

Creation Envy

By Donne Hayden

Did you hear about the *Avatar* blues? This is true. After James Cameron's movie, *Avatar* came out, a significant number of viewers were depressed because Pandora, the world depicted in the movie, was so much more beautiful than our real world. An *Avatar* online forum received over 1000 posts on the topic thread "Ways to cope with the depression of the dream of Pandora being intangible." For example, one 17-year-old studying game design in Sweden wrote:

"When I woke up this morning after watching Avatar for the first time yesterday, the world seemed ... gray. It was like my whole life, everything I've done and worked for, lost its meaning . . . It just seems so ... meaningless. I still don't really see any reason to keep ... doing things at all. I live in a dying world. . . ."

Later in an email, the young man explained,

"One can say my depression was twofold: I was depressed because I really wanted to live in Pandora, which seemed like such a perfect place, but I was also depressed and disgusted with the sight of our world, what we have done to Earth. I so much wanted to escape reality."

The topic I want to address today is a phenomenon of something I'm calling "Creation Envy," humanity's attempts to imitate—even compete with—the Creator. I would like to begin by reading a few passages from Genesis in which this theme first appears in the Hebrew/Christian tradition. At the very beginning of the story, humans consider themselves "made in the image of God, the creator." (Genesis 1:26-31: *Then God said, 'Let us make humankind* in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the*

earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.')* Adam and Eve are prohibited from eating of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, but after they eat its fruit, God (again speaking in the plural) says: ***“See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever’—***²³*therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken.”* (Genesis 3:23) Fully aware of the creature’s limitations, the God(s) are concerned that humans, who have “become like one of us, knowing good and evil,” now may seek to be even more like divinity by pursuing immortality.

Out in the world, humankind so thoroughly disappoints the Creator(s) that, in Genesis 6, He/They flood the world, destroying all except Noah and his family. Still later, after re-populating, humanity continues its attempt to “be like God.” In Genesis 11, after the Flood, a group of them get together to build a tower tall enough to reach heaven, the domain of God the Creator. According to tradition, the tower in the great city of Babylon was constructed, not for the glory of God, but to *glorify man and his achievement*. Its Babylonian name was “Babel” meaning “Gate of God,” though the Hebrew storyteller in Genesis 11 refers to it as “balal,” the Hebrew word for “jumble.”

Here is that part of the story, Genesis 11:1-9 (After the flood, and before the tower ... the Gate of God)

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ²And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³And they said to one another, ‘Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.’ And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. ⁴Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.’ ⁵The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. ⁶And the LORD said, ‘Look, they are one people, and they*

have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. ⁷Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech.' ⁸So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.*

My *Access Study Bible* says that this passage shows “*the theme of God’s limits on excessive human pride and presumption*” and a note from the *Oxford Study Bible* refers to the Tower of Babel story as a narrative that “*revisits the theme of preservation of the divine-human boundary.*” Excessive human pride, presumption, over-confidence—qualities that may still cause the world deep trouble when humans try to cross the boundary into godhood.

I can never think of the story of the Tower of Babel and this divine-human boundary without remembering my piano teacher, Mrs. Clyde Newton. For about two years between 1959 and 1961, I took piano lessons from her. She was a widow who lived in the biggest house I’d ever been in—actually the entire first floor of a two-story apartment building she owned. (Of course at the time, we lived in a three-room house, so a house didn’t have to be very big to impress me.) Mrs. Newton was quite refined and quite religious. Along with every piano lesson, I received instructions in proper behavior and right thinking. I had little interest in playing the piano (probably because I had no talent), so more than anything else Mrs. Newton said, I remember when she convinced me the world would end. **Soon.**

In the spring of 1959, I was twelve and quite impressionable, and this was my first encounter with absolute certainty that the world would end, so I lived in real and mortal fear for several months. It was going to end, Mrs. Newton said, because mankind was getting too big for its britches as shown by the voyages into outer space by the Russians, who launched the first artificial satellite, Sputnik 1, in October 1957 and continued launching them, one after

another until eventually, ten such unmanned Sputniks were orbiting the night sky! When the Russians began to talk seriously of sending a human being up into space, this sent Mrs. Newton over the edge. Throughout the spring of 1959, my piano lessons were accompanied by her fear-filled commentary on the Tower of Babel and the end of the world. I don't know what church she attended, but she had apparently read or heard descriptions of what happened to the Tower of Babel not found in Genesis. Something like, for instance, in the *Greek Apocalypse of Baruch* where the following continuation of the story appears:

Those who gave counsel to build the tower, for they whom thou seest drove forth multitudes of both men and women, to make bricks; among whom, a woman making bricks was not allowed to be released in the hour of child-birth, but brought forth while she was making bricks, and carried her child in her apron, and continued to make bricks. And the Lord appeared to them and confused their speech, when they had built the tower to the height of four hundred and sixty-three cubits. And they took a gimlet, and sought to pierce the heavens, saying, Let us see (whether) the heaven is made of clay, or of brass, or of iron. When God saw this He did not permit them, but smote them with blindness and confusion of speech, and rendered them as thou seest. (Greek Apocalypse of Baruch, 3:5-8)

That's what those Russians were doing, Mrs. Newton said. Just like the people who built the Tower of Babel, they were too presumptuous; they "sought to pierce the heavens"; they were challenging God, and they were going to get us all in trouble., She was sure that God would be mad at their intrusion into his domain, assuring me that God would be destroying the world any time now and I'd better be ready. Indoctrinated by the Southern Baptist Church as I was, I believed her, and on into summer that year, I waited for the world to end.

