It seems that each year, as I return to work in August, my sermon is basically "how I spent my summer vacation."

Today's is no exception.

If I had to find an over-arching theme for my summer this year, I'd have to say it was "the very big and the very small"... as I found myself more aware than usual of my own very personal needs, within the vast scope of a Universe that suddenly seemed much bigger than it had before.

On the personal front, as some of you know, my summer vacation took an unexpected turn as a result of a very small thing: an organ only about 9 centimeters long, which likely serves only the smallest of practical purposes within the body.

I'm speaking of my appendix, which became painfully infected on July 12th and was surgically removed two days later.

Now, in terms of seriousness in the scope of medical events, appendicitis is very small indeed.

Knowing all of you, and witnessing the many challenges you have faced and currently are facing, I was deeply grateful that my condition could be immediately and effectively treated, and that I had access to prompt medical care, effective medications and a strong support system.
I know that that is not the case for many people, including many in our congregation and in the wider world.

Yet the impact of my tiny appendix was indeed huge—and it proved an important teacher for me.

When I was in the grip of this small-yet-mighty health event, I had no interest or energy for anything else.

Along with my family, I was swept up in the tide of illness and everything else fell away.

I did not feel at all "spiritual"... and even though I am someone who prays and meditates regularly, it did not even occur to me to do those things until I was 24 hours post-op.

I say that while wholeheartedly affirming that if you ARE able to touch base, in any small way, with a source of deep energy and healing while in the midst of a crisis, that can be profoundly helpful.

And, if you're not inclined in that direction, that is also perfectly okay.

A close friend of mine provides spiritual care at Toronto General Hospital.

She describes her role as being like an "external hard drive" for spiritual connection and support when patients and family members can't make that connection themselves.

This can serve as a reminder of the small yet mighty role each of us do have, when we provide our presence to anyone who is suffering,
or send love and light in any form of prayer.

Another friend of mine provided therapeutic touch treatments to me as I recovered.

I am sure that her loving energy treatments contributed to my healing.

In any case, for a short time over the summer, my world became very small and was focused on a very small thing.

Healing took place in steady, small increments... and small blessings that I once took for granted became nothing short of magnificent.

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All of this took place against the luminous backdrop of the new images from the James Webb Space Telescope, which were released at exactly the same time I entered the hospital.

The Webb Telescope showed us in breathtaking clarity the relative smallness of humanity in the Enormity of Things.

Here's the first image that captured the world's attention, just when I was having my appendix out.

It's the galaxy cluster SMACS 0723, otherwise known as Webb’s First Deep Field.

Link: https://webbtelescope.org/contents/media/images/2022/035/01G7DCWB7137MYJ05CSH1Q5Z1Z

In terms of the scale of space, here's how writer Shannon Stirone summed it up in the New York Times:
"Nearly every dot in the image is a galaxy.

For a sense of scale, 
if you could hold a grain of sand at arm’s length up to the sky, 
that speck is the size of the view.

It is one minuscule sliver of our universe, 
filled with thousands of galaxies, 
each with billions or trillions of star systems 
and each of those with its own planets."

"Each speck of light in that image, 
each swirling swath of color, 
contains potentially trillions of planets, 
many of which are like ours."

And because the Webb Telescope sees back in time, 
this image shows the galaxy cluster as it appeared 
4.6 billion years ago.

Let's just take a moment to pause and breathe in the reality of that.

(Pause)

As one of the first articles on July 12th put it:

"There is a lot more universe out there to see 
than there was before the telescope launched, 
and there is so much more to explain."

In the weeks ahead, you're likely to hear many more reflections on the 
Webb Telescope from Rev. Shawn and others, 
as human beings grapple with the meaning 
of these awe-inspiring images.
In some ways, it was not surprising that after a brief flurry of headlines and Facebook posts in mid-July, the Webb Telescope receded into the distance, replaced by reporting on heat waves and wildfires, the ongoing challenges of Covid and Monkeypox, and the ever-alarming political developments in the United States.

As we all know, these complex catastrophes can be overwhelming to our small psyches, especially when we're dealing with additional personal concerns...as we pretty much always are.

Something so small as an appendix, a cancer cell, the Covid virus, or an errant bicycle wheel can instantly and radically change our perspective on life--sometimes permanently.

Even though the Planet Earth and our problems are so small, they surely seem big to us...and at times they seem bigger than we can handle.

How can the images from deep space affirm the deep meaning of our lives, instead of making us feel more insignificant?

In the past, and still to a certain extent today, human beings invoked gods and mythical beings to help us create a manageable framework for the vastness of the Universe.

Whether or not these beings literally existed in physical form was less important than the fact that they mediated the distance between us and the stars.
They created a bridge of sorts, which allowed us to form a relationship with the Great Mystery.

In turning away from these stories, we have unwittingly distanced ourselves from the great Living Cosmos that is both our origin and our destination.

