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**They are sick that surfeit with too much, as they that starve with nothing.**

—William Shakespeare

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## Sustainability—Do We Have To?

BY CHRISTINE ROBINSON, MINISTER, FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH  
OF ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO

I know that I don't need to convince you that ecology is important, that global warming is real, that other species are important both to us, and for their own precious sakes, and that the answer to "Sustainability, Do We Have To?" is, "Yes.

We Have To.” So instead of being convincing, I’m going to remind you of a story.

It’s a Winnie-the-Pooh story, by A.A. Milne. Pooh has gone to visit Rabbit and squeezed his rotund figure into Rabbit’s round front door. He has made a bit of a pig of himself and eaten so much of Rabbit’s honey that he can only squeeze halfway out of Rabbit’s hole, and gets stuck there. Christopher Robin is summoned to this emergency. After pushing and pulling, he proclaims that Pooh is Stuck, and that it will take a week’s fasting to cure the problem. Pooh is distraught, but Christopher Robin says that he will read to his friend to pass the time. Pooh sighs, a tear rolls down his cheek, and he says, “Then would you read a Sustaining Book, such as would help and comfort a Wedged Bear in Great Tightness?”

When it comes to the issue of sustainability, I feel a bit like a Wedged Bear in Great Tightness; a bear who has made a bit of a pig of herself while enjoying all that my host had to offer, and now things are feeling tight, and I can’t seem to find my way out of this fix. I wonder if you might feel that way, too.

I have cared about the environment and tried to live lightly on the earth my whole adult life. I recycle and wear sweaters in the winter and bought a house from which I can walk to the grocery, pharmacy, dry cleaners, and restaurants. We hang out a load of laundry most weeks, garden in the summer, and go out of our way to combine trips in the car. By virtue of living with a husband even greener than I, my household has a compost pile, every kind of water saving device made, modest sized cars and well-used bicycles. We pay extra money for high efficiency appliances, use them carefully, wear them out, and fuel them with wind-generated electricity for which we also pay extra. I’m sure that many of you do the same things...some of you even more.

So...perhaps instead of contributing five times more carbon dioxide to the atmosphere than the average human being on earth, as most Americans do, I only contribute three times as much. Perhaps the greenest of you do better.

It’s probably not enough, all those things I do, but it’s hard to live in this gluttonous society and be a radical environmentalist. I’d be willing to drive a tiny, light car, but it’s just not a safe option when so many other people have chosen to drive tanks. I’d walk to the bank more often, if crossing against six lanes of traffic which is often going 50 MPH weren’t so difficult and unpleasant. It’s hard to make the sacrifices of time it takes to hang out laundry or buy minimal packaging when our workaholic society is not set up to give us that kind of time. I know I’m living way beyond sustainability, that the lifestyle to

which we of the developed nations have become accustomed, especially in its extremely piggy American version, can't go on. I know I'm stuck.

If I could wave my magic wand, I'd put some areas of the world on a population-growth diet and others on a resource-use diet and we'd all tough out the fast together, forced to live in a sustainable way, and all in it together, working our way out of our Stuckness. In the absence of magic wands, I'm afraid that our world is in for some generations of Great Tightness, turmoil, and suffering. Adolescent humanity is going to have to grow up or die in the trying. It will have to grow out of its gluttonous bear and fertile rabbit stage, endure the consequences of its foolishness, and find a way to live sustainably on the earth. Do we have to? Yes, we have to. What will it mean? I'm afraid my crystal ball is as useless as my magic wand. I just feel the Great Tightness.

I'm not a big fan of fasting. I like my central heating, my water guzzling cooler, and the incredibly fuel inefficient airplanes that carry me to vacations, meetings and family. The bus is not a convenient way to get around the city. The dryer my mother bought us when she discovered that we had planned to raise a baby on air dried diapers turned out to be a lifesaver. I'm stuck. I admit it. Stuck and ready for that sustaining book.

Sustainability, sustain, sustenance are big, deep words. "Sustenance," when applied to food, means more than just vitamins and calories. Sustenance implies food that maintains not just our physical lives but our whole lives: food that tastes good, that was cooked and served with love, that is eaten in community. Mere calories do not sustain. Even piggy old Pooh understands this in the end. It is not honey that is the meaning of life. It is having a friend who will read to you while you recover from your Stuckness, and who will read the kind of sustaining book that will remind you of what really gives you life.

