Where Do We Come From, What Are We, Where Are We Going?

November 18, 2012

I

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

These are the words that the 19th century French artist Paul Gauguin inscribed on the painting that he considered to be his greatest artistic masterpiece and the culmination of his life’s work.

Gauguin’s painting, which he created in 1897 while living in Tahiti, depicts three groups of people: a group of three Polynesian women and a child on the right who symbolize the beginning of life; a group of men and women in the middle of the canvass who represent the daily existence of life; and, on the left side of the canvass, “an old woman approaching death who appears reconciled or resigned to her thoughts,” “a strange white bird at her feet, which represents the futility of words,” and, in the background, a blue idol symbolizing what Gauguin called: “the Beyond.”


Three questions: Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

Three questions that Gauguin pondered through his art as he struggled with depression.

Three questions that men and women have asked, and tried to answer, since the beginning of human history.

Three of life’s biggest questions, riddles, and mysteries. Three questions that I’ll explore with you in the third of this year’s “big questions” sermon series here at UUFR.

II

Paul Gauguin was born in Paris in 1848 but emigrated, with his family, to Lima, Peru when he was only eighteen months old. Following his father’s death, Gauguin and his mother returned to France and, at age eleven, he was sent to a Catholic boarding school near Orléans (which he hated).
His studies there included required classes on Catholic theology, which were taught by the Bishop of Orléans, Felix Dupanloup, who created his own catechism for schoolboys—three questions that Dupanloup believed are the most fundamental questions of life: “Where does humanity come from? Where is humanity going? How does humanity proceed?”

Dupanloup, of course, supplied Gauguin and his classmates with answers to these questions based on the teachings of Catholic Christianity—teachings which, over the course of his lifetime, Gauguin rejected as he moved away from Christianity, took up painting, and, in 1891, sailed to French Polynesia, where he sought to escape European civilization and “everything that is artificial and conventional,” and, instead, embraced the more “primitive” and “pure” mythology and religious traditions of the Polynesian natives that found expression in the quasi-religious or spiritual symbolism of his paintings.

Apparently, though, Dupanloup’s questions continued to haunt Gauguin because, like all religious questions, they are also profoundly human questions.

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

They are human questions because the “we” refers to humanity generally and, more specifically, to each one of us as human beings.

They’re human questions because they are existential and ontological questions—questions that go to the essence of what it means to be human.

They’re human questions because they address the greatest mysteries of human life—birth and death—and the greatest challenge of life: living a life that matters, a life of meaning and purpose, a life of joy and beauty in the midst of pain, sorrow, and loss.

These three questions—where do we come from, what are we, where are we going—are human questions. But they’re also religious questions because, as the late Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church has said: “Religion is our human response to being alive and knowing we have to die.”

They’re religious questions because they are cosmological, anthropological, and eschatological questions—questions about the origin of the universe and life, about the nature of human beings and being human, about the telos, or purpose, of life, the meaning or goal of human life and humanity’s final destination or fate.

III

So, where do we come from? Why are we here? How did we get here? Why is there something rather than nothing? How did the universe come to be? Who or what created the universe and life? What is our place in the world?

These questions are ones that, since the beginning of human history, have been answered by creation myths—symbolic narratives of how the world began and how people first came to inhabit it: stories from a time before time that convey powerful, metaphorical truths that speak to deeply meaningful questions held by the society that shares them and reveal the worldview of a culture or people and the framework or universal context within which the self-identity of individuals is shaped and understood.
All cultures, modern as well as ancient, have creation myths that explain both where we (and the world) come from and the place of human beings in the world.

In the Hebrew Bible, God creates the heavens and earth from a shapeless chaos or void simply by speaking and then shapes the first human being from the earth and breathes life into him.

In Mayan mythology, the gods Kukulkan and Tepeu created human beings to preserve their own legacy. First, they created human beings made of mud. But the mud people eventually crumbled to dust, so they created new humans made of wood. These wooden people, however, had no souls and forgot their creators, so the gods destroyed them by rain, and finally created the Mayan people—people made from maize or corn, the sacred and staple food of the Maya.

According to Hopi legend, the world in which we live actually the Fourth World to be inhabited by the beings created by the great spirit, Tewa. In the Hopi story, the people of each previous world, though originally happy, eventually became disobedient to Tewa and lived contrary to Tewa’s plan. A few, though, remained faithful to Tewa and were led by Spider Woman, climbing a reed from their world to the next higher world, emerging in what we call the Grand Canyon.

And in a creation story that echoes, in some ways, the creation story of the Big Bang, Taoism teaches that the undifferentiated Way mysteriously brought forth the One, which brought forth duality (yin and yang), which gave birth to the “ten thousand things”—the heavens and earth and human beings.

These and other creation stories told by human beings over the millennia differ in their details from culture to culture and time to time, but each tells the story of how the world came to be, where human beings come from, and our place in the world.

IV

What about us, though? What is the creation story told by Americans living in the 21st century?

