

The Sermon on the Rock

By Richard J. Grzywinski

November 7, 2010

All of us, I suppose, have encountered, or will encounter, those “dark moments of the soul” – those times when we face great sorrow, disappointment, grief, hopelessness, and despair. Many of us, like me, do not look to a personal god or to an afterlife for comfort or hope. And those who do might very well face doubt, discouragement, disappointment or even feelings of betrayal.

So where else can we look? Could the answer be found in the story of creation as revealed to us by modern science? Or perhaps in the Christian Bible, John 3: 1-7, where Jesus is reported to have counseled us to be “born again?” Or both?

The title of this talk today is “The Sermon on the Rock”. So as not to hold you in suspense too long, let me introduce to you the subject rock. (SHOW) I will place it here on the chalice table and ask that, from time to time, you take some small notice of it, for reasons which I will explain later.

Some time ago, my wife, Cynthia, gave me a book entitled “Hubble H-U-B-B-L-E – 15 Years of Discovery”. I dove into it immediately marveling at all the beautiful and wondrous pictures of the universe taken by the Hubble Space Telescope.

The Hubble telescope is named after Edwin Hubble, the astronomer who discovered that there are many galaxies besides our own Milky Way. {Note: “many” is a gross understatement. Perhaps 170 billion galaxies with ten million to 100 trillion stars in each, billions of stars for every human on this earth.} He also greatly changed our understanding of the universe by concluding, through observations of the light from stars, that the universe continues to expand. (discussion of Doppler shift)

The Hubble Telescope sits in orbit 352 miles above the earth. I imagine it to be like the giant one-eyed Polyphemus, the Cyclops from Homer’s Odyssey, staring out into space guarding our “cave” called earth and attempting to find what else, or who else, shares this space we claim as ours - our universe.

I also sometimes imagine this eye in space to be squinting, much as we might do, as it searches farther and deeper into the ever-expanding dimensions of time and space. And I wonder if somewhere out there, in the limitless expanse of space, there isn’t another telescope orbiting above some distant planet squinting right back at us. Someday, perhaps,

they will meet eye to eye, or lens to lens.....but I don't think so. Based upon all that science has been able to tell us, I think we are alone – a singular marvelous occurrence in this universe - intelligent life.

Much has been proposed about the origin of this earth, agreed by scientists to be about 4.5 billion years old – about one-third the age of the universe itself. Science tells us that a massive star composed primarily of helium and hydrogen exploded. This “supernova” released a cloud of cosmic gases and dust - a nebula. The particles of matter within this nebula began to attract each other due to the inherent gravitational force that exists in all matter. They grew larger and larger, forming suns, planets, and moons. {This is a process going on right now in other nebulae observable from Hubble.}

Eventually, our milky way galaxy and this planet earth was formed - hot, volcanic, and teeming with all that “star stuff” composed of metals, gases, the elements of the periodic table all formed from the simple hydrogen and helium, originally cooking, so to speak, within the hot furnace of that exploding star.

True, and amazing, isn't it? But the story, as fantastic as it is, had just begun. The best and most amazing events were yet to come.

About one billion years later, some of this space “junk” began to form the basic blocks of life on earth, those simple single-celled micro-organisms. They continued to evolve forming ever greater sophistication and complexity - the ability to reproduce, move, interact, and accommodate changing earth physics and hostile natural environments – to survive.

Now that's amazing, too, huh? What sparked this initial and sudden burst of life, particularly the formation of the first self-replicating cell, is still not understood by science. It remains one of the great unsolved mysteries.

But the story is still not done. Some of this living star stuff crawling around on the earth, not all of it, just a small amount of it, began to think, to reason, to learn, to imagine, to feel, to dream. About 200,000 years ago, humanity, we human beings, homo sapiens, had arrived. We dance, we sing, we laugh, we cry, we write and play music, we search for truth, we catch snowflakes on our tongue in the winter, we stare in joy and wonder at the aerobatic mating of dragonflies, we send space probes to other planets, we are kind and sometimes cruel, we create myths and gods to explain ourselves.

These words of Shakespeare's Hamlet ring true: “What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculties! In form and moving, how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension, how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals!”

And not only could we function and survive, but we could consider what and who we are. We can look into the glassy surface of a pond, or into a mirror, or into the eyes of another human being, and see ourselves and ponder our existence.

It's as if the entire universe had been turned into itself – to look at itself, through our eyes alone and through our imagination. One might say that it is only through our senses, our sight, our hearing, and our human mind that the beauty of the universe even exists. Aristotle said there was no such thing as absolute beauty – that beauty requires perception. Shakespeare noted that “Beauty is bought by the judgment of the eye.” Beauty is truly formed in the eye of the beholder. Thus we create beauty each time we take a moment to observe it. What an awesome gift that is, to create beauty. And what an awesome responsibility!

As far as science has been able to determine, nowhere else in the entire expanse of space did this occur. Pieces of the universe, humanity, us, began to look back at where it had come from..... and why.

What an incredible journey we have been on. We are each and every one of us, the product of that fantastic cosmic journey.

Now..... let's take a look at this rock sitting here. Did anyone notice it moving about one inch while I was speaking? No, it didn't. Of course not. But if it had, you might have said, hmmm, nice trick Richard!

And if it had jumped up off the table and into my hands, you might have exclaimed, wow, it's magic!

Now suppose this rock had gotten up off the table, ran to the kitchen on its little rock legs, and brought me back a nice cup of hot coffee, just the way I like it. Some of you would have gotten up and ran out the door in fear, perhaps. Others would have pulled out your smart phones or video recorders and the event would have been logged into history as the video went viral. It would certainly earn a prominent place on YouTube, or Facebook, and on late night TV.

