

Nature's Scripture: The Interfaith Promise of Science

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One of the things I love about religious progressives is that we try to reach across theological differences. We're not perfect at it, of course, but we do successfully spend Sunday mornings in religious community together, even with quite different beliefs about spirituality.

And it's not just us, people of goodwill all over the world do their best to reach across theological and scriptural divides, but what if there *were* no scriptural divides? Or in other words, what if there were a *common* scripture that was shared by all religions?

Pagan priestess Starhawk once wrote that something is sacred when there is no end, no goal that would justify its destruction or desecration. If you like that approach, it suggests that sacred texts describe things or ideas that must be protected, revered, cherished.

Last summer I learned about something called "Harry Potter and the Sacred Text." A Harvard divinity student named Vanessa Zoltan began studying the classic fiction book *Jane Eyre* as *though* it were a sacred scripture, just to see what spiritual meaning she could glean from it.

She and her professor were astounded at how beneficial it was, and the effort grew into a study group, using the Harry Potter books as though *they* were sacred texts. It became a podcast, and now eight years later, 16 million people have benefitted, spiritually, from studying Harry Potter books as though they were scripture, and that's *in spite* of JK Rowling's dismaying transphobia and anti-semitism.

Their point is *not* that Harry Potter is a sacred text. It isn't. They chose it because it's well known and there's a lot going on in the story's plot. I mention it because I think if can work with Harry Potter, of all things, it could work with almost *any* text.

What they're doing is exegesis, which means interpretation of a text, usually sacred texts.

Vanessa and her team say, in big letters on their website: "We believe that in treating texts as sacred, we can learn to treat one another as sacred."

They emphasize that this works—with Harry Potter!—it works because of three things: Trust, Rigor, and Community. Trust that the text can yield generous rewards; Rigor, well here's how they put it: "The text in and of itself is not sacred, but is made so through our rigorous engagement with it." and Community in that it takes a village to be uplifted, together—to make holy meaningfulness from a text studied in community. We UUs do that, but we have so many texts to choose from, we often miss the Rigor part.

If millions of people can extract spiritual enrichment from studying the Harry Potter books, then *if we had* a global text that we all regarded as sacred, what miracles could arise from *interfaith* dialogue on it? Especially if we studied it with Trust, Rigor, and Community? The world might be very different.

If we *had* a common scripture, different people would probably make different meanings from it. That's OK! As you know, the billions of people who study the Hebrew book of Genesis have lots of different takes on the role of women, for example. I can't resist: What did God say after creating Adam? She said, "I can do better than that!" Badum tshh!

What's *not* funny is how some in this country's history used Genesis to justify slavery. Some people still think that way. Clearly, the same text can yield vastly different interpretations.

So, a common scripture doesn't necessarily prevent misuse of it, or guarantee religious reconciliation, but it might help. At the very least, we could have some shared holidays, and we would have a common language for addressing challenges, from personal challenges to global crises.

At heart, religious scriptures are about spiritual experience.

Take a moment to just close your eyes and remember a time when you felt profoundly spiritually inspired, or totally at peace, or deeply connected. Take a few deep breaths and put yourself back there; remember where you were and how you felt. ... When you're ready, open your eyes and take another deep breath.

When I ask people to share about their spiritual experiences, almost always they describe something that happened in a natural or wilderness setting, or an experience that was deeply connective with something or someone outside themselves, or both: connective experience in nature.

Here's the big reveal: We **do** have a common global scripture, and you have been living and worshiping in its pages your whole life, perhaps never considering its spiritual potential, its sacred depths. It is tremendously rich in theological content.

We might disagree about the divine provenance of one another's traditional scriptures, but this one we KNOW to have been directly, personally written by the Creator, however we perceive and name that ultimate source.

Our common scripture is nature. Creation. Natural reality. A vast cosmos we now know to be at least 47 billion light years across, a universe that includes all of us on Earth, along with uncountable other Earths.

Did you know? There are more solar systems in the visible universe than there are grains of sand on Earth. I think you have heard that before, from me, but let's take a

minute to let that sink in. There are more solar systems in the universe than there are grains of sand on the Earth.

Astronomer Neil deGrasse Tyson says we are a speck, on a speck, on a speck on a speck. Really, really small.

One of those pictures, this one, is a photograph of Earth taken by Voyager 1 from beyond the orbit of Neptune. Your entire life, and all of human history, all of evolution took place on that tiny speck. Carl Sagan described it as “a pale blue dot suspended in a sunbeam.” A speck.

Imagine if your own holy scripture, whatever that is, contained a sentence like this:

“The sun is a fire bigger than a million Earths, and there are more suns in the heavens than grains of sand on Earth.” What meaning would you make of that as you studied it? How does it feel to contemplate that? Does it expand your feelings about who or what could have created such a cosmos?

