

“Embracing Mystery and Wonder”
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A colleague of mine, Rob Hardies, tells the following story. Rob serves the All Souls UU congregation in Washington, DC, and he was on a board of trustees retreat. Each person had been asked to bring an object that was important to them. An object that revealed something about their spiritual lives, about their religious journeys.

One member of the board, Steve, brought a stone. Steve is a geologist, and one day, many years ago, he told the group, he was out in Montana. He was studying the rocks out there, looking for clues as to the area’s geologic history. He was down in a valley, digging through a bunch of rocks, when one of them rolled away from the rest. As he went to pick it up, he says he immediately knew he’d found something special.

He knew it was special because it was smooth and polished. There aren’t a lot of rocks that smooth and polished in nature. It also clearly wasn’t native to the geology of the area. It had come from someplace else.

Steve had a quiet way about him, but you could tell he was getting excited as he remembered that moment. So the others asked him, “Steve, what’s so special about the stone?”

Rob recalls how Steve drew himself up in his chair, his eyes got bright and he announced, almost reverently, “It’s a gastrolith.”

What followed was an awkward moment in which Steve had the expectant look of a high school science teacher, after he has just revealed something of great excitement, and his students give him a blank stare.

After a pause, someone carefully asked, “What’s a gastrolith?”

Steve seemed undeterred, and plowed ahead with his explanation. “A gastrolith (pause) is a stone found in the stomach of reptiles and some birds that aids in the digestion of their food.”

Rob looked at the stone and thought to himself, “That would’ve had to come from a pretty big chicken!”

Anticipating the next question, Steve explained, “This stone came from the stomach of a dinosaur.”

Well, now he had their attention! Everyone wanted to know more about the gastrolith and what kind of dinosaur it had been in.

“It’s hard to know,” Steve said. “A brontosaurus, maybe? Probably a big dinosaur.”

“How old is it?” they wondered.

“Well, dinosaurs roamed the earth 150 million years ago. So that’s when it was in a stomach. But the stone itself,” he said, “is probably 300 million years old.” The room was silent.

One board member said, “Gee, that feels pretty close to eternity.”

Then someone asked, “What’s the spiritual significance of the stone for you, Steve?”

“Well, when I discovered that stone,” he said, “it really set me to thinking. It made me ask, over and over again, ‘What came before? What came before the dinosaur? What came before the stone?’ It was as though the stone put me in touch with an immense mystery that kept receding further and further into the past. It was an awe-filled experience. It was a turning point in my spiritual journey.”

I think probably a lot of us have had an experience similar to Steve’s, a time when we unexpectedly bumped up against the mystery and grandeur of the universe and of our lives in it. For me, I experience that sense of mystery and grandeur whenever I’m standing at the edge of the ocean. I feel the vastness, the

timelessness and the power of the water, and I feel small and insignificant, a blip on the universal screen, and absolutely helpless against the immense strength of the sea. But I also feel strangely exalted at the wonder that I'm a part of the vast universe. It may be an infinitely small part, but still, in these encounters, we experience ourselves as a part of that great mystery, that infinitely interconnected tapestry of all that is.

We live in a culture that sometimes seems to be obsessed with certainty and definitive answers. Author Maria Popova comments that if there is one common denominator across the history of human culture, "it is the insatiable hunger to know the unknowable –that is to know everything, and to know it with certainty."

Carl Sagan once said, "If we ever reach the point where we think we thoroughly understand who we are and where we came from, we will have failed."

What happens if we become certain that we have answers to all life's big questions? One thing that happens is that we close ourselves off to mystery and wonder. A certainty that leads us to believe we have absolute knowledge comes from our ego. When you think about it, it's pretty arrogant to think that we have all the answers. And by cutting ourselves off from mystery and wonder, we lose an important way of being in relation with the world and with each other, and with our higher power, with God. We lose our spiritual connection.

