

# Stars of Wonder, Stars of Night

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
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*Winter Solstice Eve*

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.

## **Reading**            **“Toward the Winter Solstice” by Timothy Steele**

Although the roof is just a storey high,  
It dizzies me a little to look down.  
I lariat-twirl the rope of Christmas lights  
And cast it to the weeping birch’s crown;  
A dowel into which I’ve screwed a hook  
Enables me to reach, lift, drape, and twine  
The cord among the boughs so that the bulbs  
Will accent the tree’s elegant design.

Friends, passing home from work or shopping, pause  
And call up commendations or critiques.  
I make adjustments. Though a potpourri  
Of Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Jews, and Sikhs,  
We all are conscious of the time of year;  
We all enjoy its colourful displays  
And keep some festival that mitigates  
The dwindling warmth and compass of the days.

Some say that L.A. doesn’t suit the Yule,  
But UPS vans now like magi make  
Their present-laden rounds, while fallen leaves  
Are gaily resurrected in their wake;  
The desert lifts a full moon from the east  
And issues a dry Santa Ana breeze,  
And valets at chic restaurants will soon  
Be tending flocks of cars and SUV’s.

And as the neighbourhoods sink into dusk  
The fan palms [trees] scattered all across town stand  
More calmly prominent, and this place seems  
A vast oasis in the Holy Land.  
This house might be a caravansary,  
The tree a kind of cordial fountainhead  
Of welcome, looped and decked with necklaces  
And ceintures of green, yellow, blue, and red.

Some wonder if the star of Bethlehem  
Occurred when Jupiter and Saturn crossed;  
It's comforting to look up from this roof  
And feel that, while all changes, nothing's lost,  
To recollect that in antiquity  
The winter solstice fell in Capricorn  
And that, in the Orion Nebula,  
From swirling gas, new stars are being born.

### **“Stars of Wonder, Stars of Night”**

“I wonder as I wander out under the sky. . .”

There are, of course, additional lyrics that follow.

But that short phrase from that haunting carol  
captured my imagination as a child.

It was unlike any of the other Christmas carols that I knew.  
It asked questions. And it invited questioning.

It spoke to my much younger self with a powerful, poetic sense  
of nature's grandeur, of the vast sky and our patch of earth beneath it,  
of the immensity of the universe and how,  
though small and seemingly insignificant,  
we are given to wonder about the deepest meaning  
of our having been born into this grand but bittersweet bargain that is life.

But, of course, wondering isn't only about pondering,  
about thinking, about wrestling to understand.

It's also about allowing ourselves to be swept up, to be overwhelmed,  
to be taken in by the best this world has to offer,  
to be renewed by it,  
and be reminded of the complicated gift it is to be a child of the universe.

Last week, as Angela and I discussed the story she would tell this morning,  
she shared with me the experience she had a few years ago  
when she told the same story in Children's Chapel.

She told of Mother Nature taking her great mixing bowl  
and stirring in this and that, making planets and stars, cooking up the cosmos,  
and throwing in humans just to make things interesting.

There was one little girl who was clearly captivated that morning.

Especially when Angela explained that we humans are made  
from the very same elements that comprise the stars,  
that we are, quite literally, star-stuff.

Now, this child, raised up in this congregation,  
had already heard a number of different creation stories in her years here—  
from the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden,  
to the Aboriginal story of the earth borne on the back of Big Turtle.

She had also been raised to be something of a skeptic,  
and so she immediately asked Angela, "Is the story true?"

When Angela said, "Yes, yes it is," the little girl's face lit up in a flash.

Angela could see her little mind racing, filling with thoughts and questions,  
analyzing the implications of this astounding fact,  
truly wondering, in both senses of the term.

Hearing that story a few days ago caused a not-so-little lump to form in my  
throat.

Sabine, the little girl, was, in that moment,  
even in the telling of a story now five years old, a marvel.

