

APRIL THEME - WONDER
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
April 6, 2014

OPENING WORDS *To Worship (excerpt)* ~ *Jacob Trapp*

To worship is to stand in awe under a heaven of stars,
Before a flower, a leaf in sunlight, or a grain of sand.
To worship is to be silent, receptive,
before a tree astir with the wind, or the passing shadow of a cloud.
To worship is to sing with the singing beauty of the earth,
It is to listen through a storm to the still small voice within.
Worship is the mystery within us reaching out to the mystery beyond.
It is an inarticulate silence yearning to speak;
It is the window of the moment open to the sky of the eternal.
Come, let us worship together.

STORY FOR ALL *The Wonder Box (Story of the mythical Jain Bird)*

READING *Messenger* ~ *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 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.

MESSAGE *Wonder* ~ *Rev. Stoneberg*

Wow. Wow. Can you just say that with me? Wow. Wow. Isn't that something? Just saying the word evokes, at least in me, a feeling of wonder.

How about this? Spoice. Spoice. Want to try that one? Spoice. Do you get anything off that? You're all more hip than I, and probably well aware, even before the Sochi Winter Olympics of this word...spoice....because snowboarder Sage Kostenburg used it in reaction to his gold metal win.¹ The Urban Dictionary² defines "spoice" as an

¹ <http://www.nbcdfw.com/news/sports/Pats-Sochi-Blog-Spoice-244649331.html>

exclamation of gratitude towards life, to be used when you find yourself in a situation involving a multitude of positive things at once. It can only be uttered with pure joy behind it. So let's try it again...spoice. Spoice.

Are we not always, or nearly always, in the situation of experiencing a multitude of positive things happening at once? Starting with the wonder of our hearts beating, and our lungs filling with air, and our synapses firing...then the wonder of our senses, no matter what condition they're in...the wonder of sensation we receive through sight and sound and smell and taste and touch and even intuition. Spoice!

But that's hardly the best of it...the wonder of every living thing surrounding us, the miracle of life on a planet spinning in space and immersed in a Milky Way of stars. And then there's the wonder of our ability to connect...our ability to bond together in order to help and support one another, and to fly. The ability to feel our interconnection with all that is. To be in relation with other humans, with pets, with wild things, with things that grow out of the earth, and with the earth...with dirt itself. And then to feel that connection with the whole cosmos...a cosmos that includes and embraces us. Spoice, and double spoice! Wow.

How is it that we don't live every moment filled with wonder?

This past Thursday, we concluded our Building Your Own Theology course, which involved six weeks of deep and sweet reflection on what matters in our lives. In that last session, we spent some time looking at the Stages of Faith development model as charted by James Fowler. He presented a six-stage theory of our possible progress and growth as spiritual beings. I spoke in this pulpit about his work in a two-part sermon in 2010.

Presenting in an intimate circle is much different than is preaching; and I'm also four years wized since those sermons, perhaps even wiser. Or, maybe it's just the wonder of how we seem to have different receptors available, or different windows open, when something blows by us again, in new and different circumstances. We have a wondrous ability to see things anew. Anyway, what I 'saw anew' in my study and in our discussion this week, is that in our spiritual development, our progress, we also have the potential to lose things, or to leave precious things behind...as well as the ability to regain those things. And I speak here about the imagination and openness of a child.

There's a lovely hymn...#338...I Seek the Spirit of a Child...a child who meets life naturally, who sings the world alive, and greets the morning sun with glee. Who loves instinctively, who lights our day with just a smile, and shines that light on all we see. Who sees delightfully, now clowns in cloud, now gold in sun, imaginations true and free.

Fowler's Stage One, a faith common in early childhood, is all about that spirit of a child.

² <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=spoice>

It's marked by fluid thought patterns, by encounters with novelty for which no 'knowing' has yet been formed. The gift of this early faith is imagination, the ability to grasp the world in long-lasting images without the necessity of logic.³ Transition to the next stage involves applying that logic, seeking to know and clarify things, to put the world in order and things into categories.

And so we move through these phases...if we're growing spiritually...or we get stuck somewhere...but what is fascinating, at least to me, is that if we grow enough, develop more, we can perhaps arrive back at a place where symbol and story and wonder again become the hallmark of our faith. I seek the spirit of a child.

