

**De Rerum Natura** a sermon by Rev. Doug McCusker on July 9, 2017

“Death to us is nothing?” Try telling that to someone who is grieving the death of a loved one. On the surface, such a quote is cold and uncaring. Of course, death is something. It is one of the most profound concepts that we encounter in our brief sojourns on this plane of existence. It is one of our first jarring realizations when we are children. It is a source of fear for most people. It is something that unscrupulous leaders exploit to exert social control. It is a mystery precisely because we do not want to accept that death is nothing.

So how do we hear, listen and understand what Lucretius is trying to tell us? By changing the focus from death to life. After reading his beautiful, ancient poem it is obvious that he cherishes life and all its intricacies. He wrote his treatise of Epicurean philosophy precisely because he wanted the reader to live in the present and to grasp the fullness that the world has to offer.

For Lucretius, this one wholly improbable accident of our life is all there is for us. Don't spend it trying to hold on to things forever. It is the nature of things that everything that we perceive is fleeting. Here today, gone tomorrow. We coexist with things in the blink of a cosmic eye. We are connected to them in time and space, but only for a while. He didn't write this, but I'm sure he would agree: “Enjoy the sights, take nothing and only leave footprints.”

And yet, it is the footprints of those who we have known that is the source of our grief. In the last 2 weeks, our congregation has suffered the loss of two people connected to our community. One we knew extremely well, who helped build this Fellowship with his blood, sweat and tears – Ralph Phipps. And one who we only know through his mother – Andrew Berkman. No matter, their lives mean everything. It is the nature of things that babies are born and people die. Some die old and some die young. It is the nature of things.

But why must Nature be so cruel; to connect us all and then cast us asunder? Surely there is a divine plan where all this construction and destruction is heading. But Lucretius, over two thousand years ago, calmly wrote that there is no plan. Everything we know or will know; everything we are or will be is because atoms are in constant motion and occasionally they swerve. He wrote:

*“The atoms, as their own weight bears them down  
Plumb through the void, at scarce determined times,  
In scarce determined places, from their course  
Decline a little – call it, so to speak,  
Mere changed trend. For were it not their wont  
Thuswise to swerve, down would they fall, each one,  
Like drops of rain, through the unbottomed void;  
And then collisions ne'er could be nor blows  
Among the primal elements; and thus*

*Nature would never have created aught."*

You can boil down the over 65,000 words of *De Rerum Natura* translated in English to *On the Nature of Things*, to this simple mantra: "matter and void and a little swerve maketh all things." Lucretius did not come up with this philosophy himself. He was the messenger of ideas from Epicurus, Democritus and other Greek philosophers who preceded him by several centuries. And he was the precursor to Galileo, Spinoza, and Richard Dawkins.

Lucretius, as an Epicurean philosopher, did not really care if gods existed or if they were myths of humans. He opened his masterpiece with an invocation to Venus and he interwove images of Hades and the Elysian Fields throughout. He understood full well their purpose in literature and in religion. And he didn't have much nice to say about religion. He merely consigned the gods beyond nature where they don't affect this universe in which we live. To Lucretius, they were inconsequential to the nature of things.

Lucretius was a poet who knew how to penetrate our hearts and minds through song. He reduced the universe to its essential elements and then built everything back up to explain how things work. He was a scientist, a philosopher, an artist, and a poet. He wrote:

*"So now I too (since this my doctrine seems in general somewhat woeful unto those who've had it not in hand, and since the crowd starts back from it in horror) have desired to expound our doctrine unto thee in song, soft-speaking and Pierian, and, as 'twere, to touch it with sweet honey of the Muse – if by such method happily I might hold the mind of thee upon these lines of ours, till thou see through the nature of all things, and how exists the interwoven frame."*

Basically, there are primordial germs, which he called atoms, but which we now know consist of much smaller particles. Nonetheless, he posited that there was an infinite number of these particles that were eternal and could never be divided into something smaller. Likewise, there was infinite, eternal void in which the particles travelled and coalesced to form larger and larger things. But there was also a limit to how large they could get lest they take up all the space. If you need an image to help understand his idea of matter and void, think of dust motes that you can see floating in the air when illuminated by sunlight.

Everything that is made from the attractions and collisions of these particles is finite, destined to return to the void. Every living thing, and even the once living or fabricated is finite. Our bodies, our minds, our souls – finite. The sun, the moon, the earth and other celestial bodies – finite. Language, culture, art, stories, civilizations and empires – finite. The atoms and the void are the only things that persist. But do not brood or pine for things we have known or lost, because it is the nature of things to recreate into future things that are more beautiful and terrible than we can ever know.

Science is the basic understanding of the nature of things. You could say that it is our nature as conscious beings to explore and examine the nature of things as Lucretius did. In his day, he could not see or even mathematically prove what he believed. But he had a keen awareness, and he used reason and rational proofs to arrive at something that is for the most part accepted by our current astrophysics community.

Our current narrative of the origin of things, the Big Bang theory, is entirely consistent with *De Rerum Natura*. Scientists accept a point of creation, but they are busily trying to understand what if anything preceded the Big Bang. Because, in Lucretius' words: "since naught from nothing can become."

