

Resurrection: Death, Science, and the Profound Meaning of Spring

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Reading: Ross Gay's *Burial*

Today is Easter, and tomorrow is Earth Day. A major holiday for Christians, followed immediately by a major holiday for Unitarians! Today we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus after his torture and crucifixion. Tomorrow we acknowledge the torture and likely crucifixion of a living planet, and we work to prevent the *need* for its resurrection.

If you grew up in the Christian tradition, you may have wondered why it's called Easter, anyway. Here we have the single most important holiday in the tradition, remembering an event that literally *defines* the tradition, and yet the word Easter is nowhere to be found in the Christian scriptures, and the word has no meaning in English beyond designating that holiday.

In Spanish, this holiday is called "Pascua." In French, "Paques"; Swahili: "Pasaka"; Russian: Paskha; Tagalog: Pasko; Dutch: Pasen. Those are all variations of the word *Passover*! By the way, the Passover story being remembered and celebrated all over the world this week is a great metaphor for the struggles of Earth Day and our bondage to a fossil-fueled economy, and the resulting plagues being visited upon us. But that's a different sermon entirely.

German and English are the only languages to name this holiday after an ancient Pagan goddess, Eostre. In the part of Europe that's now called Germany, ancient pagans celebrated the spring equinox with symbols of fertility: eggs, rabbits, and flowers, all in the name of Eostre, the goddess of fertility.

I saw a sign that made me chuckle. It said: "Silly rabbit, Easter is for Jesus!" Well, in different cultures today it's named after either a Jewish holiday or a Pagan one, but the eggs, chocolate, jelly beans, marshmallow peeps, bunnies, and that plastic-grass-from-Hell that we use to celebrate it, those all come from the Pagan side of the family. While I'm being irreverent, I'll tell you about another comment I saw online, asking, "Isn't Jesus technically a zombie?"

But this sermon is supposed to be about resurrection. There is an obvious resonance between resurrection and the seasonal return of abundant life and warmth after a long winter, a winter which for our temperate-climate ancestors meant deprivation if not famine. This resonance certainly helped Christianity find a home in Pagan lands, but beyond our neighborhood of this bioregion awakening from the sleep of

winter, does resurrection offer *anything* to non-theists?

At the risk of being a downer on Easter, I have to point out that you can't have resurrection without death. That means we have to talk about death, at least a little. Death has been more on my mind the last few years, as people whose living I took for granted begin to die off in an ever-increasing hemorrhage of loss. Maybe for you, too.

The more I contemplate death, the more clear it becomes that life and death are the same thing. The Taoists nailed this in the yin/yang symbol. Life on this planet only happens because living things eat each other. To live is to eat, and to eat is to kill. We can argue about the relative harm of killing plants or killing animals, but either way death is right there in every mouthful.

On longer time scales, death is what allows evolution to innovate. Carl Sagan once said "The secrets of evolution are Time and Death." We wouldn't even be here if the dinosaurs hadn't made way for us by dying, and *they* wouldn't have existed if green plants hadn't previously wiped out all the earliest life forms by spewing out a toxic gas, a gas we call oxygen.

Life and death cannot be separated. Like the yin/yang symbol, they cycle, dancing together, each containing and giving rise to the other.

We Americans are raised in a culture that fears death. We don't even like to mention it. Talking about death is impolite. Dark. Morbid. Death is to be avoided at all costs.

A close friend of mine died of ALS four years ago, and his body now rests in cryogenic suspension somewhere in Michigan. Before he died, he set up a perpetual trust to pay for the energy needed to keep him frozen until he can be awakened, in the hope that he will be cured of ALS, and resume life in a new, hopefully better world. He encouraged friends to leave messages for him now and then on his blog, for him to read upon awakening. A tremendous amount of effort and expense for what's in all likelihood a hopelessly-slim chance at an afterlife.

There is a way to do that for less, ya know: Some people have only their heads frozen, with the expectation that someday their brain can be scanned and their personality and memories uploaded into the internet, to live a fully-digital afterlife "in the cloud." Cloud nine, maybe. It's OK with me that they do this, as long as I don't have to be the one who saws their heads off!

For those of us for whom nature is enough, who rather than looking to the supernatural for solace and inspiration, look for it in *this* world, IS there any hope of an afterlife, other than having our corpsicles float in some giant flask of liquid

nitrogen? Does personal resurrection have any meaning at all? Can we count on a kind of natural resurrection before death snuffs out this... selfness, this... ego that wants so desperately to live on?

