

Moon Dance

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When my son Avery was not yet two years old, he fell in love - with the moon.

It was a beautiful love affair that started one summer night when he awoke inconsolable at 3 in the morning. Maybe it was teething, maybe something was troubling his stomach -- but it was beyond my powers to soothe him. My husband Jamie and I finally bundled all three of us up and took him outside.

It was a full moon - the perfect mysterious moonlit night, with just enough cloud cover that the moon was vanishing and reappearing at a steady pace.

My son was awestruck.

After an hour, he still didn't want to go inside.

This was such a special, and such a reassuring experience, at a time when I fear for his attention span and how it is being affected by screens where images move at the rate of miles a minute. The three of us calmly outside in the cool of a summer night, watching the clouds pass over the moon.

Then for days afterward, he ordered me to produce the moon at regular intervals. Moon, mommy. Moon now, Avery would say. Then more impatiently - as if he was saying, ok mommy, it's not funny anymore. Time for you to make the moon appear.

I explained to him, patiently, again and again, that the moon hides during the day. And it only comes out at night. Sometimes we can't even see it because it is hiding behind the clouds. Finally I think he understood.

But then one morning shortly after, while walking him to daycare in the morning he said "Moon! Moon!"

And he was right - there was a beautiful moon right there in the middle of a blue sky. We saw the moon several mornings in a row, and he resumed his requests for me to produce the moon.

And I thought, How am I supposed to explain how this works to a two year old? How can I explain that affecting the moon is totally beyond the scope of my limited human powers?

In the years since Avery first noticed the moon, I have had a crash course in basic astronomy. His curiosity about the moon turned into a fascination with the eight primary planets - the rocky planets and the gas giants and the ice giants - then with the dwarf planets - of which there are five, Pluto among them now - then with the exoplanets, and then with the concept of a galaxy.

Then with all the galaxies that exist in the universe, which the New Horizons space probe suggests is roughly 200 billion. I was totally unaware of this number and quite shocked by it.

I didn't really understand that the stars we see in the sky are incomprehensibly far away, the nearest one being our Sun at 147 million kilometres away, and the next Alpha Centauri at 40 trillion kilometres away.

Part of our experience of wonder is bound up in this: that we as humans are small in the grand scheme of things, and not in control. And part of my experience of being a Unitarian Universalist is this: that we are the faith that uniquely embraces what science tells us about the human place in the cosmic story, and matches that understanding with the profound spiritual qualities of reverence, awe and wonder.

Carl Sagan said: "A religion that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later, such a religion will emerge." When I first read this quote, I asked myself: how can we be this religion?

The last five years being a parent of two young kids has deepened my experience of wonder, being exposed more to the science of space. And also the science of the oceans, another of Avery's fascinations. And I've learned quite a lot more about how the human body works so I can explain to Avery, for example, exactly how food passes through the body and exits a common interest uniting possibly all five year olds.

And,...being a UU seminarian called upon to write homilies from time to time has also been another way that I have cultivated my own sense of wonder. There's a saying that Christian ministers should preach with the newspaper in one hand, and the Bible in the other.

As a UU minister in formation, I try to preach to the events of the day, and speak to our eight principles, using our six official sources, and more and more with direct reference to what I like to think of as “The Book of the Universe” - the vast array of human knowledge that demonstrates both how incredibly intelligent we are, and also how small, insignificant, and ignorant we are. The Book of the Universe has us gravitating towards the outer reaches of human knowledge in the form of disciplines like neuroscience and astrophysics, and pairing that with our earth-centered traditions that encourage us to heed what the natural world calls us to pay attention to at any given moment. Like tonight, that blueberry, salmon, deer antler moon.

In approaching our tradition this way, I’m joining many others who practice what they call religious or reverential naturalism - a worldview that combines many elements of secular humanism with a strong environmental ethic and ecological mindset, which results in a greater spiritual depth and a language of reverence.

This kind of spirituality is not opposed to science - rather, science and reverential naturalism are deeply interconnected and complementary ways of seeing and being fully present to the world.

