

**THE MYSTERIOUS DANCE OF SCIENCE AND SPIRITUALITY**

THE UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP OF PETERBOROUGH

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**OPENING WORDS**                      *A Common Destiny*                      #557

All living substance, all substance of energy, being, and purpose,  
are united and share the same destiny.

\_\_All people, those we love and those we know not of, are united and share the  
same destiny.

Birth-to-death, we share this unity with the sun, earth,

\_\_our brothers and sisters, strangers,

flowers of the field, snow flakes, volcanoes and moon beams.

\_\_Birth--Life – Death. Unknown--Known--Unknown

Our destiny: from unknown to unknown.

\_\_May we have the faith to accept this mystery and build upon its everlasting  
truth.

Come, let us enter the mystery together.

**STORY FOR ALL**    *Here We Are: Notes for Living on Planet Earth* ~ Oliver Jeffers

*(This book explains what it's like to live on planet earth to new child. What we know, what we don't know, and how to live...be kind...ask for help...know you're not alone.)*

**READING**    *from The Sacred Depths of Nature* ~ Ursula Goodenough

I've had a lot of trouble with the universe. It began soon after I was told about it in physics class. I was perhaps 20, and I went on a camping trip, where I found myself in a sleeping bag looking up into the crisp Colorado night. Before I could look around for Orion and the Big Dipper, I was overwhelmed with terror. The panic became so acute that I had to roll over and bury my face in my pillow. All the stars that I see are part of but one galaxy. There are some 100 billion galaxies in the universe, with perhaps 100 billion stars in each one. Each star is dying, exploding, accreting, exploding again. Our Sun, too, will die, frying the Earth to a crisp during its own heat-death.

The night sky was ruined. I would never be able to look at it again. I wept into my pillow, the long, slow tears of adolescent despair. . . A bleak emptiness overtook me whenever I thought about what was really going on out in the cosmos. So, I did my best not to think about it.

But, since then, I have found a way to defeat the nihilism that lurks in the infinite and the infinitesimal. I have come to understand that I can deflect the apparent pointlessness of it all by realizing that I don't have to seek a point; in any of it. Instead, I can see it as the locus of Mystery: The Mystery of why there is anything at all, rather

than nothing, of where the laws of physics came from, of why the universe seems so strange. Mystery. Inherently pointless, inherently shrouded in its own absence of category...

(I've come to see that) mystery can take its place as a strange but wondrous given.

**MESSAGE**      *The Mysterious Dance*      ~ Rev. Julie Stoneberg

Here we are. Living on planet earth. Just trying to make some sense of it, and doing our best to live in right relationship with each other and with the earth itself. Here we are.

Not alone...although we might sometimes feel that way. Here we are, certainly not all by ourselves, but here. On this earth. Surrounded by wonders as yet unwitnessed.

Here we are. All of us looking for answers, although not necessarily to the same questions. We need to feel we understand, at least some of it, and to make sense of it, at least sometimes, and to apply what we've learned to how we live. All of us here searching for meaning of some kind, even while being aware that we are surrounded by great mysteries that we may never know or understand. And even that is a mysterious conundrum...that we seek to know the unknowable.

We are all looking for answers, and we are each searching differently. Each of us unique. Yes, each of us human, but like the stars in the sky, each separate, with our own very particular place in the family of all that is. And that too, is a mystery. Why so much diversity? Why doesn't creation find the things that 'work' and then hit the repeat button...spitting out the best and the brightest over and over...identically?

Here we are, sitting in this like-minded community...although we probably kid ourselves a bit too much about that. We are not, cannot be, like-minded...not really. I know, we do tend to think of ourselves here as like-minded...because very generally speaking, in very broad categories, we are similar, and maybe that makes us feel less alone.

It might be that we are alike in open-mindedness, or the degree of curiosity with which we live. It might be that we are alike in certain political persuasions, although I would caution us in making assumptions about that. It might be that we are alike in our desire to move with an ever-unfolding evolution of ideas and change, a desire that makes us suspicious of capital T truth and dogma. It might be that we are somewhat alike in our wish to be accepting and respectful of diversity. Maybe.

But like minds? In truth, each mind, each spirit is unique, and like geo-location coordinates, each has singular characteristics. Maybe one day, some kind of gps-like system will be able to map our mindscapes...and tell us exactly who we are and why we do what we do...but so far, our brains and our evolving consciousness-es are themselves mysteries...at least to me. How

we use our minds, and the worldviews that we have both created and espoused, creates a hugely diverse field, and isn't that diversity itself a great mystery!?

Yesterday I attended a webinar about social media and membership growth in our congregations. The presenter, Peter Bowden, a life-long UU, spoke of how social media is literally changing us. It is changing how we make decisions, and what information we need at our fingertips to make those decisions. And it's changing how we connect, or don't connect, with one another. It may be that how we are able to use social media as a congregation will be a primary determinant of our future vitality and growth. And, listening to this, I realized that my mind, my brain, my thinking, even how I know what I know, is not yet up to speed on these changes. It seems that the 'operating system' is eclipsing my ability to understand it...and yet I am also aware that some brains in other beings are keeping apace. Thank goodness.

