

Living a Life of Wonder

Small Groups: November 2013

Two weeks ago, I visited my friends' new born twins. The girls were born at just 27 1/2 weeks and so they will spend the next couple months in the hospital as they work on getting bigger and stronger. When they were born, each weighed around 2 pounds. Both are doing well, but they still have a lot of growing to do and a long road ahead.

I had never seen babies so small, and to see them filled me with wonder. So small, yet still, everything was there - eyes and ears, ten fingers and toes, and a precious little cry. It really was beautiful to see them and to watch my friend hold her daughter close.

The English author and poet D. H. Lawrence wrote, "There is a sixth sense, the natural religious sense, the sense of wonder." This is certainly true for Unitarian Universalism. In fact, one of the sources that we draw on for our living tradition is "direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life." In addition to scriptures and teachings of world religions, in addition to science and humanist teachings, this experience of wonder and mystery is a key piece of our religious inspiration.

I appreciate this naming of wonder, without much explanation, as a source of our tradition for this direct experience of wonder is something which cannot fully yield to explanation - and if it does, it still does not become less wonderful. Before entering the ministry, I studied Molecular Biology. I studied the processes of life and even the process of gestation and human development from a single egg to birth. But all that science - all that knowledge - was not immediately what I thought of as I looked upon my friend's daughters - these brand new lives unfolding. In fact, I wouldn't describe my experience as thinking at all - but feeling - a feeling of wonder and reverence that filled my consciousness. It was not that I forgot the science. Caught by a feeling of wonder, it seemed even more impressive and awe-inspiring knowing the science behind it.

Recently, someone asked what I thought about science versus religion. My answer is that both are better off being informed by each other. For religion without accepting the discoveries of science becomes detached from the reality of our lives. Its ability to engage and speak to our world is diminished when it denies the findings of science. And science without a fundamental reverence for life more easily falls prey to serving only material or commercial purposes. It can even become harmful to the natural world, rather than serving a larger purpose of service to life and humanity. Religion and science, together, not controlled by, but informed by the other, make each better. This is something particularly wonderful about Unitarian Universalism - the ability to find inspiration in the mysteries we explore through science, while also leaving room for wonder to remain.

This month we will explore in depth the places where wonder breaks into our lives and how nurturing a greater sense of wonder can help us in living the lives that we want for ourselves and for our future. Over this month, I invite you to be more mindful of the times that wonder or awe breaks into your consciousness. Sit with the question, what does this feeling of wonder teach me?

Yours, Rev. Susan

Living the Theme: Experiencing Wonder

Use these exercises to reflect on how you experience wonder and what those experiences teach you about living a life of wonder. Choose one of the exercises below to engage the theme. Come to the meeting prepared to share how you tried to live wonder and what you learned from the practice.

Exercise # 1 Capture a Moment of Wonder

Grab your camera, camera phone, or if you are an artist, grab some paper and make a sketch. Try to capture a picture of something that gives you a feeling of wonder. Try to take a couple of these pictures over the month. Maybe it is the sunset, the harvest moon rising over the mountains, your child or grandchild, your partner's face as he or she stares in wonder at a new accomplishment by your child. Pay attention to something that gives you a feeling of awe and try to capture that image. Bring your picture or drawing to share with your group and think about what these pictures have in common. What made them wondrous to you and how does this help you define wonder. And what did trying to capture these experiences of wonder teach you?

Exercise # 2 Invite a Time of Wonder

The options are endless. Spend one or two hours one evening looking up at the stars and contemplate how incredible (even improbable) creation and life are. Get up early to watch the sunrise and invite your consciousness to let go of the worries of life and be fully present to the beauty of nature. Spend time with a child or grandchild and try to be absolutely present in the moment. Try to create a space of wonder as you engage in play. Go for a walk in the lovely fall weather. Find your own way to take an hour or two off from to-do's and worries and regrets, and marvel at the world around you. Was this exercise easy or challenging? Why? Was it hard to keep your mind from wandering to worry of the past or planning for the future? What was this experience like?

Exercise # 3 Collecting Wonder

Do you have a collection of wonder moments? Research shows that awe experiences trigger a release of stress reducing hormones in our brains. Make a list of your awe moments and post them in a visible place. What things are on your list? How does being able to see that list affect how you feel? Is it useful in stressful moments? (this exercise is from [flyingnotscreaming](#) based on the essay "Collecting Awe" posted June 28, 2011.)

