

“Curiouser and Curiouser”

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N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

“Blessed are the curious.”

When I chose that quote, by British Columbia painter Robert Genn, for the top of our Order of Service, I was thinking about the relationship of “curiosity” to “wonder”—our new theme for the month of April.

But when I looked at it the other day, I was struck by the other meaning of the word.

Curious can also mean “odd” or “unusual”. So the quote might read, “blessed are the weird.”

When I realized that I almost took the quote out.

But then I realized how odd we Unitarians often can seem.

Often we are a little unusual or unconventional, compared to the mainstream.

I’m sure we sometimes seem like “odd ducks”—like the duck in Kathleen McTigue’s story.

A few weeks ago we meet our 19th century Unitarian ancestor Theodore Parker. He must have seemed that way, when he said that religious truth did not depend on proof of miracles.

Just as Kathleen McTigue realized that there didn't have to be any miraculous explanation for why a duck ended up in her living room,

Parker realized that whether or not Jesus performed miracles or not, his teachings were worthy of reverence.

By wondering about what mattered most in religion, Parker set himself apart from the crowd.

He dared to be curious...and to seem curious as a result.

Because of him and others who looked wide-eyed at the world with a curious spirit, we're part of a religious tradition that need not stay stuck.

And that's a good thing, because life keeps moving and changing...and unless we're able to stay curious about it, we're likely to close down in judgment.

Life has a way of surprising us. Of baffling and confounding us.

Lewis Carroll wrote a wonderful story about that called "Alice in Wonderland."

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In that story, a young girl on the edge of growing up finds herself thrown into a strange and challenging world, where nothing is as expected.

Readers have pointed out that the story parallels the changes that take place in adolescence...when one's body and emotions are thrown all out-of-whack.

It doesn't just happen in adolescence...it happens at other times of life too.

During the changes of midlife and later, the traumas of illness and grief, the unexpected upturning of life during unemployment.

We might find ourselves falling down a “rabbit hole” of anxiety or depression.

Many stories, in fact and fiction, take us in those dark directions.

Lewis Carroll’s story, though, is called “Alice in Wonderland”—not “Alice in Anxiety-land”.

And maybe that can give us a clue of how to respond, when things go topsy-turvy.

The title of this sermon, “Curiouser and Curiouser,” comes from the following passage:

“...she decided on going into the garden at once; but, alas for poor Alice! when she got to the door, she found she had forgotten the little golden key, and when she went back to the table for it, she found she could not possibly reach it.

Soon her eye fell on a little glass box that was lying under the table: she opened it, and found in it a very small cake, on which the words 'EAT ME' were beautifully marked in currants.”

'Well, I'll eat it,' said Alice, 'and if it makes me grow larger, I can reach the key; and if it makes me grow smaller, I can creep under the door; so either way I'll get into the garden, and I don't care which happens!'

So she set to work, and very soon finished off the cake.

'Curiouser and curiouser!' cried Alice. 'Now I'm opening out like the largest telescope that ever was! Good-bye, feet!'

(For when she looked down at her feet, they seemed to be almost out of sight, they were getting so far off.)

In the story, as Alice is trying hard to get into the garden she desires, she is literally stretched so far that she loses the connection with her feet.

You might say she loses her groundedness...loses her footing.

And yet, with the creative presence-of-mind we might all hope to have, Alice decides to keep in touch with her feet by sending them new boots in the mail.

Alice's problems don't stop there, though. For now she is nine feet tall, and when she reaches the garden door, she can only look into it by lying down on one side.

Her situation seems more hopeless than ever, and she says to herself, 'Dear, dear! How strange everything is to-day!

I wonder if I've been changed in the night.'

It's a familiar feeling: that we've been changed somehow, after a particularly difficult experience.

And then Alice asks,

“If I'm not the same, the next question is, “Who in the world am I? Ah, THAT'S the great puzzle!”

When Alice's strategies to get into the “garden” don't work, at first she falls down into a vast pool of tears...

But then she rises, and asks central question:
“Who in the world am I?”

When life stretches us, maybe it’s time for wonder.

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The healing power of wonder is illustrated beautifully by this story by Dr. Richard Selzer.

“I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish.

A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed. She will be thus from now on.

As a surgeon, I had followed with religious fervour the curve of her flesh, I promise you that.

Nevertheless, to remove the tumour in her cheek, I had to cut the little nerve.

Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private.

“Who are they,” I ask myself, “he and this wry mouth who gaze and touch each other so generously?”

The woman speaks:

“Will my mouth always be like this?” she asks.

“Yes,” I say. “It’s because the nerve was cut.”

She nods, is silent. But the young man smiles.

“I like it,” he says, “It’s kind of cute.”

All at once I know who he is. I understand, and I lower my gaze.
One is not bold in an encounter with a god.

Unmindful of my presence, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and
I’m so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate
hers, to show her that their kiss still works.