This afternoon, we have a general meeting, with two very important agenda items. One of those is the approval of our annual budget; and the budget being put forward by our Board contains a rather large deficit. Are we like-minded in how we see this? Are we like-minded in believing that we ought to spend what we have on life-giving possibilities, or are we like-minded in seeing our savings as something to be safeguarded to ensure a long future? Are we like-minded in seeing these two mindsets as mutually exclusive, or like-minded in our ability to embrace the both/and of our financial realities? Can we do this dance? I trust that we can.

The other agenda item is a motion to get more serious about a long-term relationship with Beth Israel and this building. Last Sunday's conversation revealed that we are not yet informed enough to determine the desirability or viability of such a future. We don't yet have the information we need in order to eventually make that decision. Some of us are drawn to the emotional benefits of sharing space and embracing religious diversity. Some of us are concerned about how that would affect our identify. Others are unsure that this is the building we want to live into. We are not of like mind. But we are here. Trying to figure it out. Together.

What does all this have to do with the dance of science and spirituality? Everything. We seek elusive answers, trying to do our best to navigate the decisions before us. Some of us, the scientists, use data, proven research methodology, hypotheses and control groups. It's not that the scientists, having come to a conclusion, are absolutely sure they are right (because science has again and again found that it has been wrong) but it's that scientists are most comfortable with 'knowing' and making decisions in this way.

Some of us are mystics, who use feeling and imagination and intuition to discern answers. And, it's not the mystics always have it right. It's just another way of knowing.

I haven't spoken of science and spirituality since sometime during my first year with you...and even then, I spoke of it as science and religion. I re-read that sermon this week, and...it's not bad...but my mind and understanding are not where they were then. I've changed a bit...which affirms what I believe about life...that we are always on an ever-evolving and somewhat mysterious journey of becoming.

That sermon was in response to what I understood to be the make up of this community, at that time. This congregation was founded by humanist-identified engineers who presented as favouring science over spirituality, and fact over imagination. I felt their resistance to the presence of a minister who might use some 'language of reverence' and god-talk, and I was trying to bridge the apparent chasm between us.

And now, some eleven years later, I'm speaking of science and spirituality again, but this time, I am less convinced that they are opposites, but rather that they are moving in a beautiful dance with one another. I can make less distinction between them. None of us is purely scientist, and none of us is purely spiritual. I no longer see these things as opposites, or even as distinct squares in the patchwork of meaning-making, but rather as different ways of trying to figure out the same stuff. And each of us has a mind and a heart, both a brain and a spirit. We search for meaning that needs and relies upon both perspectives to balance and counter our search. Religion or spirituality tries to explain the unknown with mystery, and science attempts to explain the mystery with the knowable. Each is a response to unanswered questions...a response to humankind's endless romance with the unknown.

So, given that we each see the world through our individual lens, and that each of us has the ability to be both a scientist and a mystic, and that we each have unique experiences and criteria that determine how we weigh the evidence and make meaning, how can we say that one is preferable to another? It is indeed a dance...a dance inevitable given our human proclivities.

Ursula Goodenough, a cell biologist and the author of the piece Marion read a bit earlier, apparently identifies as a religious naturalist, a position that beautifully weds science and spirituality. Religious naturalism asserts that the natural world...that is, all that makes up our experience right here, on earth...is the center of our most significant experiences and understandings. Goodenough says that as a religious naturalist, she is called to "revere the whole enterprise of planetary existence, the whole and all of its myriad parts as they catalyze and secrete and replicate and mutate and evolve."<sup>1</sup> In other words, it is the very fact that we exist here at all...an existence that is full of complexity and beauty...and then that we have the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://polanyisociety.org/TAD%20WEB%20ARCHIVE/TAD28-3/TAD28-3-pg29-41-pdf.pdf>

ability to apprehend all of it...and that it is this incredible miraculous existence that calls forth, from the deepest part of us, gratitude and awe and reverence.

We stand before great mysteries. Over time, science has explained some of them, and in the process has pushed the edge of our knowing out further into the vast unknown. Over time, spirituality has taught us to attend to the sacred, to listen to the small voice within, to offer gratitude for the journey, to live with respect...and these practices have perhaps brought us closer to enlightenment, and yet, this too seems even more unattainable and impossible to comprehend.

And yet, here we are. We are surrounded by things we can touch and see, but the deeper we look, the more we see the mystery. Here we are. Human beings who seem wired to question, to search, to seek meaning, surrounded by great mysteries that we may never know or understand.

The mysterious dance. One partner is science/knowing; the other spirituality/mystery. I think it's more than a dance. It's a burgeoning love affair. I believe that as we continue our journey of evolution, the scientist and the mystic within each of us is getting to know one another better. They are dancing in exquisite patterns...leaning, falling, twirling...holding one another with increasing love and respect.

May it be so within each of us. May it be so between each of us, as we learn to dance together in a diverse and beautiful community. Here, where we are. Amen.

#### **READING**

*~ Dag Hammarskjöld*

I am being driven forward  
Into an unknown land.

The pass grows steeper  
The air colder and sharper  
A wind from my unknown goal  
Stirs the strings of expectation.

Still the question  
Shall I ever get there?  
There where life resounds  
A clear pure note in the silence.

#### **\* CLOSING WORDS**

*~ Sara Moores Campbell*

We receive fragments of holiness, glimpses of eternity, brief moments of insight. Let us gather them up for the precious gifts that they are and, renewed by their grace, move boldly into the unknown.

#### **EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME**