

A Cosmic Liturgy

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Please let me know if you intend to use this Liturgy and feel free to modify it to your uses. But please acknowledge the authors. Uncited sections written by Jason Brown.

Elements needed: Tea candles, bread, water with bowl, shroud for altar, labels for directions.

Introduction

- Silence cell phones.
- Sit in circle with altar in center.
- Introductions.
- Explain the elements of each of five sections.
- Answer questions.

Introit

It has been said: “True religion is the original umbilical cord that binds our individual selves back to our larger, universal source.”¹ We gather to celebrate that Source, our dwelling place in that Source, to contemplate the Mystery of being, and to meditate on the creative beauty of the Web of Life.

Settle your minds as we participate together in this sacrament of the present moment.

“It was the Beginning of all Beginnings. It was a time of no time, for time did not exist, a place of no place, for space did not exist. It was a beginning like no other, for there was no ‘before’. There was only the Infinite, and the Unfathomable Mystery.”²

Element: Fire

Direction: Reflecting on the Infinite, we celebrate the element of Fire in our bodies, in our world, and in our hearts. Fire is the element held by the south; it reminds us of the season of summer, the sacred sun pulsing with nuclear heat, feeding the spark that gave rise to life, falling in love with life through photosynthesis; fire is the energy in our muscles when we work. Fire is love burning in our hearts.

Cosmic Evolution: The universe began with a Great Flaring Forth, 13.8 billion years ago.

[A single candle is lit.] A single point, trillions of degrees hot.

“And out of the Unfathomable Mystery, the infinite called forth unto itself. It called forth space. It called forth time. It called forth being. And in that ecstatic instant, the Universe slammed exploding outward into existence, with the jubilant and breathtaking beauty, brightness, energy, violence, power, and glory of a trillion new born stars.”³

“If the rate of expansion had been slower...even one millionth of a percent slower, the universe would have collapsed. If the universe had expanded more quickly, even one millionth of one percent more quickly, the universe would have expanded too quickly for structures to form.”⁴

“We awaken to existence and discover ourselves in the inner circles of [cosmic] creativity. Held by the embrace of a spiral galaxy, we enter into a multilayered and seemingly infinite fecundity.”⁵ We discover that like the ancient ones of this earth believed, the stars are our ancestors; we are made of star stuff. Super novae, “womb[s] of intense creativity give birth to the elements that form our planet and our bodies...Our bodies [have] passed through countless vast explosion[s].”⁶

Ecology: The sacred element of Fire is an agent of creative destruction. Just as supernovas collide to produce stars, so too does fire in its very violence and destruction cleanse and renew the earth.

The Great Unravelling: Joanna Macy calls our difficult time the Great Unravelling. For with our mastery of fire, has come the industrial revolution, and the burning of fossil fuels. “The [Great Unravelling] in not just a problem ‘out there’. It [has] inscrib[ed] itself in our bloodstreams, our breasts and prostates, our very mother’s milk, all of which carry [its]...toxins.”⁷ And it threatens to displace millions and affect millions more of the poorest among us.

Responsorial/Participation: [Light candle, and say a word or phrase that the element of Fire invokes for us.]

Meditation: [Sit with the warmth of our own bodies. The candle. The light in the room.]

Element: Earth

Direction: Reflecting on the Infinite, we celebrate the element of Earth; in our bodies, in our world, and in our hearts. In gratitude for our fecund planet, we honor the direction of north which invokes the sleep of winter that promises awakening; the fertile soil where we grow our bodies in the form of food; our Mother Earth, like a single body of which we are but strands in a glorious web of life-death.

Cosmic Evolution: 4.5 billion years ago, the earth formed from super novae and began to orbit our sun like a whirling dervish. Life, that great Mystery, our primordial elders, emerged shortly thereafter. Evolution is the blossoming of a sacred Tree of Life whose branches meander through time. The dynamic of life and death, predator and prey, living and nonliving gave shape to our bodies.

Our eyes in relation to light.

Our ears in relation to sound.

Our hands in relation to trees.

Our feet in relation to ground.

Our teeth in relation to the bodies of others.

Our hearts in relation to each other.

