

Starship First Parish
Sunday July 14, 2019

[Questionnaire handout congregation received before service]

Imagine that you are going to leave Earth to venture out to the stars, in search of a habitable planet. You will not be coming back! On Starship First Parish, your physical needs will be supplied. You will be allowed to choose five items to bring—two that are personally meaningful to you and three items from the Earth's treasures that you choose for their cultural or historical value. What would you choose?

And—what belief or attitude of mind from our world would be most important to bring?

My reflection today is on the stars and the special inspiration they can give to any child of Earth who takes a moment at night to look up.

Last week we looked up, to the clouds. Next week we're going further, to the moon. But this week, let's imagine taking a giant step beyond, to the stars! Let's imagine what it would actually be like to leave our Earth, our home, our terroir, the creator of our bodily design, our senses, our molecules, the stuff of ourselves—and find a new home for ourselves, perhaps on an exo-planet around another star.

Today when you came in I gave you a questionnaire, asking you to list items that you would want to take along with you in Starship First Parish. We'll get to that a bit later, but first I'd like to think with you about the fact that we can even imagine leaving planet earth. For you kids—anyone under 50, from my point of view—space travel is a reality, but for human existence up to the point of the moon landing, we were stuck! Here to stay, except for those who believed in some version of Heaven, a place probably in the sky beyond the clouds where the righteous or the saved would live again after death—or after the end of the world—whichever came first.

Emily Dickinson, the great poet who lived in Amherst, Massachusetts during the burst of astronomical knowledge in the 19th century, wrote a poem in 1861 that expressed both the belief in the resurrection of the righteous and an awareness of the tininess of human concerns in the vast universe:

*Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—
Untouched by Morning—
And untouched by Noon—
Lie the meek members of the Resurrection—
Rafters of satin—and roof of Stone!*

*Grand go the Years—in the Crescent—above them—
Worlds scoop their Arcs—
And Firmaments—row—
Diadems—drop—and Doges—surrender—
Soundless as dots—on a disc of Snow—*

The Resurrection--That was the way I thought that I would leave the Earth. In the fundamentalist Christian faith in which I was raised, I believed that any day, tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, the world would end. Christ would appear in the sky and I and the congregation of my church would be swept up in the air, interrupted from perhaps a Sunday service like the one here this morning, and whisked up through the sanctuary roof to Heaven before the battle of Armageddon would destroy the Earth. It would be the end of days.

Now, in Scituate Massachusetts, in the sweet reasonable light of First Parish Unitarian Church, I no longer worry about the Rapture and the destruction of Earth from Armageddon. But I do worry about the destruction of Earth—from nuclear war, from pandemics, and (especially) from climate change. We in this town have seen the Atlantic Ocean advance up our streets in several nor'easters in the past two winters. We hear news of melting ice sheets, of burning forests, of cities filling up with rain. It seems like the last days.

But we believe in science. Science got us into this mess, and science has to get us out of it. We believe in the scientific analysis of our perhaps catastrophic impact on the environment, and we search for the best ways to reverse it. Also, fueled by science's gift of space travel, and by our own imagination when, like Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson, we look up at the stars, we imagine leaving Earth—perhaps escape for a chosen few (like Dickinson's "meek members of the Resurrection")—perhaps to pass on Earth's biological biological and cultural heritage to another site, another planet around another star, one that could give humanity time to change to a sustainable, healthy way of life.

That is the premise of a 2015 novel by Kim Stanley Robinson called *Aurora*. It tells the story of the arrival of the first starship sent out by earth on a planet circling a nearby star, and of the coming of age of Freya, a girl born on the starship. Robinson has Freya describe the expedition:

Two thousand, one hundred twenty-two people are living in a multigenerational starship, headed for Tau Ceti, 11.9 lightyears from Earth. The ship is made of two rings or toruses attached by spokes to a central spine. The spine is 10 kilometers lone. Each torus is made of twelve cylinders. Each cylinder is four kilometers long, and contains within it a particular specific

Terran ecosystem. . . . The ship's voyage has now lasted 159 years and 119 days.

Tau Ceti is a G-type star, a solar analog but not a solar twin, with 78 percent of Sol's mass, 55 percent of its luminosity, and 28 percent of its metallicity.

The twelve cylinders in each of the two toruses of the ship contain ecosystems modeling the twelve major Terran ecological zones, these being permafrost glacier, taiga, rangeland, steppes, chaparral, savannah, tropical seasonal forest, tropical rain forest, temperate rain forest, temperate deciduous forest, alpine mountains, and temperate farmland . . . The ship is carrying populations of as many Terran species as could be practically conveyed. Thus, the ship is a zoo, or a seed bank. Or one could say it is like Noah's Ark.

Author Kim Stanley Robinson builds a believable story of the questing starship and its journey, and of heroine Freya's role in her community's venture. I highly recommend the book, both for the gripping story it tells and for the values it conveys. But now let's think about Starship First Parish. What items did you take with you from Earth? What did you decide was worth preserving?

[Some answers from the congregation:

--a deck of cards to play games with the other folks on the Starship. It's a good way to get to know people and to build community.

--a bicycle to ride around the ship and meet the shipmates.

--the family cats and stuffed animals.

--a Kindle—very high capacity! All recorded literature.

--a photo album

--a set of colored pencils and journals, to write down thoughts, memories, everything

--poetry, because poems mean something different every time you read them

--music, in recorded form and in musical notation. As much as possible of the world's music.

--a piano

--a guitar

--written and recorded records of all the languages of the Earth.

--One person ended with the insight that you really couldn't take anything personal, because all you take would become this world's property.

As to values—openness, communication, tolerance, service, love. One person observed that while some things deserved to be left behind, it was good to remember everything.]

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What value or belief would you promote on the starship?

What would be important to leave behind?

I'd like to close by reading one more poem about stars, by another American poet, Walt Whitman. Finally, he reminds us of the finest gift of the stars—they way they lead us to that greatest of human emotions, wonder.

*When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and
measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much
applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.*

- Lin Haire-Sargeant