Exercise # 4 Sit and Reflect

As you sit, consider something you once saw or experienced that transported you to a place where you were filled with awe and wonder. Why were you moved to a sense of wonder? What was there about that experience that thrilled you? Do you often go to such a space, or not? Why so? How could you make a spirit of being filled with wonder more readily available to you?

Some Questions to Think and Talk About

As always, don't treat these questions as "homework." You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply look them over and find one that "hooks" you most. Live with it for a while. Allow it to regularly break into - and break open - your ordinary thoughts. Then come to your small group prepared to share that journey with the group.

- 1. How has "growing up" affected your sense of wonder? Do you have memories that illustrate your change in perception? Do you view life with more wonder now, or less, and why?** In the book *The Age of Miracles*, Karen Thompson Walker says that the adolescent or teen years are the times of our lives when everything is possible, when we are most open to change, learning, growth and the general awesomeness of the universe. By default, through age, experience and disappointments along the way, most of us allow elements of cynicism or skepticism to cloud our view. Is this true?
- 2. When you were young was your sense of wonder encouraged or squashed?** What were you taught as a child and young adult about wonder? Albert Einstein was quoted as saying that we can live as if nothing is a miracle or as if everything is a miracle. Which way were you encouraged to live? **As a corollary, what did you teach your children (or other important young people) about wonder?**
- 3. Beside nature, what other kinds of things give you a feeling of awe and wonder?**
- 4. Is our wonder at technology or human-made creations the same or different from that the feeling of wonder we get from life and nature?** People often talk about being in awe of some new technology. Is there a qualitative difference between the ways we can be awed by innovation and the experience of wonder that we have in the beauty of the sunset, the birth of a child, or looking out over the Grand Canyon?
- 5. When was the last time you allowed yourself to be altered by wonder?** John Milton writes about "encounters and transcendent moments of awe that change forever how we experience life and the world." Has this been true for you? Have your moments of wonder really "changed forever" how you experience life in the world? If so, how? If not, do you see that as a problem or spiritual challenge?
- 7. Do your experiences of wonder affect how you live your life, how you treat others and the values you hold?** Albert Schweitzer won the Nobel Peace Prize for his philosophy of "Reverence for Life." He believed reverence for life was a universal ethic that grew out of an understanding and even wonder of nature. And he thought this ethic could open the way to a more humanitarian and peaceful future for humankind. What do you think?
- 8. Has our world-view become separated from a life-view? Has it become separated from wonder and reverence?** Albert Schweitzer thought that the challenges facing Western civilization could be attributed to the way that our world-view had become too disconnected from a life-view, too disconnected from the wonder, beauty and teachings of nature. **Where do you see this and what do you think the effect is?**
- 9. When does wonder become something you can't get behind?** Let's not assume that everyone gets along glowingly with wonder. When wonder takes the form of "miracles," many of us skeptics jump off the wonder wagon. Wonder is fine as long as it doesn't ask us to leave reason and science behind. When it comes to wonders and miracles, how do you separate out the "reasonable" from the "ridiculous"?
Or maybe your struggle is different. Maybe it's not skepticism that gets between you and wonder. Maybe it's plain old numbness? Or your busy life? We all, at times, go through spring with a yawn. We all, at times, curse our "boring, ordinary lives." And let's be honest, we can't be caught in a state of wonder all the time. When you go numb to the wonder of it all, what's the cause? What, most often, wakes you up?
- 10. What is the relationship between mystery and wonder?** Does scientific knowledge open more doorways to wonder, or does it impede wonder?
- 11. What would it mean to live a life without wonder?** Do you believe that human beings are in some sense created for wonder? Do we have a "responsibility to awe"?
- 12. What has been the biggest wonder of your life? What tops the list?** What are the one or two "greatest wonders" you've ever experienced? When were you "knocked to your knees" in reverence? Humbled or scared by something you simply could not explain? Or was it more subtle? Just as "big" but something that came on more quietly? Something that was ordinary but suddenly seen in a whole new light?

Recommended Resources

These are **not** required reading. We will not dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started and offer different ways to see and explore the theme.

