

Universalist Unitarian Church of Halifax

Themed Church Magazine - December 2015

Wonder



Definition

wonder n.

The feeling of surprise, admiration and awe aroused by something strange,

wonder v.

to think or speculate curiously;
to be filled with admiration or awe;
to doubt

Synonyms: doubt, reverence, surprise, uncertainty, meditate, ponder, question, marvel

This is the fourth in a series of monthly “magazines” on the topic of the theme for the month. Each magazine will contain inspiring words, questions to ponder, articles to read and further resources to explore.

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What Does Wonder Mean in Your Life?

Albert Einstein wrote this thought provoking idea: "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle." But who among us can function in a world where everything is a miracle? We simplify most of our lives, ignoring the miraculous nature of creation, in order to get done what needs to be done. But there are other times when the miraculous breaks through.

But our UU faith places wonder front and center. The first of our six UU sources of wisdom, which accompany our seven principles, is ***“Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.”***

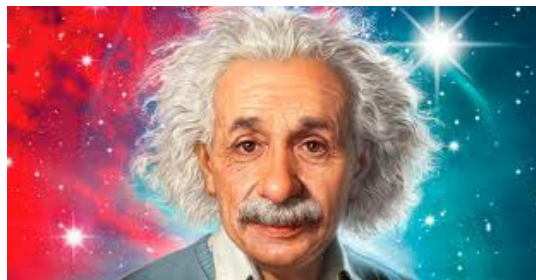
Part of the role of our church is to remind us, amid the mundane struggles of our daily lives that under all of this is a mystery, a mystery that will always exceed our grasp. Science, the process that has done the most to free us from the shackles of religious dogma, is now telling us that the world around us is much more mysterious than it seems. Matter and energy are interchangeable as are time and space. When we “look” at the components of the matter around us, the things we think of a solid, dissolve into a lacework of fluctuating energy and statistical probability that can only be “understood” in terms of mathematical equations and concepts. I agree with the evolutionary biologist, J.B.S. Haldane who wrote: I have no doubt that in reality the future will be vastly more surprising than anything I can imagine. Now my own suspicion is that the Universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we can suppose.

If January first is the time for resolutions, then December is the time to contemplate what is really important in our lives, so that we may make our resolutions wisely. For me, it is acknowledging the mystery of my life in this universe that is the starting place. It requires real humility to admit that we live in ignorance. Science now tells us that the part of the universe we can see and measure, all the matter and energy that we understand makes up only about 5% of the universe. The rest is something called Dark Matter and Dark Energy, things that we have given names to but know nothing about.

Sometimes it seems that my life is like that. All the things in my life that I understand make up only 5% of what this experience of life is really about. The rest is a mystery, a mystery that can put us in our place and give our lives meaning.

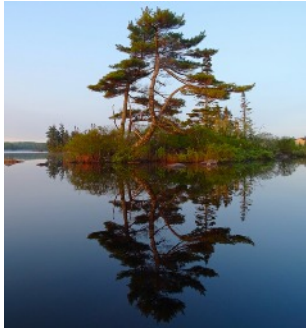
I look forward to exploring the mystery with you during the month of December.

Rev. Norm Horofker



There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle.
The other is as though everything is a miracle. Albert Einstein

Our Spiritual Exercise



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Option A: Share An Ordinary Wonder

What seemingly simple thing sustains your sense of reverence right now? What ordinary object or relationship reminds you of life's preciousness? What is currently helping you not take things for granted? Or even, what keeps you curious and engaged? Hopefully, this is an easy question for you. If not, figure out why and use this month to reconnect with the source of ordinary wonder that is surely right under your nose. Share this insight with a friend.

Option B: Who's Been Wonderful Lately?

We say it with a huge smile: "I love it when people surprise me!" The jerk at the office who, out of nowhere, is the one most kind. The nervous and cautious child of yours who unexpectedly turns brave. The self-sacrificing friend who finally stands up for herself. All of them leave us in wonder at what people are capable of—of what we are capable of. Find at least 2 "wonder folk" this month—two people who surprise you, two people who remind you why it's important to never write people off.



Option C: I Wonder What Would Happen If I...

You are thinking it right now. And if not right now, then certainly at least once this past week. All of us regularly find ourselves asking, "I wonder what would happen if I..." If you are sick of asking and finally want to move from wondering to action, use this month to at least share your secret.

Option D: Spend Some Time Acknowledging the Mystery of It All...

Cultivating personal humility has always been seen as a spiritual practice. We know that our lives are finite, that our truth will always exceed our knowledge. Try sitting quietly and letting go of what you think you know, letting go of the habit of judging others because they "know" less than you. Try acknowledging that the difference between what you and someone else knows may just be totally insignificant in the big picture of what is true.



