



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Gospel of the Sacred Scarab”

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Centering Thoughts

*Blessings on thee, Beetle Sun, which rolls into life every day
kicking six legs and humming your shiny ball of song.
The world is a little patch of ground you travel with no haste.
Egyptian ‘Book of the Dead’*

Every creature is a glimmering, glistening mirror of Divinity. Hildegard of Bingen

*One should pay attention to even the smallest crawling creature
for these too may have a valuable lesson to teach us. Black Elk*

Sermon

Unitarian Universalism draws from many sources, but dung beetles—really?

Yes, even critters that spend their days dung diving and poop pushing have good news.

Once each year I plan a service around an animal whose behavior, mythology, or interaction with humans makes it interesting, meaningful, or perhaps thought-provoking. Many Unitarian Universalists, myself included, find inspiration and beauty in the natural world and so it seems appropriate to lift up the virtues of some of the creatures who share our home planet with us. Animals throughout the world and in all cultures are often revered, if not as gods, at least as representatives of the spiritual or divine realm. I personally find animals that hold strong religious symbolism to be especially worthy of our exploration. Therefore today it’s the dung beetle, otherwise known as the sacred scarab.

The myth I shared with the children earlier only scratched the surface of Khepri’s symbolic journey. In addition to their ball rolling habit, scarabs were of double interest to Ancient Egyptians as rebirth or resurrection figures because they believed, miraculously, out of a dung ball, fully-formed beetles emerged.

They didn’t see a male and female beetle meet up at the freshest dung heap, form a ball together, or mate. They didn’t see the female insert fertilized eggs into the ball after it was rolled to a safe location away from other beetles or predators, and then bury the ball which would be

warmly incubated by the sun. They didn't know that within the dung ball, the eggs became larvae that fed on the nutrients in the dung. And, they didn't know that, through the wonder of metamorphosis, the larvae became adult flying beetles that crawled out to repeat the cycle.

What they saw was something created out of nothing. The ball brought forth life, just as the Sun gave life, just as the creator god, Amen-Ra as Khepri, by returning the Sun to the sky gave life each day. Khepri's name means becoming, or to come into being.

Today, we can appreciate the 50-million year old dung beetle species because of its role as nature's own waste disposal service. Where elephants, horses, sheep, and cows are found, you'll find the dung beetle. There exist over 7,000 species worldwide. And we'd be up to our ears in doo-doo if it weren't for the beetles that redistribute, consume, and bury pounds of excrement within minutes of being dropped by a passing animal.

Our Seventh Principle is alive and well-illustrated by this 1-2 inch critter. Mother Nature perfectly provides a niche for every creature, great or small. The cycle and circle of life would not be complete without creatures that consume the bodies of the dead and the leavings of the alive. We need bacteria, fungi, carrion-eaters, and dung-eaters. We do exist in an interdependent web of life.

Whatever your source of creation, be it God, Mother Nature, or Cosmic law, its efficiency is awesome and miraculous. But wait, there's more that may inspire in you a feeling of awe and wonder for this little creature.

Imagine you and I are sacred scarabs in search of dung. We smell a fresh deposit and race to its location. There, we attract a mate and for a romantic evening, we fashion a dung ball together. Next, we must move our lovely ball that's much bigger than we away from competitors who might want it for their own. But how?

Pushing it like a dog nudging a tennis ball around with its nose isn't the way. Kicking it like a human punting a soccer ball with its feet isn't the way. Hiring a few beasts of burden to move it for us isn't the way, either.

Instead, we turn our backs to the ball and lift our hind legs and feet up onto the ball to guide it as we push backwards with our front feet, thus moving the ball opposite the direction we're facing. I'm not sure what gave Mother Nature the idea that walking backwards in a handstand while pushing a big ball was the best solution, but it certainly was creative.

You might wonder, just how are we scarabs to know where we're going when our dung ball is too big to see around and we're not facing the direction we're moving in. Mother Nature tells us to dance.

Yes, dance. Every now and then we're to climb on top of the ball, look around to orient ourselves, raise our feet to momentarily cool them off from the hot sand or soil we tread, then we climb down to continue our backward journey. But if you think we're just looking at the landscape to see where we're going, you would be wrong. Something more amazing occurs.

We dung beetles orient our path by checking the position of the sun and moon. We can even use the Milky Way to navigate, the only known creature besides humans to do so. Day or night, cloudy or bright, our special beetle eyes can see the polarized rays emitted by these celestial light sources. Scientists have performed numerous studies proving this amazing fact. Little did the ancient Egyptians realize how closely connected a scarab pushing a dung ball was to the movement of the solar disc across the sky. [Research by Dr. Emily Baird, Lund University, Sweden, <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/dung-beetle-dance/>]

I'm sure you're as fascinated as I am by this intersection of science and religion. Perhaps you find it equally interesting to imagine life as an insect, as Franz Kafka did with the human-turned cockroach in his book *Metamorphosis*. Even so, you may wonder what this has to do with identity, our May theme.

I believe it is this: whatever your or my identity, whoever we are, wherever we come from, or whatever amount of money we have, et cetera, the dung beetle proves that there is a place for each of us in this interconnected web of existence of which we are a part. Like the scarab, each of us is sacred, each of us is to be valued, and each of us contributes to the rich diversity of life. We would be poorer for it if we were we all the same.

And whether we're humans or beetles or some other creature, we arise each day to greet the sun, the moon, the stars, the flowers, the birds, and all the rest that the world contains. And each day offers us a chance to be reborn, a chance to re-imagine who we are, a chance to start anew our search for love, meaning, purpose, and more.

I believe life and our awareness of it truly is a miracle. What prompted our universe into existence remains a mystery, but somehow our planet came to host an infinite variety of amazing creatures. Wow.

Pablo Casals, the Spanish cellist and composer, once said, "Each second we live is a new and unique moment of the universe, a moment that never was before and never will be again." Indeed, every moment and every day is a miracle. We should be glad to rise and greet the dawn. Acknowledging this miracle makes me drop to my knees in thanks and praise. And I give thanks to you for sharing this moment of time with me and with every other living thing.

Let us not forget to notice the creatures we share this planet with. Let us marvel at them. Let us experience the awe and wonder of creation. Let us bow down to the Mystery that created it all. Let us say, "Amen!"

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. How might your body, mind, or spirit be tied to the sun? Are you a sun worshiper?
2. Might you be rolling your own ball of dung and is it nurturing a new you? Please share.
3. Do you believe there is a spark of divinity in all things, even the sun or a dung beetle? Share.
4. Dung beetles, divine recyclers, prove that all creatures have their place in the interdependent web. What is your place and how is your life affecting the world?