

What If...in 4-D  
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July 25, 2010

Okay – San Diego has been in the grips of Comic Con these past couple of days so that has to mean that this is my annual sci-fi sermon and yes, I'm including the movie Avatar in the sermon (thank you Ken for the beautiful music and Abby, for the great pictures!). And it's more than just a sci-fi sermon – it's also an environmental sermon, it's our 7<sup>th</sup> principle sermon, and it fits our summer worship theme of Joy and Ecstasy because I think we experience deep joy and maybe even ecstasy when we live in 4D. What does that mean? We'll get to it soon, I promise.

Now I know some of you saw the film (because you told me about it and wanted to know when I would preach on it!), but maybe some of you haven't seen it. If you didn't see it, perhaps you remember the splash it made? It cost more than any film ever made and has made more money than any film has ever made. To my understanding, the creators of the film also have to invent some of the very technology needed to create the film and the art of it, beautiful, I think. For Oscar counters, it earned three, for cinematography, visual effects and art direction. For folks who still don't know the film, it was the one in 3D and had blue beings in it. Lots of hype, critique and money surround the picture and it's out now in DVD – in the regular 2D version. Some say the film is a repeat of the earlier Blade Runner or Dances with Wolves; some say Avatar is a film for tree huggers, literally, while others say it's a polemic on our political system and nature as a country; some say it's just another white man's guilt picture about race, while others point out the subtle and not-so subtle symbolism from Hinduism. And certainly, all of these points of view can be seen in this film. It depends on the lens through which you're

looking. I've seen it now, twice and I have to say that it's a film with lots of guns and shooting. The violence is hard to see and it plays a part in the film. And I say it's also a film that is spiritual; it's a film that speaks to a greater longing that we have – at least two great longings...regarding the critique about race – perhaps the film gives us a chance to see ourselves in a different light – one that takes care of that which is sacred and gives us life, literally – the earth and seeks to live with, to understand others.

The other great longing is also a spiritual one, I think. The film speaks to our intrinsic desire to be seen, to be known in a deep way. For me this is a spiritual longing and I believe this faith, this community offers us a response ...to be seen, to be recognized as having worth because we're alive on the planet and that we can move in thought and action beyond just taking care of the planet but we can see ourselves connected to it. We are not merely visiting this world – but this is the only home we have. I believe we have a longing to be connected to that which is greater than ourselves – for some that which is greater is called God, for others, Spirit, for still others, it is the earth. This fantasy story of a film offers a vision of what and how that might be.

The 2.5 hour film...like most epic stories, is another way to tell the hero's journey...the story of a person in the midst of a lost life (ever feel that way?) – Jake the protagonist opens the narration after being released from a VA hospital – “with a big hole in the middle of his life;” An ex-Marine who is now paraplegic, says he “dreamed of flying, he was free; but sooner or later though you have to wake up.” What Jake wakes up from is a life and mentality that left him wanting, that left him adrift, and that left him out of the mainstream, a place where he didn't fit. He woke up into a truly different world, a

different mindset and way of being in the world. But it wasn't on this planet – it was on a moon named Pandora, where the species named the Na'vi live.

The world on which the Na'vi live is not hospitable to humans; oxygen masks are needed and they are limited in their contact with the Na'vi. Basic plot: there's a substance on the moon that humans want and can sell back on earth for a huge profit; this substance is underground – and of course, the biggest deposit of the mineral is under the sacred grounds of the Na'vi. Sounds familiar, I know. The science team, working for the company there to mine to mineral, wants a diplomatic relationship with the Na'vi and that's their job. So they create an avatar – a being that looks like the Na'vi and can live in that environment to learn about them, gain their trust and create a relationship in order to help get the mineral. For the scientists, obtaining the mineral is the second or minor part of the plan; their main goal is learning. Our protagonist Jake is the middle man – as an ex-marine, he can talk with the security team (interpret as former or ex-military) that offers security to the corporation and Jake fits in with the scientists because there's an avatar created for his twin brother who died so Jake is filling in.

What's an avatar? Some would say this is where the science comes into play in the film but really, it's where some religious teachings come into the film. “The term “avatar” might already be familiar to those who play virtual reality games where avatars are movable images representing real people. Avatar's origins, however, come from the Sanskrit language in sacred Hindu texts, and it's a term for divine beings sent to restore goodness to Earth. Hinduism, the third-largest religion in the world with about 1 billion adherents, began many centuries ago..., and a majority of the world's Hindus reside in India. Those who practice Hinduism recognize three main deities. Lord Brahma is

considered the creator of the universe; Lord Vishnu is considered the sustainer of the universe, to right things when needed; and Lord Shiva is the redeemer of the universe. It is believed that these deities sent avatars — incarnations of themselves in human form — to perform “dharma,” or righteous duty, to right wrongs or to restore peace and goodness.”<sup>1</sup>

Another interesting aspect of this part of the story or symbolism is that in Hinduism, these deities are often depicted as blue in color. Blue is a color that is calming and it is a color that almost everyone likes some shade of it. Blue is a natural color – as the color of the sky – it’s universal. In many diverse cultures, the color blue in religious traditions brings peace or is believed to keep bad spirits away. So far the story line goes we have humans who have created blue avatars to infiltrate the indigenous blue-colored people to gain their trust in order to get something humans want. And we have a human figure who does gain their trust and then action happens and we see betrayal and more on many sides.