People go abroad to wonder at the heights of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of the rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motions of the stars, and they pass by themselves without wondering.

St. Augustine

Your Question



No need to treat these questions like “homework.” You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply find the one that “hooks” you most and let it lead you where you need to go.



1. When you were young, was your sense of wonder encouraged or squashed? How is the legacy of that playing out today? How do you want to change that legacy? Or build on it?

2. Do you take the time to wonder? We make time for what matters. Does your life prove that wonder matters to you? How might you need to be more intentional about making room for wonder?

3. Which wonder are you embarrassed by? Many of us have experiences of wonder we keep secret. We worry our “rational” friends would worry about us if we told them about it. Or judge us. Is this the month you might be able to finally share it out loud?

4. Why have you stopped wondering? You once were a dreamer, but now you talk more about the importance of being realistic and responsible. There was a time when you couldn't wait to see how things were going to turn out, now you are fine with how things are. This may not describe you at all. But then again maybe it does. Are you ok with that?

5. Do you believe in miracles? It's not really more complicated than that. Miracles are the biggest wonders of all. How do you define a miracle? Why is it important to you that others understand what you mean?

I BELIEVE IN
MIRACLES



6. What takes the wonder out of your holiday season? How are you going to prevent that from happening again this year?

7. What does a different generation need to know about wonder? Why haven't you told them yet?

9. What do you wonder about wonder? What question do you wish had been asked on this list? Why does that missing question hook you?

Dear, dear! How queer everything is today! And yesterday things went on just as usual. I wonder if I've been changed in the night? Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle!

Lewis Carroll

Recommended Resources

As always, this is not required reading. These pieces are simply meant to get your thinking started, and maybe to open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to “be a people of wonder”.

Wise Words

We are made of “carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, and nitrogen, a little calcium, a dash of sulphur, a light dusting of other very ordinary elements . . . and that’s all.” We are both miraculous and mundane. We live in a world too immense to begin to imagine, yet we are made of particles too small to conceptualize. It’s these paradoxical truths that I find interesting to ponder.

Julie Parker Amery

People go abroad to wonder at the heights of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of the rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motions of the stars, and they pass by themselves without wondering.

St. Augustine

We are the miracle of force and matter making itself over into imagination and will. Incredible. The Life Force experimenting with forms. You for one. Me for another. The Universe has shouted itself alive. We are one of the shouts.

Ray Bradbury

There are mysteries which you can solve by taking thought. For instance a murder-mystery whose mysteriousness must be dispelled in order for the truth to be known.

There are other mysteries which do not conceal a truth to think your way to, but whose truth is itself the mystery. The mystery of your self, for example. The more you try to fathom it, the more fathomless it is revealed to be. No matter how much of your self you are able to objectify and examine, the quintessential, living part of yourself will always elude you, i.e., the part that is conducting the examination. Thus you do not solve the mystery, you live the mystery. And you do that not by fully knowing yourself but by fully being yourself.

Fredrick Buechner

One way to open your eyes is to ask yourself, “What if I had never seen this before? What if I knew I would never see it again?”

Rachel Carson

Perhaps for a moment
the typewriters will stop clicking,
the wheels stop rolling,
the computers desist from computing,
and a hush will fall over the city.

For in an instant, in the stillness,
the chiming of celestial spheres will be heard
as earth hangs poised
in the crystalline darkness, and then
gracefully tilts.

Let there be a season
when holiness is heard and
The splendor of living is revealed.
Stunned to stillness by beauty
we remember who we are and why we are here.

There are inexplicable mysteries.
We are not alone.
In the universe there moves a Wild One
whose gestures alter earth’s axis toward love.
In the immense darkness everything spins with
joy.

The cosmos enfolds us.
We are caught in a web of stars,
cradled in a swaying embrace,
rocked by the holy night,
babes of the universe.

Let this be the time
we wake to life,
as spring wakes,
in the moment of winter solstice.

Rev. Rebecca Parker

Something began me and it had no beginning; something will end me and it has no end.

Carl Sandburg

Articles

Some months ago my wife delivered twin sons one minute apart. The older is Joseph and the younger is Liam. Joseph is dark and Liam is light. Joseph is healthy and Liam is not. Joseph has a whole heart and Liam has half. This means that Liam will have two major surgeries before he is three years old. The first surgery—during which a doctor will slice open my son’s chest with a razor, saw his breastbone in half and reconstruct the flawed plumbing of his heart—is imminent.

I have read many pamphlets about Liam’s problem. I have watched many doctors’ hands drawing red and blue lines on pieces of white paper. They are trying to show me why Liam’s heart doesn’t work properly. Blue lines are for blood that needs oxygen. Red lines are for blood that needs to be pumped out of the heart. I watch the markers in the doctors’ hands. Here comes red, there goes blue. The heart is a railroad station where the trains are switched to different tracks. A normal heart switches trains flawlessly two billion times in a life; in an abnormal heart, like Liam’s, the trains crash and the station crumbles to dust.