Ecology: In the Hebrew creation myth, we were formed from the dust of the earth. Creation is an earthly affair. Our bodies, our stories, our holy books come of the earth. “Passages [from the Bible] that within walls seem improbable...outdoors seem merely natural. This is because outdoors we are confronted everywhere with wonders...It is our daily bread. Whoever really has considered the lilies of the field or the birds of the air and pondered the improbability of their existence in this warm world...will hardly balk at the turning of water into wine...We forget the greater and still continuing miracle by which water (with soil and sunlight) is turned into grapes.”⁸

“There is nothing in me that is not of earth, no split instant of separateness, no particle that disunites me from the surroundings. I am no less than the earth itself. The rivers run through my veins, the winds blow in and out with my breath, the soil makes my flesh, the sun’s heat smolders inside me. A sickness or injury that befalls the earth befalls me. A fouled molecule that runs through the earth runs through me. Where the earth is cleansed and nourished, its purity infuses me. The life of the earth is my life. My eyes are the earth gazing at itself.”⁹

The Great Unravelling: The Great Unravelling is threatening the body of the earth with death. The biodiversity on earth is shrinking. The amount of wild animals cut in half over the last half century. The Web of Life is coming apart. “We are losing splendid and intimate modes of divine presence.”¹⁰ We are living the 6th great extinction.

Response/Participation:

[A loaf of bread is passed followed by one word or phrase elicited by the element of Earth.]

“The bread in your hand is the body of the cosmos.”¹¹

Meditation: [Focus on listening.]

Element: Water

Direction: Reflecting on the Infinite, we celebrate the element of Water; in our bodies, in our world, and in our hearts. In gratitude for the sacred element of water, we honor the direction of the west, the season of autumn, of quiet rain, the vast dark seas, the ocean in our blood and bodies. Water is new life, as our bodies are reborn each day, cell by cell.

Cosmic Evolution: When the earth was formed 4.5 billion years ago, a collision birthed our moon. It became the calendar for our ancestors. Its body lures the oceans into an eternally swaying dance.

From the beginning, the sun has gently carried millions of gallons of water into the air through evaporation to make rain and snow to feed the parched lips of all life. Water, sometimes patiently, sometimes violently, carves the features into our mountains and valleys.

Ecology: The vast sacred oceans were the womb for life on this planet. “Water is the raw material of creation, the source of life. When the waters break, the child is born

from them, just as the gods of old parted the dark, primeval ocean and fashioned the Earth, just as the first land creatures struggled up out of the tide.”¹² We carry the ocean within our bodies onto land like a vast terrestrial ocean.¹³ Our bodies contain up to 40 liters of water.

The Great Unravelling: The Great Unravelling is causing the oceans to acidify. The seas to rise. Fish are being harvested so fast, that most of our large fish may be extinct by the end of this century. There are millions of people without access to clean drinking water.

Participation/Response:

[A chalice is distributed. Touch water, or wash hands and say a word or phrase that is elicited by the element of Water.]

Meditation: [Focus on the pulse, the mouth, and the eyes.]

Element: Air

Direction: Reflecting on the Infinite, we celebrate the element of Water; in our bodies, in our world, and in our hearts. Breathing deeply, watching our breath, let us honor the direction of the East as we celebrate the element of Air, the rebirth of spring, the breath of life; photosynthesis, a sacred icon to the depth of communion of all things.

Cosmic Evolution: “The universe began with a great outpouring of cosmic breath that has complexified over billions of years until it could burst forth as evergreen forests and alpine meadows, with their cicadas and fireflies.”¹⁴ Creation and destruction; life and death are unified in continual transformation throughout the cosmos.

“Atoms are mostly empty space. Matter is composed chiefly of nothing.”¹⁵ In our Stories “Air is the creative force, the spirit moving over the face of the waters...the Word of God breathing life into the world...the divine command that sets so many creation stories in motion. It is the first of the elements that create and support our lives.”¹⁶

“Air also embodies ideas in speech and language, in song and in the sweet airs of music. Air is a physical substance; it embraces us so intimately that we cannot say where we leave off and air begins. Inside as well as outside we are minutely designed for the central activity of our existence –drawing the atmosphere into the center of our being, deep into the moist, delicate membranous labyrinth within our chests, and putting it to use.”¹⁷

Ecology: Believe it or not, oxygen began as a poison. But the crisis of the Great Oxygenation brought on evolutionary innovations. Now “Each breath is a sacrament, an affirmation of our connection with all other living things, a renewal of our link with our ancestors and a contribution to generations yet to come. Our breath is a part of life’s breath, the ocean of air that envelops Earth. Unique in the solar system, air is both the creator and the creation of life itself.”¹⁸

The Great Unravelling: Climate change is changing the very air we breathe, the very atmosphere of the planet. Like the great oxygenation, climate change is pushing the threshold of livable conditions. 3 million people die of air pollution each year. But change is in the air. Millions of people are beginning to wake up to the possibilities of an

ecologically sustainable global civilization. We have the choice to the Great Unravelling into the Great Turning.