What does a stuck bear do? He fasts... and the more thoroughly he fasts the sooner he is out of his predicament. If that predicament is a matter of gluttonous use of the world's resources, the fasting is a broader matter. You know the drill: the smallest car that will work for you, the dressing for the weather rather than playing with the thermostat, the water-wise yard and energy-saving appliances, the habits of frugality—eating the leftovers, combining the trips, turning off the lights, hanging out the laundry. We all make our own choices about what will work for us. Because nothing we do will likely be enough, the most important thing, it seems to me, is to keep doing them—to live frugally and simply into a future in which these things will be required of us. The stuck bear will no doubt scabble a bit at the hole he is stuck in.... Who could resist trying to make the

hole bigger rather than the tummy smaller? We'll come up with more energy efficient products to make us comfortable. When we buy the most efficient appliances we're not only being frugal, we're also using our economic power to shape the market. These things may not be the ultimate answer, but they are a part of the answer. They are a part of the answer that is especially important to those of us who are addicted to our comforts. In our future and in the future of the human race, comfort is going to be more expensive. We live into that future by supporting the new technology, even if we pay a premium in the price.

But the stuck bear will also have to learn to enjoy the things that really sustain him...and honey isn't one of them. Education, spiritual growth, love, and community – those infinite-sum games – become important, even vital. If it becomes impossibly expensive to drive across town, one falls back on the truly sustaining pastimes of conversation, learning, meditation and caring for and about those who are close by. If we can no longer visit all of our friends and relations whenever we wish, we will relearn the art of letter writing...though it will probably be e-letter writing. Cherishing sustaining values is not only what will drive the development of more efficient technology, it is what will keep us human and humane.

There's no getting around it. There's going to be a crisis. It's already started and people are already suffering. Some nations are nearly under water, people suffer from cancer, wells dry up, new and terrible diseases take advantage of weakened populations, and livelihoods are challenged by high gas prices. There's no question, after all, that the human race must live in a sustainable way. "Yes, we have to."

One of my sustaining family stories goes like this. My grandfather was a truck driver. During the international crisis known as the Great Depression, the amount of work dropped off. The management gathered the drivers and outlined the problem. There was simply not enough work for everyone, and it might get worse. The management asked, "Would the drivers prefer that some...the younger, newer, or less skilled, be laid off or would the drivers prefer that every driver go to part time?" According to the story told in my family, the drivers voted for the latter. My mother remembered the family belt-tightening. It was not an easy time, and it wasn't clear whether society would survive or prosperity would ever return. But that story was told with pride. The drivers chose to stick together and share the sacrifice of those hard times. They felt good about their choice. The event, the choice, the story, gave meaning to their lives. It's one of the stories that make me who I am. It is, for me, a Sustaining Story. And I suppose that that story is one of the reasons that I think that the human

race, advanced civilization, and love, joy, and learning will make it through the crisis we're facing, for all the denial, the chaos, the suffering, and the devil-take-the-hindmost moral thinking that will also be a part of the picture. I believe that in the face of the need for a fast, we'll lose some weight, make the hole a bit bigger, and discover what really sustains our lives. ■

## Dirt

BY LYNN UNGAR, CLF MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING

One of the things that has long appealed to me about Unitarian Universalism is its openness to earth-centered spirituality. "Earth-centered religions" are listed as one of the living traditions in our Unitarian Universalist principles and purposes statement, and several years ago, in a major survey of UUs, it turned out that the most common theology amongst our younger members is one they describe as earth-centered.

I, for one, am all in favor of our getting in touch with earth-centered spirituality. Locating the holy in all the beings of the world matches both my intuitive sense of living in an enspirited world and my social preference for radical egalitarianism. Even more than that, however, I suspect that our salvation on a living, but threatened, planet lies in the willingness of human beings to treat the other creatures of the earth as holy beings with inherent worth and dignity of their own rather than resources to be consumed. However, it wasn't until a friend insisted that I read a book with the rather uninspiring title *Dirt*, that I really gave any thought to earth centered spirituality: spirituality based in the earth itself: the very soil, the dirt.

