

## IS SOMEONE CALLING?

A sermon on fate, free will and our place in the cosmos

By Rev. John Morehouse

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Between our house, the office and our cell phones, we probably deal with somewhere near 140 phone calls a week. Occasionally, these calls are of a mysterious nature. Several weeks ago for instance, I received what was obviously a collect phone call on a fully automated system. I couldn't understand who the caller was on my voice mail. I replayed the message over and over again, still no way to figure out who called. I followed the instructions to retrieve the message from AT&T but still could not retrieve the message. Generally, collect phone calls are fairly important to a minister; they usually indicate an emergency, with my kids, one of you, one of my colleagues or just some lost soul with no place left to go. Calls from jail are always collect. I pursued the mystery, calling up the company and asking how I might retrieve the message. "I'm sorry sir" came the reply, there is no way to tell who called once it goes into the automated system. And while we have caller i.d. (ever wonder how I know its you before you say a word, no not divine knowledge) but the i.d. only said "unavailable." How fitting!

This was really beginning to bother me. I don't know why, usually I just have to move on. Who was calling? Avon, girl scout cookies, God? Who then? Who knows maybe aliens?

All of this mystery got me to thinking about how often we might be missing the cues not only from people in need but from the larger cosmos around us. How many of you have stopped on a walk outside and listened to the sounds around you? How many of those sounds can you identify? This last week I flew back to Maryland to celebrate my youngest grandson's first birthday. Snow on the ground, grey, bare trees, I remembered why I live here. But Tuesday I rose early and went outside. Winter has a different sound there than here in LA. I listened intently to the sounds around me, the cars, the birds, the planes and I mused how it might have been for some human progenitor 20,000 years ago. What was she listening to? To be certain, a quieter world. And for those sounds that she couldn't identify did the earliest homo sapiens imagine an invisible force? Archeology seems to think so; our earliest religions are now thought to have been burial rites connecting the known of life with the unknown of death. As religion developed it brought meaning to where we go after we die and then moved on to where we came from, and why we are here. In the last thousand years or so we have demarcated that search to the known within the realm of science and the unknown mysteries

of religion. It has been an uneasy alliance. Science demanding proof and religion relying on imagination and faith. And while science has been blazing forward in our quest to know and hear more of our universe, religion has been playing catch up. Trying to make historically bound doctrines such as the resurrection fit a modern world.

Today I want to explore the nature of this essential mystery of the universe and our place in it. I want to begin more ambitiously perhaps to chart a new spirituality for us as Unitarian Universalists.

Michael Murphy, the founder of the Eslan Institute in California has assembled a team of serious scientists to study the connection with our fragile place in the cosmos and our spiritual drive.

Murphy suggests that the overwhelming evidence of evolution is suggesting that we are part of a great arc towards a consciousness that will not only unite humankind, a thousand years from now but possibly connected us with a larger cosmic community.

The story of evolution suggests that we are moving, destined perhaps, towards a great spiritual end. Perhaps nirvana, heaven, atonement, or communion with other life. Now before you think I have gone off my rocker hear me out. First the case for evolution, fundamentalist understandings aside, our universe is about 14 billion years old, at the current rate of expansion we will either

expand to nothingness or begin to relapse in about another 14 billion years. Our lonely planet is 4.6 billion years old. The first 3 billion years were taken up in planet formation; cooling, oxidizing and reforming. In the last 900 million years life began. First as single cell beings, then jumping to multicelled organisms, then to breathing multi organ beings, finally to fish, reptiles, mammals and us. It has really only been in the last 50,000 years that we have achieved any semblance of intelligence and only in the last 20,000 years that we have been what I would call aware; capable of meaning making.

What is it that pulls us forward as a species? Does the universe have a “telos” Greek for message it is sending to us not as individuals but as a species? I believe it does. Not because I have heard the voice of God, though I have certainly felt the power of her presence urging me onward. Not because any great prophet has said so, Jesus, the Buddha or Mohammed. No, not because of any proclamation but because of the insatiable need humanity has to discover. I believe that we are being called, pulled forward by a force of cosmological proportions, not measured by what you and I see in our short lives or through our senses, but in the march of generations (generations starting with little Nathan Pobre here) to connect with a larger and larger universe.

When we knew nothing of any worlds beyond our own we were arrogant enough to assume that this is all there is. And human history is about one group conquering another only to lose what they thought they had gained. Here, the Buddha was correct. We are bound to suffering and life by thinking that meaning is found in what we have. Death levels that illusion for us all. For my money, the really important thinking and work to be done in finding meaning in our lives; resides in loving one another and looking for a connection to the larger universe. The really cutting edge spiritual growth will be in hearing the call of the cosmos and making sense of it in our own life.

What am I talking about? While I am not talking about a phone call from God. Someone shared with me an experience they had as a child walking past a Pentecostal church in Florida during a funeral. There was a great deal of singing going on and he went up to the open door to see what was happening. The deceased laid for viewing before the altar. One of the ushers seeing the young boy invited him in and walked him down to the casket. There was the man all dressed with a telephone in his hand. The usher exclaimed in all seriousness, "God called and he answered"! True story. In fact, telephones in caskets were quite popular back in the 1930s. Only trouble was the line was dead!

