Are you conservative or progressive? A thinker or a feeler? A cat person or a dog person? Are you a humanist or a theist? I think of a prophet as one who can transcend such categories and help us see the world anew. Kenneth L. Patton was one such prophet.

One of my teachers at Meadville/Lombard, David Bumbaugh, when asked if he were a theist always replied, "I am a Ken Patton theist." When asked if he were a humanist, his response, "I am a Ken Patton humanist."

There are many definitions of theism and many definitions of humanism, and answering the question requires finding out what the questioner means with those words. But David’s answer subverts that forced dichotomy or battle of word definitions. Some of you today appreciated his answer as soon as I shared it, but for others, I assume, particularly those of you newer to Unitarian Universalism, it may take this entire sermon and more to fully understand David’s answer.

To understand David’s answer, you need to know a little about Kenneth L. Patton, and that is what I wish to share with you this morning. A bit of Ken Patton’s theology – not because it is his theology and because he is known as the prophet and poet of Unitarian Universalism, all that is true, – but rather I share with you this morning because I know deep in my bones, that the theology I have worked so hard to develop over the years, is so grounded in his theology.

A couple of Sundays ago when preaching on the blessings of diversity, I mentioned that I think of the blue hymnal I grew up with– Hymns for the Celebration of Life, as the minimization hymnal. I’m going to go off on a tangent here, but I promise it will come back to Kenneth Patton in a moment.

In that sermon I was teaching the Intercultural Development Continuum – the stages of development to reach an intercultural mindset – just to remind you, or inform you if you weren’t here that Sunday – the continuum has at least 5 stages – denial where we miss difference, polarization where we judge difference – we are in a state of polarization writ large in this country at this moment in time, then there is minimization where we emphasis our commonalities and de-emphasize difference. Acceptance is when we deeply comprehend difference, and adaptation is when we not only comprehend the difference but we can create bridges across those differences and make choices to adapt our behavior based on the circumstance. That’s just a review. But I told you a few weeks ago that most Americans and most American Unitarian Universalists are in the minimization stage of this developmental process. Where we emphasize our common humanity and gloss over the differences, minimizing them to try to get along. And the hymnal I grew up with as a UU, Hymns for the Celebration of Life – I told you I like to call the minimization hymnal because it extols the kind of Universalism that says we are all really the same underneath. While we do share a common humanity, the emphasis of what we share understates the differences. And, since most of the UU’s in the center of our movement were white straight cisgender men, this minimization marginalized all those whose identities differed. So, this is the context in which I’m now going to praise that old blue hymnal I chided a couple of weeks ago. Because there is another name for it that has developed over the years, a more common one. It is also called the Ken Patton hymnal – because he is author of so many of the words to the hymns and the readings contained within. And just because he is a dead, white, straight, cisgender man, his theology is not to be dismissed. Even if the minimization it practiced is outdated today.
His theology is part of my own, and I believe that within it is a message that is important to be heard and said and lived for our individual lives and the world at large. It is a message that offers faith and hope in a world not yet able to make peace or justice.

“The Earth is Home,” I titled this sermon after the Patton hymn we just sang. The Earth is Home. And when I get to despairing about the state of the world, the earth, my home, and when I worry that I am not doing all that I can do, or I am feeling helpless to do anything that might make a difference on this small planet, I turn to prophets and poets such as Patton who remind me that the history and politics, the social concerns and social problems of my nation and all nations, the potential for warring states and warring families, that these are all parts of human history, the human story, of life itself. The sanctity of life is the source of our power. And by telling our story within the context of all life, Patton neither exalts human power nor demeans it. He provides us perspective, to be able to begin as grounded in the reality of the human condition embedded in the story of life itself – and in that groundedness, that reality, hope can be found.

Hope was demonstrated yesterday as people demonstrated both in Portland and Vancouver and across the country. Families belong together, We belong together were the rallying cry of those demanding a review of the zero-tolerance policy and reinstitute detention program alternatives for immigrants entering the U.S. Were any of you there yesterday? The Columbian reported over 500 people in Vancouver alone, hundreds of thousands of marchers from major cities and tiny towns across America. 30,000 in DC alone. I have talked to so many of you in recent weeks who have been despairing and felt hopeless about all that is wrong with the direction this country has taken, especially with regard to immigration policy – and the opportunities we have been presented abound, to come together and demand humanitarian treatment, basic human rights, for all. I wasn’t able to attend Saturday’s demonstrations, but I was at the Interfaith Prayer breakfast that took place Thursday morning – and how inspiring that was, to meet folks of such different faith traditions, who work together to try to make the world a better place. Differences were celebrated on Thursday, even as we came together for a singular cause.

