

# "Wonder, Awe & Mystery"

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Wonder! A feeling: our response to something strange, surprising, puzzling, inspiring. Not a pure feeling though: surprise with admiration, excitement, eeriness. A tingle on the back of the neck. A moment of suspension.

Wonder! An act: to feel amazement or awe; perhaps this is the feeling of wonder mixed with being aware: I wonder at the sky every morning. With being curious: I wonder how the first cell formed. With feeling doubt: I wonder if they'll keep that promise.

Wonder! A noun: the Northern Lights are a phenomenon of wonder. The Niagara Escarpment is a place of wonder.

If there's a single-most aspect of spiritual or physical experience that moves Unitarian Universalists to the perception of the ultimate, it's wonder. We find common ground in this ethereal feeling. This is possible because there are so many aspects of life that can trigger wonder. The world of science. The world of nature. Of creativity. Of thought. Of the ineffable.

No matter which direction we want to go, along the way and in the end, we discover wonder. If we go macro to peer into the near or distant cosmos, we find wonder. If we go micro towards electron microscopy or particle physics, we find wonder. If we go literally inside our animal bodies, we find wonder. If we gaze into the human mind, we find wonder. Question after answer after question.

I love "Wow!" experiences. You know what I mean. Crossing the country by train in 1976, I wake up in a roomette as the train is stopped somewhere near McBride British Columbia west of the Rockies; it's mid-winter and mountains and enormous trees heaped with snow fill my wide window – Wow!

Only once during my medical training in 1980 can I say that / deliver the baby: that moment when his head finally emerges and the rest just suddenly flows into my arms; I hold him in the safe way I've been taught, and he fits there perfectly and cries almost immediately and he's beautiful – Wow!

Shortly after moving into a downtown condo in 1987, there's an awesome thunderstorm out over the harbour. I see the gigantic height of the dark clouds, lightning shooting out, striking the high antennas on top of the bank towers a few blocks away, but also flashing deep within the thunderhead. Yet... no rain at all is falling between all that and

me: the view is crystal clear. It looks like enhanced cinematography on IMAX: a display of unbelievable power – Wow!

In Wow moments, those of us who pray, and those of us who don't, are in the same state of mind, right on the edge of what seems grand beyond our knowing – teetering there giddily, breathless, thought obliterated. Some of us continually seek out these moments: we travel; we climb; dive, delve, search and research. We open a creative vein, look harder-closer-keener. Or we choose something new: take a different route to work. Sit in a chair that we never use in our own living room. Walk through our home in the dark.

The thing about wonder is that we can find it anytime simply by focusing on perceptions: stopping to find out what something really feels like, but also feeling what it's like to stop and feel it, being aware of our awareness. Wondering what exactly is it that we're feeling. What does something soft look like under a microscope? Do any molecules from that surface stick to our fingers? Are there any tiny living things on what looks like an inanimate object? Wonder arises simply from asking questions!

## **Second Homily: Awe and Mystery!**

**June 10, 2018**

It's not only the physical world or objective reality that triggers wonder. There's the immense world of thought and concepts, of abstracts and imagination. Mathematics and philosophy both consider what may exist only in thought. The square root of minus-one is an imaginary number. Plato's world of forms was real only in his mind. Math, Philosophy and Anthropology all have concepts of beauty, an abstract term that can in some ways be measured objectively, but in other ways not. In fact, if a math proof or cosmological theory has 'beauty' – which I guess depends on the slide rule of the beholder – it's considered more likely to be true or correct. Even that claim is a thing of wonder. And if perfect symmetry between the cheek bones and the chin defines physical beauty, how is that Picasso threw it all up in the air and creates more beauty? Even more, how is it that a painting can jump right into your soul as soon as you see it?

During the summer of 2003, my job is to write short online bios of New Brunswick artists for junior high students. I'm researching a living artist from Fredericton, and open an art magazine to a full-page image of one of his paintings. I gasp and jump a little in my chair. Tears spring to my eyes. There's a faint shadow of a person just behind the main figure in this all red-tones picture. I don't know why my response is so deep and powerful. Then I read that this painting is from a series memorializing friends of the artist who died of AIDS. What in me joined that artist in his pain simply by seeing a reproduction of his work? I had not just understood the painting as an image of loss, I felt the loss as soon as I saw it. It's probably too much to claim that his image conveyed

*AIDS-related* loss specifically, but this commonality between us—the loss of many friends—only added to my awe at the power of art.

Awe moves into a next level of wonder: that which contains a tone of reverence for something truly beyond our small self. Awe welcomes humility into our engagement with the sublime aspects of the world. Awe includes a strain of fear, maybe of the supernatural, but also of the immensity of the natural. We are infinitely tiny creatures, surviving less than the flash of a neuron relative to the space-time continuum. But that doesn't make us unimportant; rather it enhances our importance. In our little lives along with countless billions of other little lives in the Universe, we may not be things of awe, but we have all the power in the universe to *experience* awe – to reflect upon that of which are made. And, in my mind, that *does* make us awesome: the beings that know, and that know that we know.

Yet in all of this wonder and awe at the glorious spectacle of nature, we do not have to be limited to nature. We have the capacity to behold Mystery. I relate this to the sense of awe in which we also experience reverence; the Something that we hold in reverence I think of as Mystery. Concretely, Mystery begins with all that we don't know but which we conceivably can know someday. Mystery also has the quality of being unknown; with our capacity for abstract thinking, we can imagine ourselves in relation to the unknown. Einstein talks about our capacity to “stand rapt in awe” at the Mystery of the Unknown.

Some physicists are probably better at this than many theologians; the physicist may have theories to define what's as yet unknown, but is likely comfortable that there will always be something that might alter the theory. On the other hand, many theologians, though not all, want to fill in what's Unknown with assertions of what *is* there *for sure*, *just* what it's like, or even just what *kind* of mystery it is or is not. In one class at seminary, I share a metaphor for the Trinity that helps me understand how it could work, and the response from Christian classmates is that I'm wrong, meaning that my metaphor doesn't fit the definition of traditional creeds—and after all, why can't I accept that the Trinity is a mystery that doesn't require understanding? I wish I'd thought at the time to say, “Well, is it a Mystery, or isn't it? How can there be a correct understanding of a Mystery?”

And then there are those who seek to experience Mystery directly, the Mystics, whether of historic renown like Theresa of Avila or Rumi, or the everyday kind like millions of meditators. Mystical experience is, well, mysterious, unrelated to facts, but very much entwined with reality; experiences of mystery feel very real, often more so than ordinary reality. The fact is that reality can be altered, even magnified by Mystery.

Many of us personify Mystery because our experiences conform to that idea: the Mystery feels like, acts like Something tangible or that has been described almost

exactly by others, too. We may most relate to a historical figure used by countless others as the personification of Mystery: Jesus, Krishna, Buddha. We may personify it more generally as a Higher Power. Still, Mystery may be both accessible and extremely mysterious.

moving back to the bridge between the Mystical and the Mystery. Einstein recognizes the Mysterious as “the source of all true art and all science.” We may begin in wonder at the Rockies; and then move into Awe at the geological forces that create such beauty; and then land in the rich suspended animation before Mystery itself. How, really, did this all come to be?

Or we may linger somewhere along the way where we feel completely satisfied. But our minds have been expanded, our hearts magnified and our spirits uplifted.

Such is the spiritual quality of Mystery.