

**EMBRACING DIVERSITY**  
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I'd like to thank Michael Wisniewski, Dr. Tracy Leskey and the Equal Opportunity Employment committee for inviting me to address this world-class group of scientists who labor to protect and preserve the diversity of fruits. The first thing I want to say is: I love all fruits. We need more fruit. Heaven only knows we have enough nuts, especially religious nuts. By the time this talk is over you may think I'm one.

For the past 40 years it's been my privilege to serve the Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church which includes world-class scientists like Michael Wisniewski, Tim Artlip and Than Hitt plus environmentalists like Ed Zahniser, Mark Madison and Mary Anne Hitt director of the Sierra Club Beyond Coal Campaign. The congregation includes agnostics, atheists, anti-theists, non-theists, pantheists, pagans, democrats, republicans, libertarians, practicing Jews, practicing Buddhists, and practicing Unitarians although I have no idea what Unitarians actually practice.

And, oh yes, we've also got a few Christians though I often tell them to shut up about it. Christian is a better adjective than a noun in my book. Let someone else call you Christian, I tell them. (And by the way, heaven and hell are better adjectives than nouns as well.)

The Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church wasn't always so religiously diverse. It helps, I think, that the minister himself is an agnostic with a chip on his shoulder about organized religion.

This diversity has come about, in part, due to a dramatic paradigm shift, by a reframing of scriptural tradition, by taking the Bible seriously but not literally, by saying out loud and often that gays and lesbian are beloved children of God, and by having the children of the church sing happy birthday to Charles Darwin on the occasion of his 200<sup>th</sup> birthday. We may be the only church on the planet that's ever done that.

Charles Darwin is a saint in my book. He helped me see the world as stupendously diverse yet one.

In 2010 in the wake of a certain Christian minister publicly burning the Koran and inflaming Islamophobia in this country, I visited the imam at the Western Maryland Islamic Society in Hagerstown. I invited him and his congregation to the Presbyterian Meeting House so we could publicly embrace each other figuratively and literally. Our Meeting House was full that night—including many Muslims.

The following year, after several high profile gay beatings and gay suicides we decided to publicly embrace and celebrate the LGBTQ community. The Meeting House was full that night as well.

Neither the congregation nor I got to embracing and celebrating diversity overnight. I evolved. We evolved gradually.

I was raised as a born-again Christian by working class parents. I was taught that blacks were cursed by God to be slaves to whites, gays were an abomination unto the Lord, evolution was a lie, and that only born again Christians like us would go to heaven. I was shown specific verses in the Bible to prove it.

But education is a powerful thing. I graduated from a liberal arts college in 1969 with a BA in philosophy. I learned to ask questions.

In 1978 I read *Lives of a Cell* by Lewis Thomas and last week I finished reading *Undeniable: Evolution and the Science of Creation* by Bill Nye and *Beyond Nature: A Politic for the Anthropocene* by Jedediah Purdy. I've read many scientific works in between. I consider the Big Bang, the 13.5 billion year cosmic expansion and the 4.5 billion years of planetary evolution as simply glorious, breath-taking and full of mystery.

I believe in creation but I'm not a creationist. I happen to see Genesis way differently, through an entirely different paradigm and I don't mind saying so and proclaiming it every chance I get.

And that brings me to that paradigm shift.

I'd like to pause here and ask each of you to shift your position by moving to a different chair. {Wait.} I'm guessing that was a little uncomfortable. But that's what it takes sometimes to see things differently as Thomas Kuhn stated in his (1962) book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

I'd like to spend the rest of my time reframing some of the most problematic scriptural texts for a scientific mind—specifically, the first 11 chapters of Genesis. You will see they are not what fundamentalists and certain evangelicals have claimed and hoisted on school boards all across this country.

I and many others see the seven-day creation story in Genesis 1 as a mythic poem. It's a myth—not in the sense of false but in the sense of something that never was but always is. In it the Great Ancestors—using seven days as a poetic device—proclaim that the natural world is blessed and was blessed long before humankind appeared. It's more of "scientific discovery" than a divine revelation.

*Behold it is good* is the refrain resounding through each day including the 6th when animals, including the human animal emerges. Unlike orthodox Christianity, I don't believe in original sin. I believe in original blessing.

The Great Ancestors believed the world is good. Not perfect, or complete, but good. But they weren't fools. They could see that all is not good in this world. Somebody messed up and guess what, it wasn't the plants or beasts. So, who's responsible and why?

And that brings us to a carefully crafted set of folktales that follow immediately upon the mythic poem of the blessed creation. These tales will collectively portray the condition and predicament of being human.

The story of Adam's rib in Genesis 2 is the first folktale in the series. Out of the mud, the creator like a potter fashions Adam, meaning earthling. "Adam" derives from the word soil. Adam was neither male nor female. The creator sees that the earthling is terribly alone and lonely. And unlike the preceding creation myth, we hear for the first time: this is NOT good.