And while most scientists today agree on the limits of the universe, they freely admit that it is only the prevailing theory. Some also speculate with no proof, as of yet, that there may be other universes, perhaps an infinity of them as Lucretius described.

With our powerful microscopes, telescopes and particle blasters, we realize that there is a vastness that boggles the mind. Using all the known laws of physics to describe the nature of things today, we have determined that the smallest thing, what Lucretius called the primordial germ, cannot be smaller than 10 to the negative 33 centimeters. That is the maximum mass that can be squeezed into the smallest space before it collapses into itself to form a black hole.

On the other end of the spectrum, the largest things we know about are superclusters which cannot exceed 10 to the 30 centimeters before gravity pulls it apart. Lucretius didn't know about gravity, but it fits entirely into his construct of the nature of things. Gravity is the force that causes particles to swerve and shrinks and expands objects to their limits, thus unifying the universe.

Biologists, chemists, paleontologists, epidemiologists, geologists and climatologists have all picked up Lucretius' search for the nature of things. But their work is in peril as they uncover inconvenient truths, like Galileo at the dawn of the Renaissance, and Lucretius during the reign of the Roman Empire. Perhaps there will always be those who believe that all they have to do is silence the scientists and the gods will save us. In this case, the gods of greed and power. As Lucretius foretold:

*"...To pursue the atoms one by one, to see the law whereby each thing goes on. But some men, ignorant of matter, think, opposing this, that not without the gods, in such adjustment to our human ways can nature change the seasons of the years, and bring to birth the grains and all of else to which divine Delight, the guide of life, persuades mortality and leads it on, that, through her artful blandishments of love, it propagates the generations still, lest humankind should perish."*

Right now, science is under assault in our educational system, in our government research labs and international climate models. Thank you, Elizabeth and everyone else here who marched on Washington for science. We all must resist this colossal folly to return to the dark ages of knowledge. Like religion, science is a double-edged sword. It

can be used for good or for evil. But in the vacuum of ignorance, matter and void march on in the shadows, totally impervious to gods and humans.

Ironically, civilization came perilously close to losing *De Rerum Natura* to oblivion. Stephen Greenblatt wrote a fascinating book titled *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*, which I highly recommend as a summer read. He weaves an entertaining and enlightening account of how Lucretius' epic poem was rediscovered in 1417 in a remote abbey in the German Alps. The only way that ancient texts like *De Rerum Natura* survived was that every three to four hundred years someone completely copied them hand. After the fall of the Roman Empire, most of the books in their great libraries rotted away never to be seen again. Only a very few made it to the invention of the printing press one thousand years later. And thanks to Humanist book hunters like Poggio Bracciolinni, who found *De Rerum Natura*, can we now read the classics.

Greenblatt writes, "It is not surprising that the philosophical tradition from which Lucretius' poem derived, so incompatible with the cult of the gods and the cult of the state, struck some, even in the tolerant culture of the classical Mediterranean, as scandalous. The adherents of this tradition were on occasion dismissed as mad or impious or simply stupid. And with the rise of Christianity, their texts were attacked, ridiculed, burned, or most devastating ignored and eventually forgotten. What is astonishing is that one magnificent articulation of the whole [Epicurean] philosophy survived. Apart from a few odds and ends and secondhand reports, all that was left of the whole rich tradition was contained in one single copy of text."

Of all the ancient masterpieces, this poem is one that should certainly have disappeared in the company of the lost works that had inspired it. That it did not disappear, that it surfaced after many centuries and began once again to propagate its deeply subversive thesis, is something one could be tempted to call a miracle. But Lucretius did not believe in miracles. He thought that nothing could violate the laws of nature. He posited instead what he called a "swerve," an unexpected, unpredictable movement of matter. The reappearance of his poem was such a swerve, an unforeseen deviation from the direct trajectory toward oblivion.

Just as things die when they tear apart, things live when they connect. Some abbot or learned monk must have connected with that poem for it to live. Life is abundant when the primordial atoms attract and work together to form a bond. The body, mind and soul are intertwined by our cellular energy. Communities thrive when its members share their resources for the common good. The key to our survival is to understand our interdependencies with all of life. Ultimately, Earth will perish, but not for a long, long time. It is humanity, and the other beings on this planet, that are in danger if we don't learn to live in harmony with our environment. Perhaps that is why Lucretius began his study by invoking the spirit of Venus, the goddess of love.

"Mother of Rome, delight of Gods and men,  
Dear Venus that beneath the gliding stars

Makest to teem the many-voyaged main  
And fruitful lands – for all of living things  
Through thee alone are evermore conceived,  
Through thee, are risen to visit the great sun -  
Before thee, Goddess, and thy coming on,  
Flee stormy wind and massy cloud away,  
For thee, the daedal Earth bears scented flowers,  
For thee, waters of the unvexed deep  
Smile, and the hollows of the serene sky  
Glow with diffused radiance for thee!”

Lucretius didn't believe in Venus, he believed in love. Love guides us to seek understanding. Love is the scientist's elixir. Love is the gravitational force that unifies the universe and creates life. Love is the reason we grieve and miss our deceased loved ones. Love is everything. Death is nothing. Ashay, Om, Amen.

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