First Thoughts and Wise Words

Wonder:

1. a cause of astonishment or admiration : marvel
- 2 the quality of exciting amazed admiration
- 3 rapt attention or astonishment at something awesomely mysterious or new to one's experience
- 4 a feeling of doubt or uncertainty

“Still, what I want in my life is to be willing to be dazzled---to cast aside the weight of facts and maybe even to float a little above this difficult world.” by Mary Oliver

From without,
no wonderful effect
is wrought within ourselves
unless some interior, responding
wonder meets it.
- Herman Melville

At moments of wonder, it is easy
to avoid small thinking,
to entertain thoughts
that span the universe,
that capture both thunder and tinkle,
thick and thin,
the near and the far.
- from "The Life of Pi" by Yann Martel

Worship will cease when wonder dies in the heart of man. - Thomas Starr King, famous UU Minister

"One can't believe impossible things," Alice said. "I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.
- from Alice in Wonderland

From wonder into wonder, existence opens. -Lao Tzu

“Observe the wonders as they occur around you. Don't claim them. Feel the artistry moving through, and be silent.” - Jelaluddin Rumi, Sufi poet

“Wonder is the basis of worship.” - Thomas Carlyle, English historian

“A mature sense of wonder does not need the constant titillation of the sensational to keep it alive. It is most often called forth by a confrontation with the mysterious depth of meaning at the heart of the familiar and the quotidian.” - Sam Keen, American philosopher

“The feeling of awed wonder that science can give us is one of the highest experiences of which the human psyche is capable. It is a deep aesthetic passion to rank with the finest that music and poetry can deliver. It is truly one of the things that make life worth living and it does so, if anything, more effectively if it convinces us that the time we have for living is quite finite.”

- Richard Dawkins

Wonder brings to mind a deliciously cool summer night at the lake: zillions of brilliant stars overhead, the gentlest breeze carrying a hint of pine needles, the soft lapping of the dark water against the pier, the damp, still-warm sand oozing between bare toes -- and an almost unbearable, overwhelming sense of reverent wonder.

- Small Group Ministry Facilitator

“One of the things I find particularly wonderful about our tradition is its ability to embrace science, to find inspiration and wonder in the mysteries we explore through science, while also leaving room for the mystery to remain. With every new discovery or insight, the magic, the miracle, the wonder of life, of conscience, of compassion remains. And as much as we seek truth and knowledge, with every answer we find, we still make room for more questions, for more wonders, for more mystery.” - Worship Associate

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed - Albert Einstein

“Penetrating so many secrets, we cease to believe in the unknowable. But there it sits nevertheless, calmly licking its chops” — H.L. Mencken, Minority Report

Mysteries, Yes by Mary Oliver

Truly, we live with mysteries too marvelous
to be understood.

How grass can be nourishing in the
mouths of the lambs.
How rivers and stones are forever
in allegiance with gravity
while we ourselves dream of rising.
How two hands touch and the bonds will
never be broken.
How people come, from delight or the
scars of damage,
to the comfort of a poem.

Let me keep my distance, always, from those
who think they have the answers.

Let me keep company always with those who say
"Look!" and laugh in astonishment,
and bow their heads.

"There is an anaesthetic of familiarity, a sedative of ordinariness which dulls the senses and hides the wonder of existence. For those of us not gifted in poetry, it is at least worth while from time to time making an effort to shake off the anaesthetic. What is the best way of countering the sluggish habituation brought about by our gradual crawl from babyhood? We can't actually fly to another planet. But we can recapture that sense of having just tumbled out to life on a new world by looking at our own world in unfamiliar ways." — Richard Dawkins, Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder

"We are stopped in our tracks by the majesty of creation and the gift of our lives. We need to practice what comedian Lily Tomlin calls "awe-aerobics."

- Frederic & Mary Ann Brussat

"I was struck by the fact that I hadn't been awed in a while. Did that mean awesome things had disappeared from my life? No. What it did mean was that I'd gotten too caught up in distractions and mind mucking to recognize anything as awe-inspiring. . . . I hadn't been paying attention to the beauty around me."