No this is not what I mean, although faith in the afterlife is one way of answering the call. But there is another way to heed what I believe is the call to our ultimate destiny as human beings and that is ETI. Extra terrestrial intelligence. Now before you put on your Nikes here, let me explain. I have been a serious student of ET for sometime. Not the UFO stuff but the serious scientific inquiry into the possibility of life elsewhere. A real connection to something larger than we are. Let me start by saying that to date there is no evidence of ET. Period. Not because we haven't tried. NASA before the Reagan cuts, and now several university and private institutes (see SETI) are engaged in a serious and systematic scan of the known galaxy for radio waves. There have been hundreds of unexplainable signals after a serious culling for other reasons but none of them has repeated itself – a requisite for the scientific method - still we are looking. There is a lot to listen to. Of the roughly 400 billion stars in our galaxy, (just one in billions) researchers believe that only 3% or 12 million are sun like stars, and only a fraction of those will have the distance to create the conditions for life, somewhere around 100,000 solar systems. Let me say that we do now have evidence that other planets exist. Our most recent catalog is about 199 planets around nearby stars (Source: Princeton University). Let me also say that probability of life on the other planets is high. Carbon and water, the two most

necessary elements for life exist in abundance. Mars is believed to have oceans worth of water in its crust and Europa, one of Jupiter's moons is all water. Primitive one celled organism fossils have been found on asteroids. Life most definitely exists out there and some of it by the sheer probability of the numbers of stars, is intelligent probably more intelligent than we are. If our planet is 4.6 billion years old and the universe is 14 billion years old there was more than enough time for another planet to spawn and evolve another species of intelligence. And it wouldn't even take that long. Look how far we have come in the last 1000 years, the last 100 years, the last 10 years. Computer capability doubles every 18 months.

Assuming we are in a mediocre system around a mediocre star, it follows statistically that there are other civilizations beyond us. And more than likely these civilizations will have outgrown war.

It is towards that discovery and the knowledge that we will gain from that contact that I believe we are, as a species drawn, by some unseen hand. Before I attempt to suggest to you what that hand might be let me lay to rest your fears that all of this is determined and we are just pawns in some great cosmic chess game. The Jewish Kabala, the great mystical arm of Judaism has a wonderful saying: All is determined, but free will is given. The age old debate between those who say all life is predetermined, eat drink and be merry and those who are, like us, fierce individualists that believe

only we can determine our course is missing the point. The march of evolution, the almost certainty that there is a larger intelligence beyond us (dare I say “Intelligent Design”? more this summer), the attempt of myth and poetry and religion to give context to this larger reality says to me, yes, we are part of a much bigger scheme of things than we can ever see. The earth is curved, if you travel west you eventually become east, returning from where you started. But you can’t see that. So it is, I believe with us, we can’t see how we fit into this larger destiny but that doesn’t mean we aren’t a part of it. In our daily life, the life that earns money, deals with kids, money and sex, the part that has fears and joys and knows suffering we are like a single being on this planet. Sure the planet curves but that doesn’t affect our lives at this moment. At this micro-existence we call life, our choices do make a difference. And we do have the power to decide. We are free. Just as Adam and Eve were free to disobey God and eat of the tree of good and evil, so too are we free. And those decisions make a difference, good or bad, in the physical world. Perhaps even beyond this world, like the Hindu law of karma, each action, good or bad has a reaction, like ripples in a pond.

But Adam and Eve were thrown out of the garden of Eden for that freedom. And something in them, in all of us, is drawing us back. Not to what was, but to what could be. A garden of new

knowledge, new wisdom, new hope. This is why I believe we are connected together in a much, much larger scheme. We are destined to find that garden, or perhaps to see the garden all around us. Someone or something deep within us, generation upon generation is calling us home.

So is the Goddess ET? Intriguing thought. If so that we must have a bad connection. Of the roughly four billion channels we would need to listen to hear a signal, our current technology can only listen to a mere 2 million at once. This will change. But perhaps it won't be radio waves, it might be light, in fact infrared light might be flashing at us right now even if we can't see it. What would they think of us? Our earliest T.V. signals are from I love Lucy, now reaching 30 light years away, roughly 50 million miles, only to about the nearest dozen stars in our neighborhood.

It's hard to imagine God as ET broadcasting live from Alpha Centurai, a mere four light years away. Rather I find that God's place is more subtle than even the stars. The Sufi mystic Rumi put it better: Divine, within, without, all in all. The drive to connection (which is after all what religion means) is for me, God. Not a place or person but a condition. We are drawn by a destiny of what the ancients called atonement. To be one with what is.

What does this mean for you and me this morning. Not much. We will go on with our lives, making difficult choices to real life problems. Seeking love and acceptance and courage. But it is my hope, than for just the occasional moment you might ponder your inevitable connection to a universe where you, far from being too small to count, do count by the very fact that you wonder what is out there. We are not alone, said the little boy dying, we are definitely not alone. The Spanish mystic Jose Ortega Y Gasset said it best: It is not primarily in the present or in the past that we live. Our life is the activity directed to what is to come.

I believe someone is calling. And we are, in some small way, answering the call by simply being and living on this earth. Amen.