

Wonder  
December 11, 2011

The magi, according to the story that circulates frequently this time of year, made their way to Bethlehem guided by a star. A star of wonder. Ever since, Unitarians have been trying to diminish that wonder by explaining it away scientifically as some astronomical activity that coincided with the birth of Jesus IF THAT BIRTH ACTUALLY HAPPENED.

But wonder is not a mystery to be solved. Wonder is not like a who “dunnit” murder where at the end you finally get to the truth of the matter. As unsettling as it may be to the rational mind, there are mysteries...splashes of wonder...that do not conceal a truth that needs resolving like a riddle. Imagine a situation whereby the truth of the matter is itself a mystery. No matter how much you study it, examine it, or scrutinize it under the lens of science, you don’t solve the mystery; you live it.

Ralph Waldo Emerson felt pretty comfortable living with wonder. “If stars should appear one night in a thousand years,” he wrote, “how men would believe and adore and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the City of God which had been shown. But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile.”

It was not until moving to Utah that I had an inkling of what Emerson meant. In the first autumn of my ministry here, 1987, I found myself driving a 15-passenger van to the Nevada test site. Judy Lord and I were the only ones not arrested during the protest, which was a good thing since somebody had to drive all the way to Tonopah, Nevada to pick up our fellow church members who crossed the line and were arrested. On the way to Tonopah we got to talking about light pollution, especially in the east, and she asked me: “Tom, have you ever seen the night sky?” “What do you ever mean?” I asked. “I go out a lot at night and there’s the sky above.”

So she made me pull over and get out of the car. And look up. Wonder is powerful stuff. It can clobber you sideways. It was as though the sky had a bad case of chicken pox. So many stars I could hardly see the sky. I staggered as though intoxicated by splendor.

My favorite definition of wonder is a splendor that cannot be named. I had the same feeling when my daughter’s 4<sup>th</sup> grade class had an outing one night to the parking lot by Little Mountain and a bunch of telescopes were set up and real astronomers were there to bring “wonder” a little closer to us. Seeing Saturn through a telescope so colorful with brightly lit rings gave me chills. But then I was instructed to look into another telescope and was asked to identify a bit of haze – up there a little to the left. “I see it,” I said. And the reply was: “That’s a Andromeda, a whole other galaxy next door.”

My dear friend Robert Fulghum, who has spoken from this pulpit on several occasions, took a course once in celestial navigation. He fumbled with a sextant, muttered some formulas, and juggled some numbers, with the task of locating himself on the face of the earth by relating to the stars. His first attempt placed him 12 miles east of Addis Ababa, in Ethiopia. The second time around he was standing in the water about 200 miles out in the middle of Gulf of Mexico. He remarks: "I'll find out where I am yet. I'd like to know where I am. I've spent too much time worrying about where I'm going."

He concludes with following poignant observation:

People have been staring at the stars and reading messages in them for a long time. People have been laying this life alongside some other life up there. Asking – who are we, anyhow? Where are we headed after all? What's it all about? We keep asking like it might be important to know. And the stars? Well, the stars don't say much at all.

I'm sure most of us were made aware earlier this week that astronomers have taken the measure of the biggest, baddest, black hole yet found in the universe. It's ten times the size of our solar system and has swallowed billions of stars, violent quasars, and young galaxies that dominated the early years of the universe. The gravity is so intense that not even light can escape. Scientists don't have a clue how black holes got so big. But they can measure them and they are filled with wonder.

Even the universe is uncertain. You never know when you'll be swallowed by a black hole. And yet we gaze upon a mere infinitesimal fraction of it and feel, what is termed, "cosmic mediocrity." In other words, how can we not help feel insignificant in a night sky perceived merely by the naked eye? Are we not chastened by our smallness and thus struggle to find some semblance of security and meaning?

And so religion began, it would seem, as a method by which to approach these eminently human considerations about what we're doing on this earth and what it's supposed to mean when you look with wonder out at the life above us. We suffer from the same ailment today as what afflicted the first people on this planet: cosmic mediocrity. But religion, at least traditional religions may have made a huge but understandable mistake: It looked upon the mysteries and pretended that an answer or a revelation or a truth existed to explain the mystery as though solving the latest murder mystery. Doctrines were established to teach the truth and rituals were formed to feel the truth. The truth about who the architect of the heavens and earth really is, and that He cares about us, and life is made meaningful by living according to His word. (So much for cosmic mediocrity). Given the option between certainty and meaning or uncertainty and meaninglessness, the former triumphs again and again. Religion takes over the truth about the universe.

I believe we have paid a heavy price for religion's insistence that supernatural law takes precedence over natural law. To believe it is our divine right to have dominion over the earth, entitles us then to exploit all of earth's gifts for selfish

needs. Our alienation from the natural world deprives us of a real intimacy with the natural splendor that graces our life and which in fact has given us life to begin with.

