

“Fearfully, Wonderfully Made”

If you take the bus to work you soon may see a new ad on the side of the bus—“There is probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” This is actually an ad campaign that started in England, where the organizers had aimed to raise £5,500, or about \$10,000, to put ads on 30 London buses. Instead, they raised more than £144,000. An organizer in Toronto said, “There’s atheists that are out there. This will show them they are not alone.”

Now the campaign that started in England received a major matching donation from Richard Dawkins, author of “God is a Delusion”. It may be that he is just trying to promote further book sales. His first major book “The Selfish Gene” published over thirty years ago has sold over a million copies and has been translated into 25 different languages. This book postulates a gene-centred view of evolution. A simplistic analogy would be the old saying that a chicken is just an egg’s way of making more eggs. So a human being is just a means that enable genes to replicate themselves.

So in answer to the question who am I and what is the purpose of my life, it is to reproduce genes and hope (certainly not pray) that mine are stronger than the replicating body machine next to me. Hence the bus ads “There is probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.”

The moderator of the United Church of Canada, Right Rev. David Giuliano, said he would rather see atheists say what they believe in, rather than what they are against. But, pointing out that the United Church also uses advertising, he said he has some sympathy with the impetus behind the ads. “I think most of these ads ... are responding to a version of God and Christianity that is grounded in a kind of judgment and fear and guilt... and I don’t believe in that God either.”

Forty-two years ago, when this congregation was only eight years old, the front cover of time magazine

proclaimed, “God is Dead”. Some of you will remember that. The issues were the same; the God who is dead is the one with a long white beard sitting on a cloud trying to figure out who’s naughty and nice.

That God does not exist. In fact, God does not exist. God is beyond existence and we who exist cannot even begin to comprehend the creator who began it all. But try to imagine it, this incredible process when from no-thing-ness there are in a few billion years so many things. What caused it all? What brought it into being? Where did it come from?

The physicist Brian Swimme says it “comes from the same place that everything comes from. From the same place out of which the primeval fireball comes: an empty realm, a mysterious order of reality—a nothing-ness that is simultaneously the ultimate source of all things.”

In the good old days, the days of Aristotle and Newton, it was simply a matter of cause and effect. In modern physics it is beyond what we can even imagine. It is quantum fluctuation where elementary particles fluctuate in and out of existence. Elementary particles leap into existence, then disappear. A proton emerges suddenly—there it is—where previously it was not.

This is not mass and energy that is transformed into one another, this is something very mysterious. It is as if particles boil into existence out of sheer emptiness. That is the way the universe works. Our understanding of the universe is approaching the ultimate mystery, something that defeats our attempts to probe, investigate, understand. There was no fireball, and then the fireball erupted. The universe erupted; all that has existence erupted out of nothing, all of being erupted into light.

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And at this point we can only exclaim “I praise you, for the universe is fearfully, wonderfully made.”

As awesome the universe is and beyond our understanding, the reality is we cannot understand our own corporal existence. We are more emptiness than substance. Consider for a moment a single atom in your body. There are more atoms in your body than stars in the sky that you could see with the Hubble telescope. But just consider one atom and in your mind make it as large as the front nine at the Delta Golf Course. It would be mostly empty space. The centre of the atom, the nucleus, would be smaller than a golf ball sitting out in the middle of a fairway. The outer parts of the atom would be tiny fleas higher than a par 5 hole is long. And between the fleas and the golf ball? Nothingness. All empty. You are more emptiness than anything else.

If all the space were taken out of you, you would be a million times smaller than the tiniest grain of sand. But it is prayer to consider the emptiness, for all this emptiness is also the source of all being.

And at this point we can only exclaim “I praise you, for I am fearfully, wonderfully made.”

The scripture readings this morning must be heard on knowing the mystery of existence and our own personal existence. Samuel hearing a voice in the emptiness of his room, Jesus telling Nathaniel that he will see angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man, if they are considered literally they are garbage, meaningless but if we hear and know the experience, of our own emptiness and the shortness of our existence then the God encounter is possible and the response of Samuel “Here, I am, send me” is inevitable.

In her book “Teaching a Stone to Talk”, Annie Dillard marvels at the nonchalance of most Christians. ‘On the whole,’ she writes, ‘I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely evoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offence...’

Did you ever consider that this might be a dangerous place to be? Not that we might start a fire with too many candles, but rather in the emptiness God might cry out your name. If that happens, it will not be to boost up your self-esteem, it will be a call to a dangerous life.

Nathaniel was sitting under a fig tree. That is Biblical image that he had it made, he didn’t have to work, his investments were secure, life was good and then Jesus came along and simply said, “follow me.” Dangerous stuff.

This week there will be a new President in the country to the south of us. A saying that names the significance of this event goes like this: “Rosa Parks sat so Martin Luther King could walk. Martin Luther King walked so Obama could run. Obama ran so we can all fly.”

In 1966 Martin Luther King Jr. said this in a sermon, “No individual can live alone, no nation can live alone, and anyone who feels that he can live alone is sleeping through a revolution. The world in which we live is geographically one. The challenge that we face today is to make it one in terms of brotherhood ...

Through our scientific and technological genius, we have made of this world a neighborhood and yet we have not had the ethical commitment to make of it a brotherhood. But somehow, and in some way, we have got to do this. We must all learn to live together as brothers or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way Gods universe is made; this is the way it is structured.”

We are fearfully, wonderfully made. And that vision will not only heal our souls, but also our world. Thanks be to God our maker.