That event, if it had occurred, would undoubtedly have earned your excitement, your awe, your sense of wonder and amazement. It would most likely have occupied your thoughts for a very long time, maybe forever.

So why, then, does the fact that we humans can perform acts of far greater complexity not earn your correspondingly far greater wonder? Why is this life of ours not the miracle of all

miracles? - A miracle not in the sense of a divine intervention in the laws of nature, but an amazing occurrence that stirs our imagination and fires our curiosity. Why doesn't YouTube or Late Night TV exclaim with equal vigor and excitement, "look! a baby was born!!" "look! a woman is suffering!!" "look! today a man died!!". Have we become so accustomed to who we are, so consumed by the minutia of our daily lives, that we have ceased to recognize the mystery, wonder and grandeur of it all?

Aren't we human beings made of the same star stuff as that rock? Did not we and that rock both exist as helium and hydrogen atoms within a star so many years ago....helium and hydrogen....perhaps the true Adam and Eve of our formation. Were we both not simple atoms of carbon, sodium, magnesium, phosphorus, and oxygen, and molecules of carbonates and silicates?

If ever you doubted the interconnectedness of all things, living and not living, or the fatherhood of the stars, the motherhood of planet earth, or your kinship with the animals and plants, then think of our common origin. At one time, we all occupied the same space, sharing our atoms and our energy. We are, metaphorically speaking, brothers and sisters of all matter on this earth.

And when we die our flesh will turn to carbon dioxide and water and we are left with only the stuff of limestone and rock –our bones - and like this rock we become part, again, of the earth and the recurring cycle of life.

Genesis 3:19 "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."

This is the astounding miracle of our biological life. Stop, and consider it. From here (rock) to here (me), and back again,and perhaps back again.....and back again....

And yet, with all of these miracles, these gifts of life, this transformation from star to human, there is still more to marvel at.

Our existence, our being, comes with another component that cannot be observed with our senses, not weighed in pounds, not represented by equations, and not measured in inches or quantified in number. It is no less miraculous than our life itself. Some of us call it our "spirituality."

With many thanks to our own Kathryn Kelley, I learned that Elizabeth Lesser, in her book entitled "The new American Spirituality" defines this spirituality as "fearlessness... a way of looking boldly at life and death, as a brave search for the truth about existence."

Fearlessness.

My wife Cynthia once said to me that she thought the opposite of love is not hate, but fear. The more I thought about that, the more profound that simple thought seemed to be.

So I think that somewhere around those two statements is a truism, ..at the core of the miracle of spirituality is the phenomenon of love.

Love offers the joy of giving and the gifts of compassion, empathy, sympathy, and so much more. Our spirituality is the miracle that drives each of us to seek our highest purpose in life and to attend these services on Sunday mornings. It instructs us to do treat others as we would like to be treated.

This spirituality, our love, is the greatest unanswered mystery. Why do we sacrifice our comfort, perhaps our fortunes, and our lives for the sake of goodness? Why do we love? It's enough to drive an atheist like me crazy, or at least create some doubt as to whether there isn't some greater force at work in the universe.

And why did all of this happen here? Why now? Why only on this speck of dust called earth lost in an infinitely sized universe? Why us? {Discuss the Goldilocks Principle}

And we're still not done. At the end of this long miracle-filled journey from exploding star to thinking, loving, learning, evolving, spiritual human, with all those miracles of science and of life itself that we have inherited from our trip out of the cosmos, comes yet the potential for even greater miracles. These greater miracles each of us, individually, have been given the power to perform. They exist only when we choose to act upon them. What are they?

First, let's go back and look at those dark moments of the soul, those powerful negative feelings and emotions. They are, I believe, the symptoms of the loss of love – love of self, love of others, love of life. Spiritual exhaustion.

So then what are these greater miracles? They are the personal actions we can take to expunge these dark moments. To restore the joy of living.

We inherit the burden of emotional injury and psychological pain, but we have the power, if we will to do so, to perform the great miracle of healing.

We inherit sorrow and hurt, but we can choose to forgive.

We inherit despair, but the greater miracle is hope.

We inherit death, the knowledge of our death, or the death of a loved one, but the greater miracle is our understanding and acceptance.

So when we are most challenged by life's dark moments, how can we garner the strength and wisdom to perform these greater miracles?

Let's look at the Gospel of John, Chapter 3, verses 1-7. {Discuss informally}

"There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews:

The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.

Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?

Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and [of] the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again."

You must be born again.

A time will arrive in your life, if it hasn't already, to revisit who you really are. To "muck out the stables," get rid of those things which have been holding you back from seeing the world as it is and seeing yourself for what you are - the miraculous product of this true, non-mythical creation story. A time to be "born again." To recover your lost spirituality. To be rejuvenated.

So, if that day comes when the emotional injury and pain you feel becomes too difficult to heal,when the sorrow and hurt begin to overwhelm you,when despair crowds out the joy of living,when the death of a loved one becomes unbearable and unacceptable, ...when your ability to work those great miracles seems exhausted, I invite you, then,..... to go out and find a rock, maybe like this one. This rock, like life, has its smooth areas but can also be rough. It has its rounded corners but it also has sharp and hurtful edges. So like life, hold it carefully.

And if by chance this act helps you recall the story you heard today, this creation story..... If it allows you to be born again, to become intimate again with the universe..... If it reminds you of your journey to this time and to this place and your wondrous role in the universe as an observer and creator of beauty and lover of all things..... If holding that rock reminds you of the power that you hold to heal, to forgive, to hope, to accept. If that happens, then I invite you to do just one more thing. Whisper this simple prayer "Thank you for all the miracles".

And if, by chance, after those words of gratitude you hear the words “you’re welcome” whispered back to you, don’t be too surprised. There’s always room for just one more miracle.

Blessed Be and Amen