For most of us here, it’s the “scientific” story of the Big Bang and evolution. The story, based on astronomical observations and the theory of quantum physics, in which a universe that is more expansive than any of us can imagine literally exploded, without any apparent cause, from a singularity of energy that was smaller than anyone could possibly imagine, spawning subatomic particles, stars, galaxies, and, from the remnants of long-dead stars, this beautiful and fragile planet on which we live—a planet on which chemical reactions created amino acids, RNA, proteins, and organic molecules, which came together first as simple, one-celled organisms and, over the course of 3.7 billion years, evolved into plants, dinosaurs, fish, birds, mice, chimpanzees, and human beings.

That’s our story. And it’s one that most of us believe is literally and scientifically true—even though I, for one, have to accept it “on faith,” in a sense, because it completely blows my mind and I don’t completely understand it.

It’s a story that is mythical as well as literal because it conveys truths that are deeper, but no less real, than the scientific truths it claims. It’s a story of creation not ex nihilo or “out of nothing” but from something that was so incredibly small that it was essentially nothing and, at the same time, everything. The story of a creation without any obvious creator. The story of a continually unfolding creation. The story of chaotic expansion and the formation of vast galaxies from clouds of gas floating in space. The story of complexity from simplicity. The story of how the undifferentiated one gave birth to the “ten thousand things.” The story of
life created from inanimate matter. The story of living, breathing, loving, wonderful, and flawed human beings who, literally, are made from star dust.

Where do we come from? We come from the stars and beyond the stars. We come from the earth. We come from the stream of life that started as a mere trickle billions of years ago and still flows today in our veins.

V

Where do we come from? What are we? Who are we? What is the essence of our nature as human beings? What is our place in the world? How are we related to and connected with each other, all living things, and the world in which we live?

Are human beings inherently flawed and sinful by nature or basically good? What distinguishes human beings from “mere” animals? Morality? Language? Self-consciousness? Are we, as the Hebrew Bible tells us, created in the image of God? Are we all children of God? Are some people God’s chosen ones? Are we human beings on a spiritual journey or spiritual beings on a human journey? Do we have immortal souls that are somehow separate from our “earthly bodies”? Is that which we call our “self” and Hindus call “atman” part of the larger Self, universal Soul, or ultimate Reality that Hindus call “Brahman”? Or is what we call the “self” simply an illusion as Buddhism teaches?

These are just a few of the questions that western and non-western religions have asked and attempted to answer over more than four millennia and some of the questions are still being asked from newer scientific perspectives, including evolutionary biology, sociology, psychology, and anthropology.

VI

What are we? You’d think we’d know who we are, wouldn’t you? But, alas, that’s simply not the case. Because we know less about ourselves than we think we know and the answers of both science and religion can take us only so far.

We are and always will be a riddle and a mystery, even to ourselves. An enigma wrapped in a paradox. So wonderful and so flawed. So creative and yet so destructive. So intelligent and so foolish. So selfish and so giving. So courageous and so fearful. So loving and so cruel.

And yet, we can, as Unitarian Universalists and religious liberals, make at least some affirmations about who we are as human beings and the place of human beings in the world—not because those affirmations are empirically true or scientifically verifiable, but because we choose to affirm them as matters of faith and, somehow, know that they’re true deep in our hearts and bones.

And so we say that we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of each and every human being, without exception—even when it’s hard for us to see another’s worth or dignity. We, or at least many of us, say that we believe that we are all more alike than we are different and that the things that divide us are less important than the things that unite us. We say that we share with all human beings a common history and a common destiny. And we believe that we are all bound together—with all human beings, with all living things, and with the universe—in a great, complex, mysterious, and interdependent web of being.

What are we? Who are we? We are the universe slowly becoming self-aware and conscious of itself.
VII

Three questions: Where do we come from? What are we? And, finally: Where are we going?

Are we, as some believe, going to hell in a hand basket? Are we heading toward a future in which we, through our thoughtlessness, selfishness, greed, arrogance, hatred, and fear destroy the world in which we live through pollution, global warming, or nuclear war? Or will we be lucky enough to survive as a species for another five billion years or so until the dying sun expands in a cosmic fireball that incinerates the earth?

Where are we going? To a promised land? To some brave, new world? To heaven here on earth or a utopia we create? To the sweet by and by—a life of eternal happiness and joy beyond this life on earth? (I hope not because I’m not sure I could deal with anything—even eternal happiness—forever.) Or are we simply going round and round in circles, trapped in the endless cycle of birth, life, death, and reincarnation?

Where are we going? As the song says: “Heaven knows where we are going.” Some people think they know, but the truth is that no one knows for sure. No one has a crystal ball.

That said, though, I hope that our destination is what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the place of “beloved community,” which is not a utopia devoid of conflict where lions and lambs coexist in idyllic harmony, but rather a world in which all people share in the earth’s wealth and life’s blessings, a time in which hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because human decency will not allow them, a world in which racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood, a time when love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred and when peace with justice will prevail over war and military conflict.

Will we get there? “Heaven knows.” I sure don’t. But I do know one thing for sure, and that is this: Regardless of where we come from or where we’re going, we’re all on this journey together and, as human beings, we’re all responsible, individually and collectively, for creating our own future and the world’s future through our choices and our actions in the here and now, walking together, working and struggling together, laughing and singing together, loving together, and living together in the deep and unanswerable questions, riddles, and mystery of life.