This is indeed a big part of this film and in many others films too. You have seen this story line even if you haven’t seen this film. Why do we keep making the same picture, telling the same story over and over again? I think we do for many reasons, including we haven’t learned to fully live in 4D and thus we keep trying through art different ways to experience the story in the hopes of changing our behavior and ourselves. I don’t think our behavior will change until we experience a shift in our understanding of ourselves on a cellular level and re-learn to live within the world around us. You see, as I understand it, that’s the way of the Na’vi. When Jake first meets the

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<sup>1</sup> “New Movie Avatar Shines Light on Hindu Word,” article by Arlene Nisson Lassin for the Chronicle, [www.chron.com/displstory.mpl/life/religion/6777326.html](http://www.chron.com/displstory.mpl/life/religion/6777326.html)

spiritual leader of the Na'vi, The People, she asks him, knowing he's an outsider, knowing he's a Dreamwalker as the Na'vi refer to him, she asks him, "Why are you here?" Jake, in his avatar body, says, "I'm here to learn." She replies, "Hard to teach when cup is full." He assures her he is empty (and he is – empty of more than just knowledge). She instructs him, "learn well our ways and we'll see if your insanity can be cured." She wasn't talking of healing his spine and giving him his legs back (in human form) but rather she was speaking of a deeper healing – of living life in 4D. Living life in the way of connection with all things.

So he is obedient – he learns the way of the Na'vi – when learning to ride their version of a horse, he is instructed by the young female Na'vi to "feel her, feel her heart beat, her breathing, feel her strong legs; tell her what to do from inside you – but for now, use your voice."<sup>2</sup> He can do this deep feeling of the horse beneath him because in his Na'vi body he has a tail (think of it like the tail of a horse) and at the end of the tail the loose strands of hair move to reveal stronger looking strands of fibers that can mesh with or interlock with the fiber strands of the animal he's riding. It's called creating the bond with the animal. That bond allows for the senses of both the Na'vi and the animal to merge, in a sense and thus create a deeper connection between them is felt and understood.

This may sound like a stretch for some of us, I know but think about your favorite pet – maybe as a kid or even now maybe you share a connection with that other being. Yes, a different species but a live being with a heart beating just the same as yours. That connection, it's real. And it doesn't have to be such a close pet – or even a pet at all. About a month or so ago I was walking on the pier in Imperial Beach, and I stopped to

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<sup>2</sup> From the movie Avatar, 2009.

watch some fishermen. One of their lines hooked what looked to be a young sting ray and it was desperately trying to free itself. I watched as it broke the surface of the water and for a brief moment, our eyes met – then it went under the water. I couldn't watch the struggle anymore. Making that contact, even briefly felt like a connection – a recognition of another being and I was uncomfortable because I couldn't free it or end its misery. Sometimes it is a challenge to acknowledge the whole of life and stay within the balance of the circle of life.

Understanding this balance of life is what allows the Na'vi to live in what I call 4D. 4D is a spirit level connection. It's acknowledging that Life is not just something to be honored in humans but in every species. It is acknowledging that all Life, in whatever form, has value. Early in the story, Jake in his avatar body on the planet is separated from the crew and he ends up staying the night out in the forest, on his own. He's not expected to survive. Alone he hears and feels animals in the night approaching him. Jake resorts to creating and lighting a torch for protection. He uses fire to chase away that which scares him; it's a common, basic survival technique that's based on fear, not trusting the world around us; not sure if we can trust it or not. Fighting the unknown with his torch keeps him safe but busy and the animals sense that sooner or later he will run out of energy – he can't keep it up all night. A young Na'vi woman comes to his rescue and together they fight off the night prowlers. She ends up killing some of them in order to protect him. The others run off and after the fight Jake expresses his thanks for her help. She, kneeling over one of the dead animals, in anger responds to him that she is not to be thanked; this was a senseless killing. She tells him that while he has a strong heart and no fear, he is

stupid and ignorant like a child. She extinguishes his torch and when the flame is out, the natural light of the night in all its beauty illuminates the area around them.

