

# The Moral Arc of the Universe, Part I

by Bill Graves

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I presume at least a few of you have come across a short story called “The Star” by Arthur C. Clark, best known as the author of “2001, A Space Odyssey”.

Briefly summarized, the hero of the story is a Jesuit priest who is also an astrophysicist and part of an interstellar mission to explore the Phoenix Nebula, the remnant of a supernova, which is a star that becomes enormously bright shortly before it explodes. What the mission finds is something that utterly destroys the priest’s faith and something he knows will end the Jesuits, the Society of Jesus founded in 1534 by Saint Ignatius of Loyola.

Within the Nebula is one surviving planet of the dead star, far enough away that it was not totally incinerated. On the planet the team found preserved deep below the rock surface a Vault. Inside the vault they found a complete record of an amazingly warm and beautiful civilization.

The tragedy is apparent. The priest wonders: “To be destroyed so completely in the full flower of achievement, leaving no survivors—how could that be reconciled with the mercy of God?” But the priest discovered something else almost equally shocking. From the record in the rocks of that one surviving planet he was able to date very exactly in what year the light of this colossal conflagration reached our Earth. Let me read you the final paragraph of the story:

“There can be no reasonable doubt: the ancient mystery is solved at last. Yet, oh God, there were so many stars you could have used. What was the need to give these people to the fire, that the symbol of their passing might shine above Bethlehem?”

What the story poses so dramatically is the classic conundrum that Theologians have wrestled with for millennia. It’s called the “Theodicy question.” Briefly put, visualize, if you will, a triangle. At one angle of the triangle is the concept of an omnipotent, all-powerful creator God. At the second angle is the traditional belief that this is a just and compassionate God. And, at the third angle is the reality that pointless and debilitating suffering exists.

Dozens of theories have been advanced in attempts to rationalize and understand the Theodicy dilemma. It is the super-bowl of theological discourse. And, it’s not a trivial question because on it hang such topics as hope, purpose, meaning in life, or not.

By now you should know me well enough to know I don’t like to tackle such weighty questions all by myself. I like visiting dignitaries to share the pulpit. Fortunately, we have present with us a number of them eager to share with you their positions on the Theodicy question.

Voice #1: I represent the medieval church. Obviously, persons are caused to suffer because God is exacting just retribution for their worship of false idols or their sinful living. I’m sure there are a good many UU’s high on that list. And, if we can’t figure out anything wicked they did to deserve the suffering, there are always people possessed by the devil or demons to blame. John Calvin, and the good people of Salem, Mass. knew what to do with those kind.

Voice #2: I represent much of the post-Reformation church.... not including many heathens some of whom I hear are Unitarian Universalists. The answer was given to us in the Book of Job of the Hebrew Scriptures.

I know some of you think this Theodicy question points to a contradiction proving there is no God. Well it proves nothing of the sort. Anyone who argues thus is being swayed by emotion, not logic. God has no need to justify His actions to us finite, flawed humans. The One who built the universe or gave life can destroy it whenever He chooses. It is arrogance—it is perilously near blasphemy—for us to judge God’s motives, or meddle in His affairs, or say what He may or may not do. All happens only through God’s Grace.

Voice # 3: I represent all the hedonistic materialists out there. How about a little fun and pleasure! Is there really any other point in life given the fact that tomorrow is but a roll of the dice? Our gospel is the Book of Ecclesiastes of the Hebrew Scriptures where it says: “It is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot...All else is vanity and a chasing after wind.” I repeat: “All else is vanity and chasing after wind.”

Voice# 4: I represent secularists out there. We have had major flirtations with you UU’s during the past century. We think the Theodicy question is founded on assumptions that would draw us backwards towards ignorance and away from science. The universe has no purpose or plan. Whether a race of beings exterminated in the cosmic explosion has done good or evil during its lifetime, will make no difference in the end: there is no divine justice, for there is no God.

I presented these four responses to the Theodicy question in something like the order that I would put them according to my own ranking of belief. But all somehow leave me rather cold. In all these belief systems I am of utterly of no consequence. Nothing I do matters? Are we really in the clutch of a process that is random, meaningless, mechanistic? It seems relevant to raise this question right now, when hope and faith in the future is a challenging dimension, right now when factors of doom and gloom are closing in on all directions.

That brings me to utterly elegant words from which the title of this sermon is taken: “*The moral arc of the universe is long but it bends towards justice.*” Could that possibly be true?

Those words were uttered by three human beings I admire deeply. They were originally part of a sermon by Theodore Parker in 1857. In the pantheon of UU prophets and just cool people, Parker, a Unitarian minister and transcendentalist is right near the top. Over 100 years later Dr. Martin Luther King rediscovered the phrase and made use of it in some of his most important speeches including his address following the march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965. The words are again on our collective consciousness because we have them paraphrased by President Obama in his election eve speech in Chicago, last November 4.

*The moral arc of the universe* calls us to the big picture, to cosmology, to the history of the human species and our collective future. And here I encounter, everywhere, the epic of evolution which is fitting since it’s Charles Darwin’s 200<sup>th</sup> birthday next Thursday. In a later sermon, part 2 of this series, I hope to bring the question down to the personal level, how does all this relate to each of our immediate sufferings.

“*The moral arc of the universe is long but it bends towards justice.*” Notice it’s a cautious statement, but it does proclaim hope, an optimism about the human condition, a grounds for faith in the future. It is a profoundly religious statement.

But, does it get past my UU skeptic’s lens? I find help here from Rev. Michael Dowd who describes himself as an “evolutionary evangelist.” He and his wife, Connie Barlow, a science writer, have lived entirely on the road since 2002, preaching mostly at UU churches, and proclaiming what they refer to as “The Great Story” based on the thought of Father Thomas Berry (who is also the main inspiration behind the Whidbey Institute, a spiritual retreat center located near my home.)

