

“To Live in Wonder”

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City MD, Dec 1, 2019

Wonder; awe. I stood in a museum, I can never remember which museum, but I will carry with me always the painting that hung before me, which evoked such awe, such wonder. It was a painting of Pablo Picasso's of a solitary seated woman. This painting is held forever in my memory for the emotion I saw in that woman's face, the detail in her eyes, her non-comital gaze into the distance, the slouch of her shoulders. The details of the painting paired with the memories it evoked led to a sense of reverence that I carry with me to this day; searching for that painting each time I enter a museum.

Wonder; awe. The wonder of the intricacies of a city block; the awe of the hustle and bustle of pedestrians and cars and bikes and buses all navigating those roads and sidewalks; Buildings perhaps reaching to the sky or buildings built long ago alongside more modern architecture. Even the cracks running through a sidewalk. The city; a place where the many coalesce, and, in a way, become one complex organism.

Wonder; awe. Standing in a stretch of land covered in snow, first thing in the morning before footprints break the glaze of ice that causes that white expanse to glitter; or the feeling of standing in a forest surrounded by those towering trees, birds chirping above and squirrels scampering below; the opportunity in a forest to be a piece of something much bigger than oneself.

Wonder; awe. That spark, that things that centers you, connects you to your own holy; we each have this. That wonder that fills your soul, the awe that elicits joy and evokes comfort and

generates questions. We see this often, in children, in the minds of those new humans to which every bit of this earth is still a wonder – Let us retain some of this wonder

Leonard Cohen wrote,

“Seven to eleven is a huge chunk of life, full of dulling and forgetting. It is fabled that we slowly lose the gift of speech with animals, that birds no longer visit our windowsills to converse. As our eyes grow accustomed to sight, they armor themselves against wonder.” This loss of wonder that begins at such a young age.

Some seven-year-olds encounter a puddle and instead sees a wading pool, ready to splash! Or perhaps a child hears the chirp of a bird and experiences an orchestra. How can we connect with the awe found in these 7-year-olds? How can we engage with life filling, soul warming wonder.

Let us lift up the lyrics of the song we just sang,

“My life flows on in endless song, above earth’s lamentation. I hear the real though far off hymn that hails a new creation. Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear the music ringing. It sounds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from singing?”

The far-off hymn. The music ringing. The echo in her soul. When we live a life of wonder, when we engage with awe, how can any of us keep from singing? Overcoming tumult and strife! Let this wonder keep our spirits alive! For this composer, music elicits life sustaining, soul filling awe. Those black notes dancing across a page, inaccessible to all but a learned musician.

There are some for which mathematics elicits awe. Those theorems and proofs that always ultimately produce the same results – the absolute concreteness to math.

There are some for which science creates awe, formulating hypotheses, grappling with the wonder of bacteria or the questions of evolution or the harnessing of sustainable energy

There are some who connect with art, who find wonder and awe in the strokes of a brush or the chiseling of a piece of wood or the refrains of a piece of music.

There are some who find profound awe in that which is man-made, like a carefully designed airplane.

What, to you, elicits awe? What keeps you singing?

Let the potential of this song in each and every one of us help connect us to the holy; for what for what is awe if not a connection to the holy? To elicit awe is to elicit God, goddess, spirit of life, ultimate truth; to elicit awe connects us at our core to a spiritual awakening.

Mechtild of Magdeburg wrote,

“The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw – and knew I saw – all things in God and God in all things.” All things in God and God in all things.

All of these things – music, mathematics, nature, science, art, cities – all of this is connected to the holy. Amoebas enlarged under a microscope or theorems scribbled across a page.

Whatever it is that elicits this rush of awe, of wonder, of that joy felt by a child, this is holy! This awakens our spirits. This centers us; this brings us back to our true selves. This connects us to the ultimate. If we are living in this sense of awe and wonder, how can we keep from singing?

Rabbi Heschel writes,

“The profound and perpetual awareness of the wonder of being has become a part of the religious consciousness of the Jew... We are trained in maintaining our sense of wonder by uttering a prayer before the enjoyment of food... This is one of the goals of the Jewish way of living: to experience commonplace deeds as spiritual adventures, to feel the hidden love and wisdom of all things” Even in a glass of water, drops forming in condensation, sustaining our lives.

This is a practice of being grateful and living in awe and being intentional about noticing the little things – a spiritual practice of maintaining a sense of wonder; Rabbi Heschel writes, “Each time we are about to drink a glass of water, we remind ourselves of the eternal mystery of creation.” Rabbi Heschel ties awe and prayer, with an acknowledgement of the holy. He speaks of prayer as maintaining wonder – a small yet significant act of prayer that connects one to the holy and maintains and feeds this sense of awe. These common things such as a glass of water become saturated in wonder. Being thankful for these common things elicits awe and connects us to the holy; whatever that may mean.

As we grapple with our own holy, let us connect to that which brings us together as Unitarian Universalists

What about the awe found in our Unitarian Universalist principles? Those seven principles by which we covenant to live. I am reminded especially by two – our first and our seventh. Our first principle emphasizes the inherent worth and dignity of every person. This simple yet profound idea that each and every person has this inherent worth, this inherent dignity. This

can be a difficult idea to grasp and implement and that is what makes it so profound. Even those we don't like or disagree with – inherent worth. This doesn't mean we need agree, this doesn't mean that actions are condoned, but that within the soul of every person is worth. The least of these – worth. Those who struggle and make bad decisions – worth. Those we disagree with – worth. Those we love – worth. Is this not awesome?

