

“Living Spiritually on the Edge”
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
A sermon preached by Stephanie Gannon
on 13 December 2015

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.

When I was a kid, wonder was something special I felt only now and then. Or at least that’s how I remember it. When I was about 10, my parents took my brother and me to Niagara Falls. We took a boat ride underneath some of the falls. I was astonished by the force of the water and by its beauty. It was like nothing I’d ever seen or imagined before. Wow, just wow! How could flowing water be so strong? What was its source? Why were there magical rainbows floating in the mist? I was fascinated by stories of people going over the falls in barrels. Didn’t they know that was dangerous? I was so excited and had many more questions than my parents could possibly answer. As we drove back home to Maryland, I was filled with so much wonder I nearly burst.

There were other moments of wonder in my childhood that stood out. For example, the few times my parents took us to see the Blue Angels air shows in Dover, Delaware. My jaw would fall open as I stared up at the sky as the planes did their incredibly difficult formations. The jets were extremely loud, and as they descended quickly and then suddenly changed course again and again in unison, the crowd would cheer in excitement, and I along with them. But this was just once a year at most.

The same was true of the circus. We didn’t go every year, but it was my favourite excursion. I loved the clowns with their colourful costumes, tiny cars, and goofy tricks. I was riveted by the great tigers that could be coaxed through hoops and taught to stand on their hind legs and dance around by their brave trainers who would be inside the enclosed ring with them. But most of all, I liked looking up at the tightrope walkers and trapeze artists. I was mesmerized by their beauty and grace as they balanced and performed up in the air under the bright lights. I wanted to be them. I dreamed of being part of the community of performers and misfits in the traveling circus. I wanted to have as much glamour, fun, and daring as them. I came home with the large format circus program. Every day for weeks after I studied the pictures and read the stories that went along with them. I wanted to keep as long as possible that sense of mystery and wonder I experienced in the show.

These were some of the extraordinary moments of wonder from my childhood. In contrast, everyday wonder closer to home was much harder for me to find. Maybe that’s why these memories are stronger somehow.

When you look back over your life, where has wonder been for you? Was it something you had a lot of? Was it taught to you, or did you discover it on your own? When did you last experience wonder this month? This past week? Today? Does wonder come and go for you, or is the experience something you can continually cultivate?

A little over a year ago I signed up for Dr. Cornel West's class at Union on Abraham Joshua Heschel. What I didn't realize then is that reading Heschel would help me fill in some of the gaps in my seminary education concerning spiritual formation. Heschel would teach me new ways of connecting more the prophetic with the pastoral. It may sound shocking, but discovering Heschel was one of the few times during seminary that I found a theologian who was also deeply spiritual. Among other things, his work suggests compelling ways of grounding ourselves spiritually for activist work.

You might recall that Heschel is the one who famously insisted that we need to be praying with our feet. I love this metaphor. It combines so well the contemplative with the active. Heschel courageously marched at Selma alongside Martin Luther King, Jr. and was a great Civil Rights advocate and ally. Many Unitarian Universalists will know him from the context of his interfaith work and his famous speech, "No Religion Is an Island," given at Union Theological Seminary fifty years ago. He taught for many years right across the street at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Heschel came from a long line of Hassidic rabbis in Poland. He completed his doctorate from the University of Berlin in 1933, just after Hitler came to power. A few years later his dissertation was published as the book *The Prophets*. It's astonishing to think that such a book about Hebrew Bible prophets managed to get published in Nazi Germany. The young Heschel narrowly escaped the Nazis—eventually making it to Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio—but tragically his mother and three sisters didn't survive the war. For the survivor Heschel life was especially precious and fragile. He couldn't help being grateful for the simplest of things and never forgot about the catastrophes and losses caused by Nazism and throughout the Second World War. As Heschel puts it so eloquently, "We live for the sake of a song. We praise for the privilege of being."¹ In his view worship is where we can express our gratitude most fully.

Heschel saw religion as a struggle. It shouldn't just be about so-called going through the motions. It requires being fully engaged and intense in one's religious commitment or devotional practices. He laments the fact that people have lost touch with the holy and insists on the need to rekindle an intimacy of relationship to God. Needless to say, it won't be easy. The relationship must be "patiently, honestly, persistently nourished"² through prayer and devotion.

Wonder is central to Heschel's sense of religiosity and faith. In our reading for today Heschel claims that our potential for happiness depends on our capacity for wonder. A life without wonder simply isn't worth living. For him wonder is not something that can be

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susannah Heschel. (New York: FSG, 1996) 263.