What happens to us when we stop, and we truly experience the richness of the natural world? First, our senses become fully engaged. Sensory experience is that aspect of being alive that we share with all our animal kin - When we experience nature, our senses are operating at greater capacity.

This primal part -- this visceral experience -- reminds us of the glory of having a body, of being more than grey matter, more than just neurons in our brains. Of being creatures who are so capable of delight.

But then as humans, our minds are engaged as well. We might gasp in awe not just at an image of Alpha Centauri, but at knowing how far away it is, and how miraculous that we’ve managed to photograph it.

When we experience this kind of awe, we recognize and remind ourselves of truths about the universe that put humans in their proper place with respect to nature. Scientists who study awe call this “self-diminishment” - feeling small before something vast. And more and more research demonstrates just how powerful and how valuable this experience is.

According to Dr. Summer Allen with the Greater Good Science Centre at UC Berkeley, experiencing awe makes people more kind and generous. Awe makes us want to

engage with others more, it makes us feel more connected. People who experience awe more often are said to be more humble by their friends.

Awe and wonder also have effects on individual well-being - awe was the emotion most likely to be linked to lowering levels of proinflammatory cytokines, the proteins that are connected to heart disease, diabetes, and depression.

Awe and humility also connect reverence for nature back to the scientific method. At its best, the scientific method is characterized by humility - by constantly trying to prove yourself wrong, rather than prove yourself right. Unlike theologians, scientists are taught to disprove their hypotheses. This effort to overcome our biases – the tendency that humans have to see the world only in line with our pre-existing values and beliefs – is key to our learning and growth.

To quote UU Minister David E Bumbaugh –" the way that we know nature through modern evolutionary science gives us a story rooted not in the history of a single tribe or a particular people, but a history rooted in the sum of our knowledge of the universe itself.

Through evolutionary science, we have learned that the holy did not incarnate in one single place to give a special message to a single chosen people, but that the universe is instead continually incarnating itself

in microbes and maples
in hummingbirds and human beings

constantly inviting us to tease out the revelation contained in stars and atoms and every living thing. "

As Robin Wall Kimmerer says in her incredible book "Braiding Sweetgrass" - "science can be a way of forming intimacy and respect with other species that is rivaled only by the observations of traditional knowledge holders. It can be a path to kinship."

The exact kind of kinship that is urgently needed to reverse the historic losses in the natural world that we humans are causing.

This kind of reverence for nature is important because of the preciousness of humility in our polarized world. I want to contrast the big show of evolutionary biology and astrophysics with the other big show taking place before our eyes right now -- the chaos

and destruction being wrought by big egos like Elon Musk, Vladimir Putin, and of course, Donald Trump. These are stories not of humility but of hubris.

Stories of trying to be the master of the universe instead of its reverential observer.

How many of the great tragedies of the contemporary era are caused by this tragic flaw, from the war in Ukraine, to the rise of hate speech on platforms like twitter, to the erosion of democracy and rise of fascism, to the endless fossil fuel extraction that is driving the climate crisis?

As Reverend William R. Murry says: "The human ability to think critically and constructively has made possible our many medical and technological advances...but it is only reverence, understood as feelings of respect and awe, that can save us from the hubris that would destroy all the good we have accomplished..."

Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations" Reverence is about wonder, about awe. It's about self-diminishment. Feeling small and humble - and grateful. Engaging all our senses as well as our cognitive capacity for learning and growth.

Shortly before leaving our Toronto apartment and the only home he had ever known, my son and I were sitting by the window as a yellow leaf floated by. Caught in an updraft, it danced and swirled around our fifth story window. If he hadn't been there I might not have noticed, but of course through his eyes I watched, riveted, until the brief ballet ended.

Immediately came the cry "more, Mommy, more." I said "I know Avery - I would like more too."

What he is still learning is that part of the beauty of nature is that we can't just demand more and get it. I might be able to provide my son with more cheerios and more cartoons, but I can't provide more moonlight. None of us can. We have to live with what nature provides. As human beings, that unites us. What I'm praying for is the larger cultural shift to reverence and humility that this recognition brings about. I'm praying for our tradition to be part of that shift.