I've read briefly about the work of psychologist Arthur Deikman. His work was in the area of consciousness and mysticism. He believed that there are two poles of human consciousness. On the one hand, one pole, our consciousness is active and is concerned with the matters of everyday life. It has a rather narrow attention, and makes sharp distinctions in time and space. Our active consciousness is concerned with subject and object. At the other pole, our consciousness is receptive, and in this mode we can receive the world with an immediacy and spontaneity akin to early childhood.⁴

I'd like to just jump ahead and start to explore how we might connect with this spirit of the child, with our receptive consciousness, but I think a few words about 'why' must come first. Why embrace life with wonder? Why is this part of our UFP purpose statement? Why wonder?

Certainly, a person can get through life, from birth to death, or at least post-childhood to death, without wondering much at all. Some might say that our culture increasingly deters our wonder...by bombarding us with more and more heart-racing imagery, by wearing us down into cynics and those who cannot be impressed. And perhaps some see critical thinking and acquiring knowledge as superior to the practice of wonder. Yet, great scientists have seen it differently. Carl Sagan is quoted as saying "Human beings evolved to wonder."

Albert Einstein said that if we can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, we are as good as dead, and that "the cosmic religious feeling is the strongest and noblest motive for scientific research."

Wonder is also firmly embraced by this religious tradition, Unitarian Universalism. We have a list of sources...a living tradition...upon which we draw to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. The first on that list 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."

³ Fowler, James, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, p. 133-4

⁴ Deikman, Arthur, "Bimodal Consciousness and the Mystic Experience," in *Understanding Mysticism* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1980) p. 261-269 as cited in <http://www.rochesterunitarian.org/2012-13/20121125.html>

Likewise, Albert Schweitzer, in his struggle to find a moral and ethical foundation that would affirm and support life, landed upon “reverence for life” to describe this ethic. In his view, reverence...awe, wonder...was the place to begin. And indeed, wonder is seen by many as the gateway to the life of the spirit.

So, then...how? How do we throw open the windows to the experience of wonder? I return to the experience shared in the Building Your Own Theology course. We did several exercises together over the course of the weeks, exercises asking us to write a description of the way we choose to live, a list of our own 10 commandments, our ‘eschatological laundry list’...which essentially amounts to ‘final’ words to live by. And I was amazed at how the process of naming things brings them more into focus and even into being.

What if, on the top of your list was a commandment to live every day with wonder? What if, in describing the way that you choose to live, you name that you want to embrace life with a sense of awe and curiosity, always open to discovery? What if, a central maxim in your toolbox of understanding resembled this statement by Annie Dillard... “Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery?” All this to say, I think it ‘simply’ takes intention and commitment, a determination to spend our lives wondering, and standing in awe of the beauty and chaos and mysteries all about us. What's not so 'simple' at all is that such a stance is completely counter-cultural, and very difficult to do in the swirling and constant busyness of our lives.

I suppose that in order to really live with that intention, we have to believe that it would make a difference, that life would be better and richer, if we were able to spend our lives in wonder, with the spirit of a child.

I’m going to let you in on my sermon writing process, a process I’d say I use for 50%, or more, of my sermons. Having received some bit of inspiration that determines my topic...and that can come from anywhere...a conversation, something I read, a movie, a snippet of insight, some random awareness...I begin by looking to see what other Unitarian Universalist ministers might have had to say on the subject. (Like, isn’t the Internet a wondrous thing?? I can’t possibly imagine what it would be to write a sermon in a pre-electronic age!)

I gather sermons of others on the topic...because I trust this source, my colleagues, as principle wisdom on any topic. Which is not to say that they agree, or that they come to similar conclusions...but just like our circle in our BYOT class, we are inspired by interaction with the ideas and lives of others. Hearing what someone else has to say, and then agreeing or disagreeing, being stimulated or even bored, helps us to bring our own ideas into focus.

In this case, as you might imagine, looking for sermons about wonder, I found several sermons for Christmas time...a time of childlike wonder. I found several sermons that focused heavily on the words and meaning of our first source...that ‘direct experience of transcending wonder and mystery’ that I mentioned just a bit ago. And this time, I was most moved by a particular strand of thought that I found in several reflections, but

mostly strongly in a sermon given by Rev. Victoria Safford. She's a hero of mine, actually. I just love how she thinks, and I love hearing her preach. I actually had that opportunity last September when I was 'home' in Minneapolis, and near enough to get to White Bear Lake for Sunday AM. Spoice!

Anyway, in her sermon about wonder, she made a point that resonates with the Mary Oliver poem that Ruth read..."My work is loving the world. My work is standing still and learning to be astonished. My work is mostly rejoicing. My work is gratitude." Well, Rev. Safford said,⁵

"We've been doing this a long, long time, this staring into space, imagining. Everywhere and always we have done this, and as far as we know, we're the only ones that do, or can....No one else makes stories, none make music or art or religion out of wonder. No one else is asking why? Or what if? Or how? Or what now? Nothing else on earth that we know of, nothing else in the universe that we know so far, looks at the stars or the land or at their own existence, their own face in the mirror, with questions and terror and reverence and awe. ...However this all got here, we're the only oneswho...notice, and marvel, and call it good, call it beautiful, sacred, and then act accordingly.

