

“A Wing and a Prayer: Wow!”

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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.

I was guest-preaching,
at another Unitarian congregation,
during my final year at seminary.

I'd just completed my master's thesis,
which explored the theological dimensions
of songwriting.

As part of the project, I had written three songs,
documenting as well as I could
the creative process that led to their completion.

On this particular Sunday,
I was all set to preach my sermon and sing one of the songs,
which had only been finished a few weeks before.

As I set up my papers on the chancel,
getting used to the unfamiliar worship space,
I noticed something unusual happening.

Every so often,
a fly would drop from the skylight high overhead...
a tiny casualty, it seemed, of the bright springtime sun.

Every few moments, another fly would drop,

out of the sky, onto my page,
and I would discreetly sweep him or her away...
not wanting to call attention to these small imperfections
in the otherwise beautiful sanctuary.

It was time for the service to begin.

So I moved over to the guitar,
and began to sing my new song “Calling on You.”

It was so freshly written, I hadn’t memorized the lyrics,
so I had them printed up on a music stand in front of me.

Imagine my surprise when I sang the line,

The deep and the doubtless...they’re dropping like flies.

What?!!

Wow!

I was so amazed, I could scarcely keep singing.

It was an amazing synchronicity.

And...wow. What a gift.

What an unexpected, mysterious and uniquely personal
and frankly weird gift:

One I will always treasure.

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Today we finish our five-part series on prayer with the subject of “Wow!”

It’s one of the three essential prayers identified by writer and theologian Anne Lamott, in her book, “Help, Thanks, Wow!”

In our series, we explored two other essential prayers: “Hello” and “Sorry”.

All of these can be seen as “opening lines” in our personal conversations with the sacred.

In “wow” we are rendered speechless... perhaps by something completely inexplicable... or something more beautiful or meaningful than we could have imagined.

As Anne Lamott says, “When we are stunned to the place beyond words, we’re finally starting to get somewhere.

When all we can say in response [to Life] is “Wow,” that’s a prayer.”¹

In moments of profound surprise, dramatic change...
The witnessing of birth or death...
The experience of falling in love...

¹ Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*, (New York: Riverhead, 2012), 73.

All of these, and more, open us up
beyond our usual frameworks
of what we think it means to be “me.”

In the flash of “Wow” we forget ourselves.
We lose ourselves, in our false sense of separateness.

“Wow” cracks open the shell of how we see ourselves
and how we work so very hard to be seen.

“Wow” gives us a glimpse of More than we can control...
More than we can understand.

Something More, to which we are deeply connected.

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We often think of “Wow” in the context of awe and
wonder...

The beholding of beauty...the moment of seeing
that everything is holy now.

But that’s not the only kind of “Wow.”

“Wow” sounds quite a lot like “Whoa”—and also, “Ow!”

There can be a sense of being overwhelmed by something.
It can be an uncomfortable feeling.

“Wow” can be the response of “I don’t understand.”
“This makes no sense” or “I didn’t see this coming.”

Sometimes it’s not blissful or sought-after at all.

But what it has in common with the joyful “wow”
is the sense that we are small in the face of it.

We do not understand. We are not in control.

We are embraced by a web or
we are swimming in an ocean (pick your metaphor)
that is so much larger than us,
our puny little efforts at control
seem almost funny in comparison.

This isn’t to say that we shouldn’t
stay engaged in our meaningful work...

That we shouldn’t do our best to tend our gardens,
to make the most of our time on earth.

Of course, we should. We must.

And at the same time that we are working
for peace and justice and healing, we can know what we are
encompassed by the “Wow” that surpasses understanding.

When we stay connected to that awareness...
When we pray our “Wow” without ceasing...

It can help us release a bit of our anxiety.

Let a little—or perhaps even a lot—
of weight fall from our shoulders.

When we say “Wow!” we affirm
the largeness of all that is not us.

And that is healthy. That is healing.

“Wow” can connect us with energy beyond ourselves,
that can assist us in living out our callings more effectively.

