

Tell Me a Story

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Ganges, Michigan
September 13, 2009

Today is my last presentation for the 2009 season – my fifth this summer – and I want to express my deep appreciation and gratitude to Tapas and the community that gathers here for the privilege I have been afforded in my retirement to continue to reflect and write and present on subjects that catch my attention and interest – subjects I think are critical for our consideration as we continue to wonder about our human existence and what we are being called to be in this age of Radical Evolution.

Radical Evolution – that is the title of the book by Joel Garreau about which I spoke last time. I can usually discern whether I did well or not by Nancy's response. I think the grade last month was C+ plus grace. As she told me, "The folks that come, come for an 'emotional fix' from you." She did not add the obvious – and you aimed at their heads and missed!

That isn't a new problem for me. Most of my ministry I have been tolerated because my people sort of liked me and put up with me even though I apparently shot over their heads with regularity. But I am not really penitent because I am convinced that the things with which I deal are of critical importance for our human being. I do, however, recognize the necessity of making that with which we deal touch the heart as well as the head. And so let me attempt to portray our human situation in the context of where we have emerged and suggest that the only hope for a human and humane future lies in the love of God which we find incarnate in Jesus.

Let me be clear. I speak as a Christian. I speak as a Christian who loves his faith tradition, who loves and, with his whole being, would follow Jesus. But I speak not in an exclusivistic sense that Jesus is the only exemplar of the Love which is our only hope. Jesus is my window to God, not the only window to God.

I learned that so powerfully one day at the magnificent cathedral at Chartres outside Paris. I led a tour group of a couple dozen and I had been told that an Englishman named Malcomb Miller had lived in the shadow of the cathedral for years and gave a fascinating lecture and tour of the cathedral. We arranged for our group to meet him and his lecture was as good as I had been told. We gathered in the nave. Beautiful stained glass windows were brilliant in the

morning sunshine. Our guide told us something I had never realized – the windows were created to reflect biblical characters and biblical narratives – that was obvious, but then he said, the cathedral was like a town library before the printing press. Here the people were taught the biblical story in visual images. We were then taken through the great cathedral, Malcomb Miller knowing, it seemed, every stone and carving in that high expanse of sacred space – the transepts, the choir, the chancel, the magnificent Rose Window over the altar.

At some point it came to me as a parable. I imagined all the great religious traditions – each religious group gathered before one of the great windows, the window telling its story in stained glass – Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Native Peoples – some in the Nave, some in the Transepts, some in the Choir, the Chancel – each group focused on a particular story – not contradictory stories but complementary stories. And then – as a burst of light – I thought – different stories, but all illuminated by One Light.

I had been probing this whole question. To be sure, I was ready for such an answer but the cathedral image provided me with a story that focused for me the whole question of the universality of the religious quest and the recognition that in each of the great religious traditions there was a common purpose – that the respective stories of the human family address ultimate questions of our beginnings, our endings, and the meaning of the human adventure and how we should then live. In sum, I was and am convinced that in all the great religions there is the mediation of truth and grace to live and die by. It seems so obvious to me at this point in my life.

After that excursus, if I speak of the biblical story and the Love of God that came to expression in Jesus, you will hear me speaking of a particular expression or story in the context of a universal quest.

Last month I spoke of the heady and harrowing place we humans have come at present with the knowledge and techniques we possess – the information explosion with the Internet, robotics, genetics, and nanotechnology, creating amazing, incredible potential for good or ill. All of that was a bit technical perhaps even though what Garreau was portraying as the radical evolution we are engaged with has very practical implications and ramifications: Where does our future lie? Will our further progress lead us to a heavenly world or a hellish world? Or will we just keep on muddling through – will we prevail?

But there is a bigger picture that I want to paint today, to set, as it were, the present moment and crisis in a cosmic context.

In the biblical story, “in the beginning” God calls creation into existence from nothing. Then ensues the story of the temptation and fall of the human being.