Even by proxy, she was a wonder to behold,

as she came to terms with her place, with our place, in the universe.

The great Unitarian Universalist ethicist James Luther Adams said that we need regular encounters with both life's intimacy and its ultimacy. Intimacy and Ultimacy. Not either/or, but both/and.

We need to experience the depth of human connection through close bonds with the world around us— with friends and family, with those who carry us in their hearts, and we them.

But we also need those moments that break forth into the everyday, those moments that cut through the chaos and the clutter of our days, and put everything into a broader understanding— reminding us of where we exist, not merely in the grand scheme of things, but in the grandest scheme of things.

Yes, it is true. We are of stardust made.

We are not simply alive in the universe; we are the universe, alive, here and now.

The vast story that began with the Big Bang is—wonder of wonders— being told for a few fleeting moments in you and in me.

I think that's why it's still so compelling to cast our eyes to the heavens and take part in our cosmic family reunion.

To see in those twinkling stars, the pulse of the universe, to hear the music of the spheres.

Those who've heard me talk about Bob through the years won't be surprised to learn that he's an avid stargazer.

It's not uncommon that we hop in the car late at night and head north to take in the night sky.

So, for a big milestone birthday this year, we, after buying double carbon offsets for our trip, went to Hawaii to experience one of the biggest items on Bob's bucket list. Most people go to Hawaii for the beaches. We went for the stars.

The observatory atop Mauna Kea—the highest mountain in the Hawaiian islands,  
and, if measured from the ocean floor, the tallest mountain in the world—  
is one of the best spots on the earth to see the stars,  
not only for its location but because it's largely free of air and light pollution.

It's also one of the few places on the planet  
where you can see both the Southern Cross and the North Star,  
the coordinates that help anchor our place on earth  
in the neighbourhood of the Milky Way.

You've likely seen photos of the mountain.

Near its top, it has thirteen observatories  
built and managed by eleven different countries.

All with enormous telescopes trained  
into the outer reaches of our known universe.

It takes years for most astronomers to even get  
a block of time with the telescopes.

I'm sure it must be a thrill to get to operate one of those things.

(And I'm pretty sure they're not something I'll ever be entrusted with.  
Given the quick mess I can make of things at home  
with our inexplicable array of remote controls,  
it's probably best that I just stick to working with words...)

The real party at Mauna Kea, though, is 1000 metres down from the top.

The top is perfect for the telescopes,  
but it turns out that the altitude of over 4,000  
metres (and resulting air pressure)  
isn't so great for seeing with the naked human eye.

Each evening at the Visitors' Centre, as night falls,  
intrepid stargazers are taken on a tour of the universe  
by one of the resident astronomers.

The whole place is set up for stargazing.  
No regular white lights are allowed anywhere.

As cars climb the mountain they are required to turn off their headlights.  
Needless to say, it's advisable to make the drive before dusk.  
But the drive, harrowing even during the bright light of day, is worth it.

For hours in the freezing cold, kept warm with our winter coats  
and multiple mugs of hot chocolate, we took in the view.

We peeked through telescopes to see the rings of Saturn  
and four of Jupiter's moons, to see the beauty of star clusters,  
and to behold the vast cosmic dance going on and on above our heads.

Though this trip was for Bob,  
the truth is that I was star struck.

"Stars of wonder, stars of night." Indeed.

How dare we miss this show so often, this grand spectacle,  
this wondrous story that plays out night after night?

How easy it is to take it for granted, rather than taking it in.

How easy it is to forget these beacons burning bright over our heads,  
and the power they have to help us find our way,  
to navigate our journey through this one, wild and precious life,  
to remind us from whence we've come,  
and assure us that we'll always be held in the cradle of this life-giving universe.

One of the most powerful stories I know  
about the saving grace of the night sky  
is told by my remarkable colleague Rebecca Parker.<sup>1</sup>

Years ago, living in Seattle,  
Rebecca had come to the end of her will to live.