*Dirt*, after all, is the lowliest of the low, the realm of mere inert rocks mixed with whatever is dropped, left over, excreted or dead. The word "dirt" itself refers, etymologically, to the excretory part of the equation, not unlike another four-letter Anglo-Saxon term which I try not to use in church. Spirituality, traditionally, is associated with the "higher" capacities of human beings, more akin to stars and soaring birds than worms and fungi breaking things down into their component parts. But the more I contemplate dirt, the more a sky-based theology seems sterile, insubstantial. The Greeks, who formed so great a part of our Western philosophy, tried to separate the spirit from the body, to tell us that real reality was in a realm apart from what we could actually touch, that the spirit was only contaminated by the flesh. In doing so they split us off from our

roots, from the literal ground of our being.

The Hebrew Scriptures, however, tell a different story—a story we all know. After creating light and dark, water and air, stars, planets and all the swimming, flying and creeping things of the world, God reaches down and grabs a clump of dirt, and out of this God makes the first human beings. In the original Hebrew the connection is made even more clear, for God forms the person, Adam, from *adamah*, the earth. In English the closest equivalent might be to say that humans were created from the humus. We aren't just from the earth. We are the earth. "Dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return."

Perhaps that is why we have tried so hard to cut our connection with the earth. People do often seem to have a difficult time with the notion of being compost. Generally speaking, we don't care for the concept that we live only a brief time, and then go back to dirt. And why not? It doesn't seem fair that all our work, our creativity, our running and playing and talking and singing should come down in the end to passive dirt.

Except, of course, that there is no such thing as passive dirt. Dirt grows as humus forms from organic matter. It moves, sometimes subtly and sometimes with pyrotechnic grandeur: sand dunes crawl with the wind at the rate of inches per day. Dust blows off the Sahara and comes to rest thousands of miles away in the Amazonian rain forest. Volcanoes erupt, spewing mountainsides out into great clouds of dust that may not settle for years. Speaking as someone who has lived most of my life in California, I can say with all certainty that it is impossible to feel the ground roll under your feet during an earthquake and still retain an image of the earth as passive and inert. Dirt changes, not only on a grand geologic scale, but also through a constant exchange of minerals, as plants grow and die and water leaches out minerals and carries in new ones.

In his book *Dirt*, William Bryant Logan points out, "Science says that an acre of soil produces one horsepower every day. But you could pour gasoline all over the ground forever and never see it sprout maple trees." Dirt is with us, not just as something we are constantly trying to remove from our clothes and our homes, not just as the surface upon which we walk—in however removed a fashion. It is not even simply the medium in which our food is grown. We live by virtue of a vast network of exchanges which puts the stock market to shame. Carbon dioxide, oxygen, nitrogen, elements too numerous to mention buzz and vibrate amongst us like a vast hive of bees, and it is dirt, with its elemental partners air and water, that fuels the whole vibrant shebang. We marvel at the feat of walking on hot coals, but the reality is that we all spend our days treading

on slow fire. William Bryant Logan puts it this way:

*Moses, it is written, "turns aside to see a wonder," a bush that burns but is not consumed. Throughout my life, I had thought this a ridiculous passage. Why should God get Moses' attention by such outlandish means? I mean, why couldn't He just have boomed, 'Hey Moses!' ... Now I know why. The truth, when really perceived and not simply described, is always a wonder. Moses does not see a Technicolor fantasy. He sees the bush as it really is. He sees the bush as all bushes actually are. There is in biology a formula called 'the equation of burning.' It is one of the fundamental pair of equations by which all organic life subsists....All that is living burns. This is the fundamental fact of nature.*

God tells Moses to take off his shoes—to stand in the dirt. We might do the same. Or at the very least, engage in an activity so dirty that your shoes fill with soil and could just as well not be there. It is, so my friends who are real gardeners tell me, the only way to understand dirt. There are hundreds of names for different types of soils, but that provides only a beginning. Logan points out "For more than a century, chemists have been trying to answer the question, What is humus? And to this date, no one knows. Probably no one will ever know." Humus, like humanity, seems to break down into component parts which are similar, but never identical. We are, quite literally, fed and sustained by diversity. Humus, like humans, makes the most sense described as interconnections—relationships rather than pure essences. I suppose you come to know a soil like you come to know a person, over time, through conversation, in a willingness to work together and allow the connections to deepen.

