

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario

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Rev. Dr. David Thompson

OUR COMMON QUEST

WHO ARE WE? WHAT HAVE WE BECOME? WHAT ARE WE ALL SEARCHING FOR?

From the Christian New Testament: "I shall make the earth shake once more and not only the earth but Heaven as well the things being shaken are created things, they are going to be changed, so that the unshakeable things will be left." Hebrews

At 5:29 am and 45 seconds on July 16, 1945 the world as we know it changed irrevocably. It changed in a white blaze that stretched from the basin of the Jemez Mountains in northern New Mexico up to the still-dark skies. An atom bomb called, "The Gadget" ushered in the Atomic Age. The light of the explosion then turned orange as the atomic fireball began shooting upwards at 360 feet per second, reddening and pulsing as it cooled. The characteristic mushroom cloud of radioactive vapor materialized at 30,000 feet. Beneath the cloud, all that remained of the soil at the blast site were fragments of jade green radioactive glass created by the heat of the reaction. The brilliant light from the detonation pierced the early morning skies with such intensity that even a blind girl saw the flash 120 miles away. It was as if two suns came up that day. Upon witnessing the explosion, its creators had mixed reactions. Isidor Rabi felt that the equilibrium in nature had been upset as if humankind had become a threat to the world it inhabited.

The age-old questions took on a new relevance.

Who are we? What have we become? What are we searching for?

Robert Oppenheimer, though ecstatic about the success of the project, quoted a remembered fragment from the Bhagavad-Gita. "I am become Death," he said, "the destroyer of worlds. "

I was listening on the radio to the latest scientific theory on the development of life. According to this theory, originally there was a primeval cosmic soup of life. Life all cooperated together. Between cells gene sharing was going on. Then at some point there was a change. Suddenly gene sharing only went on between like cells. Out of that came species development; and out of that competition; and out of competition came the survival of the fittest. And this has gone on for eons.

But in our day another cosmic shift is going on. Gene sharing is taking place again, but this time it is being engineered by humans. Plants are being modified, tiny perfect human kidneys are being grown in mice, and cows may soon be producing human livers. With the mapping of the genome in primates we have discovered that chimpanzees have all of our genetic- material some 97% of it in fact. We have an additional 3% that the chimp does not have.

Scientists say the differences between apes and humans is rather like a color spectrum between blue and green. At what point do we say this is blue and this is green except at either end? In between we are blue/ green. This is similar in human evolution. When are we human in terms of evolution? When did we stop being chimps and start being human? Who are we?

Contrast these questions with the Adam and Eve story found in the Bible. This story began its life as a transcendent myth/parable. The name Adam means 'mankind' and Eve mean 'womankind.' Mankind and womankind were placed in Eden. The story is a truth teaching parable, complete with a talking snake. Soon afterwards, and until we knew differently in the last century, it was taken in the Western world as history. Then Biblical scholarship and paleontology showed that it could only be taken as originally intended as a story to explain who we were. The Jewish community sees it today not as a story about original sin, but as a story about avoiding responsibility. And it has, as Joseph Campbell so eloquently pointed out, so much more power as myth, because myth transcends history and is still relevant to us today.

Its original understanding was that we were made of dust (stardust if you like) and that the Creator formed us from dust as male and female. The story has a tale of a beautiful

relationship between nature, mankind and God. God walked with the pair in the Garden of Eden at the cool of the day.

The myth said that we were creatures of God in harmony with God and nature. But then everything changed when the talking snake seduced Eve, who in turn seduced Adam away from God. A curse was placed upon creation and the couple was banished from the garden. Everything suddenly became harder. Sweat and toil were introduced. The task in life was to find a way to recover a relationship with God and creation. That was the common quest according to the old creation myth.

Who were we then? Children of God. God was our Creator; Father/ Mother in whose image we were made. We were special beings given dominion over other parts of creation. But according to the myth we have trashed that role and have been in recovery ever afterwards.

But who are we today? We live now in the time after nuclear fission and the mapping of the Genome, allowing us to control many things that we did not control before.

Paul Tillich the Great German Theologian writing in 1948 after the bombs had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki said: "But out of the fertile soil of the earth a being was generated and nourished, who was able to find the key to the foundation of all beings. That being was man. He has discovered the key which can unlock the forces of the ground, those forces which were bound when the foundations of the earth were laid. He has begun to use this key. He has subjected the basis of life and thought and will to his will. And he willed destruction. For the sake of destruction, he used the forces of the ground; by his thought and his work he unlocked and untied them. That is why the foundations of the earth rock and shake in our time."

Who are we today? We find ourselves in a greater mystery than ever before. There are no longer easy answers. Today we are on a common quest to understand ourselves, the universe, and the nature of God and whether a Divine Quest to know God is even possible.

At the same time across the whole world, there is a coming together. The power of social networks is changing everything. We are discovering a common unity. Democracy is now a part of the common world quest. Think Hong Kong.

The meaning of things is now a common quest. Nature is now a common quest: as Richard Louv writes in his nature principle: Every day, our relationship with nature, or the lack of it, influences our lives. This has always been true. But in the 21st century, our survival-or thrival-will require a transformative framework for that relationship, a reunion of humans with the rest of nature."