From her home, at the top of the hill far above Lake Union,

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<sup>1</sup> Paraphrased from Rebecca Ann Parker's own telling, in her book *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, written with Rita Nakashima Brock.

sometime after midnight she left her house  
and started walking down the hill.

She knew the water would be cold enough.  
She would walk into it, then swim, and let go,  
sinking down into the darkness and, as she put it, “go home to God.”

Comforted by that notion, she had no second thoughts.  
She was set on her course.

At the bottom of the hill, she had only the small grassy rise  
at the edge of Kite Hill to cross before coming to the water’s edge.

She crested the familiar rise and began the descent  
to the welcoming water when she was caught short  
by a barrier that hadn’t been there before.

It looked like a long line of oddly shaped sawhorses,  
laid out to the left and to the right, the width of the grassy field.

In the dark she couldn’t see a way to get around either end,  
but thought she might be able to climb over the middle.

So, she quickened her pace, impelled by a grief that would not let her go.

As she got closer, the dark forms before her eyes seemed to be moving.  
She squinted to understand what she was seeing.

The odd bunched shapes  
were actually a line of human beings, all bundled up in parkas and hats.

The stick shapes weren’t sawhorses, after all.

They were telescopes.  
She had just stumbled upon a late-night gathering  
of the Seattle Amateur Astronomy Club.

Before she could make her way through the line,  
one of them looked up from his eyeglass  
and, presuming her to be an astronomer, said with great enthusiasm,  
“I’ve got it focused perfectly on Jupiter. Come, take a look.”

She didn't want to be rude or give away her real reason for being there,  
so she bent down and peered through the telescope.

And, there it was: Jupiter—banded red and glowing!

“Isn't it great?” he asked.

And, it was great.

Jupiter was astonishingly beautiful through the telescope.

That amateur astronomer didn't know Rebecca,  
or know why she was there.

He just assumed she was there

because the night sky is a wonder to behold.

In that instant, Rebecca knew she couldn't kill herself  
in the presence of these good people  
who had gotten up in the middle of a cold spring night,  
with their home-built Radio Shack telescopes,  
to behold the marvel of the planets and the stars.

Looking back on that moment,  
she recalled the stunning words of the poet James Agee:

Sure on this shining night  
Of starmade shadows round,  
kindness must watch for me  
This side the ground. . .

That night, the poets, the amateur scientists,  
and the splendour of the night sky kept Rebecca in this world.

She is quick to say that it was not the overwhelming beauty that did it.  
It was more that she simply came to feel more than she had before.  
Her senses expanded. Her capacity for life broadened.

And, while life's hurts remained,  
she was able to embrace pain, and sadness, and despair, with a larger heart.

As she puts it,

“The ordinary inclination of human beings to share what pleases them,



the delight of being awake to the beauty of the night sky,  
the cool air, the grass beneath [our] feet—  
these [things] returned life to my senses.

[That night,] the commonplace translated itself into a deeper knowing.  
[That] there is a web of connection we live in  
that is greater than [our] senses can tell.”<sup>2</sup>

Friends, as we stand at the great gate of winter, out under the solstice sky,  
let us wonder as we wander.

Let us give thanks for that enduring web that binds us to everything.

Let us take time to truly marvel at the mystery and the majesty and the miracle  
that brought each of us into being.

And, with it all, let our hearts be glad,  
as we rejoice in the growing light of longer days.

Blessed Be.

### **Closing Words – Shawn Newton**

This Solstice, as the heavens twirl and spin in their course,  
may you find your place anew.

As we hear again the wondrous stories once again:  
of miracles that give light longer than we could hope,  
of babes born to save the world,  
of the turning of the great wheel of the year toward the growing days . . . ,  
may we hold tight to our hearts the greatest wonder of them all:  
that life abounds this day, and this night, in you and in me.

Blessed Be!

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<sup>2</sup> *Proverbs of Ashes*, 114-115.