

A natural, supernatural or sub-natural cosmos?



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

Listening to Ann Druyan, the writer and producer of “Cosmos,” in conversation with Michael Shermer on his Science Salon podcast, I was most impressed with her statement:

“Life is naturally amazing enough. What do we need the supernatural for? If I could accomplish one thing in my life it would be that people would start referring to the ‘supernatural’ as the ‘sub-natural.’ Because it’s not above nature, it’s below nature, and nature is everything.”

Druyan, wife of the late great Carl Sagan, graciously responded to my letter a few years ago when I was floating the wild idea of a Moon Wilderness Park. It was probably “lunacy” to suggest the United Nations designate the Luna (moon) as a protected park like our National Parks. I was responding to the way the U.S. along with India, China, Russia and Japan have literally crashed spacecraft all over the lunar surface, strewing trash across that pristine landscape, in the quest for “strategic uses.”

I’m intrigued by Druyan’s thoughts about the super-natural. Involved in

scientific study and communication for many years, once married to an eminent scientist, she expresses a certain impatience with the way we keep searching for something beyond the universe, when we are only beginning to explore the one we know (and know that we don’t know much).

“Sub-natural.” An appropriate way to describe these calls to other worlds, other realities, “super” things we imagine are out there beyond (and below) the reach of our rational investigation. I too feel the discouragement when so many subordinate the amazing frontiers of our world and the vastness of the cosmos to subvert the natural – Nature itself. The natural universe cannot be subsumed under a theological construct. It is greater, more wonderful than any supernatural belief can offer.

In an interview with The Planetary Society (March 18, 2020), Druyan spoke of her late husband: “Carl was very prophetic. He was just a human being, but he saw clearly. He used his science to see clearly and to call attention to not only opportunities and wonders, but also looming dangers.”

What if our religious leaders could be described in these words? “Prophetic” not because they call upon supernatural authority or quote ancient scriptures, but because they “see clearly” and “call attention” to the opportunities, won-

ders and dangers we must take responsibility for as human beings in the natural world?

No wonder people like naturalist John Burroughs, saw science as the next world religion. Yet, greater than a religion – a fresh way of thinking about our world, experiencing its wonders, and constantly exploring, seeking to know more.

Unfortunately this is not the interest of traditional religion. With its emphasis on the “super” things, religion has focused attention on miracles not wonder, the invisible rather than the visible, an absent Parent in the sky rather than a responsible, cooperative family of humankind. Religion rejoices in the “sub” and thinks it’s “super.”

Of course, this is one origin of the misinformation campaign of some in the religious community who insist they are the voices of morality and divinity, receiving “the word” from beyond. That the rest of us aren’t hearing that word should give us pause if not cause to dismiss their claims.

Carl Sagan once wrote that Einstein’s view of God was “something not very different from the sum total of the physical laws of the universe.” These powerful natural laws apply to the Earth as well as “Mars, Alpha Centauri, the center of the Milky Way, and out by the most distant quasars known.” And that

“represents a power greater than any of us.” Sagan goes on to say “it would be wholly foolish to deny the existence of laws of nature.” If this is what people are talking about when they speak of God, “then no one can possibly be an atheist.” If this is the definition of God, “we all believe in God.” (“The God Hypothesis”)

We humans are squeezed here, aren’t we? We are neither above nor below nature. Not sub or super, we are nothing less and nothing more than nature, both a significant and insignificant part of nature. If we’re dissatisfied with our squeezed-ness, our in-betweenness or “just a part of” position in it all, we may call in the gods so we can understand ourselves as a vital part of a divine vitality – just “a little lower than the angels,” as the Psalmist sings.

As Ann Druyan succinctly put it: “Life is naturally amazing enough.” Can we hold to that? Can that be enough, to sustain us through the most challenging times of human life? Can we face the crises of life by respecting the laws of nature, knowing we belong, as fragile as we are?

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.