

# *The Servants of Life*

**Rev. David E. Bumbaugh**

**The Unitarian Church in Summit**

**Oct. 25, 1998**

The beaches of Costabel are littered with the debris of life. Shells are cast up in windrows; a hermit crab, fumbling for a new home in the depths, is tossed naked ashore, where the waiting gulls cut him to pieces. Along the strip of wet sand that marks the ebbing and flowing of the tide, death walks hugely and in many forms. Even the torn fragments of green sponge yield bits of scrambling life striving to return to the great mother that has nourished and protected them.

In the end, the sea rejects its offspring. They cannot fight their way home through the surf which casts them repeatedly back upon the shore. ...

In the night, particularly in the tourist season ... one can see, in the hour before dawn on the ebb tide, electric torches bobbing like fireflies along the beach. This is the sign of the professional shellers. ... After a storm one can see them hurrying along with bundles of gathered starfish, or clutching bags of living shells whose hidden occupants will be slowly cooked and dissolved in the outdoor kettles provided by the resort hotels. ... Following one such episode, I met the Star Thrower. ...

As I came down the steps to the shore, I could hear the deeper rumble of the surf. A gaping hole filled with churning sand had cut sharply into the breakwater. ... I made my way around the altered edges of the cove and proceeded on my morning walk up the shore.

Soon I began to make out objects, up-ended timbers, conch shells, sea wrack wrenched from the far-out kelp forests. A pink-clawed crab encased in a green cup of sponge lay sprawling where the waves had tossed him. Long-limbed starfish were strewn everywhere, as though the night sky had showered down. ...

The sun behind me was pressing upward at the horizon's rim. ... Ahead of me ... a gigantic rainbow of incredible perfection had sprung into existence. Somewhere toward its foot I discerned a human figure standing, as it seemed to me within the rainbow, though unconscious of his position. He was gazing fixedly at something in the sand.

Eventually he stooped and flung the object beyond the breaking surf. ... By the time I reached him ... he was starting to kneel again.

In a pool of sand and silt a starfish had thrust its arms up stiffly and was holding its body away from the stifling mud.

"It's still alive," I ventured.

"Yes," he said, and with a quick yet gentle movement he picked up the star and spun it over my head and far out to sea. It sank in a burst of spume. ...

"It may live," he said, "if the offshore pull is strong enough." He spoke gently, and across his bronzed, worn face the light came and went in subtly altering colors.

"There are not many come this far," I said, groping in a sudden embarrassment for words. "Do you collect (shells)?"

"Only like this," he said softly, gesturing amidst the wreckage of the shore, "and only for the living." He stooped again, oblivious of my curiosity, and skipped another star neatly across the water.

"The stars," he said, "throw well. One can help them."

He looked full at me with a faint question kindling in his eyes which seemed to take on the far depths of the sea.

"I do not collect," I said uncomfortably. ... "Neither the living nor the dead. I gave it up a long time ago. Death is the only successful collector." ... I nodded and walked away, leaving him there upon the dune with that great rainbow ranging up the sky behind him.

I turned as I neared a bend in the coast and saw him toss another star, skimming it skillfully far out over the ravaging and tumultuous water. For a moment, in the changing light, the sower appeared magnified, as though casting larger stars upon some greater sea. He had, at any rate, the posture of a god. ... He is a man, I considered sharply. ... The Star Thrower is a man, and death is running more fleet than he along every sea beach in the world. ... I paced slowly back by the starfish gatherers, past the shell collectors.

The sermon I had intended to preach this morning simply would not come. I read the title I had announced a month ago and it could not have been more incomprehensible had I written it in Sanskrit. For days I wrestled with the topic, but whenever I attempted to write, my mind returned to the discussion following last Sunday's sermon, when someone suggested that we might better serve ourselves by a walk in the woods than by attending church, and someone else suggested that much of our difficulty is to be found in the fact that we have lost the ability to live in the moment and continue to be haunted by past and future. Somewhere a response was struggling to be born. And then, in the middle of the night, when sleep deserted me, I woke remembering Loren Eiseley's compelling essay, "The Starthrower," and I knew the sermon I must preach this morning, regardless of the title announced.

Every time I read Eiseley's essay, one phrase jumps out at me and commands my attention. You may recall that Eiseley, in explaining himself to the Star Thrower, says

that he is not a collector of shells or anything else, that "Death is the only successful collector." That sentence always commands my attention.