Now imagine that that sentence isn't just a sentence in a book, recorded by a revered prophet long ago, but a present-day reality you can see with your own eyes. Imagine that *anyone* can see it, and engage with you about what it means to them, how *they* feel knowing it.

How **do** you feel, knowing this? Me too. It's humbling. We are SO small. A bit of humility might be just what we need at this time in history, hmm?

Often in nature, there's a counterbalance, and that's true here, too. As far as we know the only complex life in the entire universe is here on Earth. Two trillion galaxies of stars, and this tiny dot of a planet may have the only eyes, the only hearts, the only love, the only minds to appreciate it all. So, are you a speck, or are you precious beyond measure? Science just describes, and in that regard it's a text; it doesn't tell us what it means, or what to make of it.

Science concerns itself with *what is*. It's up to each of us to determine *what it means*. Human beings are hard-wired for making meaning. We can't avoid it. We think in metaphors and analogies.

So, am I a mere speck, or precious in thy sight? I say both. For me, being both minuscule *and* precious instills a durable humility, along with a sense of responsibility. It says I'm not in control here, *and* what I do really matters. I'm a terribly small part of something incomprehensibly vast, and, never-the-less an *essential* part.

Richard Louv (loov) says, “All spiritual life begins with a sense of wonder.” I have spent many years now, collecting and cataloguing awe-inspiring wonders of natural reality. I call them Revelations, because they get revealed as scientists do their work.

When I meditate on science revelations like this, and interpret them like the chapters of a religious text, I see patterns that offer to help heal a wounded society on a critically-ill planet. I call them “The Insights.” I want to just skim through three of them.

First let me say that what I’m about to share is partly science and partly exegesis—it’s interpretive meaning-making from the *findings* of science. Someone else might look at the same science knowledge and interpret it differently.

Unity. As I’ve said here before, multiple lines of genetic evidence tell us we are all cousins. Do we treat each other like family? With multiple wars raging, we know the answer to that. Every day, every time we meet someone is a family reunion!

How do we greet a cousin we’ve never met that turns up at a family reunion?

Of course, I’m not just talking about people who are *easy* to know and get along with; I’m talking about the panhandler I ignored yesterday, and the guy who cut me off on the road, people with unfamiliar ways, and world leaders I regard as evil. Those are my cousins, too. This doesn’t thrill me; it’s not all sweetness and light. I don’t *like* that the water I drink has been part of people who do awful things, too.

Revelations are not always comfortable, and that’s true of most sacred scriptures, right? Discomfort is part of the spiritual journey. Our choice is to face the truth of it, or live in superficial denial of reality.

All humans are cousins. Every conflict is a family conflict. Every war is a civil war. Recognizing this, for me, has been profoundly spiritual. This kinship goes far beyond our human cousins.

The tree of life on Earth is a *family* tree, with branches for every living thing on this planet. Every living thing is a cousin. And we’re embedded in Earth’s cycles, part of the water cycle, the carbon cycle, and so on. That’s the science.

Until recently I used the word “interdependence” for this, but it never felt adequate. We are not separate objects that depend on trading materials and energy with other objects; we are integral elements of a larger whole.

A few months ago, I learned the word “interbeing” as used by Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. I think “interbeing” fits better; I’m not a distinct but interdependent object; I exist as an integral inter-being within and as a living planet.

Interbeing extends beyond Earth, too. Every atom on Earth came from somewhere, and now we know where. All the atoms heavier than Hydrogen and Helium were forged inside the furnaces of exploding supernova stars. Stars *make* all those other elements out of hydrogen and helium. Remember, this is the origins of our bodies we’re talkin’ about.

Did you know that the main elements in your body are in the same order of abundance as elements in the universe as a whole? Except for Helium and Neon, who don't play well with others, and are extremely rare on Earth. I wanna show you a short clip about this.

[Voice of Neil deGrasse Tyson]:

"I know that the molecules in my body are traceable to phenomena in the cosmos. And it's our 15 pounds of gray matter that figured this out! There's a kinship with the cosmos that resonates deeply with New Age thinking, but I'm not apologetic about that; it's what we find! If whatever we find resonates with whoever, go ahead, take it.

When I reflect on our kinship with the cosmos; when I do the calculation that shows that a 15-ton meteorite that we have in the Rose Center for Earth and Space, it's an iron meteorite. When I do the calculation that shows that if you take all of the iron from the hemoglobin of the people in the tri-state area of New York City, you can recover that much iron out of their blood. And realize that the iron from that meteorite, and the iron from your blood has a common origin in the core of a star, tell me what part of my brain is lighting up. Because that excites me. That makes me want to grab people in the street, and say, "Have you heard this?!"

Your body is a microcosm of the cosmos. You're a reflection of the whole, acting within the whole, for the whole.

