

What Color Is Your Turtle?

Rev. Don Garrett

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What color is your turtle? Does its shell help you to feel safe? Is it real or an abstract symbol of your imagination? Or is it both? The church I served in Indianapolis had its own very real reddish-brown stone turtle sitting on the lawn. And it was good-sized, too: about 3 feet wide by 4-1/2 feet long and a foot and a half tall. I had admired it from afar, but didn't really appreciate it until I asked the kids in the Coming of Age program how they felt about it.

Their affection for the turtle was unmistakable. Their eyes lit up as they eagerly shared their memories. They revealed a special affection for it as something they had connected with as young children, and had remained a constant ever since. One young lady recalled that, when she was small and sat on its back, she had felt like a princess riding to her wedding on her own special steed. Several insisted that the turtle should be the symbol for the church, maybe with a chalice on its back. Their appreciation for the real thing is so great that they wanted it to be a symbol, too.

This is interesting because it's a feeling so widely shared that turtles have been symbols of safety, strength, and endurance for millennia. An animal with its own shell embodies our longing for safety and security in such a compelling way that we don't need to elaborate on the symbolism for children to "get it." They can "get it" all on their own.

This symbolism goes way back into prehistory, when people are said to have believed the earth rested on the back of a giant turtle. Stephen Hawking referred to the persistence of ancient beliefs in the beginning of his book, *A Brief History of Time*.

A well-known scientist (some say it was Bertrand Russell) once gave a public lecture on astronomy. He described how the earth orbits around the sun and how the sun, in turn, orbits around the center of a vast collection of stars called our galaxy. At the end of the lecture, a little old lady at the back of the room got up and said: “What you have told us is rubbish. This world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise.” The scientist gave a superior smile before replying, “What is the tortoise standing on?” “You’re very clever, young man, very clever,” said the old lady. “But it’s turtles all the way down!”

Like that professor, we can look down on that lady with feelings of smug superiority because we know better. Our evidence tells us that the professor is right and the lady is wrong. We can say that she’s being irrational, that she is denying the evidence that our reason tells us must be true. But, hidden in this story is the truth that we all run out of evidence at some point; that sooner or later we have to stop and decide what everything rests on. For some, it might as well be a giant turtle. But, for everyone, it is always at least one step beyond the evidence at hand.

What does your world rest on? If it’s anything like mine, the answer isn’t as simple as a turtle. My world rests on a lot of different things, and I often don’t find out what they were until they’re lost or disturbed. The thing about the turtles under our world is that we tend to take them for granted. Take water, for example, there’s a reason for the old saying, “You never miss the water until the well goes dry.” We can’t live without water, but usually notice our dependence when our supply is disrupted. In recent years, more and more of us have been starting to notice how much of our world rests on the supply of crude oil.

We can take our friendships for granted, too, and our extended social networks of relationships. I can recall how devastating it was when I left Boston,

where I'd lived for six years and had dozens of friends and acquaintances, and moved to rural central New York State, where I didn't know anyone. All of a sudden, my life was surprisingly flat and empty. I hadn't realized how important it was to have all those friends I'd taken for granted. It took me a couple of years to rebuild that network with new friends.

The Unitarian Universalist minister, Fred Campbell, says that the meaning in our lives, our purpose, our goals, our psychological and spiritual health are all based on our relationships, on what he calls "transcendent systems of meaning." He defines transcendent as being simply, "larger than." A relationship is larger than the individuals participating in that relationship, so relationships are, by this definition, transcendent. They involve people going beyond the boundaries of their own selves. Campbell posits a series of transcendent reference systems, each of which includes the previous one. They are: self, relationship, community of human beings, community of living creatures, nature, and God or the Creativity of the Universe. He substitutes Creativity for God because God is just one way we describe the leap we make as we move beyond the evidence at hand.

The philosopher, Ken Wilber describes these levels of relatedness as what he calls, "holons," in which the universe is like a series of nesting dolls, with everything containing smaller parts and also being part of a larger system of meaning at the same time. Wilber describes a number of systems of these holonic nesting dolls: atom, molecule, cell, organ, nervous system, brain, etc. Another might be self, other, family, church, nationality, and world community. When asked whether there's a point at which you reach the smallest or largest holon, Wilber paraphrases the story of the old lady and the turtle, saying, "It's holons all the way down."

For Campbell, religion is what individuals and communities of individuals do with the fact of individual human solitariness and their awareness of this condition. The religious response to solitariness deepens and enriches our self

knowledge, our need for and involvement in community, and our embeddedness in the creation and creativity of our Universe.

The basic step of religion is that of transcendence as we move to a level of greater inclusiveness. There is always some challenge to this step because one's own self becomes a smaller part of a progressively greater whole. This is the secret of humility as a religious virtue.