For the rest, the biblical story is a story of human sin and divine grace, God providing redemption leading to the original purpose of God – the creation of a new heaven and earth and the Shalom of God emerging, the darkness being banished.

That story – and it is a story which our ancestors told to make sense of the human situation as they experienced it – that story reflected some profound understanding of the human, historical situation –

The cosmos does not ground itself but is grounded in that which calls it into being.

And the human being is in the image of God, always before the decision to choose wisely or destructively – and it is universally true that humans fail in the test. Human test, human failure, human guilt, and human hope for redemption. Somehow that is all involved in those early Genesis stories or myths.

But that story of beginning and human unfolding, while still appreciated for what was being wrestled with, no longer can be our story because our knowledge and understanding of the cosmos, of the evolutionary unfolding of the cosmic reality – the movement from Big Bang to the present – tells us an amazing tale that makes the Genesis account pale in comparison. It is a mind-boggling account that has only been available to us for a little over a century.

In Joel Garreau's *Radical Evolution*, which portrays for us where we are in terms of what is presently within human capacity, he makes an obvious statement, but a statement that should give us pause as religious people with our respective stories. Garreau declares, "Right now the stories we tell do not match the facts." (p. 264)

One of the truly great and visionary thinkers, who as a scientist had penetrating knowledge of and insight into the natural order and who simultaneously was concerned to relate that knowledge to his Christian faith understanding, was Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. A leading paleontologist whose scientific credentials were unquestioned, he was also a devout Roman Catholic belonging to the Jesuit Society. In his most important work, *The Phenomenon of Man*, Teilhard created a new story, a story based on the best scientific knowledge, an amazing intuitive gift of imagination and a profound faith in God as Source, Ground and Goal of the unfolding cosmic process. In a few paragraphs from Wikipedia, his teaching as it came to expression in his posthumously published magnum opus is summarized:

...Teilhard writes of the unfolding of the material cosmos, from primordial particles to the development of life, human beings and the noosphere,

and finally to his vision of the Omega Point in the future, which is “pulling” all creation towards it. He was a leading proponent of orthogenesis, the idea that evolution occurs in a directional, goal-driven way. To Teilhard, evolution unfolded from cell to organism to planet to solar system and whole-universe (see Gaia theory). Such theories are generally termed teleological views of evolution.

Teilhard attempts to make sense of the universe by its evolutionary process. He interprets mankind as the axis of evolution into higher consciousness, and postulates that a supreme consciousness, God, must be drawing the universe towards him...

Teilhard studied what he called the rise of spirit, or evolution of consciousness, in the universe. He believed it to be observable and verifiable in a simple law he called the Law of Complexity/Consciousness. This law simply states that there is an inherent compulsion in matter to arrange itself in more complex groupings, exhibiting higher levels of consciousness. The more complex the matter, the more conscious it is. Teilhard proposed that this is a better way to describe the evolution of life on earth, rather than Herbert Spencer’s “survival of the fittest.” The universe, he argued, strives towards higher consciousness, and does so by arranging itself into more complex structures.

Teilhard identified what he termed to be different stages in the rise of consciousness. These stages are analogous to what are termed the geosphere and the biosphere. The Law of Complexity/Consciousness traces matter’s path through these stages, as it ‘complexifies’ upon itself and rises in consciousness. Teilhard claimed that, although it is not evident, consciousness (in an extremely limited degree) exists even in rocks, as the Law of Complexity/Consciousness implies. In plants, matter is complex enough to exhibit a consciousness that is the very life of the plant. In animals, matter is conscious enough to an extraordinary degree to where consciousness shows itself in a wide range of reactionary movement to the whole universe.

However, Teilhard here proposed another level of consciousness, to which human beings belong, because of their cognitive ability; i.e. their ability to ‘think’. Human beings, Teilhard argued, represent the layer of consciousness which has “folded back in upon itself”, and has become self-conscious. Julian Huxley, Teilhard’s scientific colleague, described it like this: “evolution is nothing but matter become conscious of itself.”

