

THE UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP OF PETERBOROUGH
MYSTERY: IT'S EVERYWHERE I TURN
THE REV. JULIE STONEBERG
DECEMBER 2, 2018

OPENING WORDS *In This Spirit of Searching* ~ Joan Javier-Duval

Out of depths unknown
The spark of life ignites...And we are born
We enter a world, a universe...Not of our making
Our lives unfold...In mystery and wonder
Questions abound...For which there are no definite answers
And so
We gather in community...To seek in one another
Assurance....And recognition
Compassion....And strength
We gather in community...To be reminded
Of what is most ultimate...And what is most sacred
In this spirit of searching....And of reverence
Let us worship together this morning

STORY FOR ALL *I Wonder* ~ Annaka Harris
(A mum and her daughter wander through the woods, following the moon and asking wondering questions.)

READING *The Mystic and the Scientist*¹

One day a Religious Man approached a Mystic and asked, "Does God exist?" "Allow me to go within for an answer," the Mystic replied.

After meditating for quite some time, expanding her heart-consciousness to embrace the totality of existence, she answered, "I do not know what you mean by the word 'God,' but I do know that this world is more mysterious and more wonderful than I could ever imagine. I know that you and I are part of something so much larger than our own lives. Perhaps this 'something larger' is what you seek."

Then the Religious Man approached a Scientist. "Does God exist?" he asked. "Let me think," the Scientist replied.

And so she thought. She thought about the vastness of the universe – 156 billion light-years, or something like 936 billion trillion miles, in diameter – and the almost immeasurable smallness of a quark. She thought of how the energy of the Big Bang fuels the beating of her own heart. And then she answered, "I do not know what you mean by the word 'God,' but I do know that this world is more mysterious and more wonderful than I could ever imagine. I know that you and I are part of something so much larger than our own lives. Perhaps this 'something larger' is what you seek."

¹ <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/practice/workshop5/59475.shtml>

The Religious Man then thought to himself. He thought of what he knows and what he does not know. He thought about how he knows what he knows, and how he knows he doesn't know what he doesn't know. He thought about his experience of the world and how it is but one tiny, infinitesimal fraction of all experience. He thought about his dependence on forces larger than himself, and he thought about the interdependence of all existence. He experienced wonder and pondered mystery. And then he knew – he knew in his soul the truth of what the Mystic and the Scientist said – that he is part of something so much larger than his own life.

And then, only then, did he think about what he'd call it. (*pause*)

MESSAGE *It's Everywhere I Turn*

~ Rev. Julie Stoneberg

I don't know.

Really, I don't know.

I can't be sure. I mean, I just don't know.

As we enter this month of mystery, I wonder if these words will be the sum total of what I can say. I don't know. I can't know. Maybe even, I don't want to know.

I don't know why bad things happen to good people.

I don't know how the young girl I once knew as me ever turned out to be a Unitarian minister.

I don't know why what I think or believe isn't always evident in how I act or live.

I don't know who you are and what makes you tick...not really.

I don't know where we come from, where we are going, or who or what we are.

I don't know why certain bodies are resilient and strong, and others are susceptible to illness and disease.

I don't know how it is that with all of our knowledge and human wisdom, we can't see our way clear to living in ways that are kind to our planet, to its atmosphere, and to all of its beings.

I don't know why hate exists.

I don't know why the earth thrives in diversity, or how all of that diversity came into being.

I don't know why, amid all of the infinite possibilities, we humans arrived on this spinning ball of rock and water.

I don't know if anything else is out there.

I don't know if anyone is listening.

I don't know what will happen when I die. And I don't know what will happen when you die, except that it will make me incredibly sad.

I don't know why I cry when I'm sad.

I don't know how a heart feels what it feels, or how it can hold so much love and awe.

I don't know if there's anything I can know for sure.

You get the picture. I don't know. Well, I do know this...that I can't possibly know. I know that what there is to discover is limitless. I know how sitting in the unknowing can sometimes be incredibly scary and at other times be the richest, most awe-inspiring experience of one's life.

I don't know why some mysteries are comforting and others are frightening. Last year, on this very Sunday, I was facing a surgery that's purpose was to rout out an unknown... to get to the bottom of something that had refused by other means to make itself known to medical science. For me, it was a frightening mystery...an unknown which essentially took over my psyche and captured all of my attention until it could be resolved. Now, well on the other side of that, I wonder why I was unable to simply embrace that mystery for what it was...a doorway into a future that would take me to new and undiscovered places. Yes, certainly, one of the possibilities was an insidious, invasive cancer...certainly another possibility was future pain and suffering...but those weren't the only possibilities, and even if they had turned out to be reality, it all could well have been easily treatable and not scary at all.