Patton’s theology grounded in the story of the universe provides us perspective, to be able to begin as grounded in the reality of the human condition embedded in the story of life itself – and in that that reality, hope can be found. When Karen listed to Dr. Carolyn Porco in that session at General Assembly on Cosmos and Life: The Greatest Story ever told, she found that hope. Karen reports that Dr. Porco proposed “that science and the study of the cosmos offers the same sort of spiritual fulfillment that people find in the belief of god and religion.” Which is entirely true – science and theology began as a single science – just because many of the stories which emerged in ancient days no longer ring true today, doesn’t mean that science and religion aren’t both still looking for the truth – but more than that, the meaning of life. And perspective. If nothing else, the view of a total eclipse of the sun seen from the other side of Saturn, provides such perspective on our little home. And I love the truth in the statement that we are all recycled goods. “The matter and energy that makes up each of us has been here forever and will go on to make other things. Therefore, we are truly immortal and eternal and profoundly connected.”

Ken Patton taught us about the interdependent web of all existence, before that principle was ever written by committee at a General Assembly....

Just to make sure we’re all on the same page: I think we printed in the order of service this morning the 7 principles, but when you don’t find them in the order of service, you can always find them on the page before the first hymn in our current hymnal, Singing the Living Tradition
On the page before the first hymn, on the left, it says "We, the Member Congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: and there lists seven "principles" – I refer to the last of those: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. That's Ken Patton's thing, at least as I read him. And he got it long before the rest of us.

But Ken Patton taught it to us through poetry, when many had rejected the Bible or scripture on literal grounds, Patton brought back the metaphor and helped us return to the poetry of life through the metaphor of the cosmos. With poetry, music, and art, Patton brought back feeling to worship, without throwing out rational thought and sound ideas.

The sanctity of life is the source of our power, and by framing religion in terms of the human story, rather than the particular history of a particular tribe of people in a particular holy land or a culture or a single sacred text, Patton provides us with a perspective that is expansive. Ever-expansive. And that, for me, is a requirement for my religion. He universalized Universalism, it is said of Patton.

He universalized Universalism not just by placing the religious story in context of the cosmos, of all life, and the human story, but also by incorporating the wisdom he found in all world religions into worship. This new frame for theology is best illustrated by the Charles Street Meeting house itself that Patton was called to serve in 1949 with its design that integrated symbols and art from all over the world – and the map of the globe and mural of Andromeda that was the center of focus, with a bookshelf instead of an altar. The bookshelf contained scriptures from religious traditions around the world.

The Earth is Home. He universalized Universalism with an aesthetic sensibility, with poetry and art. There is always this tension in Unitarian Universalist Churches, and this one is probably no exception, between the hard core rationalists and literalists, and the poets. Often the issue is framed with this false dichotomy of humanist and no god vs. theist and god. But I would like to suggest that this polarization – god vs. no god, theism vs. humanism, is a false contradiction. Dividing science from religion, is also false, in my opinion. Or rational thinking from artistic thinking, also not a helpful division of categories. Or helpful to an extent, but taken too far, misleading. I am reminded of a reflection piece on creativity that Seth Moran, a Worship Associate who is a scientist in his day job, gave in early May, where he declared that he had dropped out of a PhD program in geophysics because he lacked the creativity to do a PhD in science.... We misunderstand science if we think it is not an art, not creative, not spiritual. And fortunately for the world of science, Seth decided he was a creative scientist after all.

Our Earth is Home. It is where we reside, where we live, where we do our work. And we are interconnected, so interconnected, that decisions about immigration policy matter. Decisions such as how we address one another matter. Decisions such as how we worship matter. Decisions such as how we vote matter. And yet we can get overwhelmed by the responsibility of all the decisions of our lives. Of all the things that matter to us and can make a difference. And when that time comes, when we start feeling too responsible for too much, it helps to return to the cosmos and the metaphor of the cosmos, to the home that is our earth, and to remember that we are just an itsy, bitsy, speck of stardust called life within a vast universe, and in that perspective, there is hope. "Nothing has greater power to alter and correct our perception of ourselves and our place in the cosmos than seeing our planet from afar." Says Dr. Porco.

As Ken Patton said, “We are of all time past and our aspiration is that of all time to come. Our hope is as ancient as eating and breathing and the rising of the sun. Our hope is as new as the first leaves, as young as the baby not yet born. Remember and be patient, holding to our faith and our hope.”
I say to you, hold onto that faith and that hope, in the difficult days which are ours, in a world not yet able to make peace or justice, hold onto each other, hold onto that creative spirit from which possibility springs and hope arises and let it transform you, and me, and the world we inhabit together. The earth is our home. May it be so.

_Benediction_

Our hope is as ancient as eating and breathing and the rising of the sun. We give thanks to the waves upholding us. When you despair this week, and the world will give you plenty to despair about, just remember that image of our blue boat home, across a billion miles of interplanetary space, nestled in the arms of Saturn’s rings. The earth is home.

* Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.