So, in addition to the geosphere and the biosphere, Teilhard posited another sphere, which is the realm of human beings, the realm of reflective thought: the noosphere.

In the noosphere Teilhard believed the same Law of Complexity/Consciousness to be at work, although not in a way previously seen. He argued that, ever since human beings first came into existence 200,000 years ago, the Law of Complexity/Consciousness began to run on a different (higher) plane. Consciousness in the universe, he argued, now continues to rise in the complex arrangement and unification (Teilhard sometimes called it 'totalization' of mankind on earth.) As human beings converge around the earth, he reasoned, unifying themselves in ever more complex forms of arrangement, consciousness will rise.

Finally, the keystone to his phenomenology is that, because Teilhard could not explain why the universe would move in the direction of more complex arrangements and higher consciousness, he postulated that there must exist ahead of the moving universe, and pulling it along, a higher pole of supreme consciousness, which he called Omega Point.

This is an amazing vision. An evolving, emerging cosmic reality from primordial particles to the development of life, human beings with conscious awareness, an envelope of mind/intelligence/consciousness being "pulled" toward the Omega Point. He believed evolution occurs in a directional, goal-driven way. "To Teilhard, evolution unfolded from cell to organism to planet to solar system and whole universe"—and God is drawing the universe toward Him.

Now there is a new story. It is a story as Genesis is a story, but there is this difference. Genesis is an ancient story of an ancient people asking deeply human questions and the story reflects some deep truths or experiences which the writer brought to expression. Teilhard, too, composed a story reflective of a deep faith in God – Creator/Source/Ground and Goal of the whole process, but his story takes account of all available knowledge of our cosmic journey as the secrets of the universe have been laid bare through scientific investigation.

The hard evidence of science is gathered and the grand evolutionary movement of reality is analyzed. But, of course, that evidence cannot answer the question of the mystery of beginnings nor the mystery of the end. There the believing man expresses his faith that this cosmic dance is not an accident, or simply a random unfolding of a meaningless cosmic phenomenon along whose unfolding has appeared life, consciousness, and the human being who – as Garreau suggests – is seizing the keys of creation and beginning to determine its future course.

I must say I was enthralled with Teilhard's *The Phenomenon of Man*. Written in 1938, he was anticipating the very kinds of developments Garreau tells us in his *Radical Evolution* are now within our reach. The work was not published until 1955 because Teilhard was forbidden by the Roman Catholic hierarchy to publish his work during his life and, being obedient to his Jesuit vows of obedience, he did not. Posthumously his manuscripts were published and it is amazing how far-seeing was his vision before the actual scientific data was known.

Over fifty years after Teilhard's grand imaginative story, Gordon Kaufman, Professor of Divinity at Harvard University, wrote *In Face of Mystery* (1993) and as I revisit that study I am amazed that what Kaufman reflects on was already envisioned by Teilhard. Kaufman writes,

...the traditional notion that God works through all of cosmic history – and is working in human history in particular toward the creation of a thoroughly humane order (that is, toward human salvation) – now becomes understood in terms of the modern notion of the evolutionary-historical process within which humanity has emerged and developed: the serendipitous creativity underlying and working through all reality is expressing itself here (over many aeons of time) in a trajectory toward human and humane orders of being. In a slow, long-term development of this sort the direction in which things are moving may, of course, remain unclear for a very long time. Not until a stage of considerable differentiation and specification has been reached is it possible to imagine, or make judgments about, what is really happening; and even then many quite diverse possibilities remain open. But each new stage of the ongoing biohistorical process specifies a bit more precisely what directions the movement is going and what outcomes may be expected, as some possibilities are cut off and eliminated, and others are opened up and increasingly realized; and there may come a moment of decisive “revelation” of what is going on in the process as a whole.