Yes. *I* think so.

Remember: we are made of atoms, which our bodies assemble into molecules, then cells, tissues, organs, and organ systems to make our bodies. Then our social nature assembles these bodies into families, clans, societies, nations and, for the fore-thinking among us, the global human family.

Our appearance doesn't change much from day to day, but the atoms and molecules that make us up change by the minute. Take a breath with me. You just breathed in uncountable air molecules. Actually, thanks to Amedeo Avogadro, we *can* count them, give or take a few million out of the total 13 sextillion air molecules in each breath. Most go in and right out again, but a significant portion of the oxygen molecules coming in stick around and become part of us, replacing the carbon dioxide molecules going out.

And where do those outgoing molecules go? They get taken up by plants, or dissolved in the oceans, or trapped in glaciers, and they go on to rich after-lives in all kinds of things: arcing dolphins, orange-purple sunsets, iridescent nautilus spirals, the soft succulence of dark-green moss, Yosemite's soaring cliffs, seahorses gently curling their tails around delicate corals. *That's* what the stuff you exhale gets up to when it's done being you!

Water, too, comes in and goes out from us every day. It, too, races off to colorful after-lives all over the planet: rainbows, waterfalls, cool clean sparkling spring water. I did the calculation: every pint of water on this planet contains, on average, over 300 million water molecules that were alive inside Jesus' body during his life. He died young, so the same pint of water contains even more molecules from, say, George Burns, or my centenarian grandfather. All water is holy water. It is the very atoms of our ancestors, every time we drink.

98% of the atoms that make up your body today are new since last Easter. All of this holy molecular exchange happens while we *live*, every moment of every day, slowly blanketing the earth with atoms that have been us and then sashayed on. By the time we die, the atoms that *have been* in our bodies are thousands of times the atoms that remain. Those few remaining atoms are the tiny remnant that get buried or cremated.

For someone 60 years old, it's in the ballpark of half a million pounds of stuff out there that was once in here. And we are adding more such stuff every minute. All

land is holy land, because every square inch of soil on this planet contains stuff that once lived in, lived as, our ancestors, and got dispersed while they were still alive. In light of that, where they were buried is barely an afterthought.

I told our kids that if you want to visit my gravesite, go ahead, but you might just remember that everywhere you go, every time you drink or breathe, I will be right there with you in the form of atoms you once embraced, spoke with, and loved. Atoms that are scattered all over the world, today, now, long before my death. (Assuming I have a few years left, at least!)

We don't need to scatter ashes; the stuff of us is self-scattering with every breath, every flush of a toilet, every drop of sweat, or tears running down our face at a funeral or a wedding.

That's not all that ripples out from us. Recently the merger of two black holes somewhere out beyond the Magellanic Clouds provided the first real proof that gravity distorts space, releasing ripples that reverberate through the universe forever. A few years ago an astronomer was quoted in National Geographic in an article about orbits. It turns out that a change as small as moving a pencil from one side of a desk to another is enough of a change in the gravitational field of the solar system to shift Jupiter half-way around its orbit a billion years from now. You're a lot bigger than a pencil, and you move a lot more, and farther than across a desk. Yeah, if it takes a billion years to see much change, it's a pretty small effect, but still, it's not zero! The gravitational waves from everything you do ripple out into the universe forever.

Our question today is "If our presence here matters, if our movements and behaviors affect not only the course of human events, but through physical forces the entire cosmos, if our atoms have rich lives after us, if this morning's service changes your thoughts or behaviors even a tiny bit, a tiny bit that initiates a cascade of ever-increasing secondary effects, isn't that a kind of afterlife?"

Here's a concrete way to think about it. You have two parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, etc. doubling in each previous generation. I call that your "cone of ancestry." If you have children, there is a similar cone of descendants, so you have this hourglass shape through time, with you at the apex where the cones touch. The same idea applies to cultural memes as to genetic genes, so even if you don't have children, there are cones of influence behind and in front of you, representing your *cultural* ancestors and descendants. The complexity of the systems in both the biosphere and human history, coupled with the butterfly effect, magnify your impact as time goes by. *Yes, you do matter.* More than you can know.