There are many nights just now when I tuck Liam and his wheezing train station under my beard in the blue hours of night and think about his Maker. I would kill the god who sentenced him to such awful pain, I would stab him in the heart like he stabbed my son, I would shove my fury in his face like a fist, but I know in my own broken heart that this same god made my magic boys, shaped their apple faces and coyote eyes, put joy in the eager suck of their mouths. So it is that my hands are not clenched in anger but clasped in confused and merry and bitter prayer.

I talk to God more than I admit. “Why did you break my boy?” I ask.

I gave you that boy, he says, and his lean brown brother, and the elfin daughter you love so.

“But you wrote death on his heart,” I say.

I write death on all hearts, he says, just as I write life.

This is where our conversation always ends, and I am left holding the extraordinary awful perfect prayer of my second son, who snores like a seal, who might die tomorrow, who did not die today.

Brian Doyle



“Embraced by the Night” – From Afghanistan

Darkness falls. I sit outside on a clear night looking up at the vast starlit sky. One more day down. How many more to go?

Above, the dome of the sky rounds gracefully into the dark horizon. Beyond that, mystery and wonder. Some things are too vast to fathom. To attempt to understand them ends only in misunderstanding. Other things are finite. They have a beginning. They have an end. Our time here is one of those comprehensible things. Sometimes it can seem like an eternity, but it is not. It had a beginning. It has an end.

One of the great mistakes is to confuse ultimate mystery with finite reality. We want to understand things, so we bring them down to our level. But some things can only be felt in our souls as awe and wonder.

Human beings have tried to name this Truth. We have tried to capture it in words. The great religious traditions each give us a glimpse of it. But none of these words or glimpses can describe the Holy.

We can hold the finite. We must allow the infinite to hold us. Mistaking the two leads to disappointment when the finite slips from our grasp and we are left reaching for empty air.

For a moment, I look at the stars and long to be home. I long to hold my wife and children in my arms and feel the familiar warmth of their touch. At this moment, even one day more seems too much.

Then I look again. I imagine I am not held captive by the finite days ahead, but embraced by the infinite Truth beyond. I know somehow that the same mystery and wonder that embrace me embrace my family, embrace all. In a real sense, if just for a moment, embraced by God, I am home.

UUA Army Chaplain Meditations



Photo credit - Marilyn Shinyei

"I'll tell you a secret. Something they don't teach you in your temple. The Gods envy us. They envy us because we're mortal, because any moment might be our last. Everything is more beautiful because we're doomed. You will never be lovelier than you are now. We will never be here again." Achilles



In an unimaginably vast universe, what do our individual lives mean?

Julie Parker Amery | UU World | **May/June 2005**

Julie is director of religious education at the First Religious Society of Newburyport, MA

When you think about it, our lives are pretty insignificant—speaking in terms of the grand scheme of the cosmos. For instance, think about a supernova. A huge star explodes, giving off the energy of a hundred billion suns. Think about two grains of dust colliding after one of these explosions, microscopic specks that collide with more specks until they form a great planet—until they form ours. It's rather inconceivable. Meanwhile, here we are, we mere humans, running to the drugstore for toothpaste, reading the back of a cereal box as we eat our breakfast, going to the car wash. We've surely got nothing on the stars.

Who among us has not at one time or another felt tiny and insignificant? We are powerless against so many things. We are often not even in control of the course of our own lives, let alone the forces of nature. Hunger and poverty ravage a huge portion of the world's people; wars are being fought; there are any number of human-created evils. It's enough to make one sometimes throw one's hands up and say, "I can't possibly make a difference in all this. So what am I here for?"

We are small. Most of us will never be widely-known for performing heroic deeds; we live our lives quietly, relatively unknown. We know that our lives affect the lives and well-being of our loved ones. But, generally speaking, this is not far-reaching. We are each a mere speck of dust in the unimaginably vast universe.

Strangely, this is a rather comforting notion to me. It is reassuring to me to know that, even through some unfortunate blunder, I cannot possibly explode and release the energy of a hundred billion suns. No matter how much I stumble and mess up, no matter how many mistakes I make—and they are numerous on any given day—I feel relatively certain that the universe is not going to be affected by it. Earth will continue in her orbit around the sun, and her inhabitants will wake up to a new day.

Our lives are insignificant and small. We move through this life quickly and quietly, and most of us will be forgotten a few generations hence.