Participation: [Using our breath, say a word or phrase that is elicited by the element of Air.]

Meditation: [Focus your attention on your breath. Let the air pass through your nostrils and fill your lungs. Feel your lungs slowly fill and then deflate as your body pulls in oxygen and expels carbon dioxide. Focus on the entire process of breathing and how each moment changes. Imagine trees doing the opposite.]

Spirit: The Great Turning

[Audience stands if able.]

Reflecting on the Infinite, we celebrate the element of Spirit; in our bodies, in our world, and in our hearts. With Spirit we honor possibility. The unknown. The undying beauty of human potential. We look toward a Great Turning toward a livable future for humanity and all the other creatures we share with planet with.

“We have begun to contemplate our origins: star stuff pondering the stars; organized assemblages of ten billion billion billion atoms considering the evolution of atoms; tracing the long journey by which, here at least, consciousness arose.”¹⁹ “However insignificant we may feel with respect to the age and size of the universe, we are, even so, beings in whom the universe shivers in wonder at itself.”²⁰ “For small creatures such as we, the vastness is bearable only through love.”²¹ Thus, we must become the heart of the cosmos.²²

“We cannot [effect change] without the traditional religions, but they cannot presently do what needs to be done. We need a new type of religious orientation. This must...emerge from our new story of the universe. This constitutes a new revelatory experience.”²³ We are building this new religious consciousness through rituals like this one; within, on the margins, and outside of traditional religions. Deepening our connection to the earth, and contributing to a shared vision for her future.

“When the universe was just quarks and leptons, could anyone have known that it was in the process of bringing forth stars and galaxies? We find ourselves inside an amazing drama filled with danger and risk but also stunning creativity... It is in the nature of the universe to move forward between great tensions, between dynamic opposing forces. If the creative energies in the heart of the universe succeeded so brilliantly in the past, we have reason to hope that such creativity will inspire us and guide us into the future.”²⁴ “In a mysterious and profound way, the Infinite wants Earth. The Infinite wants life. The infinite wants humanity. The Infinite wants you.”²⁵

What will be the great work of the human species in relation to the cosmos? Wonder will guide us. “Wonder...is an opening into the heart of the universe.”²⁶

Participation: [Final reflections, prayers, hopes.]

¹ Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ: The Healing of Mother Earth and the Birth of a Global Renaissance* (San Francisco: Harper Row, 1988), 11.

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- ² David Christopher, *The Holy Universe* 41
- ³ David Christopher, *The Holy Universe* 42
- ⁴ Brian T. Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Journey of the Universe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 10-11.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.
- ⁷ Robert Gottlieb, *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, 6.
- ⁸ Wendell Berry, 'Christianity and the Survival of Creation' IN *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* (San Francisco: Pantheon Books, 1993), 103.
- ⁹ Richard Nelson, *The Island Within* (New York: Vintage, 1991).
- ¹⁰ Thomas Berry *The Dream of the Earth* 8
- ¹¹ Thich Nhat Hanh
- ¹² David Suzuki. *The Sacred Balance: Rediscovering our Place in Nature* (Vancouver: Grey Stone Books, 2007), 82.
- ¹³ David Suzuki, *The Sacred Balance*, 83.
- ¹⁴ Brian T. Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Journey of the Universe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 5.
- ¹⁵ Carl Sagan, *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage*, PBS Television Series, 1980.
- ¹⁶ *The Sacred Balance*, 50.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.
- ¹⁹ Carl Sagan, *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage*, PBS Television Series, 1980.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 114.
- ²¹ Carl Sagan, *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage*, PBS Television Series, 1980
- ²² Brian T. Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Journey of the Universe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 115.
- ²³ Thomas Berry, *Dream of the Earth*, 87
- ²⁴ *Journey of the Universe* 117-118
- ²⁵ David Christopher, *Holy Universe* 83
- ²⁶ Brian T. Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Journey of the Universe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 114.