Now that's all well and good for the film and the Na'vi in their fantasy world but we're humans – we have a reptilian brain that responds to danger by freezing, fighting or fleeing. And we don't have a tail with fibers ready to connect to other beings - but we do have something else that allows to connections – a mind and heart that's willing to see, to experience reality in a counter-cultural way. You see, I think we can – it is a matter of opening, it's a matter of being willing; for me it's a matter of humility and seeing your place in the universe in a different way. It's living life in a way that is not domineering but living with, along side rather than conquering.

The deep ecologist John Seed explains it this way in his essay 'Beyond Anthropocentrism' (that big word means human chauvinism). He writes "When humans investigate and see through their layers of anthropocentric self-cherishing, a most profound change in consciousness beings to take place. Alienation subsides. The human is no longer an outsider, apart. Your humanness is then recognized as merely the most recent stage of your existence, and ...you start to get in touch with yourself as mammal, as vertebrate, as a species only recently emerged from the rainforest. As the fog of amnesia disperses, there is a transformation in your relationship to other species, and in your commitment to them. ... 'I am protecting the rainforest' develops to 'I am part of the rainforest protecting myself. I am that part of the rainforest recently emerged into thinking.' What a relief then! The thousands of years of imagined separation are over and we begin to recall our true nature."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> From Forrest Gilmore's sermon "Respect for the Interdependent Web of All Existence of Which We Are a Part," The Seven Principles in Word and Worship, editor, Ellen Brandenburg, 2007, page 111.

This then is another way we can interpret our seventh principle; not just as an eco-friendly statement but a lived experience. My colleague Forrest Gilmore wrote a sermon for the book *The Seven Principles in Word and Worship* that speaks directly to this subject. In the sermon he explains how and why he changed his name to forest – for the epiphany he had in experiencing this deep connection to the earth. It was something more than just wanting to take care of or protect the earth and its resources – but rather it was a different way of understanding his place in the universe. He writes about the wilderness fast he participated in before entering professional ministry. With limited supplies he lived in the desert and reflected on his life, family and friends, how he had lived his life up to this moment and how he wanted to live it in the future. He sat and pondered ministry and what it means to be an adult male. He waited and watched the mountains that stood silently before him. He writes, “On the final morning I went out to a ledge to watch the sun rise. As the light slowly grew, I felt that I too was rising. When the sun finally cracked the horizon, that first speck of light seems to pierce into my heart. And I understood myself in a new way. I knew so clearly that there was something far greater than myself alone, and that my life would now be lived in dedication to it. It was then that I knew that the word Forrest in the spirit of ‘I am part of the rainforest protecting myself’ was to become my new name...it says I belong to the forest, to the water, to the plants, animals, people. I belong to the earth and to the stars.”<sup>4</sup>

What is it that you belong to? Do you know? How might you open to belonging more to all that this life is? Forrest invites us to change the world through our faith communities “from sanctuaries of individualism into communities of awe and purpose.”

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, page 112-113.

As in most epic story's our protagonist falls in love – Jake says he fell in love with the forest, with The People, and then with the young woman. And falling in love with this new way of living within the planet – he does all he can to protect it. How shall we protect all that we hold most sacred? Living life in 4D – with a deeper sense of connection with the world around us – it can be demanding and require us to do more than recycle and drive hybrid cars. As important as those actions are, living in 4D asks that we re-learn, see anew life and its connections between beings of all species and this may make us uncomfortable. We may need to ask ourselves to change some of our habits and ways of thinking. It is a challenge for me; I don't like to think I am like the earthworm crawling through the dirt and yet I'm drawn to the idea, in thoughts, essays and movies because we are connected, more than we know.

Living a 3D life says I'm alive and conscious of the earth that is our home – a home with its limited supply of resources; the earth that sustains us even as we pollute its waters and air, deplete its resources and leave the very dirt under our feet infertile. Living a 4D life says we have limited resources, that the earth doesn't have its resources but our resources – we are polluting our water, our air, we are part of the rainforest protecting ourselves, because there is no separation; we are linked – beyond our knowing.

One of the final scenes in Avatar is Jake speaking over the image of the gathering of The People – He says, “The Na’vi say a person is born twice – the second time is when you earn your place among The People – forever.” Have you earned your place here? And the image is the whole community gathered together – honoring his place among The People – and they have laid their hands on the shoulders of one another until they are all connected in a living, heart-beating together web of life.

One of our deepest longings is to be seen, to be connected. May this community – with all its frailty, all its pain and joy, and good intentions be a community for you to find connection to that which you experience as greater than yourself; may we patiently encourage one another into a deeper life of purpose and awe; may it be a place for you to be seen. Amen.