When it didn't, I realized several things. The first was that I had to convince my parents that I did not want any more piano lessons. The second was that people who predict the end of the world can be wrong. The third was that fear makes fools of perfectly intelligent people.

I may not have learned much about the piano from Mrs. Newton, but I have always remembered the concept of humanity going perhaps too far, of challenging divinity and competing with God in arenas beyond our understanding. Several things converged around this idea in the past couple of weeks. One, of course, is the BP oil spill in the Gulf—caused in part at least by humans being over-confident, skipping safety procedures, apparently confident that nothing could possibly be so big and go so wrong that we couldn't fix it with human ingenuity.

In most recent *The Week* magazine is a summary from *Scientific American* of possible achievements by 2050. Likely events/accomplishments include self-aware robots, “able to self-replicate, teach themselves, and adapt to different conditions,” and cloned human beings. In fact, a company called Advanced Cell Technologies (ACT) in Worcester, Massachusetts has already cloned human embryos.¹ And the creation of synthetic life is almost certain to happen in the next 40 years. *The Week* explains it this way:

A major aim of such work is to bring the principles of large-scale engineering to biology. Imagine a world where bamboo is programmed to grow into a chair, or where self-assembling solar panels (otherwise known as leaves) feed electricity to houses. Reprogrammed bacteria might even be able to invade our bodies to heal, acting as an army of living doctors inside us.

“In principle, everything that is manufactured could be manufactured with biology,” argues George M. Church, a geneticist and technology developer at Harvard Medical School. It is already happening on a small scale: Enzymes from high-temperature microbes used in laundry detergent have been re-engineered to perform in cold water, thereby saving energy.

The article continues with this statement:

With great promise comes great risk, of course—namely in the form of modified organisms escaping the lab. Most such creations today are too ungainly to survive in the wild. For more sophisticated creations in the future, synthetic biologists expect that various safeguards would have to be instituted, such as including a new kind of self-destruct sequence in the genetic code.²

¹ “What Are the Odds?” “The Last Word” (column), *The Week* magazine, July 2-9, 2010 and online <http://theweek.com/article/index/204500/the-last-word-what-are-the-odds>

² “What Are the Odds?”

I am not so sure modified organisms escaping from the lab are the greatest risk—I distrust the human desire for power too much. I can imagine synthetic life-forms programmed to kill and destroy.

The young man in Sweden training to be a game designer who felt depressed after watching *Avatar* is probably like many of us these day: his life is circumscribed by man-made, human-controlled environments—air-conditioned rooms & cars & buses, heated offices & homes, 3-D movie theaters—I suspect he doesn't spend much time out in the real world of earth's nature. Everything James Cameron created in his film actually exists, although it may be in out-of-the-way places like the bottom of the ocean. “. . . the alien world of Pandora is based on our own biological paradise—Earth. The wonders of *Avatar* are all around us, you just have to know where to look.”³

Every day I walk my dog along the road paralleling the railroad tracks near my apartment complex. Thick vegetation blocks my view of the railroad tracks, and if I didn't know better, I could think I was walking past beautiful woods. Through the spring I've watched various plants blossom & bloom—the one little redbud tree, a couple of dogwoods, some sweet-smelling honeysuckle vines, a pink wild rose bush. Now into summer, a few volunteer day-lilies sprout along the roadside, blue cornflowers open early in the morning & in the early evening, white bindweed blossoms wind around foliage, and orange trumpet vine flowers are tucked among the leaves like ornaments. And one Queen Anne's Lace or wild carrot—probably my favorite plant. I picked one of the blossoms this morning to bring to Meeting. When I look

³ World of Avatar: in real life [Commentary by: Jeremy Hance](#)mongabay.com January 13, 2010.

closely at the construction of Queen Anne's Lace flowers, I marvel; I can be moved to tears. Look at the delicate tumbrel of tiny white flowers—*why* is it made that way? So lovely and complicated—surely Nature and/or the Creator could have made everything much simpler!

Unfortunately, along with all the vegetation, something else has bloomed beside the road—trash and litter. Earlier in the spring, I made a point to pick up the litter that began appearing with warm weather—soft drink cups, beer cans, candy wrappers. But the trash proliferated and I didn't wear gloves nor have a stick to snag it with—it felt too dirty to pick up with my bare hands—and about then I developed a nasty rash of some kind, perhaps caused by a fungus, that made me leery of everything. So I stopped picking up the trash along the pretty little wooded area. Now I am like the young man with the *Avatar* blues: “depressed and disgusted with the sight of our world, what we have done to Earth.” Thinking about this today, I've decided to resume the task of picking up the trash—it will be a ministry, small and insignificant to everyone but me. I can never create something as magnificent as Queen Anne's Lace or even the simplest weed, but I can take more care of the natural piece of the planet I walk on each day.

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then when we humans create *anything*, we are essentially imitating our own creator. We don't seem to realize or remember, however, that we don't have the divine perspective, the long view of things, the big picture. Some humility and caution are in order, combined with deep appreciation of the complexity of creation in which we live and move and have our being. I will end with wisdom from that great and weighty Friend, William Penn, who wrote in the 18th century:

. . . it would go a great way to caution and direct People in their Use of the World, that they were better studied and known in the Creation of it. For how could Man find the

Confidence to abuse it, while they should see the Great Creator stare them in the Face, in all and every part thereof? Their Ignorance makes them insensible, and that Insensibility hardy in misusing this noble Creation, that has the Stamp and Voice of a Deity every where, and in every Thing to the Observing.