
how can we not be amazed?*

Is there not a power, I ask, in our mere amazement that we are emotionally alive at all in such an oppressive context? Doesn't the mere sensing of capacity for appreciation, for awe, in fact form the seed of meaning? It does, I think, and its power does not there. We are not even doomed, I believe, only to possess the power to be starstruck.

In another Bloom County cartoon, Berke Breathed helped me see a further extension of our power, again in his simple 4 panels:

In panel 1 this time, Opus comes upon Binkley sitting slumped on the front stoop, eyes sad and hollow. Opus is holding a tie in each of his hands and says. "Well I'm absolutely stumped Binkley. Should it be a red or a green tie today?"

Through panels 2, 3 and 4, Binkley's disgusted response moves through three stages of rising tone and energetic gesture:

- "Red or green? You're worrying about choosing a red or green tie when all of this will hardly be a whisper of a memory in a short 143 million years?"

- "when the sun is due to go "nova" and explode, swallowing everything -- mountains, oceans, taco bells -- everything in a giant fire ball.

- "leaving the entire planet just a big, bubbling, glowing glob of MOLTEN LAVA!!!"

Opus' response comes chin tucked, timid hand in the air holding up one of the ties: "It's the red one, then?"

Is there power, is there meaning, Opus seems to ask in our capacity for symbolism? Even if we can't presume to cool the sun in summer or save it from death in the winter, can't we in small, symbolic ways, align our lives with the powers of the universe. The power of symbol is, I believe, a beginning. And yet, I also dare to believe, our power might even extend beyond mere alignment with those powers of the cosmos. I dare even imagine, that we as conscious beings might, in infinitesimally small ways, actually share in the creativity of this universe.

Maria Mitchell, in the relatively optimistic times of her century, clearly dared imagine such power. She wrote, "As small as is our whole system compared with the infinitude of creation, brief as is our life compared with cycles of time, we are so tethered to all by the beautiful dependencies of law, that not only the sparrow's fall is felt to the uttermost bound, but the vibration set in motion by the words we utter reach through all space and the tremor is felt throughout all time."

If we can in any way sustain this faith in our more despairing age, we must at least take the same care in choosing and uttering our words, our symbols, as the Anasazis did in fixing and raising their kiva timbers. With such care, I dare imagine, the power of the stars themselves may in some way be ours. Robert Frost, of course, showed us the way:

*O Star, (the fairest one in sight)
We grant your loftiness the right
To some obscurity of cloud
It will not do to say of night,
Since dark is what brings out your light.
Some mystery becomes the proud.
But to be wholly taciturn
In your reserve is not allowed.
Say something to us we can learn
By heart and when alone repeat.
Say something! And it says, "I burn."
But say with what degree of heat.
Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade.
Use language we can comprehend.
Tell us what elements you blend.
It gives us strangely little aid,
But does tell us something in the end.
And steadfast to Keats' Eremite,
Not even stooping from its sphere,
It asks a little of us here.
It asks of us a certain height,
So when at times the mob is swayed
To carry praise or blame too far,
We choose something like a star
To stay our minds on and be staid.*

Closing Song: "O Star of Truth"

Chalice Extinguishing

*O our Mother the Earth,
O our Father the Sky,
Your children are we,
and with tired backs
we bring you the gifts you love.
Then weave for us a garment of brightness;*

*May the warp be the white light of morning.
May the weft be the red light of evening.
May the fringes be the falling rain.
May the border be the standing rainbow.*

*Thus weave for us a garment of brightness,
That we may walk fittingly where birds sing,
That we may walk fittingly*

where grass is green,

O our Mother the Earth,

O our Father the Sky.

Tewa People of the Rio Grande