To be clear, I am not talking about nature worship as much as I am trying to better understand just who we think we are as we plunder the earth with indifference for our personal gain. We are feeling now the consequence of theologies that have inflated the significance of humankind over and above the rest of nature, and theologies that claim divine interaction when anything threatening lies on the horizon. It's as though this huge arm reaches down from the heavens, a Mr. Fix It prototype, that can right all wrongs and reset the clock to where carbon emission levels are equal to what they were on the night the star of wonder led the magi to Bethlehem.

T.S. Eliot once said, "Humankind cannot bear very much reality." And David Orr paraphrased that notion by claiming "Humans are more ignorant than they are smart, and many seem to prefer it that way."

I believe that religion today stands at the crossroad of science and mythology. As more and more people become aware that myths merely point to a truth but can never be truth itself, we are beginning to experience a restoration of the natural world to its sacred status. In the Emersonian sense that the stars light the universe with their admonishing smile, the natural world becomes the sacred text that teaches us how we must live as spiritual beings.

Wonder plays a huge part in how we relate to the earth. I personally believe very strongly that this time in history represents the optimal moment for Unitarian Universalist growth...as long as we don't continue bad habits like shutting out wonder. Religious liberals, trying to snuff out wonder as an archaic religious relic like putting out a fire with an extinguisher...religious liberals, particularly Unitarians, must accept wonder because not all splendor can be named.

I emphatically believe that we make a huge mistake by tossing the creation story aside and replacing it exclusively with science. Thomas Berry offers a story – a new creation narrative – where wonder is pivotal. Through this story we gain new insights how every component of the universe is integral with every other member of the universe community. Rather than exhibiting defiance to the natural world, we finally understand reverence and bring that reverence to the table.

The new creation narrative became available to us through empirical inquiry into the origin, structure and sequence of transformations in the universe. It opens the door to wonder which is precisely what new and young people seek in their endeavor to find a religious home. How do we feel "at home" in the vastness of the universe? The role of religion at this point in time, is to underscore a larger vision of our place and purpose through understanding our relationship with a planet of finite resources. Unitarian Universalism is well poised to lead the spirit of a new

generation into a greater reverence for what is, and provide an ethical charge for how to preserve and sustain that which is sacred.

Human consumption and earth's limits are on a collision course. A new religious imagination needs to guide us and help identify the interconnectedness within the web of all existence. The deeply ingrained notion of self-sufficiency reinforces our alienation from the sacred community of the natural world.

The future, as only Thomas Berry can see so clearly, requires a transition from theology to cosmology. Is it as obvious to you as it is to me that our struggling denomination is better suited to address the spiritual needs of this young century than any of the traditional religions steeped in the dogmatic rigors of identifying a pre-scientific truth as binding for all times? Unitarian Universalism can embrace a new narrative for the modern age while cherishing reverence, and wonder. The transition from theology to cosmology would require a new approach to an ethical system that emphasizes the integrity of the natural world as a condition for integrity of the inner spiritual world.

Our UU leadership in Boston needs to connect the dots and understand that we as a denomination are poised to lead the transition from theology to cosmology. And in the process we must hold on to wonder as the pivotal sensibility that will guide us. But never can we afford to lose the gift of wonder. The interconnectedness and interrelatedness of earth's eco-systems are inescapably tied to wonder and thus beckon reverence. We can witness the wondrous harmony of life's interconnections once when we stop long enough to realize that melting polar ice caps due to global warming will affect the erosion of sandy beaches in Florida. Our immoral neglect of carbon dioxide emissions into the atmosphere means that as ice caps melt, wheat farmers in Kansas will feel the effect. We are all so linked personally and naturally. Kansas will become 4 degrees warmer in the winter without the ice cover of the arctic. Warm winters are bad news for wheat farmers who need freezing temperatures to grow winter wheat. Warm summers would rob Kansas's soil of 10% of its moisture, drying out valuable cropland. This would then lead to a food shortage and the downward spiral of effects will play themselves out. It's not just the cute polar bear that needs the arctic ice. Every one of us does...from Ethiopia to China to America. We're all so interconnected.

I am rapt with wonder as I contemplate earth as a living planet – a complex self-organizing system with the capacity to maintain the delicate conditions of life until we interfered. The old thinking is that earth was just a ball or platform for life to exist. But in fact, the earth as a living organism has continuously adapted to preserve life. By drawing carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere through photosynthesis, earth altered the composition of its atmosphere to keep itself cool as the sun grew hotter. Earth wants to teach us the powerful gift of adapting, for this is the only way that life can be perpetuated.

Every single element of the universe is aligned with the stars, including us, situated in one lonely corner of the cosmos. Indeed, we are stardust. Every single atom in your body; the calcium in your bones; the carbon in your genes; the iron in your blood; the gold in your fillings was created in a star billions of years ago.

O star of Wonder. Be it shining over Bethlehem, Moscow, Addis Ababa, the arctic, or Salt Lake City, it is wonder that sustains us: Stars, smiles, melodies, love...  
Wonder surrounds us and reminds us that we are not alone in this universe.

Envoys of beauty, we bathe in thy light. Amen