So...why wasn't I able to see it that way at the time? Why is it that some people face such things with a trusting assurance and others with trembling and trepidation? Why do some seeds insist on surviving and growing, even when they find themselves in a dry sidewalk crack, and others perish without even trying to sprout?

Perhaps you can hear in the tone of my voice that I would like to figure all of this out. I would like to know. Or maybe, I've been programmed to want to know. Somewhere along the line, I learned that my survival was tied up in having answers. I learned that my role in life, maybe even my identity, was dependent on having answers. I learned that if I had the answer, I could solve the puzzle. And if I could solve the problem, I'd be okay. Maybe I'd even be loved, or respected, or at least know my 'place in the family of things.'²

And now, even though I know that all of these lessons were lies, or at least not always dependable hypotheses, I still seem to want to know. And, I want to know why that is! My brain is like a record skipping...stuck on repeating...why why why why why...

Arghh...I'm a borderline senior citizen and I haven't gotten out of my terrible twos! It's like the worst kind of monkey brain! Am I alone in this?

Where is the salve for this kind of mental anxiety...this pathological insistence on the need to have certain answers?

Hmmm...I might just have an answer! I think that the answer to this one is found in a conundrum...one which says that when we enter the mystery, and are willing to embrace unknowing, it is there that we find a rich, supportive, embracing spaciousness. It's like that field that Rumi speaks of... out beyond ideas of rightdoing and wrongdoing. He thought that when our soul lay down in the grass there, the world is too full to talk about. Richard Rohr speaks of this in his book *Holding the Tension: The Power of Paradox*.³ He says that when we allow ourselves to fall into the abyss of mystery, into limitlessness and unknowability, into a void without boundaries - it is then that we experience being held in unrestricted love and eternal care.

Falling into the abyss. Scary? We have so many mental images of losing control, of being lost forever, falling into the rabbit hole. And we don't imagine these to be places we want to visit.

² Refers to a line in Mary Oliver's poem, *Wild Geese*.

³ <https://cac.org/mystery-endless-knowability-2016-08-23/>

But, what if there's another way to see this? David Breeden wrote a poem called *Falling into the Sky*:⁴

Years end ways
I dug and dug
Deeper into the earth
Looking for blue heaven
Choking always
On piles of dust rising
Then once
At midnight
I slipped
And fell into the sky

I fell into the sky. Not a place we know. But one that holds the possibility of a kind of heaven, right?

I was just telling someone the other day of how much I like maps, and so perhaps it's no surprise that I am fond of this metaphor: Chet Raymo, a naturalist who has written more than twenty books on science and nature, speaks of our limited knowledge as an island existing in a sea of limitless unknowing. As I understand it, this means that our growing knowledge increases the ground we stand on, essentially making the island larger. But as the island grows, so grows the shoreline, and our experience of unknowing lengthens. The more we know, the longer the shoreline, which means that as we grow in learning, we also become more aware of how much we don't know. Walking along the sea of mystery becomes a longer journey. Our island may be larger, but that doesn't change the fact that the mystery is infinite. Or, as Bruce Cockburn sings, "You can't tell me there is no mystery. It's everywhere I turn." No matter where I go on my island of knowing, I turn, and I see that I am immersed in, surrounded by, mystery.

So, do we choose to view our existence as unpredictable and scary, or as something held within a container of what Richard Rohr calls endless knowability? That is, we can know the mystery as always being present. I guess it's sort of like making friends with the mystery, and then resting into the awareness that we know it intimately, exactly as that which surrounds us and holds us...something infinitely boundless in its eternal presence.

You know, there was a time when the most knowledgeable people on the earth believed it to be flat, and to have edges over which, if one went too far, one would fall. Although we've been told that this was still the primary worldview at the time of Christopher Columbus, in truth, many ancient Greeks believed the earth to be round, or at least curved⁵. Still, there must have been sea-faring explorers at some time who headed off into an unknown, into waters and in search of lands which had not yet been mapped... at least not in any way that they knew.

⁴ <http://blueyreview.com/david-breeden/>

⁵ <https://scienceblogs.com/startswithabang/2011/09/21/who-discovered-the-earth-is-ro>

still as a rock,
it breathes and flows
and turns inside out.
Ever seen a lion in a cage?
He paces and glowers.
That must be how God feels
locked in our little religions.
Look how big the sky is,
the deep distances between stars.
Little speck, that's you;
laughable speck, that's me.
How could we contain The Truth,
all that overwhelming light?
Our truth is just a pinprick
in mystery's velvet curtain.
Even so, see how we struggle
to fix an eyeball to that –
peepshow's tiny window.

*** CLOSING WORDS**

Mysteries, Yes

~ *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.

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME