

Deep Time - no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end

Unitarian Fellowship of Kelowna
Sundays at 10:30 — 1310 Bertram Street

This month's theme is story, it seems a good place to begin.

Jerome Bruner, proposes that we can frame experience in two ways: propositional and narrative. Propositional thought hinges on logic and formality. Narrative thought is the reverse. It's concrete, imagistic, personally convincing, and emotional.

And it's strong. It's the basis of myth and history, ritual and social relations. Karl Popper proposed that "falsifiability is the cornerstone of the scientific method, But believability is :\$the hallmark of the well-formed narrative." Even scientists construct narratives. There is no scientific method without the narrative thread that holds the whole enterprise together.

Stories make things more plausible, more convincing... We can dismiss hard logic, but not how you feel. Give a good story, we naturally suspend disbelief, no longer able to finger what, if anything, should set off alarm bells. The personal narrative is much more persuasive than any other form of appeal.

And if a story is especially emotionally jarring — its perceived truthfulness increases. Which is why I am wary of any personal, emotional story... that gives my life meaning.

So my most trusted narratives are not told by people. Stories are everywhere, in the trees, the lake, the whispers of the wind.... and they are in the mountains that surround us.

Of course, I am not the only one to hear the stories told by the mountains. In the 1830s, Sir Charles Lyell was the foremost geologist of his day. By paying close attention to the narrative found in rocks, Lyell was one of the first to understand that the story of the world is truly ancient, "Lyell's explanitory use of unquantified but virtually limitless time."

In a small boat, on a deep ocean, as far from civilization as any modern human can be. Everything is wild, the waves, the wind, the sun, the stars, and they have stories, expressed using unquantified but virtually limitless time. This I know to be true.

Of course, there appears to be a schizm between Lyell's deep time and many other stories about the origin of the world. There are those that reject deep time, and hold fast to other stories. Among the most vocal are the Creationists, those that believe in the literal truth of Genesis and a place a 6000 year limit on existance.

Creationist stories often credit (or blame) Lyell for undermining faith in both the Genesis Flood and the biblical time scale. Often Creationist writings attack this geologist's beliefs and principles, commonly using the most vilified label available. "Radical Unitarian"...

I love this label "Radical Unitarian", so I looked it up on wikipedia.

Apparently a "Conservative Unitarian" is one whose beliefs can accommodate a

wide range of understandings of God, fine. One takes the step to "Radical Unitarian" when one also rejects the importance of dogma, liturgy, and anything other than ethics and a gospel of love.

I still love the "Radical Unitarian" label, we need a T-shirt.

First up, a warm up exercise, let's share a shallow dive into Deep Time. I will start with a story I shared with my princess, Sarah, the most important person in my world.

I start with the notion that Sarah has two biological parents. It follows that she has four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, and so on... In Galileo's time, 30 generations ago, she has over 1 billion ancestors. But here's the catch, at that time, 500 years ago, the global population was less than 600 million. So everyone in the whole world is her cousin.

On the boat, on a calm day, I sometimes lay down on the deck and look up at the sky. Often, there is this strange twist of perspective, I am no longer on a boat, on the water, safely tucked in under 100 kilometers of air. Instead, I am stuck to the top of the world, precariously suspended over this vast expanse of gas, which dwindles to nothing... forever.

Genesis 2 often comes to mind: "Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters."

It's like when you're a kid, the first time they tell you that the world is turning and you just can't quite believe it because everything looks like it's standing still. If you are patient, and you pay attention, you can sense it... the age of the earth...

The ground beneath our feet is spinning at a thousand miles an hour. The entire planet is hurtling around the Sun at 67000 miles an hour. Open your mind, look at the stars, wait, breathe, and you can feel it.... We're falling through space, you and me, clinging to the skin of this tiny little world. And, if we let go... eternity... it is terrifying when you touch it... it is worse when it touches you back...

We have five senses; sight, smell, sound, taste and touch. These senses allow us to navigate our lives with remarkable ability, but... none of them perceive time.

Time, truth, meaning, they obviously exist, all woven into the fabric of existence, it is just that we are deaf and blind to them. But let's not stop there, humans are a creative animal, and since we cannot sense time, we conjure up a perception of time and Presto! We have an inner eye, and we can feel time's passage.

This illusion is so complete, that we often forget that while time is very real... Time surrounds us, and defines us, and time binds us together... It is just that our sixth sense, our inner eye, our perception of time that is an illusion...

Sunsets are special. We need to stop and watch them more often. There is truth in sunsets, on many levels. They are complex and predictable and with careful observation they radiate rational truth. But they are also beautiful, and there is truth in that beauty. Artists try to capture it, that artistic truth that transcends rationality. But artistic truth is fleeting, caught up in the moment, and will not be captured. Sunsets are old, older than scriptures, older than stories, sunsets have been happening since before there were humans to watch them, an ancient

spiritual truth that speaks to the soul. If you are patient, and you pay attention, you can feel it... the age of the earth...

Let's go deeper, 10000 years, just beyond history, just beyond scripture, into undiscovered country...

But before we do, let me talk about jumping into the deep. Around here, out on the lake, I have jumped off of the boat into a few meters of water. On the other had, out on the ocean, I have jumped off of the boat into a few kilometers of water. Either way, the splash is the same... The difference is just that nagging fear of being swallowed up like Jonah.

700 generations ago, no one lived here, mostly because this area was submerged under a 100 meters of Galacial Lake Pentiction. So to find people, we will also have to go elsewhere. 10000 years ago, behaviourally modern humans were at the pinnacle of 40000 years of a sustainable, hunter-gatherer society, they lived in a wild world, a natural world, an uncivilized world...

Then, unexpectedly, for humans, evolution stopped.

Since the advent of civilization about 10000 years ago, humans have not had a stable environment against which natural selection can operate. Natural selection needs stability, it does not work against moving targets, and civilization has been changing our environment far too rapidly for evolution to catch up. Civilized humans may be the planet's first post-evolutionary species. The Creationists got it right again. There is no evidence of human evolution during the span of scripture, seven times seventy generations.

I honor my ancestors, by being wary of any personal, emotional story... that gives my life meaning.

Back to 700 generations ago, our ancestors were essentially the same as you or me. They were preoccupied with their daily activities, they had hopes for their children and grandchildren, they had arts, crafts, culture, philisophy, and sprituality, and they appreciated sunsets.

They were wild, by wild I mean, not civilized. Civil, or civic comes from the word city. Thus civilization is the narrative of cities, and civilized means affected by cities. Oral traditions are constrained to the language of their origin. It is only written stories than transcend language, and writing is a product of civilization, so all of our most ancient stories have been civilized.

Wild humans lived in small, sustainable groups, with fewer than 30 individuals. Theirs was a hard life, but they lived in a truly personal world. Wild people would not have worshipped their gods in fear, the relationship would be personal.

Takes a breath, and try and connect with a wild ancestor. Connect with a time when, every person, plant, animal, rock, cloud and raindrop has a personal relationship with you. It's like watching a sunset.

George Wald, Nobel Laureate in Medicine:

“Our everyday concept of what is impossible, possible or certain derives from our experience: the number of trials that may be encompassed within the space of a human lifetime, or at most within recorded human history.”

But when it comes to things that change the world. It is perhaps enough for it to happen once. The probability with which we are concerned is of a special kind; it is the probability that an event occur at least once. To this type of probability a fundamentally important thing happens as one increases the number of trials. However improbable the event in a single trial, it becomes increasingly probable as the trials are multiplied. Eventually the event becomes virtually inevitable.

Take a breath. One last dive, time works another way... in 700 generations, we will be the ancient ancestors.

Before we start, let's take a moment to celebrate the fact that Unitarians can talk about the deep future. So many believe that we are in the end times, that this relationship between corporeal and eternal existence is coming to a close. There is something quintessentially Unitarian in seeing that our journey to find truth and meaning is just getting started. Instead, we mostly worry that might end up accidentally extinguishing our species before we get a chance to see what is just over the horizon.

If it was hard to looking back 10000 years, trust me, looking forward is harder. There is this issue of letting go, of not being God's greatest achievement. 700 generations isn't really that many. It is not a huge number. But the changes going forward will be greater than those between us and our wild ancestors.

Sarah's school showed a movie, Finding Dory, at her school last week. Two hundred children, and again about as many parents assembled in the gymnasium and watched this movie together. Our wild ancestors, in their personal world, could not imagine such an event. Sharing an experience with strangers, it would be quite beyond comprehension, even for elders. But my Sarah, at only six years old, enjoyed a Rockets game with thousands.

The Buddha predicted that his teachings of dharma would be forgotten after 5,000 years. But what of Christ, Mohammed, the Tao? It is not just that our lives will not be remembered, it everything else... Yea, The Very Stuff And Pith Of All We Hold Most Dear.

I welcome my descendants, by being wary of any personal, emotional story... that gives my life meaning.

That little mote of dust will still be there, still suspended in a sunbeam.... Our descendants will still be clinging to the skin of this tiny little world... and I believe that God is so vast, so awesome, so engaging, that even in 700 generations. They will still be on a journey... a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Fair Winds, and Following Seas.