I found one of the best descriptions of this step in a poem by Philip Booth called "First Lesson," about teaching his daughter to swim. I like it because it describes this sense of trusting, resting in the embrace of something beyond one's self, in one's parent, floating in the ocean, or, ultimately, in any relationship with the transcendent:

Lie back, daughter, let your head
be tipped back in the cup of my hand.
Gently, and I will hold you. Spread
your arms wide, lie out on the stream
and look high at the gulls. A dead-
man's float is face down. You will dive
and swim soon enough where this tidewater
ebbs to the sea. Daughter, believe
me, when you tire on the long thrash
to your island, lie up, and survive.
As you float now, where I held you
and let go, remember when fear
cramps your heart what I told you:
lie gently back and wide to the light-year
stars, lie back, and the sea will hold you.

Lie back, and the sea will hold you. We are all held in a great sea of meanings and forces that are beyond ourselves. Call it God or Nature, or Humanity or the Tao or Creativity, we are all contained in its embrace.

How we describe that embrace is up to us, and it is religion's job to help us choose. And we will know we've made the choice that's right for us because our worries, anxieties, and fears will fade as we experience the embrace of the transcendent.

Campbell uses the image of a spider's web to illustrate this. He says, "I think of each human self as the hole in the center. The strands of the web form the matrix of the meaning of each life. The inner circle forms the boundary of my self. The next rings represent the communities in which I participate. When there is change in my life, part of the web changes shape. When I move or someone I care about dies, part of the web is torn away. The process of grief is to seal off the damaged area and then rebuild the web's structure. The circles of netting symbolize the transcending reference systems that make up the meaning of one's living. The radius strands symbolize the interconnectedness between the levels of transcendence.

"The radius arms reach out and out to anchor points. In a real spider web they reach out through space to twigs, tree limbs or leaves or the earth. For us as humans these supportive strands reach out to: our spouse, our family of origin, our jobs, our church, our friends, our understanding of the meaning of living. Who can say where anyone's anchor points are? Every individual is solitary. Every person has her or his own points to which they anchor. Each of us will experience grief if some portion of our web is torn away. The depth of our grieving will depend on how much of our web has been destroyed and how central to our living that portion was. . . .

"One of the important consequences of this image is that where anyone anchors the out-reaching strands of their web is somewhat arbitrary. Each person

reaches out till it is enough. Campbell calls this the Enough Principle. It says that each of us has an enough point. We have reached out far enough for us. This outer rim of the web will change as we grow older and with our changing capacity to know. Some of us will reach out into the human community and stop. Some of us will reach out into the natural world of living things and inanimate things and stop. Some of us will reach out and rest our being in the power or force or presence which we experience to be within or behind the natural world. Others of us know God and rest our being in this transcendent reference system of meaning.”

Fred Campbell calls these four levels of transcendence, “four faiths:” humanism, naturalism, mysticism, and theism. He says that humanists use the human community as the primary transcendent reference system of meaning for the content of their religion. Science is often trusted as a reliable source of knowledge.

Naturalists, on the other hand, understand themselves as participants in and dependent upon the natural world as the transcendent reference system of meaning within which they find their religious identity. The natural world includes all living organisms on our globe and all elements of our Universe. This faith also strongly trusts the sciences for knowledge of the world and to describe reality.

Mystics have had an experience of “union with the transcendent,” or other experiences which they know the sciences exclude. These experiences are so strong or occur frequently enough that they cannot be denied. Mystics draw the meaning of life and the values that shape their living from the experience of the relationship and union with the transcendent they know in their solitariness.

Theists have experience of a presence, which they call God. Any theist tradition which has served to bring meaning to human living over many generations will have layers and layers of meaning and interpretation about the

being or concept of God. Each generation has added to what the previous ones have revealed. God, for theists, points to a transcendent flowing pattern of events that individuals trust and know themselves to be profoundly dependent upon. Trust and dependence are known from direct experience.”

Four faiths, four basic points to which we can anchor ourselves. Which is right for you? Is yours a blend of several or all of them? They aren't necessarily mutually exclusive. What color is your turtle? Only you can know the answer because only you can know which choice gives you the degree of rootedness, security, and safety that you need. Only you can know the embrace of the sea in which you are floating. Only you will know the feeling of “enough” when you lie back and let the sea hold you.

One thing that we hold in common, though, no matter how diverse the anchor points of our theologies might be, is the first transcendent step: the humanistic awareness of the transcendent other. We may disagree about nature, mysticism, or even God, but we all agree about the first important thing: relationship.

Unitarian Universalist congregations welcome you wherever you are in the continuum of the four faiths. We don't tell you what choice you need to make to be one of us. We do encourage each other's spiritual growth and we pursue our free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Something else we all do share here is the holonic embrace of this community of faith. We come together as parts of this congregation, to support and be supported, to find meaning and purpose through being part of something larger than ourselves: the beloved community united in a commitment to be kind, fair, and forgiving.

Isn't this exactly what we need in our culture at this time – the ability to come together and lift up our highest values of kindness, caring, and compassion no matter how we came to hold those values? Wouldn't it be great if we could all

respect each other's religious and cultural traditions, no matter how different they are from our own?

As Jean M. Rickard Rowe said, "We have a calling in this world: we are called to honor diversity and respect differences with dignity and to challenge those who would forbid it. We are people of a wide path. Let us be wide in affection and go our way in peace."