...We're the part of all this that laughs and loves and notices, the part of the universe that can scratch its head in amazement, the part that fall on its knees in humility, in prayer. That's our job in this world, our unique calling, perhaps the most important work we do. No one else and nothing else will do it."

Amazement, wonder, is our job in the world. Rev. Safford says that "our calling is alchemy: to transform wonder into something that endures even after the moment of wonderment passes, to transform awe into some kind of commitment, some kind of promise to stay awake and keep alive the change that took place in you..."

What might our world look like...I wonder...if we spent the energy of our lives in service to awe and amazement? I can't help but think it would be a more beautiful and compassionate place. It would just have to be a place where hearts, and hands, were able to stay open...a place where we could tell stories of wonder, and hope...stories that move us to act for justice...stories that fill us with kindness and courage for this work...this work of wonder made real.

Wow.

In her new book⁶, Anne Lamott says that Wow is one of three essential prayers, the other two being Help and Thanks. Wow is a way to fall on our knees. She writes:

"Life is motion, change, stagnation, bloom; nothing ever seems to happen, or awful stuff happens, or beautiful stuff happens, and ... Just when we think we've

⁵ <http://whitebearunitarian.org/worship-and-spirituality/sermons/>

⁶ Lamott, Anne, Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers (Riverhead:New York, 2012), pp. 92, 85

gotten things all lined up nicely, a rogue wave washes it all away, or deposits on the shore a bright orange queen conch that we've been looking for all our lives, or a big chunk of fossilized whale bone, honeycombed with minuscule cells of color, and we say, 'Wow.' We're blown away."

"Gorgeous, amazing things come into our lives when we are paying attention: mangoes, grandnieces, Bach, ponds. . . . Astonishing material and revelation appear in our lives all the time. Let it be. Unto us, so much is given. We just have to be open for business."

Let us remain open to the business of wonder...our work is loving the world...and through that love, to make way for transformation. Wow.

Spoice. Amen.

READING *Being Human* ~ Naima⁷

I wonder if the sun debates dawn some mornings
not wanting to rise out of bed from under the down-feather horizon

If the sky grows tired of being everywhere at once
adapting to the mood swings of the weather

If clouds drift off trying to hold themselves together
make deals with gravity to loiter a little longer

I wonder if rain is scared of falling
if it has trouble letting go

If snowflakes get sick of being perfect all the time
each one trying to be one-of-a-kind

I wonder if stars wish upon themselves before they die
if they need to teach their young how to shine

I wonder if shadows long to just for once feel the sun
if they get lost in the shuffle not knowing where they're from
I wonder if sunrise and sunset respect each other
even though they've never met

If storms have regrets
If volcanoes get stressed
If compost believes in life after death

I wonder if breath ever thinks of suicide
If the wind just wants to sit still sometimes
and watch the world pass it by

If smoke was born knowing how to rise

⁷ <http://www.climbingpoetree.com/html/notepad.php?pad=1>

If rainbows get shy back stage not sure if their colors match right
I wonder if lightning needs an alarm clock to know when to crack
If rivers ever stop and think of turning back
If streams meet the wrong sea and their whole lives run off-track
I wonder if the snow wants to be black

If the soil thinks she's too dark
If butterflies want to cover up their marks
If rocks are self-conscious of their weight
If mountains are insecure of their strength

I wonder if waves get discouraged crawling up the sand
only to be pulled back again to where they began

I wonder if land feels stepped upon
If sand feels insignificant
If trees need to question their lovers to know where they stand

If branches waver at the crossroads unsure of which way to grow
If leaves understand they're replaceable and still dance when the wind blows

I wonder where the moon goes when she is hiding
I want to find her there and watch the ocean spin from a distance
Listen to her stir in her sleep

Effort give way to existence.

***CLOSING WORDS**

~ Dan Gerber⁸

Often I imagine the earth
through the eyes of the atoms we're made of –
atoms, peculiar
atoms everywhere –
no me, no you, no opinions,
no beginning, no middle, no end,
soaring together like those
ancient Chinese birds
hatched miraculously with only one wing,
helping each other fly home.

Go now, with love, with curiosity, and make stories and music and justice out of
wonder. Amen.

⁸ <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/238834>