I must confess that I am, as a gardener, something of a dilettante. Nonetheless, over the years and in various locations, I have made more than a passing acquaintance with the dirt which I, rather misguidedly, think of as "mine." I first really met up with soil, with the particular character of dirt, when I bought a house in the agricultural area of Moscow, Idaho. The dirt of our front flower bed, unfortunately, was dense clay, which I imagine once occupied the spot where the basement took up residence. This soil, I gather, was not helped by the presence for some decades of a vast monstrosity of a juniper bush. A four-wheel drive truck with a chain took care of the juniper bush. Making the soil permeable to something more tender than a pick-ax took longer. Dirt-centered spirituality teaches the virtues of patience, of sustained contact, of knowing when to pull hard and when to let go.

My friend Theresa and her pick-up truck brought over a load of manure, and she and her partner Rebecca and I shoveled the...dung...one late fall as the first snow

started. As we spread manure over the top of the plot and mulched it with leaves, Theresa assured me that the worms would do their work, and by spring the soil would be mixed. Dirt-centered spirituality teaches the joy of cooperation, and appreciation for friends, even for ones as unprepossessing as the earthworm.

My front flower bed always had areas where only the irrepressible violets would grow, but the balance shifted, and after four years it really did look more like a garden plot than a moonscape. Each year I added some more organic matter to the soil, and each year a few more perennials survived. And each year, in the spring, I would head over to my neighbor Bill's to beg a few more of the transplants from his stunning garden. Small town that it was, Theresa gave Bill the benefit of her composting expertise, and bits of Theresa's garden began to look familiar as I recognized the same plants that Bill has shared with me. Dirt-centered spirituality, like all authentic spirituality, is about connections, all the untold and often indescribable ways that our lives are interwoven, the magic of transformation that takes place as the elements meet and recombine.

As I've moved around the country, to Chicago, then to a couple of different towns in California, the process has repeated. In Chicago a different neighbor helped us dig out a different—but equally ugly—juniper, and our neighbor Diane's transplanted irises moved into the front flower bed, once we painstakingly dug manure into the dense soil. In San Leandro it was feverfew and columbine from my mother's garden that managed to take root after we dug out the lava rock and dug in the manure. Now some rosemary plants that used to be in my mother's yard are growing by my driveway, and our neighbor Ann says that the iris-y looking bushes all over the front came from one plant in her back yard.

Again and again I've rediscovered that dirt-centered spirituality is rooted in relationship—not only relationships between beings, but also the relationship between beings and place. It is about the ordinary, essential joys of knowing who you are, which is only possible when you understand the web of connections which holds you up.

For all its variety and complexity, dirt is, perhaps, the quintessential basic thing. Whatever its form: sand or dust, humus or clay, whatever the balance of minerals which turn it black or red or yellow or brown, dirt is fundamental. All of us, no matter how hidden the dirt around us may be by asphalt and concrete, rest in the end on that thin layer which holds us from the molten rock beneath. In remembering the earth we re-member ourselves, bring back all the pieces scattered through cyber-space and tele-time and recall that we are indeed rooted

in soil, that we live in all the messy and transformative glory of plain dirt. ■

## RE Express Plus

Looking for high-quality religious education resources for your family, small group or congregation? The CLF's RE Express Plus offers tools to create a complete RE program for a family or small group, or to expand a larger program. Each month RE Express Plus subscribers receive via email:

- **CLiF Notes: A Curriculum for Families and Small Groups**

With a session for each week, this year CLiF Notes is focused on helping children address great theological questions such as "What (if anything) is God?" and "How do I live a good life?" While designed for small groups, CLiF Notes can be adapted for use in age-graded classrooms, or used by churches that have a smaller program at one of the service times, or for programs that incorporate monthly worship for children of all ages.

- **RE Index of Resources**

This searchable index will take you to a wealth of CLF RE resources available on the Web. Search by age or topic to find curriculum ideas, Web links, craft ideas, and much more.