Ask Greta Thunberg.

Science and religions are coming together. There is now a religious awe in science. The universe is so amazing as we discover its complexity. Micro worlds amaze us as do the furthest reaches of the universe which hold the possibility of life on planets similar to ours just discovered recently.

Our technology is breathtaking, sending us clear accurate pictures from space invisibly through the atmosphere and yet showing up on our computer screens in vivid detail and colors. We are living in a magical world full of wonders.

We are involved now in the very real possibility that we can create life and may even be able soon to reverse the aging process. In fact, anything now seems to be possible- both wonderful things and dark frightening things. The power to choose good over evil is now truly awesome. As the serpent said to Eve: "You will not die. God knows in fact that on the day you eat it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like Gods knowing good and evil.'

Never before has there been such a time of shaking of the foundations. Never before such knowledge of good and evil.

So, what is the point of life?

I think that it is to learn what is the Good and then to choose it steadily.

Life is not a destination, it is rather a journey, and who we are and who we become, gets defined on that journey. I think that ethical choices come, in deciding what we will do and what we will refuse to do, and that must increasingly become our common quest. Gone are the days of rugged individualism or rogue states. Now that we have nuclear weapons, we all, from the most stable governments to the most irrational terrorists, we all must decide who we are. Are Tillich's words to become the epitaph of mankind?

Have we subjected the basis of life and thought to do our will and that will was destruction? Is that what we have become? Destroyers of worlds?

Or are we going to come together as a world and save the planet for future generations? Are we to rediscover Eden and walk with the Creator in the cool of the day, loving God and each other without conditions? Can we rediscover the radiance of all things?

Joseph Campbell was interviewed once by Bill Moyers.

CAMPBELL: As Durkheim says, "When you're on a journey, and the end keeps getting further and further away, then you realize that the real end is the journey."

The Navaho have that wonderful image of what they call the pollen path. Pollen is the life source; The pollen path is the path to the center. The Navaho say, "Oh, beauty before me, beauty behind me, beauty to the right of me, beauty to the left of me, beauty above me, beauty below me, I'm on the pollen path,"

MOYERS: Eden was not, Eden will be?

CAMPBELL: Eden is. "The kingdom of the Father is spread upon the earth, and men do not see it."

MOYERS: Eden is – in this world of pain and suffering and death and violence?

CAMPBELL: That is the way it feels, but this is it, this is Eden. When you see the kingdom spread upon the earth, the old way of living in the world is annihilated. That is the end of the world.

The end of the world is not an event to come, it is an event of psychological transformation, of visionary transformation. You see not the world of solid things but a world of radiance."

The scene was a village of refugees called Cantula in Guatemala. The women and children were alone that Tuesday as their men had gone to work on the corn and bean crops higher up the mountain. There had been a massacre there eight years ago, the Paramilitary had burned down all the homes, cutting down fruit trees and burning crops and the villagers had fled.

One day the villagers decided to return and rebuild. After 8 months of peace they thought they might be safe. They had painted a sign at the edge of the village which said, "Work for peace". But the rains had not come, and the food supply was diminished to one week's supply of rice and beans.

Suddenly young Jose who had been playing outside ran in to his mother; "Mother the black men are coming."

Concepcion, his mother, grabbed her two children and ran to her neighbor's homes calling to the women. "Come quickly. Tell the others. Their eyes widened with fear, but they listened. Concepcion could tell that they wanted to run and hide as they had done before uselessly 8 years ago.

By now the soldiers with blackened faces were inside the settlement outside the town office. The women linked hands together, feeling the fear in each other's damp skin. With the children clinging to their skirts they surrounded the soldiers. The soldiers were confused and uneasy.

Concepcion in telling her story to an International observer said: "The air was heavy with possibility. The guns were loaded. The commands were waiting to be barked out."

The leader looked around and said: "You hate us, but we work for peace."

"Peace?" Concepcion exploded. "What do your blacked faces and your guns have to do with peace?"

Concepcion paused and then spoke of family, of seeds pushed gently into Mother earth. She spoke of waiting and hope. And one of the soldiers tall and very young began to cry. Slowly, all the soldiers lowered their weapons to the ground. Then silently they left. Concepcion said to the observer: "Years ago they would have come, and we would all be hiding, helpless. Concepcion then looked away into the distance: "Who knows? In my heart I see a day when our circle will include Mayan women, children, men, people from all across the world and also... here she paused briefly, "and also those wounded, wounded ones who carry the weapons."

Concepcion had understood the common quest; of a return to a relationship with each other, with nature and with the One who walks in the garden of this Earth Eden in the cool of the day.

Who are we? What have we become? What are we searching for?

Frances Key wrote: "If we lift our eyes to the moon, the stars and sun; then might we hear the ancient truth- in spirit we are one."

The Bible says, "There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God over all, in all and through all, in whom we live and move and have our being."

When we Christians across the world celebrate World Communion we hold in trust for the world and for those who do not believe, the common quest: To love the lord our God with our whole heart and mind and strength and our neighbor as ourselves.

When we do that for ourselves, and do it in trust for others, we discover who we are: creatures made in the image of God. That is who we really are. That is who we can become.

For what we are all searching for is the Creator God, in whom we all live and move and have our being.

Amen.