Religion, meaning "to bind back together" invites us back into the depths...albeit with fewer stories and mythical maps to guide us.

We would be wise to try to recover them, given the rising sense of alienation and disconnection we experience in the modern world.

In his 2020 book "Prisms," Jungian psychoanalyst and author James Hollis writes:

"Each of our lives swirls through mystery from the first scattered shards of experience, through troubled islands of biography, across savannahs of suffering, to an unwelcomed dispersal back to the swirling universe."

In this he is echoing the thoughts of the poet Anne Alexander Bingham we heard earlier.

She expressed contentment that her personal atoms would be returned to the universe, but James Hollis acknowledges that is it very often an "unwelcome dispersal" at the end of life.

He says: "And yet, there is a kinship coursing through all beings, one informing energy. We carry it.

It is implicate in all living things.

Somehow, invisible tendrils reach out and connect all.
Some have called this energy 'love,' at least what Dante called 'the love that moves the sun and the other stars.'

The Webb Telescope reveals the vast enormity of the universe more clearly than we've ever seen before.

In revealing the gigantic-ness, it also reveals our extraordinary smallness.

But there is a difference between smallness and insignificance.

We know that our tiny lives are rich with love, depth, beauty and deep mystery.

When we consider, for instance, the complexity of our dreams, or the remarkable synchronistic events that happen to us, we realize that our inner depths are as unfathomed as are the outer reaches of space.

One small act of kindness can change the trajectory of an entire life, and communities are stitched together by individual acts of caring and thoughtfulness, one small act at a time.

The vast scope of the Universe does not reveal the insignificance of the tiny parts within it...but rather the incredible significance!

The people who worked on the Telescope thought about this themselves.

Eric Smith was one of the scientists on the project.

He said "A lot of people sometimes see pictures of space and it makes them feel small.

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When I see these pictures, they make me feel powerful. They provoke pride in humanity: that when we want to, we can do that."

One of his colleagues, Jane Rigby, said that the telescope is an example of “people in a broken world managing to do something right to see some of the majesty that’s out there.”²

Now...that's all very well and good.

Eric and Jane both contributed to one of the most important scientific achievements of all time!

I'd feel pretty good about that, too, if I were them.

But what about the rest of us?

What about us, whose opportunities to make a big difference may be somewhat smaller?

What about us, who are doing the best we can, with what we have, often under very difficult circumstances?

Is it possible that in our smallness, we may matter far more than we know?

It seems to me that the new images from space--like the amazing findings of sub-atomic physics--may be pointing toward something we haven't appreciated until now.

Life is about far more, after all, than the largest and most noticeable singularities.

It's about the billions and billions of points of light that we cannot make out from our own limited perspectives.

The meaningful parts we may never be aware of at all... at least not on a conscious level.

Meditating on that, perhaps we can glimpse how our own humble and time-limited activities are essential to the workings of the magnificent and mysterious Whole.

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In a recent interview, Krista Tippett, the host of the National Public Radio program "On Being," spoke about her increasing focus on small conversations and human-scale action.

She says, "I see the broken power structures. I see the damage and the pain. I also see people tending to that.

At the heart of [...] national-level and community level conflicts, there is space to move below the radar and start stitching together relationships and quiet conversations at a very human level."

She says she is interested in "quiet conversations that will not be publicized."

She says they feel to her "like a power move in the world."
She also talks about callings, and I'll continue to quote her directly.

"Your calling," she says, "may be something that you do that gives you joy but that you're never going to get paid for.

It can be how you show up through your day, how you treat strangers.

It's the things that amplify your best humanity."³

I find her words deeply reassuring, especially as I'm now moving into a much smaller role here at First Unitarian...while continuing to do a significant amount of music ministry in the community.

I pass her wisdom on to you, that you may recognize the importance of the work you do for love, which nurtures and sustains the world and that fosters loving relationship within the interdependent web.

Finally, I'd like to recall another small-yet-large event that took place this summer, which I know some of you joined me in witnessing.

The songwriter Joni Mitchell, who is now 78 years old, returned to the concert stage at the Newport Folk Festival, several years after she suffered a brain aneurysm which forced her to relearn how to sing and play the guitar.

Songs such as "Circle Game" and "Both Sides Now" written when she was only in her twenties, seemed to channel a much larger, universal wisdom.

That wisdom seemed all the more powerful
sung by a woman late in life, with so many singing along.

We refer to Joni and others like her as "stars" recognizing their luminous
gifts and the light they provide.

But how strange, really, that in our world
we should see such profound expressions of meaning and beauty as the
personal achievement of individuals
elevated above the rest...

Rather than seeing those individuals
as instruments of a Greater Peace,
offering small acts of love for the benefit of all?

Could it be that Life itself is calling us forward,
to co-create the cosmos
through our own unique contributions...

Which, no matter how large they may seem to us,
are still as small as stardust?

May we savour these brief moments
in contemplation
and in conversation...

As we live out our small yet magnificent lives
in concert with the stars.

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