- **KidTalk Web Page for Kids**

With links to activities and information about holidays around the world, as well as featured people from Unitarian Universalist history, social justice projects, spiritual practices, ideas for practicing our principles, and a forum for kids to ask questions on religious topics, each month KidTalk provides a way for kids to connect to Unitarian Universalism, and for parents and religious educators to glean great ideas for religious education.

- **REsources for Living**

Each month CLF minister for lifespan learning, the Rev. Dr. Lynn Ungar, writes a column inviting kids (and grown-ups) to reflect on what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist.

Nancy Torres-Vignola, director of lifespan religious education at the Unitarian Universalist Church at Washington Crossing, New Jersey says of RE Express:

*It is a wonderful resource. I began by purchasing it and now have re-instituted my CLF*

*membership. The diversity of ideas and programming for all ages within the CLF was even more precious than just RE Express.*

*This has helped to create a monthly focused series that I can use right out of the download.*

RE Express Plus is available free to CLF members for family use. Non-members and those who intend to use the material in congregations or small groups may subscribe for \$129/year. Contact [bmurray@clfuu.org](mailto:bmurray@clfuu.org) for more information or subscribe via the CLF Shop at [www.clfuu.org](http://www.clfuu.org). ■

## **Upcoming Online Classes**

### **Raising Ethical Children**

This course is designed to help parents both apply their own sense of ethics to their childrearing practices, and to help parents find ways to develop a sense of ethics and responsibility in their children.

Taught by the Rev. Ken Reeves, a UU minister and clinical psychologist, this course begins on June 2nd and runs four weeks.

### **Writing a Personal Mission Statement**

The purpose of this class will be to engage in self-reflection as you create a statement which articulates your core values and the way your life choices express your principles and beliefs.

Taught by Dr. Peg Shaffer, a lifelong UU and Assistant Professor at Ball State University in the departments of Religious Studies and Educational Studies, this class begins July 7th and runs four weeks.

To learn more or to register, go to [www.clfuu.org/learn](http://www.clfuu.org/learn) . ■

## Join us at GA 2008

Make your reservations now to attend the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly 2008 in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

Some highlights will include:

**The CLF Ingathering and Annual Meeting**, Wednesday, June 25, from 4:45-6:00 PM. All CLFers and CYFers are invited to come meet one another, and CLF staff and board members. Refreshments will be provided.

**The Annual CLF Worship Service**, Saturday, June 28, at 5:00 PM.

The Reverends **Jane Rzepka** and **Meg Barnhouse** will be preaching, and **Beth Norton**, music director at the First Parish, Concord, Massachusetts, and former President of the UU Musicians Network will be leading our always-fabulous music.

**Visit the CLF Booth** in the Exhibit Hall for conversation, UU chalice jewelry, luggage straps, and all kinds of resources. Please volunteer to work in the booth with the staff. It's fun! ■

## From Your Minister

BY JANE RZEPKA, SENIOR MINISTER, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

Mother's Day. Now that's a tricky one, at least for a minister—or at least for this minister.

I don't want to exclude those of you who aren't mothers. I don't want to open wounds for you who are mourning for your mothers or your children, or for whom the relationship with your mother or your children is painful. And so many people are adopted, or have adopted, or have placed babies for adoption, adding layers of complexity. We are single parents, we are gay, we are incarcerated, we are step-parents, non-custodial parents, women hoping to get pregnant, potential parents hoping for children. We live in a society that moved beyond the ordinary Mother's Day platitudes long ago.

And so, over the years, my Mother's Day messages have highlighted a wide range of nurturers: the great religious educator Sophia Lyon Fahs, experts who favor various parenting techniques, women ministers of the Midwest, dads,

pioneer women moving West in covered wagons, the struggles of people who would like to become parents but cannot. Yet during the course of my ministry, parishioners have offered me a steady stream of articles, books, and Web sites about, well, mothering. Mothers. For Mother's Day.

I think I've finally heard the message that a lot of people would like to hear a little something about mothers on Mother's Day. The kind of thing where if you have a mother around, you could share it with her—your mom who is sitting there in a nice dress in the restaurant, wearing the corsage you've given her. Something on the sentimental side. So what if she's a corporate executive, NASCAR driver, union boss, or crossing guard. So what if the short-term memory loss is getting the best of her, or motherhood wasn't really her strong suite, or she claims not to want the attention. So what if you're busy and broke and she's as annoying as ever. So what. That's what you seem to be telling me.

