Perhaps you have heard of the apparel company named Life is Good. They began with a line of t-shirts and hats with various stick figures shown enjoying the simple pleasures of life – camping, surfing, riding horses, and such - with the statement “life is good” as a caption. The founders of the company, a pair of brothers from New England, decided they wanted to create a line of products celebrating optimism.

I have had an internal struggle with that company for years now. I alternately am drawn to the positive affirmations, yearning to wear a t-shirt or ball cap with such an upbeat statement emblazoned across it, and yet there is something about the seemingly naïve simplicity that also repels me.

Life is good. It’s a bold statement to make. Especially in the face of our global news system that delivers us all the most catastrophic news from around the world 24 hours a day. It is a bold statement to make in the face of all the violence in the world. How could anybody say that life is good when we all know about the prevalence of corruption and poverty and rape and murder and the sex slave industry and cancer that robs the childhood from little children? How could anybody in 2013 say life is good when the Earth herself has wrought so much violence in the form of storms and earthquakes and tsunamis that wipe away entire villages and claim thousands of lives? This sentiment is summed up well by those bumper stickers that declare, “If you’re not angry you’re not paying attention”.

To have the audacity to declare that life is good must mean I am being willfully ignorant of the many ways life is not really all that good for large swaths of people. As Unitarian Universalists we dedicate ourselves to seeing and resisting injustices, to noticing and changing the ways we are out of harmony with our planet. How then can a UU minister in good conscience, a minister who is paying attention, make such a horribly insipid statement?

And yet I do. Life is good.

What I’m talking about is different than blind optimism. What I am talking about involves backing up far enough to see the bigger picture, the cosmic perspective.

While we were in New York City one chilly afternoon in the early fall I met my friend Jason at the American Museum of Natural History. I was especially excited to see the show featured at the Hayden Planetarium called “Journey to the Stars”. In the planetarium we sat leaning back in our seats watching the images on the domed ceiling tell us the story of the Universe. The show began with the skyline of New York City as seen from Sheep’s Meadow in Central Park – a view with which I was growing familiar. But then it took us on a virtual zoom from New York City to the edge of the cosmos. En route the audience saw Earth, then the solar system, then the 100 billion stars of the Milky Way galaxy shrink to barely visible dots on the planetarium ceiling. We got to witness the birth of the first stars in the universe just as they were formed 13 billion years ago and watched our own sun die as it will in another 5 billion years.
I was enthralled! I felt like I couldn’t get my eyes wide enough to take it all in. My jaw kept dropping in astonishment after astonishment. I was feeling alive and connected and spirited. I couldn’t wait to talk to Jason about the sheer enormity of existence and how amazing it is to be a tiny, almost imperceptible part of something so mind-bogglingly huge.

When the lights came up Jason turned to me and said, “Well that was pretty depressing.” I was stunned. I said, “What?! Are you kidding?” He said, “Yeah, so eventually the sun will die and all life on earth will go with it. Why bother doing anything?”

I could see his point. I mean if everything we are working for here, all the buildings, all the infrastructure that enables us to travel and communicate around the globe, all the wild and scenic beauty of the earth we are trying desperately to preserve, if everything we know of life on earth will come to an end - albeit in some unimaginably far off future – it makes it hard to get too stressed out about something like the direction of one’s career, or those ten extra pounds you’ve been trying to lose for years.

Just a small aside - I’d like to put in quick a plug for anxiety and overeating. We all come from anxious people who were prone to put on weight. If we didn’t we wouldn’t be sitting here today. The ancestors who were laid back and non-anxious tended to get eaten before they could reproduce. It was the ones who were nervous and watchful that survived. And the ones who looked especially great naked didn’t always last through the harsh winters. They were weeded out of the gene pool. So let us be take a moment and offer our thanks for anxiety and those few extra pounds.

The cosmic perspective allows us to see beyond our circumstances. And for that reason it is threatening to the ego. Individually and culturally we tend to think that human beings are more important than everything else in the universe.

In that planetarium when I watched in wonder as our universe came into being before my eyes, and witnessed the process of dying stars exploding a spray of chemical elements out into their host galaxy – hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, and nitrogen — the elements of life on Earth, I understood in a new and humbling way that as astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson put it, “We are not simply in the universe. The universe is in us.”

We would like to think that we are the masters of space and time but in reality we are participants in a great cosmic chain of being. We have a direct genetic link across species both living and extinct, extending back nearly 4 billion years to the earliest single-celled organisms on Earth.

I find this cosmic perspective spiritual and liberating and redemptive, and not in the least bit depressing.

Neil deGrasse Tyson invites us to, “…imagine a world in which everyone, but especially people with power and influence, holds an expanded view of our place in the cosmos. With that perspective, our problems would shrink—or never arise at all—and we could celebrate
our earthly differences while shunning the behavior of our predecessors who slaughtered each other because of them.”

And I know we’re not quite living in that world yet. We live in a world in which nations have the ability to level entire cities with the touch of a button. We live in a world in which mentally ill men and women rummage in garbage cans for food and freeze to death in the doorways of corporate buildings. We live in a world in which we are debating how many civilians should have guns to protect themselves from the other civilians with guns.

And yet we also live in a world of kindness and compassion. Where children around the globe, and in this congregation, fold paper cranes as beautiful gestures of hope symbolizing their wishes for peace. Where people from all the continents have expressed their sympathy with those affected by the mass murder at Sandyhook Elementary School such that the people of Newtown had to rent a warehouse to store all the stuffed animals.

And even the optimistic Life is Good company is not as naïve and simplistic as I had at first assumed. I’ve discovered that they have launched a new movement to help preschoolers in major cities. Recognizing that many young children, especially in urban areas, suffer from the effects of trauma, violence poverty or illness the company has developed a certification program to train preschool teachers and daycare providers as what they call “playmakers”. The Playmaker training team are experts in early child development and childhood trauma. They have applied this training throughout the US and in response to some of the greatest crises of our time, including Hurricane Katrina, the 2010 Haiti and 2011 Japanese earthquakes.

The theory, which is backed up with research, is that playful loving relationships help kids heal. In the words of one of the people trained as a Playmaker, "It's all about the relationships. The magic is not in the play, but in the loving, joyful relationships that play helps to build."

I may yet break down and purchase one of those “Life is Good” t-shirts. I wonder if some day they might design a shirt emblazoned with the image of a tiny stick figured dancing among the stars in the universe.

I’d like to leave you with the words of the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, “People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth. Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don’t even recognize: a blue sky, white clouds, green leaves, the black, curious eyes of a child -- our own two eyes. All is a miracle.”