Thus, for example, at the moment of cosmic time in which the earth was gradually cooling and solidifying from the ball of fire it had earlier been, there would have been no way to anticipate or predict that in due course it would become a womb and home for living creatures. Later on, when living organisms began to appear in the sea, it would hardly have been possible to guess that they would eventually evolve into myriads of species of life – birds, insects, animals, plants with infinite varieties of flowers and fruits, and so on. Even with the appearance of mammals it could hardly have been suspected that anthropoids would appear further down the road. And with the emergence of fully formed *Homo* there was

still no sufficient basis to foresee the development of ancient Egypt, Babylon, India, China, Greece, or Rome – and certainly not the various forms of modern civilization. However, if from the vantage point of modern humanity we look back over this long cumulation of events, we may begin to discern what appears to be a more or less continuous line of development up to the present. It is striking to realize that this line was not visible until the last half of the nineteenth century; before that (even one hundred years earlier), it could not be seen at all. It seems, thus, that with a trajectory of this sort what is going on is by no means evident at all points along the way; the events which give it its distinct character and significance become determinate only in the course of the process itself. Only as certain crucial thresholds were crossed did new possibilities appear and in due course become realized; and only after many such decisive thresholds were crossed did beings appear with a vantage point enabling them to see that it was possible to interpret this whole development as somehow implicit from the beginning. One speaks of a “process of development” when one can specify certain points or stages through which a particular trajectory has proceeded, the process as a whole being marked off and defined by some (at least implicit) beginning and end. “End” and “beginning” and “process of development” are thus all logically interconnected with one another; they illuminate and determine one another conceptually, and no one of them can be clearly understood – as the “end” or the “beginning” of “this particular process” – without the others. Because of these conceptual interconnections we are inclined to think of the end of a particular process of development as implicit from its beginning; and if it happens to be the process of our own development into humanness that we are considering, it will be of importance to us to attempt to see, on the basis of the direction it seems to have followed up to the point at which we humans now find ourselves, where it may be going. (p. 386f)

Where are we going? That is the critical question and to what degree will we move the process toward the realization of a humane community of love and experience union and communion with God – the vision that captivated Teilhard?

On Friday we remembered 9/11. That date has been imprinted indelibly on our minds and hearts. A writer who for twenty years wrote science musings for the *Boston Globe*, Chet Raymo, wrote a piece in the wake of that horrendous event. He entitled it “The Problem of Good,” and after beautifully describing a celestial scene as he gazed upon the heavens, he raises the question in the third paragraph: “Why must human violence disturb nature’s peace? But on second thought he writes,

...But, of course, I had it exactly backwards.

It is nature that is violent. Astronomers point out how few places in the universe are sufficiently calm for life to exist. Massive black holes at the centers of galaxies gobble gas and stars. In the arms of galaxies, suns explode with a violence that shatters surrounding worlds. Comets and asteroids smash into planets. Galaxies collide...

We now understand that violence and death are corollaries of life. To persist, living creatures must take matter and energy from their environment. As life proliferates, competition for resources becomes inevitable. Aggression is advantageous, even necessary. Genetic variations that confer a competitive advantage are favored in the struggle to survive. If nature were not cruel, conscious creatures such as ourselves would never have evolved.

It is as Loren Eisely wrote: "Instability lies at the heart of the world." The criminals who wreaked havoc on New York and Washington were acting out an ancient biological script.

Yet there is ground for hope. Our brains are of sufficient complexity to give rise to that mysterious thing known as self-awareness. Our genes may predispose us to act in certain ways, good or bad, but they do not constrain us. We are effectively free to choose good over evil. Humans alone, of all the things we know about in the universe, can escape the bipolar logic of evolution.

To a cheering extent we have done so. As Margaret Meade pointed out, the circle of those whom we do not kill has steadily expanded throughout human history. The optimists among us imagine that the circle will ultimately embrace the entire planet.

