

Radiant with Mystery

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD May 31, 2026

My husband and I stood in awe on the edge of a plummeting precipice dripping with sweat and a thirsting for adventure. Far before our inquisitive gaze, stretching well beyond what the eye can see, was a winding canyon. Its immense rock walls rose from the depths of the earth to meet the eye. At the bottom twisted a river – the same river that for millions of years slowly and with great patience carved through solid rock to create a canyon that at points reached a mile deep. The heat rose from below us, the sun blazed from far above, as we settled into a moment of deep wonder and abiding awe. Mystery surrounded us, as natural beauty stretched above us, below us, and far beyond us. A mystery that led to inquisitive, unanswerable questions. How could the earth create something so breathtaking, filled with wonder? From where was this beauty born? We felt so small and insignificant standing before a stretching, breathtaking landscape.

Yet, one need not stand on the edge of the Grand Canyon to be immersed in the abundant wonder of this blessed and finite realm. I think of the Fourth of July fireworks where I live in Catonsville — twenty-five minutes of myriad colors illuminating the velvety evening sky, immense explosions of blue, pink, and green bursting into endless shapes and forms. Or a family of deer in the woods - that one precious moment when our eyes meet before they quickly scatter. The wonder of true love that stretches for decades, or the immense strength needed to overcome adversity. Beautiful. Awe filled. We reside in a world radiant with mystery. We are finite beings held within an infinite, forever unfolding reality. What we know is but a tiny piece of all that has existed and all that is yet to unfold. The rest is left to the mystery.

Earlier this week, I spoke on the phone with a helpful man. I sat, tucked away in our church office suite. He made small talk, discussing the day's rainstorm. "How is the rain by you?" he asked. My answer? "I have no idea!" It was the middle of the afternoon, hours into my day, and

since entering the office, I had not yet looked out a single window or stepped outside. Does this sound familiar? Sometimes we become so consumed in the business of our days - our endlessly calculating minds, our tasks, whether mundane or significant, our work, our parenting –that we forget there is a world all around us, beckoning us to engage with **it**. We cut ourselves off, grow jaded, and inattentive. There is a great mystery awaiting our inquisitive minds. Each and every moment has something to offer us. Beauty. Unexpected kindness. Reminders of the finitude of life. What if we paused – one moment at a time – to open our minds beyond tasks and towards mystery? Poet and author Dejan Stojanovic wrote, “The world is always open, waiting to be discovered.”¹ May we dwell in mystery, meeting each day with wonder and reverence.

Let us lean into the question posed by author and psychologist Dr. Sharon Blackie. “What would happen,” she asks, “if we began each day from the position that we don’t know everything, and that what we proudly imagine to be ‘our truth’ and ‘our wisdom’ probably aren’t such perfect reflections of reality after all?”² What we perceive as wisdom or truth can by no means penetrate a great, enduring mystery. We simply do not know. The meaning we have built is far more incomplete and fragile than we think. Certainty itself is an illusion. What if all that we think we know is simply unknowable? Through decades of learning, maturity, and growth, we drift away from the inquisitiveness so pronounced in childhood - a wholehearted embrace of wonder and awe. What might it mean to live but one day with the recognition that we simply do not know? Would that open each day into a genuine adventure? What if we lived, less concerned about what we hold as true, but dedicated to embracing mystery and the unknowable? Poet Rainer Maria Rilke offers this wisdom: “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves.”³ Love the questions — the philosophical and theological questions. Love the mystery, as the answers remain forever beyond our grasp, as wonder prevails.

¹ “The Open Door” by Dejan Stojanovic

² “On Getting Over Ourselves” by Sharon Blackie

³ *Letters to a Young Poet* by Rainer Maria Rilke

Think of a child. Spend any time with a three-year-old and you will see evidence of her noticing every minute detail of the robin, the bird song, the earth worm. We see her curious about the wall outlets, or in complete joy simply beating two sticks together. Perhaps she follows the moon during a nighttime car ride or asks questions about the flowers in a flourishing garden. Is she even expecting answers, or is she simply delighting in the abundance of the unknown, embracing mystery again and again, through the curiosity and wonder of youth?

Philosopher and poet Henri Frederic Amiel, whose wisdom we heard earlier, offers the metaphor of the quote, “little fallow corner in your heart ready for any seed the winds may bring.”⁴ It is a metaphor for agriculture. How can we understand it more deeply? I think of corn fields in New Jersey where I was raised, often lining two and four-lane highways as cars rushed past. They represent intentional production and hard work. Yet, very periodically, there appears a field with nothing growing – simply dry, brown dirt. Yet this is not emptiness. This is a fallowed field - land intentionally left unplanted, allowing time for the soil to rest, recover its nutrients, and eventually sustain life again. Renewal offered in place of production. What does this mean for our hearts and spirits? In the farms of our mind, the corn is worry. The wheat is certainty. The tomatoes are endless to-do lists and obligations. Amiel’s metaphor invites us to leave space intentionally unfilled – open to contemplation. A space in our minds open to whatever small gifts the wind may bring. A fallow corner of the heart is a space where curiosity will not be overpowered by indifference, beauty by anxiety, or wonder by conviction.