I wonder about this, though. I wonder if because our lives are so small each life is also that much more precious. Recall Carl Sagan's notion that "if we were randomly inserted into the universe, the chances that you would be on or near a planet would be less than one in a billion trillion." I invite you to imagine how much slimmer the chance is of being on or near one of these tiny little lives. "Worlds are precious," Sagan notes. Doesn't it follow logically that so, too, is each life? As a whole, we take up an impossibly small fraction of the space that's out there. Each one of us is an exquisite commodity.

Cont'd on next page

One way to open your eyes is to ask yourself, "What if I had never seen this before? What if I knew I would never see it again?"

Rachel Carson

Personally, it's not often that I see myself and my life in this way. I rarely stop and think about my life's place in the universe. As the parent of two young children, it's all I can do to get through the day without forks being flushed down the toilet or teeth being knocked out. Our cats are months overdue for their shots; I am at least as long overdue for a dental appointment; we've dealt with burst pipes, stomach bugs, cars that won't start, computers that won't behave, and e-mail coming at a rate I can't keep up with; and I haven't balanced the checkbook in months. You know the story. Contemplating life and its significance ranks low on my to-do list, and quite possibly on yours, too.

Yet one day last summer I sat in the home of my inlaws, absorbed in Bill Bryson's *A Short History of Nearly Everything*. And suddenly it dawned on me: It really is quite spectacular that I ever came to be. Miraculous, even.

I was most interested in the sections dealing with the great and the infinitesimal. The unimaginable vastness of space, and the unimaginable smallness of the atoms that collectively are us. I was also interested in Bryson's observations having to do with our human existence. On the one hand, millions of genetic mutations had to occur over and over in a precise manner over billions of years for humans to come into being. The tiniest deviation from any one of these, he writes, "and you might now be licking algae from cave-walls or lolling walrus-like on some stony shore." On the other hand, chemically-speaking, the story is pretty mundane: We are made of "carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, and nitrogen, a little calcium, a dash of sulphur, a light dusting of other very ordinary elements . . . and that's all." We are both miraculous and mundane. We live in a world too immense to begin to imagine, yet we are made of particles too small to conceptualize. It's these paradoxical truths that I find interesting to ponder.

This little life of mine. I do not give thanks for it nearly enough, or tend to it as much as it deserves. I do not ask often enough if I am using it to its full advantage, doing all that I can with it. In short, I am not taking seriously enough my responsibility for treating this life as a wonderful and precious thing.

Oh, but if I did. If I took this responsibility more seriously, I would offer thanks often for so many things. I would take fewer things for granted. I would say thank you for the love of my children and my spouse, indeed the most miraculous would say thank you for the new and old, those who returned and those who would say thank you to the strange luck that put me place--for the freedom to to drink clean water, to be natural beauty, trees, occasional moose. I would



KimTurnerPhoto

my whole family--for this is thing of all after life itself. I companionship of friends, have faded away and have faded away for good. I whomever would listen for here at this time and in this express myself and to vote, surrounded by exquisite marshes, beaches, an join my children in their

unbounded joy. Their joy can be infectious, but there's many a time that I simply feel waves of melancholia as I consider that soon they, too, will be grown and not so easily enchanted by such things. I would say thank you, thank you, for hands that can make and break bread and a mind that, albeit unscientifically, can contemplate the heavens.

Did you ever wonder if the person in the puddle is real, and you're just a reflection of him?

Calvin and Hobbes

Videos and Online

What can an atheist possibly celebrate? (A YouTube Video)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ptwEVOxhTzI>

We Are All Connected - Symphony of Science (A YouTube Video):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Ky2JQq8lag>

Mr. Rogers' Wonderings

http://pbskids.org/rogers/video_wondering.html

Books

A Private History of Awe, by Scott Russell Sander

The Sense of Wonder by Rachel Carson

Wonder: from Emotion to Spirituality by Robert Fuller

House Hold: A Memoir of Place by Ann Peters

Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder by Richard Dawkins

Books for Young Souls

The Polar Express by Chris Van Allsburg

Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll

Wonder by R. J. Palacio

The Wonder Thing by L. Hathorn

Draw Me a Star by E. Carle

Somewhere by J. Baskwill

The Look Again...and Again and Again Book by B. Gardner



Movies

It's a Wonderful Life, the story of a small town man wondering if his life really matters.

The Polar Express, a wondrous tale about belief and wonder and the priceless gifts of Christmas.

Hubble, follow the camera that chronicles the effort of 7 astronauts aboard the Space Shuttle Atlantis to repair the Hubble Space Telescope.

Avatar, a wonder-filled film about life on another planet and how one person navigates it.

Wall-E, a possible look at our society's future and a robot who brings us back to wonder. Great for all ages.

The Matrix, how one person's wonder uncovers a new reality.

Get Ready for January's Theme – Resilience!