From nature's point of view, there is no such thing as the Problem of Evil: order and disorder, life and death, cooperation and competition are the twin principles of nature's creative force. What humans uniquely face is the Problem of Good: How to create on this tiny planet an oasis of unalloyed peace.

"The Problem of Good." I was struck by that phrase. I don't think I had ever run into it; I had never heard it spoken – the problem of good. I have heard a lot about the problem of evil, of course. The problem of evil is a constant focus of attention for our time. The problem of evil is portrayed for us and documented for us 24-7, with the ceaseless coverage of the world by the cable news networks. We are constantly facing the evil and the tragedy in the world. But what about the good? As Chet Raymo suggests, evil, violence and war are not

the whole story. There are signs of growing humanization. The problem of good is “to create on this tiny planet an oasis of unalloyed peace.”

In two places in the New Testament occurs a brief statement I have come to greatly value. The statement is,

No one has ever seen God...

It occurs in John 1:1-18 and I John 4:12. The consensus of scholarship locates the origin of both the *Gospel of John* and the *Epistles of John* in *Ephesus*, *The Gospel*, the earlier document dated in the 90's of the first century. The *Epistles* are usually assigned a date around 100 C.E. This is only of interest to us because this means the Jesus Movement that was becoming the Christian church had, by the time of these writings, three generations of believers and enough time for questions and conflicts to arise.

Coming to these statements from my own faith understanding, I see the statement “No one has ever seen God” as an acknowledgement of Mystery. Interestingly, *The Gospel* begins,

In the beginning was the Word....

Word in the Greek language being *Logos*, the term used to express reason. So we are dealing with the subject of the revelation of God who can only be spoken of mythologically, but the Christian myth here being described claims to be about the Logos: myths about Logos as it were!

Of course, my claim will be challenged because Jesus was a concrete figure of history and the writer claims precisely that the Logos was enfleshed in the human, Jesus of Nazareth. This is exactly the claim the writer makes after the acknowledgement that no one has ever seen God. He goes on:

It is God the only Son...who has made him known.

This is the explicit claim of the central Christian claim of Incarnation: The Word became flesh! The mystery of the God no one has ever seen has now a “face” and therein lies the clue to the mystery of God. Jesus is the epiphany (manifestation) of God.

The *First Epistle of John* has as its central thrust the Incarnation as well. Its opening words make that clear:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.

But I am fascinated by what I judge to be a further development of the idea of incarnation. In the *First Epistle*, following “No one has ever seen God,” we read:

If we love one another God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

A bit later, the writer underscores that claim:

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. (vs. 16)

Has not the author of the *Epistle* expanded on the idea of Incarnation? Now it is not only the luminosity of the divine enfleshment in Jesus as the locus of revelation; rather what came to expression in Jesus has expanded to the community of love.

In sum, the Johannine Community believed God is love, a love that found concretion in the human being, Jesus, as the revelation of the mystery of love, a revelation that came to expression in the life of Jesus of Nazareth or, as I like to express it – in *The Way of Jesus*. (Just a reminder of where we began – for the Christian community Jesus is a window into the mystery, but not exclusively so.)

Teilhard had a grand vision – the evolution of the cosmos– in which has emerged, after 13.7 billion years, a human being with self-consciousness and intelligence, an evolutionary reality grounded in a Creator and being “pulled” into the future toward the Omega Point – the total unification of personalized reality in God. Gordon Kaufman remarks that, in agreement with Teilhard, there is no reason to assume the evolutionary process has reached its end; the process continues. Chet Raymo is shaken by human violence after 9/11, but on deeper reflection sees the violent course of the cosmic evolutionary drama but recognizes the issue before us is the problem of good. Kaufman asks where are we going? Raymo suggests the problem of good is to create “on this tiny planet an oasis of unalloyed peace.”