What does your mother want to hear? Let's see. Let's set the stage. She was born into a particular time and circumstance. She made some choices among a few or a great many. At some point, you showed up, and she probably loved you the best way she could. She put it all together into a life. As cultural anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson puts it, she "composed her life."

*In a stable society, composing a life is somewhat like throwing a pot or building a house in a traditional form: the materials are known, the hands move skillfully in tasks familiar from thousands of performances, the fit of the completed whole in the common life is understood.... The traditional craftsperson does not face the task of solving every problem for the first time....*

*Today, the materials and skills from which a [woman's] life is composed are no longer clear. It is no longer possible to follow the paths of previous generations.... Our lives not only take new directions; they are subject to repeated redirection.... Many of the most basic concepts we use to construct a sense of self or the design of a life have changed their meanings: Work. Home. Love. Commitment.*

*For many years I have been interested in the arts of improvisation, which involve recombining partly familiar materials in new ways, often in ways especially sensitive to context, interaction, and response. Jazz, for example, exemplifies activity that is at once individual and communal, both repetitive and innovative, each participant sometimes providing background support and sometimes flying free.... The compositions we create in these times of change are filled with interlocking messages of our commitments and decisions. Each one is a message of possibility.*

So what does your mother want to hear? She's your mother, of course, and I don't know her, but she did compose her life, a life at some point with you in it. She had a job or she didn't, she learned to make chicken stock or porch steps or limericks—or maybe odes. She found a loving partner, or she did for awhile, or she didn't. She faced some set-backs. She always enjoyed tulips or TV or rowing a boat. Friends were important, or church, or solitude, when she could get it. Maybe all through your growing up years she liked to sing. Whatever the elements, she put them all together into a life, and of course if she's together with you in the restaurant, she's still putting them together. Are there ways you are proud of her? I think she'd like to hear it.

Not only did your mother compose a life, chances are good that she composed a life that included you. She didn't always call the shots perfectly, but statistics tell me she was probably a pretty good mom—good maybe with the soccer coaching and the Spanish verbs and hugs and the silly stories when you were very young, good with birthday parties, or good, now that you look back, with 7th grade heartbreak. She was the best mom when it came to...whatever. I think she'd like to hear it.

And of course there's the love, a force of nature yet an intricate composition. I know—moms can't always do this right. Sometimes we just don't have it in us, or it manifests in quirky or destructive ways. But most moms, it seems to me, love their kids. Indeed, most kids love their moms. So often it works out great. What does your mother want to hear? That you love her. ■

## REsources For Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN  
LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

*Usually this page is designed to be read by—or with—children. But religious education, of course, is for people of all ages. And since this issue of Quest includes a spirituality and nature theme, I can't resist sharing just a bit of the wonderful conversation that ensued from our online course "The*

*Sacred Depths of Nature: Science and Spirituality" that the Rev. Amanda Aikman taught on our Online Learning Center, based on a book of the same title by Ursula Goodenough.*

*In this particular session of the class, Amanda posed the question: "Do you believe that your own self is 'inherently sacred'? That you are in charge of your own emergence?"*

*Here are a few of the responses:*

Sacred. It's what attracted me to this class in the first place, the idea of exploring the sacred. Yes, I contain the sacred, as do rocks and my children and fizzy water and... I struggle to put the sacred in landfills, guns, CO2. And the sacred is only part of us. Do I still contain the sacred, the fourth time Alex refuses to pick up the carrots he spit on the floor, and I grab him instead of using my own words? Does my neighbor warming up the Hummer on a lovely fall day, somehow, in some tiny almost-forgotten part, still contain the sacred?

Let me always be able to find it somewhere. Despair lies in that other route. Is there freewill? I have really come around on this issue. I used to believe "Everything happens for a reason." I needed there to be meaning behind everything—but I had also been lucky and privileged for a lot of my life. So the meaning was usually for the good. When that started to change, my philosophy had to change. And now I can believe that sometimes, accidents just happen. We can meaning-make after the fact, but what made them happen in the first place was sometimes chance, free of intent.