Mexican culture dedicates a day each fall to the memory of those who have died. Dia

de los Muertos is a day to remember ancestors. The idea is that no one is truly dead as long as they are remembered among the living. I like this idea, except that *everyone* will eventually be forgotten, though for the most famous (or infamous) it may take a while. But the universe itself never forgets. Einstein showed us that like life and death, space and time are one thing: spacetime. Every moment of your life is recorded, engraved on the fabric of spacetime indelibly, unforgettably. The cosmos remembers everything. The cosmos remembers everyone.

At Easter time, we celebrate the fertility of spring, new life, eggs and seeds. I call eggs and seeds “magic recipes.” Most people don’t realize this when they study developmental biology, and even some obstetricians don’t quite make the connection, but the truth is that mommies don’t make babies. Babies make themselves.

Each single-celled egg, each little mustard seed, or acorn, contains a magic blueprint for constructing a new organism. I say ‘magic’ because most recipes and blueprints need some maker, some carpenter or chef to gather ingredients and assemble them according to the recipe or blueprint, but a seed or an egg is a recipe that gathers its own ingredients from surroundings, performs bio-alchemy on those ingredients, and then assembles them just-so, including making uncountable perfect copies of the recipe! How many cookie recipes can *make themselves* into chocolate-chip cookies, and bake the recipe for more cookies into each cookie? Eggs can. Seeds can.

Pregnant women’s bodies don’t construct babies, they just provide ingredients, *under the direction of the baby!* So maybe this is more like an *insurrection* than a *resurrection*! When we remember that all the ingredients in the soil or the robin’s egg or the mother’s body came from now-dead plants and animals, you’ve got a magic recipe for resurrection.

Those ancient worshippers of Eostre were onto something, something worth attending to on Earth day tomorrow. Have you ever noticed that other planets have proper names? Jupiter, Venus, Neptune, honorable proper names, capitalized. But for some reason we call our own planet, our home, the one we’re most intimate with, we call it THE earth, like it’s an object, like it’s a *thing*, separate from us. It’s not; we are in it, we are OF it, we ARE it. No, even that’s not right: it is not an “it”; it’s a we. We are we. We are Earth, along with all our green and furry and slimy and inanimate neighbors.

This season is our chance to celebrate the cycles, yes, but also to be very intentional about experiencing our embeddedness in them. As the poet Rumi wrote: “You are not a drop in the ocean; you are the entire ocean in a drop.” We live and die like cells in the larger body of Earth, a living Earth that developed and lived before us, and will continue long after us. A blood cell in my body dies and its components are

dispersed among the rest of the body, no big deal.

That we are integral in natural cycles is obvious and somewhat mundane. Even *rocks* participate in the water cycle, the carbon cycle, all the atmospheric and geological cycles of birth and death, uplift and burial, gathering and dispersement. We do, too, of course, but there is something different about us. We are awake, aware. We are conscious participants in those cycles, if we remember to experience them consciously.

Resurrection comes with our *conscious* participation, our mindful experiencing of the cycles and recycles of a living planet. Catch April showers on your tongue, grateful for entire oceans in a drop. Inhale the scent of May flowers, knowing they are made of your ancestors. Welcome the first fragile mosquito, even if you immediately squash it. With each deliberate, mindful interaction with the world, you are resurrected.

When you breathe deeply, knowing this precious breath contains the dust of your ancestors, you are resurrected, and so are the ancestors.

When you pick up litter, or write your representatives, or start composting, or take kids to an Earth Day celebration, you are resurrected, and so is Earth.

Next spring, when to your delight the daffodils return, you are resurrected, and so is the long-forgotten botanist who first bred them centuries ago.

When a grownup child makes a wise decision because they remembered something you said decades ago, you are resurrected, and so is the child you mentored.

When carbon dioxide you exhale this morning gets incorporated into an iridescent seashell that catches a beach-goer's eye in the year 3019, you are resurrected, and so is the one who finds it.

When we accept with grace that this river of life is long and wide and made of ourselves and all our relations, we are resurrected.

Because knowing this, accepting the inherent goodness and balance of the cycles within cycles, and being ourselves conscious participants embedded within those cycles, reassures us that there is indeed an afterlife, a glorious one, even while we live. We are in it already. We are part of a living whole, and we know that what comes with Death is not to be feared, but celebrated. At Eostre time, on Earth Day, and always.

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