And this ever important 7th principle, respect for the interdependent web of which we are all a part. Each insect, each amphibian, each rainfall, each tree, each and every one of us – we all rely on each other. We are all part of this sacred planet. We each rely on each other for sustenance, for protection, to maintain this delicate balance which is our planet – the cycle of rain and evaporation that quenches our thirst and fills the oceans and streams; or the inevitable cycle of life and decay. The web between humans, each action rippling out and affecting those we have not even met. That holy interdependence on all that is on our planet; all that is a part of this web of life. Let a life guided by these principles, this inherent worth, this interdependent web, let this elicit awe and connect us with the holy, whatever that may be. And let us be reminded of the awe and the holy of those things both magnificent and in those things we encounter every day – small moments.

Like Rabbi Heschel's glass of water, or the smile of a child, or the bustle of a city street – small moments. Moments of awe. Moments that keep us singing! Moments that connect us to the holy. Let us elicit the awe in those moments we can choose to pay attention to. To choose to live this life of awe. Rabbi Heschel writes of "the hidden love and wisdom of all things"

The hidden love and wisdom of all things, even the small. Not all of this awe is noticing – some things of awe come from grappling with life's questions; something things of awe come with engaging in the human experience; engaging with our finite lives or mistakes or loneliness

Rev. David Usher writes,

Because we are finite, we lift up our eyes to the infinite sky, and feel wonder and awe.

Because we have stumbled, we take the tender hand which beckons us to rise,

and feel strength and reassurance.

Because we are lonely, we reach out to those around us, and feel warmth and acceptance.

Because we are human, we do all these things, and in our worship, feel the presence of the divine.

Reverend Usher understands that because we are finite, we feel wonder and awe.

That truth of the finite nature of our lives calls us to wonder about that which seems so very infinite; the night sky, glittering with stars that reach out across the solar system, but a tiny piece of the galaxy, the universe. God, the ultimate truth, spirit of life and love, the scientific process. That simple yet profound acknowledgement that our lives will not continue indefinitely has led to wonder and awe and questions and a search for meaning throughout cultures and throughout time. That unanswerable question, why are we here? May we each find our own answer, our own holy truth. Where else can we find such profound awe but in these questions. What about the awe in overcoming human struggle?

Rev. Usher writes,

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“Because we have stumbled, we take the tender hand which beckons us to rise, and feel strength and reassurance.” – eliciting that awe that “beckons us to rise,” for there is deep awe in overcoming hardship. That which can occur after suffering is full of awe. I am reminded of a man who struggled with depression. He struggled every day to get out of bed and to find interest in daily activities. He felt hopeless, unable to function in day to day tasks. In this state of depression there was no awe, only emptiness and pain, despair. All of that which depression is – an illness that can destroy a life. Ultimately, this man got help. He agreed to see a therapist and worked hard. He agreed to try medication. And with this hard work, and time, he healed. After a time, he began to smile again. And he saw awe all around him. Awe was in all of the things he had failed to notice for years – awe in a tree, or in music, or in love, or in art. In healing from depression he received this gift of awe.

Awe engages us in emotions and connections that feed our mental and physical health.

Author and minister Rev. Susan Beaumont writes “Wonder trumps anxiety. We cannot be filled with wonder and remain anxious at the same time. Wonder is the ability to feel amazement, admiration and curiosity about something... wonder connects us with God... [there are] three internal voices that stand in the way of wonder; the voice of judgement, the voice of fear, and the voice of cynicism.”

Amazement, admiration and curiosity – to evoke these feelings and, with a sense of awe, connect with that which is holy. To live everyday amazed by the small – the wonder in the life of a bug – or the big – grappling with the finality of our lives. To be in admiration of nature and city blocks alike, to be curious about a mathematical theorem or the artwork of Monet. This

connects us to the holy – this grounds us in awe and wonderment – akin to our 7-year old selves. How can we keep from singing?

Judgment, fear, cynicism – these inhibit our ability to live a life of wonder and produce anxiety.

To judge others or ourselves for mistakes or wrong doings, to live in fear of the future or to experience the world through the lens of cynicism – these detract from our ability to live in wonder. Our ability to live in wonder, and in awe.

Rev. Scott Tayler writes,

Look friends, to the sky,

to the stars that dance with this tiny globe on which we travel.

Look to the horizon, the tree line, the expanse of wide-open fields,

to this living, breathing earth that makes our living and breathing possible.

Look at the faces that surround you,

and notice what a wonder it is that we don't have to walk this world alone.

The wonder and awe in the stars, the horizon, the trees and the fields. The awe that we are here, together, in relationship and companionship! This interdependent web, this respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every single person. This life that we can live in awe and wonder, where this awe and wonder can overcome anxiety, overcome cynicism. This thing within each one of us that connects us to the holy, to our core and our center. To all those creatures of the earth and sky, let us live in awe and wonder! Let us connect to the holy inside of each and every one of us. How can we keep from singing?

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May it be so, and Amen.