Only love can create a global community of wellbeing. Only non-violent resistance to evil and tangible expression of love in action can save us. For us, it is not a problem of evil, it is a problem of good. It is a problem of finding a way to make the good predominate. It is a way with our consciousness whereby we can become self-aware and resist that native move to violent response. And, good grief, we have come a long way. We do care for the weak. We do recognize the call to compassion. We do care, not only for our own, but we

recognize the intrinsic value of humanness. We have come a long way. And yet, collectively, we still live in tribal culture.

For us it is the problem of the good. There is no reality apart from the reality in which we are woven, and the reality into which we are woven is the externalization of the Infinite Mystery that is God, Spirit externalizing, Spirit incarnating, and that which is incarnate becoming conscious of Spirit so that that which becomes incarnate and conscious says, "I don't have to go any longer in this native course, this natural course, this ordinary human kind of response. I can stop. I can become aware of myself. I can recognize that what is necessary is not to perpetuate the hell on earth, but at some point to stop it."

Jesus knew that. Jesus actively resisted the domination system of his day. Jesus was crucified because the old system will always rise up violently, because the old system believes that what is at stake is survival. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." They knew what they were doing. They were surviving. They were surviving, if need be, by violence. But, they didn't ultimately, not in the long run, for violence begets violence...

It is a self-creating universe and it is violent and it is brutal, and there is no one out there tweaking the system. But, that self-creating universe has come to the likes of you and me who have had a taste of decency, who know a thing or two about civility, who know that the intention of God that became human was an intention that that human might learn to love, for God is love, and the one who dwells in love dwells in God, and God dwells in that one. So that the Infinite Mystery that is love becomes concrete and tangible in that interrelationship of love, person to person. In that relationship of love, person to person, that native response to violence is undercut. It is possible to come to a point, if there were a critical mass living thus, that the world could be changed.

There was a Trappist monk in Algeria, a Prior of the monastery there. Algeria has been one of those hot spots of Islamic fundamentalism conflicting with the government. Sensing the dangers around him, Dom Christian de Cherge, Prior of the Trappist monastery, had written a letter which was sealed and to be opened only in the case of his murder. Two years later, in 1996, seven Trappist monks were beheaded. The letter was opened on the day of Pentecost after the prior's death. In the letter, de Cherge indicated that if he were killed, he didn't want any reaction against Islam or a caricaturing of Islam. Committed as he was to interreligious dialogue, he indicated he had remained in Algeria as a fraternal presence. He concluded the letter by saying that some day he and his murderer would both meet in paradise before the God they both worshiped.

So, a man anticipates a violent end and he writes a letter just in case, and when it happens, he says, "Please don't retaliate. Please don't damn the enemy."

Because he's not my enemy. He is my brother, and he who murders me will stand with me one day in the presence of God." Now, you figure that one out and you will have the formula for quite a different world.

Some years ago there was a film that moved me greatly. It was called *Places of the Heart*. Perhaps you saw it. A rural Texas farmer is murdered. His widow is left with a crop to harvest. A black man comes through town looking for work. She hires him. She boards a blind man. Between them, they struggle and they harvest the crop and they save the farm, only to see the Ku Klux Klan move in and drive the black man away with their burning cross in the yard. And one's heart sinks and one has to say, "That's always the way it is!" But, the film then moves off into an ethereal future and there's a church service in that little rural community. And there's the man who was murdered and the man who murdered him. There's the bully of the Ku Klux Klan and the black man and the widow and the blind man. And they pass the bread and the cup down the row with the words, "The peace of Christ be with you."

And at first I wondered if the filmmaker was mocking the communion of the church as though one thing goes on out there and then we come here as though it isn't true, but I think, rather, since the passage that was read in the service was I Corinthians 13, he was saying, "Now – but then. Then, finally, love's vulnerability will triumph over all of our selfishness and our self-centeredness and our failure to care, our violent ways that beget violence. Only love has the power to change us. Only love can create a cosmic future. Someday love will!"

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