At its extreme, when people believe that they have absolute knowledge, with no checks and balances, the darkest side of certainty can show itself as a "betrayal of the human spirit." This is what Jacob Bronowski, director of the 1973 series, "The Ascent of Man," has called it. He is referring to the Holocaust. He says, "The assertion of dogma closes the mind and turns a nation...into a regiment of ghosts –obedient ghosts, or tortured ghosts."

There was a time when I believed that science would eventually explain all the workings of the universe. I now realize that that's impossible. To believe such an idea is another example of hubris. When we look at scientific, medical and technological advances, in our culture, there's a tendency to react by saying, "Look how much we know now!" Another mystery conquered! But a wiser and more humble approach would be to acknowledge instead how much remains to be known, and really, how much may always remain unknowable.

Astrophysicist and philosopher Marcelo Gleiser has explored our commitment to an ever-expanding base of knowledge and he comments, “There is much that is invisible to the eye, even when we augment our...perception with telescopes, microscopes, and other tools of exploration... Because much of Nature remains hidden from us, our view of the world is based only on the fraction of reality that we can measure and analyze... We strive toward knowledge, always more knowledge, but must understand that we are, and will remain, surrounded by mystery.”

Gleiser observes that it is our dancing with mystery and the urge to probe the boundaries of the known that feed our creative impulse. As we gain knowledge and insight, we experience wonder, and that makes us want to know more. The incompleteness of our knowledge and the limits of our scientific worldview “only add to the richness of our search for meaning.”

This recognition of our knowledge as incomplete is important. There is always more to be known and to understand. If we look out the window and see the creek, we can say, “Oh, I know what a creek is.” We think we know, and therefore we’re incurious. Sometimes I think about a certain kind of birder, the kind that is more interested in identifying a bird, checking it off their personal “life list” and trotting off to “get” the next one, than they are in observing and becoming better acquainted with this particular amazing living thing.

An important part of science is observation. And when we take the time to look carefully and closely, or to thoroughly experience something through any of our senses, a world of infinite richness and beauty is revealed that almost always leads us to wonder, and to a connection with mystery –that which will always dwell beyond the realm of our knowledge and understanding.

As Anais Nin once said, “The possession of knowledge does not kill the sense of wonder and mystery. There is always more mystery.”

Cultivating an attitude of curiosity and openness, along with mindfulness and paying close attention to small details, lead us to places of wonder and appreciation. Wonder and appreciation for our discoveries of the extraordinary in the ordinary, and as we bump up against the unknown.

The words of our chalice lighting this morning remind us of the value of embracing the night. “For without the darkness, we would never see the stars.”

“Live the questions,” wrote Rainer Maria Rilke to a young poet. Embrace the night. Love the mystery.

As Unitarian Universalists, we seek what is true. But we also need to maintain an attitude of skepticism. Not the dismissive kind of skepticism. What I mean here is an attitude of skepticism as a philosophical understanding that we cannot know anything with absolute certainty.

Certainty closes us to possibilities. Faith is an abiding openness to the possibilities in the midst of the mystery. Our faith is made up of the whole of our experience, including mystery and wonder. Persian Poet Jelaluddin Rumi wrote, “Observe the wonders as they occur around you. Don’t claim them. Feel the artistry moving through, and be silent.”

We don’t need the thrill of the sensational to keep wonder alive. A more mature wonder comes as we encounter the artistry in “the mysterious depth of meaning that lies at the heart of the familiar...,” as philosopher Sam Keen describes it.

In these troubling times, we need to be especially intentional about grounding ourselves in the present moment. Opening our senses to the wonders as they occur around us. Feeling our connection with Great Mystery. I am not suggesting that we turn our backs on current important issues. Not at all. But we are also called by life to drink in the impossible richness of this world with all of our senses. And there is so much to see, touch, smell, taste and hear. We must continue to appreciate and enjoy life. We must not allow anyone or anything to rob our spirits of their vitality.

We might do as theologian Frederick Buechner advises: “Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is.”

And as we seek out the fathomless mystery, we might remember the geologist Steve and his gastrolith, and think of life as a process of searching among a pile of beautiful stones. We never know what we may find.