“The Great Story” in a nutshell, starts with the notion that dust from exploding stars (and here we get back to Arthur Clark’s story) evolved along a discernable path into Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. Think about that a minute! It’s a rather astounding statement. Ancestral stars are part of our genealogy. Every atom in our bodies, other than hydrogen, was forged in the fiery belly of a star that lived and died and recycled itself back to the galaxy.

Those atoms combined in community to form molecules. Molecules assemble into living cells. Out of the cells emerge multi-cellular plants, animals, and fungi. Ants, termites, crows, prairie dogs, and human beings generate societies. Societies spawn cultures and technologies. Cultures yield artistic and religious expression. This is the awesome epic of evolution.

As Carl Sagan famously said: “We are the local embodiment of the Cosmos grown to self awareness. We have begun to contemplate our origins—star stuff pondering the stars.”

So here you and I are, star stuff. Now, let’s take a look at the full sweep of our human history. [show slide]. I refer you now to the expanding circles that have just appeared on the wall. Early on when knowledge could be retained and shared only by spoken language, anyone outside the family clan or tribe was suspect, and probably an enemy. As technologies of communication evolved, our ancestors entered interdependent relationships in ever-widening circles, from villages, chiefdoms, early nations, to today’s international organizations. Throughout this evolution there seems to be an inner transformation taking place: At each stage our circles of care, compassion and commitment have grown and our list of enemies has diminished.

Berry and Dowd proclaim that evolution is not meaningless, blind chance. Rather, biological life and human life evidence a trajectory. They would call it a “holy direction”: “It is no coincidence, nor is it an accident, [they say] that greater complexity, cooperation, and interdependence at increasing scale are evident in the DNA and fossil records, and throughout human history as well.” [end slide]

A job for religion is to make meaning out of scientific observations. A religious meaning this “Great Story” might have for you and me is it implies that our *purpose* is involved (1) in exercising our wondrous gift to witness and celebrate this magnificent Whole, (2) in each of us discovering our own self and our own destiny which are unique among all others that have been part of those 13 billion years; and 3) in how we all work together to build structures that benefit the Whole and promote further evolutionary creativity.

We have the free will to both create and destroy, and cataclysmic events threaten us from all sides, but the “good news” is that we are held in a larger arc in which evolutionary creativity seems to move in the direction of greater complexity, cooperation, interdependence, care, and compassion.

*“The moral arc of the universe is long but it bends towards justice.”*

Here’s the thing, the arc may or may not bend because of some divine force but, for sure, (quoting Obama) “it bends if each of us, in our own ways, put our hand on the arc and we bend it in the direction of justice, because we organize, we mobilize, we march, we vote, we parent, we’re active in our community, we’re active in our schools....”, we’re active in our churches.

I have a faith that there is an essential, human nobility arisen somehow out of 13 billion years of evolution, that will cause that arc to bend. In what directions we most need to make it bend now I think were also summarized by Dr. King. In his 1967 speech entitled “Beyond Vietnam,” he said:

“We must rapidly begin the shift from a *thing* oriented society to a *person* oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, militarism, and economic exploitation are incapable of being conquered. A nation can

flounder as readily in the face of moral and spiritual bankruptcy as it can through financial bankruptcy.”

I have a lawyer friend that says this to clients who think they have been wronged and want “justice”: The reality is justice is slow, and it is uncertain, and most of all it is very expensive. I am a product of the 60’s and 70’s when we dreamed, and worked and marched for justice. Only now, in my euphoria about the last election, do I get an inkling that we helped bend the arc a little.

And, if much of the wealth of our *thing* oriented society is built on the backs of injustice, racism, militarism, economic exploitation, to bend that arc is going to cost us. For sure it may cost us our overconsumption in which we spend millions to lose weight while millions elsewhere starve. But, those costs may be the price of getting us closer to fulfilling a higher purpose as part of the Great Story, for making us healthier and happier in a *person* oriented society.

Here’s something else to consider. Evolutionary scientists will tell you that the primary driver of evolutionary creativity and transformation is chaos. Paradoxically, bad news is often a good thing—a blessing in disguise.

I trust I have given you a few things to think about and that you don’t agree with me on everything. Please don’t! To our Jesuit Astronaut, I would say, you are wrong to give up. The Jesuits survived 1000 years because they were open to new truths even if very cautiously. And, every philosopher of substance knows that death is as essential to the Great Story as birth, for without one there could not be the other; there would only be a frozen and static world. Evolution could not function. There would be no stardust. It is a story filled with tragedy for sure. Yet, we are comforted in knowing that on the whole “it is good.” The arc does bend towards progress and justice.

To our four distinguished visitors this morning, let me say, NO! We are not just purposeless pawns of your God or lack of God. Peace and justice and individual empowerment are the moral foundation of our faith here. We will remember and live with the insight and integrity of those who made a difference throughout the ages; including UU’s such as Clara Barton, Susan B. Anthony, Pete Seeger, Christopher Reeve, Paul Newman. In this way we will help bend the moral arc of the universe a little bit closer toward justice. In the words of the song we are about to sing, when times get rough, that arc is a bridge over troubled waters.

Amen.

#### BENEDICTION:

We clasp the hands of those that go before us,  
And the hands of those who come after us.  
We enter the little circle of each other’s arms  
And the larger circle of lovers,  
Whose hands are joined in a dance,  
And the larger circle of all creatures,  
Passing in and out of life,  
Who move also in a dance,  
To a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it  
Except in fragments.

--Wendell Berry