It is, of course, an indisputable observation. What is more, it can be seen as the ultimate fruit of the labors of Western science over the past four centuries or more. If our efforts to unscramble the riddle of existence have taught us anything about the nature of the universe, it is that all of creation is moving inexorably toward death. We have learned that the universe, rather than being a purposed event, is probably the result of a random, accidental, primordial explosion, and that it is moving to an inescapable destiny defined by the cold, silent, eventless death of entropy, in which all available energy is exhausted and nothing further can happen. We have learned that the sun which pours its energy so abundantly upon this planet, differentiating itself into lichen and trees, into starfish and seagulls, and every one of us, must sooner or later exhaust its energy, becoming a burned-out cinder, leaving all that depends upon it dead. We have learned that the stars which sit like diamonds on the black velvet of the winter night sky must one by one wink out. We have learned that every life which begins with an infant's cry ends in a death rattle. As science tells us, "Death is the only successful collector." This is not a new insight, but it is an especially powerful insight for our post-modern, post-Christian generation, for it is not just an idiosyncratic opinion; it is married to the very core insights by which our culture understands itself and by which our lives have been structured and our existence explained.

Eiseley, himself a good scientist, can find no other response to the death and the dying all around him than that of dispassionate observer. He sees the prodigal waste, as the sea -- the mother of all life -- casts her children upon the barren beach, there to suffocate in a hostile ocean of oxygen, their pores clogged with sand and mud. He sees the scavengers collecting the still-living creatures and throwing them into boiling kettles in order to remove them from their beautiful shells. He does not approve, but he will not intervene. He is an objective observer who can only wonder that the collectors do not see the relation between the plight of the sea creatures and their own ultimate destiny. Indeed, he rejects as mad the effort by the Star Thrower to intervene in behalf of the voiceless victims of nature's colossal indifference. One might as well bail the sea with a teacup as resist the terrible toll of death which occurs on every beach of every ocean the globe around. But something in the action of the Star Thrower reminds the scientist that the great dictum that "Death is the only successful collector" has failed to consider other insights which are equally the gift of science to our generation.

For example, while the law of entropy may reign supreme over this universe, taking all down into the cold vaults of eventless death, in this small corner of the universe -- and perhaps elsewhere -- something remarkable happened. Why or how we do not know, but at some point, lifeless matter, doomed by the laws of thermodynamics to pointless existence and meaningless chaos, crossed an invisible threshold. Matter learned to replicate itself; matter learned to aggregate energy; matter discovered synergy; and life -- an anti-entropic phenomenon -- arose to cover this planet with incredible variety and durability. What is more, life became a force which shaped and sustained and regulated the planetary system, making the globe itself a living organism. It may be only a

momentary phase; it may have occurred nowhere else in the universe; but here, for a moment, at least, entropy was reversed and life arose from lifeless matter to organize a new level of existence. Indeed, life learned to use death itself to power the evolutionary process and thus to extend the dominion of living things, and to make more effective the processes by which energy could be aggregated and concentrated and the planetary system modulated so that life could be sustained.

Nor was this the only such event. After long, silent eons in which living things came into existence and went out of existence, suffering changes and alterations, paying the price of failure and passing successes on to new generations, life itself crossed an invisible threshold. The time came when living things discovered they could choose, they could be the servants of life or the servants of death. And at that moment, morality entered a universe which, 'til then, knew neither right nor wrong, which 'til then envisioned neither purpose nor direction. From that moment, dispassionate and objective uninvolvedness was no longer possible. One would either serve life, or one would serve death. Neutrality had been banished as a human option.

It was this fact which the Star Thrower incarnated, as he strode the death-haunted beach at Costabel, and stooped to lift a starfish and send it hurtling back into the vast ocean, offering it one more chance at life. He was not cursing death; he was not bemoaning a universe in which life and hope and novelty are purchased at so high a cost. He simply and quietly chose to be a servant of life. Eiseley goes on to report that as he walked away from the Star Thrower, he could not escape the challenge the Star Thrower represented. By his silent, unaccusing action, he confronted Loren Eiseley with the need to choose which side of the moral scale would feel the stubborn ounces of his weight. Pacing by the pounding surf, reflecting on that unvoiced challenge, Loren Eiseley discovered he could no longer play the role of disinterested observer. He reports that without any real hope of reversing the tide, he too was called to be a servant of life, he too would reach out across species lines to save from death what could be saved. He turned, and sought out the Star Thrower, and, without a word, joined him in sowing the sea with living stars.