Going back further, we now also know where the first atoms of hydrogen and helium came from: they came from light. Those first atoms condensed out of intense light energy at the beginning of time, in a process called big-bang nucleosynthesis. Gravity collected those atoms together to make stars, which exploded to make heavy atoms, which gravity collected again to make planets.

Taken in context with lots of other passages from the scripture of nature, to me this means that my family tree goes all the way back to the dawn of time, and I am interbeing with everything in the universe. We are the universe, come alive, in a state of total unity with all of it. Beyond that, my body was made out of light! (it took a while, but still...)

Cooperation.

When I was a child my parents were Shaklee distributors, which meant that for us kids, a "treat" was a Shaklee Energy Bar. Believe me, they were nothing like candy. One day I noticed that a colony of ants were eating an Energy Bar that had fallen unnoticed under a radiator.

To their credit, my parents treated it as a science project, and let the ants eat. Those ants were fascinating to me, and I spent hours on my belly watching them, day after day, noticing how they walked in thin lines, like highways, complete with passing lanes, and how they touched antennae with each other as they passed. Within about a month, the ants had carried off the entire bar, one tiny mouthful at a time. Why am I telling you this?

Well, “survival of the fittest” does *not* mean survival of the strongest, or fastest, or smartest. The fittest means those who are best aligned with their environment. Environments change, so “fittest” means different things in different times and places.

In the 4 billion years of life on this planet, “Survival of the fittest” has most often meant “survival of the most cooperative.” There *is* competition, between individuals and between species, but survival is often a team sport, so cooperators almost always have an advantage. The worker ants moving that cricket are sterile; they have no chance of having baby ants of their own. They are working to support their sisters and nieces who will.

Cooperation is the essence of every major advance in the complexity of life on Earth. The fossil record consistently reflects greater and greater scales of cooperation building up in layers of biological complexity. Living things cooperate in larger and larger assemblies, and that allows new potentials—new qualities—to emerge. All of this only happens if there’s diversity!

No evolutionary change can happen in a population if its members are all clones of each other. When there is diversity, natural selection has something to work with, promoting alignment with the environment, and hindering misalignment.

It’s important to mention that natural selection works on populations, not individuals. The darker-colored moth is just as likely to be eaten by a bat when these two are flying. Or, they both could have landed on a light-colored birch tree.

The lesson here is not that some individuals are better than others. It’s that diverse populations have more survival options, like a football team that’s proficient in more plays, or a musical group with a larger repertoire.

This is true with cultural evolution, too. If we all spoke the same language, worshipped the same way, ate the same foods, we would *all* be far less adaptable as the world changes around us. Diversity is a pre-requisite for *resilience*.

Natural reality as science reveals it to us, could be a source of great unity between the world’s faith traditions! The work of science is done by representatives from every major faith tradition on the planet, and they share their process and findings globally, for all humanity to take inspiration from.

More than nations, or religious organizations, or NGO's, more than any other human endeavor, science is people from every culture and nation and faith, working *together* to reveal the secrets of creation.

The culture wars urge us to think of science as some kind of enemy of religion and spirituality, claiming that science reduces all magic and mystery to the mundane mud of materialism. Well, I gotta tell ya, the last 150 years in science have done just the opposite. Every discovery, every dark frontier illuminated, reveals even greater mysteries beyond the shores of our knowledge. Some, like emergence and entanglement are truly magical by almost any definition. With each new revelation, nature's glory and intricacy grow, often by leaps and bounds! In me they inspire an ever-expanding awe of the creative forces that birthed all this!

If the world's religions want to work together for the sake of future generations, they should start on common ground. Natural reality is the only *literal* common ground we have. And here we are, living in it, **as** it.

It's true that sometimes new discoveries make us reconsider our beliefs in a new and more expansive light. That's a spiritual practice, too! For me, it's had powerful implications for WHO I AM and what's important to me. I think it could have powerful implications for others, too, and for interfaith dialogue.

For example, how does the kinship of all living things resonate—similarly or differently—for Hindus and Muslims? For Jews and Daoists? For Jains and Christians? For Mormons and Pagans and Atheists? What could they learn from one another, once they go deeper than polite appreciation for each other's distinct beliefs and rituals?

The fact of this kinship is something we all share, because we ARE it, we ARE that kinship. I think it's a solid ground for supporting deep and authentic interfaith dialogue. Kinship is just one chapter of humanity's shared global scripture.

When something is sacred, nothing can justify its destruction or desecration. I invite you to regard natural reality as holy scripture, and to study what science reveals about it with that mindset.

Approached with Trust that studying nature can yield generous rewards; Rigorous, earnest engagement to make it sacred, and in Community—global interfaith community—natural reality as science reveals it to us could be the biggest, widest, most inviting bridge *between* faiths ever proposed.

When we treat nature as sacred, knowing that our bodies are one with the whole of creation, we might just come to treat one another as sacred, too, sacred elements of a sacred planet, minuscule and precious in a vast and glorious cosmos.