—**Mandy Neff, Massachusetts**

Mandy, your comment reminds me of Thich Nhat Hanh's famous point about the "mindfulness of washing dishes" in *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, the point being that the quotidian is the very ground of the "sacred." Methinks we err when we separate the "sacred" from the "non-sacred." What I mean is an openness to see and appreciate the "What Is" in life without constricting doctrines or dogmas ... ah, back to the Seven Principles.

—**Michael Roehm, Washington, DC**

My spiritual path teaches that Nature is sacred and therefore everything that comes from Nature is sacred. And since everything, even the things Mandy mentioned (landfills, guns, CO2), is made from the building blocks given to us from Nature, it follows that everything, in some way, contains the sacred. We may not think that some of the things we DO with Nature's gifts are sacred (enter the landfills, etc. again), but that does not deny the inherent sacredness that was there in the beginning. Ultimately, what I'm stating here is that I do absolutely see myself as sacred.

Intelligent Design versus Natural Selection and the Meaning of Life: I distinctly remember once walking out of a biochemistry class thinking, "Well, that's it. There is no mystery of life. We are all just big, complex bags of chemical

reactions. And if there is no mystery, then there likely is no meaning to life either." I was filled with that existential angst so common in college students. The answer I have to that dilemma is now this: if I want my life to have meaning, then it is up to me to give it meaning. Meaning doesn't come or have to come from God. However, I do admit I would prefer it if there was some evidence of a Grand Scheme out there. That's why I tend to pull for the Intelligent Design theories. Unfortunately, the scientist in me hasn't found any solid basis to support it.

—Jennifer Mode, Wisconsin

Jennifer, like you, I have often hoped to have some unified theory of everything—like Intelligent Design—that would tie together all the weird elements that make up modern science. Neutrinos, for instance, freak me right out. They're the subatomic particles that are emitted by the sun and are so tiny that they pass right through us, the chair we're sitting on, the earth beneath us, and continue their journey out the other side. Actually detecting them—“proving” their existence—has been one of the big triumphs of modern physics, especially now that string theory is gathering more and more critics who think it is mathematically elegant and “correct” but perhaps wrong as can be in actuality. I would welcome some proof of Intelligent Design, even some indication that it might be so. But for now, at least, it seems to be wishful thinking with little or no scientific validity.

But yes indeed, I do think of myself as sacred, just as I think of every living creature as sacred, every rock and every Reese's Peanut Butter Cup as sacred, every star and every galaxy as sacred.

I think of every day as a holy day (holiday), and I think that everything in the vast multiverse has “that of G-d” about it. This notion merely means that G-d is within and without, and that we are all part of this continuously unfolding, evolving creative act called life.

—David Dawson, Tennessee

*To enter into the conversation of a CLF online class for yourself, (including the Rev. Amanda Aikman's upcoming class using the poetry of Mary Oliver) go to [www.clfuu.org/learn](http://www.clfuu.org/learn). ■*

# Outer Space

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Where does astronomy, the study of the heavens, leave a location to put God?  
Where, in the vast, blazing, inhuman, uncaring cosmos, can God fit?

Space is beautiful but hostile. It is almost always unimaginably cold, empty, and changelessly dull—or unimaginably hot and violent. Whole galaxies are sterilized by x-rays blazing from their cores where stars happen to fall together—without regard for any living things that may be in the galaxy—blind, uncaring, ignorant. The outer heavens, so beautiful and inspiring from a distance, have zero moral content. This certainly seems like no seat of a caring God.

To find qualities we think of as God-like you have to come down from the sky to Earth. Only here do things get remotely friendly and supportive. Only here do you begin to find anything that could at all be seen as a sign of a benign God's presence.

If anywhere in the universe you want to find such things as values, compassion, direction, purpose, a sign of anything higher, you have to look to people. There is no other place you will find them.

And not many people show these godly presences very much of the time. These usually come out only in our better moments—and at times when we deliberately pay homage to them. "The Kingdom of Heaven is among you."

The exact location of God, as best I can tell, is in those small, close places where the unnatural, unphysical values of compassion and love and truth and justice and higher direction and purpose are present—there can be found God. And—from an astronomer's perspective—nowhere else. ■

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