It goes without saying, of course, that the death-littered beach at Costabel, with its shell collectors and its boiling kettles waiting to destroy the beautiful, the silent, the helpless, voiceless creatures cast ashore by a remorseless tide, is a clear representation of the world we have created for ourselves. It is a world which our scientists assure us is moving inexorably toward irreversible death. It is a world in which countless women and men -- for what seem their own immediate interests -- have allied themselves with death; have poured their wealth and intelligence and competence into the building of systems which have the potential of turning this fecund planet into a lifeless waste; have prepared innumerable ecological disasters for their children and grandchildren to inherit; have created an international economic climate which condemns unnumbered millions to suffering, starvation and death and generates hatreds which run like a powder train to ignite the weapons created at such cost and so carefully stored up against the coming of doomsday. In short, it is a world in which, knowingly or unknowingly, millions of men and women have become the servants of death, stoking the fires which threaten to consume the entire human venture.

Any rational mind, looking with clear vision at this world we have created for ourselves, this narrow, shelving beach on which we walk, must conclude that death can be the only successful collector, and would seek out the most comfortable position from which to view the inevitable. But here and there are women and men who know that disengagement is as much a service of death as is active stoking of the fires beneath the kettles. Here and there are women and men who insist that while they may not win, they will not be servants of death; they will serve life while there is yet life to serve. Striding the littered beach that is our world, they reach out to the struggling, the stricken, the lost, and with a strength not theirs to give, these Star Throwers seek to return the forlorn and abandoned to the depths of hope and promise, where the tides of life still run strong.

It may be that the effort is futile, that in the end death will collect everything, will envelop all in its seamless robe of silence. But once the line was crossed from lifelessness to life, once the line was crossed from inevitability to choice, this universe became a moral universe, and we became creatures with a moral destiny. We are not required to win in any ultimate sense, since, from our time-bound perspective, none of us knows what winning ultimately might mean, but we are required to choose whether, in our lives, death shall be the servant of life, or life the servant of death; whether our energies shall be devoted to the uses of life or of death. And at no time in the entire history of the human venture has that choice been placed before humanity with greater clarity or urgency. Standing on this storm-ravaged, death-littered beach which is our own history, the image of the Star Thrower before us, the glow of the death kettles behind us, we are asked to choose this day whom we will serve.

The church, frail, feeble, often clumsy and inept though it seems, is that institution in our society which is called to see and proclaim the simple choice which confronts this generation. The church, frightened, uncertain, insecure though it often seems, is that institution in our society which is called to say a loud and clear and unmistakable "Yes" to life, while proclaiming an equally clear "No" to all the conventional forces which urge us to serve death under the guise of being reasonable and practical and pragmatic. Reason and pragmatism alone lead but to despair. On the death-littered beach of Costabel, only faith can preserve us from ending as servants of death. On this death-littered beach which is our world, only a special faith that what we do matters, that life is worth serving no matter what destiny awaits us, only faith that responding to our fellow creatures in ways which serve life represents the ultimate triumph over entropy and death, only such a faith can offer any hope for us and for our kind. The church, blind, arrogant, self-satisfied though it often seems, is that institution in our society charged to remind us that this has become a moral universe, that we cannot escape the need to choose between life and death. The church is that institution charged to proclaim the great conviction that what we choose does, in fact, matter.

I cannot tell you why, but I do firmly believe that it matters whether we commit ourselves to be Star Throwers, to walk with care along this disaster-strewn beach where our lives are lived, remembering to be gentle with living things, never taking death seriously except as death becomes the servant of life. I cannot tell you why, but I do firmly believe that it matters whether we commit ourselves as individuals, as an institution to serve life,

to reach out and to rescue what can be rescued from needless pain and untimely death, and to resist all those, in whatever position of authority, who in the name of reason and pragmatism tempt us to serve death, to make life the servant of death. This is our great calling, the vocation we all share, the ministry which is ours as women and men of faith: To serve life; no matter how futile the effort may sometimes seem, to serve life unceasingly.