² Ibid, 266.

expressed well through language. In various places in his work he links it to the ineffable. Along these lines, he writes in *Man Is Not Alone* that wonder is “the realization that the world is too incredible, too meaningful for us.”³

Towards the end of his book *God In Search of Man* Heschel writes, “Life must be earned spiritually, not only materially. We must keep alive the sense of wonder through deeds of wonder.”⁴ What might these “deeds of wonder” look like? What does wonder move us to do for ourselves or for others? Experiencing wonder is crucial for Heschel and related to deeply innate religious impulses that he claims are universal. We can choose to bring our awareness to them or to ignore them.

Heschel explains that “The world is full of wonder. Who will answer? Who will care?”⁵ Do we have an obligation to care? What do we miss when we can’t respond to wonder? Is life then worth living? Apparently for Heschel, life without wonder is destructive. He describes this state as a “dead emptiness in the heart”⁶ that’s unbearable. Over and over again in his writings he laments that the worst sins of human beings are callousness and indifference. He insists that eventually we’ll have to answer the “still small voice” of God. It can’t be avoided.

Heschel presses us to ask the question: Can we be authentically religious people without a sense of wonder? His repeated claim is that “[a]wareness of the divine begins with wonder.”⁷ Where, when, and how do we as Unitarians experience wonder? It’s listed as the first source of our faith: *direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder...which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and openness to the forces which create and uphold life*. I read this as Heschelian. Don’t you? My hope is that we experience wonder and mystery regularly in the context of worship—in our beautiful music, our readings, in our quiet time for meditation and reflection. But how about in our daily lives? How do we make room for that, let alone as a regular practice?

Wonder is intricately linked to the soul, not to the rational mind. It’s more about relationship, empathy, response. As Heschel says, we don’t wonder at things; we wonder with all things.⁸ We need to cultivate wonder regularly through prayer, worship, and gratitude practices. It’s not a light that flicks on and stays on all by itself. “The insights of wonder must be constantly kept alive.”⁹

I don’t think that for Heschel wonder is associated exclusively with happy experiences. To get close to the meaning of God, you have to become still, to distance yourself from your ego, and to become familiar with darkness. It’s not about solipsism or

³ Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone* (New York: FSG, 1979) 58.

⁴ Heschel, *God In Search of Man* (New York: FSG, 1983) 349.

⁵ Ibid, 352.

⁶ Ibid, 113.

⁷ Ibid, 46.

⁸ *Man Is Not Alone*, 65.

⁹ *God In Search of Man*, 49.

private spiritual experiences, but rather “pray[ing] the world’s cry, the world’s sigh”¹⁰ that we might hear God crying out for us. In poignant terms, Heschel describes a “loneliness in us that hears.”¹¹ We must be familiar with our own interior landscape before we can become aware of this aching for connection with the divine.

To enter into a state of wonder requires that we listen. Heschel claims that wonder *never* leaves us. We just need to return to God, to turn again to God, and that effort requires careful listening and receptivity. It’s not easy to get into this state; it’s a spiritual practice that takes some discipline. Heschel writes that, “the present is the presence of God. Things have a past and a future, but only God is pure presence.”¹² We can discover this in the present moment. *Now*.

How can we cultivate wonder during this crazy busy holiday season? When we’re running around trying to do so much—you know, the long lists of holiday shopping items, baking, card writing, etc. —there’s hardly any time to slow down, find stillness, and open ourselves to wonder. In fact, my first response to this suggestion is—come on, you’ve gotta be kidding me! External demands of parties, family gatherings, and work commitments tend to pull us away from anything like a quiet centre. The result is exhaustion and burnout. How many of you can relate?

My charge for you today is to find moments to breathe during this season of lights. I know it may be hard, but choose to slow down, notice, feel. There’s so much to wonder *with*. There’s so much to take in and be nourished by. Heschel’s invitation to us is that we open our hearts to the wonder and mystery that is *already* there waiting for us.

Our first source is a doorway or threshold to deeper faith and connection to life and its fullest meaning. Now is the perfect time for remembering and cherishing this. Allow yourselves be filled with reverence. Breathe in wonder, breathe out thanks. Won’t you take in a few of these soothing breaths with me? Ours is a living breathing faith. Don’t forget, especially at this time of year, that it begins in joy and wonder. Savor that for all it’s worth. Blessed be and amen.

¹⁰ Ibid, 140.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *God In Search of Man*, 142.