

Celestial Ashes  
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When I was in college, I was susceptible to getting into those silly arguments about whether or not it was more important to have art or science. Twyla Tharp or the steam engine. Beethoven or a washing machine. You know.

I always chose Beethoven (or e.e. cummings or Mary Cassatt) to the chagrin of my science-minded friends. You gotta have art to help us see the beauty of the world, I argued. They shot back that I'd be miserable in a minute without an oven and a dryer. Little did they know how uninterested I was in cooking and cleaning – and how much I enjoyed arguing.

These were, of course, false dichotomies. The world is filled with beauty and people who are tuned in to that beauty. And the world is also filled with people who notice matter and motion, who invent and create helpful machines and systems. We don't have to choose between the internet and Appalachian Spring - it's all there for us.

One of the places I've seen art and science come together most beautifully is in the saying that we are made of stardust. Both the singer Joni Mitchell and scientist Carl Sagan affirmed this when I was in high school. But even in the 1920's astronomers were saying that our bodies and the earth we stand on are made of star stuff; they contain the ashes of an ancient stellar explosion. We and the universe are made of the same elements.

By way of those celestial ashes we are connected to the earth and to each other and even to those seven new planets just discovered and of course also to God, the source of all life and creation. We are both scientifically and poetically interconnected with the cosmos and all that is in it.

Cool.

We are about to be invited to observe a Holy Lent, and we are about to have ashes rubbed on our foreheads to remind us that we came from dust and we will return to dust. We consider our mortality today, definitely.

But, as I feel those ashes smudged on my forehead, I also want to open myself to interconnectedness - with the Earth, with the stars, with God, with people everywhere, with you - as I begin my own observance of this holy Lent because too often, my sin is that I think I can go it alone.

My sin is the belief that I can save myself, that I can work my way to salvation, that I can transform myself into a righteous person through my own efforts. I forget that as a person in relationship with God and neighbor I will be transformed by those relationships and instead imagine that foregoing something that, honestly, is a luxury anyway (chocolate, wine, gossip) or embarking on some kind of personal self-improvement program for forty days will somehow bring me closer to God.

How small is my thinking. Here we are carrying pieces of the cosmos within us, of mountains and galaxies and oceans and spotted eagle rays and redwoods and Fiona the baby hippo and God and all of

you, and in my vanity and my limited vision I come up with a plan to cut back on carbohydrates as a pathway to a new and contrite heart.

Perhaps because something small feels easier to manage than exploring my relationship with the whole universe. And so I am tempted to close down instead of to open up.

But what I honestly wish to do is to stop striving to fend off things I am not sure I can control, to let all the things that come between me and God, between me and people, between me and my true self just blow where they will. What I want is to embrace my cosmic nature, to live as if I were part of all creation, as if I were connected to God and to everybody without all these barriers and conditions and especially without any notion that I might work my way into God's heart. What I want is to expand my scope and live as if stardust, that which is from God and in everything God made and God loves, is where my heart lies and is my treasure.

The traditional disciplines of Lent are prayer, fasting, and giving alms. Many of us practice those disciplines every year. We commit to more or special prayer time. We fast from certain foods or habits. Some keep track of the money saved through that fasting and then make a gift of that amount to church or charity.

Whatever we choose as a discipline speaks to our need for repentance and pardon and the renewal of our faith in a particular way. But it's easy to fall prey to a vision that we are each out there working on ourselves by ourselves, tempted to solitary self-improvement during this holy season. To become smaller, more controlled, more streamlined and self-focused. This vision is a trap for me.

And so this year I want my prayers to be for the needs of others. I wish for my fasting to be for the sake and benefit of others. I want to give alms to alleviate the pain of others. I want those ashes smudged on my face to be a catalyst for living a life in service of God and neighbor, in service of earth and sky and sea, and not simply in service of my own small self and my own small plan for self-improvement.

I am just a speck in the universe, but I am already a beloved speck called to recognize the belovedness of all those other precious specks with whom I share star-stuff essence. I do not need to hone my soul to achieve yet more belovedness nor hoard belovedness as if there were only a little bit to go around. The universe is full of it, and I can relax.

And in my relaxing, I can let go of my sin, the sin of stubborn self-reliance and self-absorption, of my concern with my needs and my blindness to the needs of others, and in that letting go open myself to allow God to come close to me and fill my mortal self with Divine love and grace.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, star stuff to star stuff. Amen.