I offer a story entitled “The Mystic and the Scientist,” pulled from a workshop for Unitarian Universalists. One day a religious man approached a wise mystic with a profound question, “Does God exist?” The mystic settled in meditation, stretching her heart to embrace the fulness of existence. She offered, “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.” The religious man then approached a scientist with the very same question, “Does God exist?” The scientist contemplated the overwhelming vastness of the universe, alongside the inconceivable

⁴ *Amiel’s Journal (Journal Intime)* by Henri Frederic Amiel

minuteness of a quark. After reflecting on these mysteries, she offered the same response of mystery and wonder, the same reflection of something far larger than any one human life. The religious man reflected on what he knew and did not know. He considered his own insignificant existence in the vast expanse of all that is, and his dependence on forces far greater than himself. In his spirit, heart and mind, he came to understand just as both the mystic and the scientist offered – that he was part of something immeasurably larger than himself.⁵

So, I think of the mindset of the scientist. To the humanists, religious naturalists, and atheists among us – think of physics. Think of quarks – Infinitesimal particles that help form the smallest building block of matter. The big bang – the expansion of space itself – and the billions of galaxies that fill the cosmos. Think of the chemistry of ancient stardust woven into our bones and blood and muscles. The biology of the ocean – plummeting to depths so great we have only begun to explore – or the billions of years of evolution that shaped life as it is today. An overwhelming abundance of mystery, awe, and wonder. Of things unknown yet asked of still. A web that binds all things together in sacred interdependence: quarks with stardust, the cosmos with our very bones. Something that reminds us of how small we truly are; and yet how interconnected we are to something far greater than our individual selves.

Or the mystic – Offering those questions posed by faith, moving from the tangible realities of atheism to the deeply intangible mysteries of theism. Questions of what mystery or realm, if any, follows death. Of encounters with the sacred. Of suffering and evil. Of the nature of the divine. Of the intention of the universe. Of free will and destiny. Can any question posed truly reach the heart of divinity and all that it entails? Or is it the questions that matter most, as we shape our finite lives in awe of all the possibilities of what could be? Of all that resides within the human spirit? Can we shape each day as one of reverence?

Perhaps what we are searching for is not found in solving these great questions but learning how to live worshipfully within the mystery. Author Kent Nerburn wrote, “no amount of searching will ever reveal for certain whether we are all children of chance or part of a great

⁵ *Tapestry of Faith* “The Mystic and the Scientist”

design.”⁶ We have long searched for answers through the disciplines of science, theology, and philosophy. We study the galaxy, we study sacred texts, yet many questions remain forever elusive – beyond our limit of understanding. This great mystery does not rob us of meaning; rather, it creates meaning. We open ourselves to humility and wonder. We still love, we still grieve, we still raise the next generation. Poet and writer W. B. Yeats wrote, “The world is full of magic things, patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper.” So may we sharpen our senses to the beauty of the tangible – noticing vibrant purple shades of tulips, the sweet scent of wild honeysuckle, the gentle touch of an afternoon breeze – for these are a mystery. May we sharpen our senses to the intangible – questions, prayers, meditations, moments of awe – for these are a mystery too.

So how does our faith draw us into mystery? Our theologies are forever evolving and unfinished, shaped by our ongoing experiences of grief or wonder. Our faith is formed by moments of awe – moments that reveal how interwoven and interconnected we are with all that is, just as the mystic and the scientist discovered in their own way. Ours is a faith of biology just as it is theology; it is a faith of stardust just as it is a faith of divinity. Both are pathways to awe and wonder. In our faith, mystery becomes profoundly sacred, inviting wonder, a sense of humility, and curiosity. We recognize limits to human understanding, and we embrace them. Mystery opens us to new truths, to transformation, to deeper ways of being. We remain on a never-ending search for truth and meaning, embracing the unknowable as a spiritual practice. Our task is not to have all the answers, but to deepen in spiritual growth and spiritual depth. So, pay close attention to the world around you – birdsong in the morning, the changing light of sunset, the feel of rain on your cheek. Spend time in silent contemplation not with answers but with questions. Reconnect with that childhood curiosity by asking simple questions about ordinary things. Feel the vastness of nature and the mystery of existence. Leave a sacred, fallow space in the corner of your mind for growth and transformation. Notice how connected you are, not only to one another, but to the cosmos.

⁶ *Simple Truths: Clear and Gentle Guidance on the Big Issues in Life* by Kent Nerburn

For this is a blessed life. This is a precious life, fleeting and impermanent. May we grasp all the beauty, wonder, and awe available within our brief time in this finite realm.

May it be so, and Amen.