

WHAT, ME WONDER?

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom the emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand wrapped in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed. The insight into the mystery of life, coupled though it be with fear, has also given rise to religion. To know what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty, which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms-this knowledge, this feeling is at the center of true religiousness.
Albert Einstein

One of the intended consequences of the climate change awareness campaign and an unintended consequence of the current pandemic is to slow us down to examine our lives and surroundings in wonder and awe. (Now take a deep breath and set aside your feelings of fear and anger at our present circumstances).

In this morning's mediation,¹ we were invited to simply incorporate our reflections of wonder into a wonder of ourselves. We might begin with these words from the poet May Sarton: "If one looks long enough at almost anything, looks with absolute attention at a flower, a stone, the bark of a tree, grass, snow, a cloud, something like revelation takes place." That revelation arrives through awe.

It is a revelation that inspired our Transcendentalist forebearers, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. That John Muir experienced upon his first visit to Yosemite when he recorded that,

"Everything was glowing with heaven's unquenchable enthusiasm...I tremble with excitement in the dawn of these glorious mountain sublimities, but I can only gaze and wonder."

That revelation led Muir and many of his followers to a wondrous devotion to the earth that seems, at times, mystical. It is a revelation that arises, as noted in this Unitarian Universalist principle: *out of the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*

¹ [Saint] Augustine of Hippo:
"People travel to wonder
at the height of the mountains,
at the huge waves of the seas,
at the long course of the rivers,
at the vast compass of the ocean,
at the circular motion of the stars,
and yet they pass by themselves
without wondering."

But such revelation is not dependent on sight alone, as we heard in our reading from Beston's year on Coast Guard Beach in Eastham.² On Sunday mornings we can hear it from our choir and the music so graciously offered by our director, Fred Johnson and our musician, Nancy Wendlant. In a time of solitude, I sometimes find myself on a journey of wonder and awe from Bach to Brubeck and Mozart to Miles. Indeed, for fifty years, the Church of St. John Coltrane in San Francisco has taken its congregants on such a journey to *A Love Supreme*.

In Plato's dialogues, Aristotle essentially tells Theaetetus that wonder is the beginning of philosophy. But, over the centuries wonder and awe led to holy revelation in religion and life affirming discoveries in science. Indeed, Rachel Carson, Jane Goodall, Richard Feynman, and Stephen Hawking, talk about the role of awe and wonder as psychological motivators for their work.

Abraham Heschel, a Jewish theologian and civil rights activist in the last century wrote, "awareness of the divine begins with wonder." It is the beginning of religious belief or faith. "Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement," Heschel said. "Get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed." Heschel's message is one that all of us, theist, atheist, and agnostic should embrace. It raises up one of the sources of our religion as Unitarian Universalists: *the direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.*

It is a message that will lead us from wonder and awe down a sacred path. A path that, according to a peer reviewed study done about five years ago by researchers working together from four universities in the U.S. and Canada, serves a vital social function.³ The researchers found that the participants in the study that experienced

² "The three great elemental sounds in nature are the sound of rain, the sound of wind in a primeval wood, and the sound of outer ocean on a beach. I have heard them all, and of the three elemental voices, that of ocean is the most awesome, beautiful and varied."

Henry Beston, *The Outermost House: A Year of Life on the Great Beach of Cape Cod*.

³ Paul Piff, Pia Dietz, Matthew Feinberg, Daniel Stancato, Dacha Keltner, *Awe, the Small Self, and Prosocial Behavior*; *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 108, No. 6, 883–899 (2015)

wonder and awe engaged in more prosocial behaviors. That is, behavior that is positive, helpful, and intended to promote social acceptance. According to the lead researcher, the experience of awe, while fleeting, diminishes emphasis on the individual self and encourages people to forgo self-interest to improve the welfare of others. In short, experiencing wonder and awe can lead to acts of loving kindness.

Please take minute and reflect on what you have seen, heard, or otherwise experienced that led you on path of wonder and awe. How did you feel? How do you feel now?

We have all heard friends or acquaintances say, “I am not religious, but I am spiritual” when asked if they belonged to a church. For years, I wondered what that meant. Over time I came to understand that religion provides a construct, a basis for spirituality. And that spirituality is a journey towards the sacred.

Some call the sacred, “God.” Some call it “spirit of life,” or the “ground of being.” Some just simply call it “love.” All religions teach that we are not alone and that we are loved. We are also taught that on our spiritual journey we are, in the words of the prophet, Isaiah (58:12), repairers of the world. Indeed, we share a responsibility to heal, repair and transform the world.

In Judaism, that responsibility is found in the *Aleynu* prayer and called *tikkun olam*. In Christianity, the Gospel of Luke (4:18), urges us to follow Jesus in giving sight to the blind, liberty to the captives, and deliverance to the oppressed.

As the Covid 19 pandemic has spread, that journey for repair and healing has been undertaken by our medical teams, first responders, scientific researchers, equipment manufacturers, commercial vendors, government and community-based organizations, faith communities, and so many more. It includes you, when you deliver groceries to a neighbor, or simply call a friend and ask, “*are you all right?*”

My friends, this is the time to start your spiritual journey by providing sacred service in a civic space.