- Sue Patton Thoele

"Men 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 motion of the stars, and they pass themselves without wondering." -St. Augustine

"When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it is over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world."
— Mary Oliver

"At the back of our brains...there is a forgotten blaze or burst of astonishment at our own existence. The object of the...spiritual life is to dig for this submerged sunrise of wonder." - adapted from British essayist G. K. Chesterton

"Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside our control--God, truth, justice, nature, even death. The capacity for awe, as it grows, brings with it the capacity for respecting fellow human beings, flaws and all. This in turn fosters the ability to be ashamed when we show moral flaws exceeding the normal human allotment. The Greeks before Plato saw reverence as one of the bulwarks of society, and the immediate followers of Confucius in China thought much the same. Both groups wanted to see reverence in their leaders, because reverence is the virtue that keeps leaders from trying to take tight control of other people's lives. Simply put, reverence is the virtue that keeps human beings from trying to act like gods. To forget that you are only human, to think you can act like a god--this is the opposite of reverence."

- Paul Woodruff, from his book, Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue.

"The American sociologist Peter Berger has described the modern world as a culture with no windows on the wonders of life; yet at the same time we are so fascinated by the ever greater "wonders" that scientific research discloses about life's epic history. What a paradox!"
- from The Search for Spirituality: Our Global Quest for a Spiritual Life by Ursula King p.19

"Wonder is my second favorite condition to be in after love. I sometimes wonder whether there is a difference. Maybe love is just wonder aimed at a beloved. Wonder is like grace, in that it's not a condition we grasp—it grasps us." —David James Duncan, *My Story as Told by Water*

Creation is a Wonder

“This world is no mere play of shadows. It is our home, a triumph over chaos. We belong to a community of creatures. Bright orange butterflies of the sun, faint silvered moths of the moon, turn with us to light, and rush again freely into darkness.

Life is charged with electric clearness, mirthful as ringing music. We are flowing and moving on the earth, wheeling with the stars. At dawn the sun, a red arc flaming upward like a fire rising, clears the horizon's rim, turning from red to yellow and from yellow to brightest gold.

Each day is lived in the presence of things and creatures that should make us cry aloud with great joy. We live in a world made up of islands and continents, with much space in between, uncharted and unknown.

There is much that will not yield to human inquiry. And all, no matter what they find, leave the wondrous still wondrous. At the edge of our astonishment we are always confronted by an unprobed mystery. Not out of this world but in this world we are, in and of this world of skies and seas and fellow creatures. And we shall never know why. The creation is finally mysterious: it is a wonder.”

- by Thomas E. Ahlburn, UU Minister

Messenger by Mary Oliver

My work is loving the world.
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird—equal
seekers of sweetness.

Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?
Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect? Let me
keep my mind on what matters, which is my work,
which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished.

The phoebe, the delphinium.
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.
Which is mostly rejoicing, since all the ingredients are
here,
Which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart and
these body-clothes,
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy
to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,
telling them all, over and over, how it is
that we live forever.

Wisdom begins in wonder - Socrates

“A few years back we took a family trip through California and stayed in Yosemite Park. I had been to Yosemite before but this time we were coming into the park a different way. Our boys were in the back of the van, absorbed in playing a Nintendo handheld game. We were driving through some dense forest and then we just turned a corner-- there it was --the entire glorious Yosemite Valley seen from Inspiration Point -- waterfalls, the half dome and El Capitan. I felt like a traveler discovering it for the first time, swept away by wonder. We pulled over to share it with the boys but they were too distracted and unable to be in the moment to fully appreciate the experience. Even when you're there, you have to be there.

Sometimes, like the Yosemite moment, you see something that just transports you to that moment of awe, but being present to my surroundings and being curious allows moments of wonder to occur more often. Who doesn't want more wonder? It's what makes us feel alive.”
- Worship Associate

Online Articles, Videos and Podcasts

From *On Being* with Krista Tippett “On Exoplanets and Love: Natalie Batalha on Science that Connects us to One Another” <http://www.onbeing.org/program/on-exoplanets-and-love/5029>

“The Ethics of Reverence for Life” by Albert Schweitzer <http://www1.chapman.edu/schweitzer/sch.reading4.html>

“The Inner Life of a Cell” from Harvard University <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zrXykvorybo>

“What Can and Atheist Possibly Celebrate” (a Youtube video) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ptwEV0xhTzI&feature=related>

The Most Astounding Fact – Neil deGrasse Tyson <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9D05ej8u-gU>

Books

Wonder by Alan P. Tory. Chapters include: Dance, Air, Quiet, Bloom, Sun, Giant, Krishna, Jet, Clown

Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue by Paul Woodruff

The Age of Miracles by Karen Thompson Walker.

Movies

Gravity, 2013