So the creator quickly makes every animal in the world and brings them before the earthling like some grand zoological parade. Adam gives names to all the animals but a suitable soul mate was not found.

So the creator puts the earthling into a deep sleep, removes a rib from beside its heart and fashions a woman, one akin to the other who is now a man. WOW says the awakened and aroused man. At last! Flesh of my flesh; bone of my bone. This story accentuates similarity, not difference.

For two thousand years the church subverted that story to sanction heterosexual marriage and prohibit same-sex marriage. But that's now how I see the folktale. To me it portrays the primal human longing for intimate companionship, other sex or not.

So now we have Adam and Eve in a blissful garden full of luscious fruit trees. What more could they want? And then along comes a serpent.

The serpent entices the human animal to defy God's order to not eat the forbidden fruit of knowledge. But the serpent says: *Go ahead. Take it and you will be like gods.* Eve reached, grasped and ate the forbidden fruit.

This is no fall from grace or perfection. This portrays the rise of human consciousness and our insatiable thirst for knowledge that not even the gods can stop. Humans have god like powers to create and destroy.

And that brings us to the tale of Adam and Eve's first children. Cain and Abel. Cain killed Abel because Cain felt treated unjustly. As it turns out, the urge for revenge is at the core of the human condition. Unresolved anger leads to murder even mass murder. We kill our own brothers and sisters! This folktale suggests that all humans are capable of great good and great evil. No exceptions.

Then comes the story of Noah and the great flood in Genesis 8. It's black humor for God sees that human beings are violent all day long and vows to kill them all and start all over. We all know that feeling. If only we could wipe out ISIS or all the creationists!

After the destruction, God repents. God in this tale is a projection, a personification of our own urge to kill all the bad guys so the world can be saved. A rainbow appears at the end as if to say: violence cannot end violence; another way must be found.

This sequence of folktales in Genesis 1-11 ends with the tower of Babel. It employs the Babylonian ziggurat as an icon of human ingenuity, a prototype of the scientific enterprise.

As the story goes, once upon a time all people spoke one language. Clearly that's not true. But, then, this is a folk tale.

The human ones gather in one place and conspire to build a tower into the heavens to dethrone the gods. The gods come down to take a look.

*Look what these humans can do when they cooperate. Let's confuse their tongues so they won't understand each other ever again.*

And thus diverse and baffling languages are created to thwart cooperation. That's not how languages developed, of course. This is truth of a different order. That story ends with one of the saddest verses in the Bible. *And so the humans left off building the city.*

And there ends the Great Ancestors' series of folk tales which I take to be an early and accurate, nearly "scientific" diagnosis of the universal human condition. Namely, this astoundingly ingenious, revenge prone human family is fractured into warring tribes, fearful of "the other." Sound familiar?

The mythic prelude is over and now we enter history.

The story of Abraham, a particular human being from a particular time and tribe, begins in Genesis 12. Abraham discovers a radical notion in his heart, a promise of sorts that he and his children will find a way to bless all families and tribes of the world, to rebuild that city where all can dwell in peace as one universal family.

It's a vision seemingly forever out of reach, our reach exceeding our grasp.

I believe that little peculiar moment in Hebrew scripture reflects a quantum leap in the evolution of the human brain and consciousness. And it's reflected in all great religious and ethical tradition at nearly the same time—600 BCE—in what is called "the axial period." 2700 years ago. In evolutionary time, just yesterday

The Golden Rule suddenly appeared in all traditions. And that's a hint within evolution of a new possibility, the promise of universal kinship. And that I believe is the antidote to dualism, us against them, manifested in the pathological dualism of ISIS and its ilk.

Getting to universal kinship is anything but easy given millennia of tribalism and our fight or flight instincts inherited from our animal predecessors. But I am a hopeful realist. After all, we are still a very young species. Plankton and salamanders had a big head start.

As many have observed, cultural evolution, and that includes religion and science, now seems to have over taken biological evolution at least for the moment. But progress is not inevitable. Choices must be made.

Every tradition, including the scientific one, embodies compassion. If we're looking for it, we will find it. Darwin saw love at work in the natural world and said so often. You know better than most people that the natural world cannot thrive, let alone survive, without diversity and cooperation. Nor can we. Let's embrace and celebrate universal kinship of the earth and all that dwell therein.

Prophets and poets have spoken of it. John Lennon put it into a song.

Imagine there's no heaven  
It's easy if you try  
No hell below us  
Above us only sky  
Imagine all the people  
Living for today...

Imagine there's no countries  
It isn't hard to do  
Nothing to kill or die for  
And no religion too  
Imagine all the people  
Living life in peace...

Imagine no possessions  
I wonder if you can  
No need for greed or hunger  
A brotherhood of man  
Imagine all the people  
Sharing all the world...

You may say I'm a dreamer  
But I'm not the only one  
I hope someday you'll join us  
And the world will live as one