I remember that the gods appeared in ancient Greece as mortals, and
I hold my breath and let the wonder in.”¹

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It strikes me that wonder is revealed in a couple of ways in this story.

First, the young couple is curious about how they can adapt, now that
their lives have been changed.

Both the young woman and young man seem to suspend judgment
on what has happened.

Instead, they’re interested in learning how to be with each other,
under new circumstances.

The ground has shifted beneath them, but they keep their footing,
with a kiss.

The surgeon is humbled as he witnesses the scene.

His wonder is that human beings can be, in effect, God-like.

¹ Jack Kornfield, *The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness and Peace* (New York: Bantam, 2002), 110-111.

Unconditionally loving and creative, with grace that seems almost superhuman.

Perhaps it is a child-like wonder, a holy curiosity, that allows us to grow into our divine nature.

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The open, curious acceptance of *What Is* is the starting-point for creative, loving engagement with the world.

When we start with “I wonder...” we allow ourselves to be part of the flow of life experience, to breathe with it, rather than closing down in fear and anger.

In conflict resolution training, this attitude is called “humble inquiry.”

An open curiosity about what someone else’s experience has been like...what led them to take a particular action, which may have had an unintended effect.

In artistic practice, this same spirit of inquiry can lead us to mindfully trace the exact curve of a line...

To patiently mix colours so they might match the sunset...

Or to experiment with chord changes until they reveal a particular subtle emotion.

When we wonder, “What *is* going on with me right now?”

“What *was* my friend feeling?”

or “Why *do* those trees look like my hands?”

In various ways, we're asking the question that young Alice called "the great puzzle":

Not just "who am I?" but

"Who in the world am I?"

What is my connection—my relationship—with myself, with others, with the world, and the forces that made it?

This kind of curiosity is bound to stretch us, and lead us into new fields of wonder and exploration.

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There's a new book coming out next week by the American writer Barbara Ehrenreich. I'm very curious about it.

It's called "Living with a Wild God"...though one reviewer said it will please neither athiests nor theists.

It's a memoir of experiences Ehrenreich had as a teenager in which she felt a powerful sense of union with the world, along with a falling-away of usual frames of human reference. She writes,

"I might be in school, concentrating on Latin conjugations or logarithmic tables, and suddenly notice my fingers holding the pencil and realize I was looking at a combination of yellow and pink, of straight and curved, that had never been seen before and never would be seen again by anyone in the universe, and with that realization, all that was familiar would drain out of the world around me.

Or I might look up from a book to find a patch of sunlight pulsing on the door and feel it leap up to challenge the solidity of the entire scene.

Or I might be in the midst of a conversation with a friend when without warning my sense of reality changed.”²

In another section, she writes:

"[T]he world flamed into life. How else to describe it? ...Something poured into me and I poured out into it."

Like Alice in Wonderland, Barbara Ehrenreich found herself having to stretch to make sense of these new and puzzling perceptions.

For years, she would not write about them.

Her mother told her that if something could not be explained, then it could not be true.³

In the forward to the book, quoted in an interview in the Los Angeles Times on Friday, she asked, “[W]hat do you do with something like this — an experience so anomalous, so disconnected from the normal life you share with other people, that you can't even figure out how to talk about it?”⁴

That reminds me of Alice’s comment that she’s so overcome by Wonderland, she can’t even speak correctly about it.

That’s why she says “curiouser and curiouser” instead of “more and more curious”.

² Barbara Ehrenreich, “The Trees Step Out of the Forest,” *Harper’s Magazine*, March 2014, 11-15.

³ Harper’s, 14.

⁴ David L. Ullin, “Barbara Ehrenreich faces the mystical in 'Living With a Wild God',” *Los Angeles Times*, April 4, 2014. <http://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-ca-jc-barbara-ehrenreich-20140406,0,2464009.story#ixzz2xybHd9AM>

Barbara Ehrenreich asks, “How do we reconcile the mystical experience with daily life? Let us be open to the anomalous experience.

If you see something that looks like the Other, do not fall on your knees. Find out what it is and report back.”⁵

She invites us to be curious in all dimensions of life experience. To wonder, to inquire, to engage.

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I was curious, because I couldn’t remember, whether or not Alice ever got into the garden after all.

It turns out she does, but only after growing and shrinking many times, as we all tend to do...

And after meeting many curious creatures who are a lot like humans.

Intimidating authority figures, unreliable cats in trees, rabbits late for appointments...

Sounds pretty much like fact, as much as fiction.

In the end, the story turns out to be nothing but a dream...an ephemeral and rather curious fable that is rambling and odd.

And yet, one that continues to hold meaning and inspiration, like every human life.

⁵ Los Angeles Times.

It began as an act of kindness, when Lewis Carroll—or rather, the Anglican minister Reverend Charles Dodgson—wondered what kind of story to tell his friend’s children while out on a rowing trip.

Who knew what would happen next?

Something ever more curious.

Blessed are the curious.

Blessed are we.

Amen.