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It’s worthwhile, too, to think of the many times we don’t say
“Wow” in our lives—

That is, the times we are far from a prayerful
and receptive state-of-mind.

Of course, when I’m thinking of these times,
I’m thinking of myself.

The times when I say:
“I know what’s going to happen.”

“I’ve seen it all.”

“I’ve got everything figured out.”

“I know what they should do.”

“Nothing surprises me.”

“Big deal.”

“So what?”

I’ve said all of those things. Perhaps you have too...
perhaps even as recently as this morning!

These are human responses of our rational and judging minds
which serve us very well in many circumstances.

But perfectionism, control, judgment...
not to mention cynicism, resentment, even boredom...

They all put up barriers against the “Wow!”
Barriers that are worth breaking down, at least just a little.

My attitudes of “it’s all up to me”
and that I need to work harder to control everything
often serve to crowd out the “Wow” that I need.

On the other hand, when I make space for it...
when I intentionally cultivate the moments of “Wow,”
looking for them and celebrating them when they happen...

I’m more open to whatever appears in my life.

The attitude of “Wow,” like the “attitude of gratitude” that Shawn spoke about a few weeks ago, can be seen as an “inner hospitality”—a welcoming and an appreciation...

Indeed, a reverence of all that is not me.

And perhaps that’s really what prayer is all about.

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The opening of ourselves in “Wow”
is not only an expression of reverence
for the wondrous creative forces at work in our lives...

but it’s also an opening up to assistance.

We might as well pray, “Wow, help me!”

Because it does!

It helps us understand our place in the Universe...
our relationship with everything living...
our ability to go far beyond what we thought was possible...
to let go of our rigid and preconceived notions
of what we want and expect life to be.

“Wow” lets us let go
into the unexpected...
and with energy, curiosity and strength.

I said earlier that “wow” sounds much like “whoa.”

I hear it as deeply connected to the breath...
to the life force that moves through us...

I’m reminded that in the Jewish tradition, the unpronounceable name of God can be understood as the sound of the in-breath and the out-breath:

Yah-weh.

Whoa...wow.

Anne Lamott said, “[It] takes our breath away, and makes room for new breath.”²

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The late poet Mary Oliver,
who died in January at age 83,
once said that she wanted to live as a
“bride married to amazement.”

She also had what she called “Instructions for living a life:

They are: “Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.”³

I guess I was following her instructions
when I told you my “dropping like flies” story.

² Lamott, 81.

³ Mary Oliver, “Sometimes,” from *Red Bird* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), 37.

When I think back on it,
I realize I could have responded completely differently in that
moment...and my life would not have been enriched
as a result.

If I had, for example, literally brushed off those flies...
perhaps with disgust or annoyance...

And if I had brushed off the coincidence of my lyrics,
thinking it was just a random occurrence,
with no particular significance...

I wouldn't have been blessed by the experience.

It would have come and gone, without a lot of meaning.

But when I understand the "Wow!"
as theologically meaningful...
that is to say, as a form of prayer...

It becomes infused with life-affirming energy
that renews my sense of purpose in ministry...

That motivates me to share it with you and to encourage you
to notice the astonishing "wows" in your life.

In other words, the "Wow" that is a prayer
is answered with deeper meaning and renewed relationships.

Could it be that Life or God is calling us,
wanting us to say “Wow” everyday—
to open us up into deeper relationship?

*You can search the world over
You can call up above
but the thing that will save you
is everyday love...*

*So I'm calling again
I don't mind if I do
Come with me my friend...
I am calling on you...*

I do believe that life is calling on us.

To elicit a “Wow” that is ours and ours alone...
and then to answer that prayer with meaning,
power and beauty that will carry us forward.

As we hear, in a moment, a call to a wow-inspiring river...
a breathtaking melody that connects us each to each other...
and to ancestors gone before...

I wish you all the wondrous wows
that are yours for the noticing.

May they drop upon you...
wake you up...
and break you open.