

With Wonder and Awe

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD, December 4, 2022

What was once a crisp and clear eggshell blue slowly transitions into an array of pinks mingling with oranges contrasting with reds and even darker blues. As the sun sets, the sky becomes velvety black, interspersed with shining dots almost seen as glitter – the imprints of burning stars lightyears away. There is the moon – perhaps whole, perhaps a mere crescent – reflecting the light of our own star, our own life-giving ball of heat and light. The sunset – the same sunset that occurs at the end of each day – an event that could fill us with awe and wonder evening after evening, and yet an event that so easily slips beyond our awareness, beauty and wonder lost amidst the anxieties and monotony of day-to-day life. I am curious how our experience of the sunset would change if we engaged with it in a new way - as an event we had never witnessed before and would never witness again. How would we engage with those vibrant colors melting into one another, those specks of our galaxy visible as our eyes connect to stars far beyond our own tiny, insignificant planet? I wonder of engaging with each moment the way many children engage with the world, experiencing each event as a brand-new miracle, a magical experience eliciting questions and curiosity and wonder and pure, simple, unassuming delight.

I remember my own delight in this season of short days and long nights, experiencing tiny, intricate, delicate snowflakes falling from the sky as if by magic, clouds of frozen breath escaping my mouth and dispersing into the night air, crisp air turning my nose and face and fingertips bright red as I made snow angels with my little sister, laughing and squealing and filled with simple delight. I remember celebrating Christmas with my family, immersed in cookies and love and magic. I feel within me a need to bring this childhood wonder to my own adult life – this energy and wonder and attention to those little magical and mundane occurrences we are surrounded by.

I think of those questions on the tongues of curious children – questions about those mundane miracles. Why is the sky blue? Where does snow come from? How does running water turn to ice? I invite us to turn that childhood curiosity of the tangible into adult curiosity of the intangible. In our later decades we ask different questions. Will goodness and beauty ultimately prevail? Is there a guiding force to the universe? Do we each have a sacred companion found in the holy, or are we all ultimately alone? We are called to engage with the many mysteries of existence. Today, as we are steeped in wonder, I invite us to reflect on a simple yet profound question: What is the sacred? What is that which is greater than ourselves – engaging with us in glimpses of curiosity and wonder? While I use the term God, I invite you to engage with any word that best describes your sacred – representing a connection to an evergreen tree or representing a connection with an entity in the sky. I share some Christmas anecdotes to reflect on my personal experiences but wonder and awe go way beyond Christmas in this season we are celebrating!

In many ways we come together as a culture to set aside a time to evoke wonder in this season, pausing to immerse ourselves in nature and gratitude and celebration and faith. As our hemisphere gets darker, we bring forth a different light – a light from within – a spark of something that connects us to each other and to our sacred and to our core which is love. And those strings of multicolored lights hung over trees and porches and windowsills – those mark a time of celebration, of joy, of intentionally bringing beauty and delight to strangers and beloveds alike, making that inward light into something tangible to share.

Wonder emerges with beauty – the night sky, falling snow, the embrace of lovers, a child's expectation of reindeers on a roof deep in winter. And, wonder comes with hardship – those fundamental questions that arise after death or loss or profound pain of any kind. There is depth that occurs within us following the awe-filled, joyful, meaningful moments – we will call them peaks – and the devastating moments – what we will call valleys. These peaks and valleys are found in any human life. Religion becomes a guide and support on our individual journeys towards depth and meaning making that arise from these experiences, from these moments,

from this wonder - whether steeped in hardship or joy and love. Religion becomes the “pursuit of the beautiful”¹ Theologian Paul Tillich summarized this wisdom of peaks and valleys with his reflection, ‘... there can be no depth without the way to depth. Truth without the way to truth is dead...’² This “way” – that is wonder. That is wonder. Beautiful, or painful. This way guides us to depth, to truth, to beauty. We surrender to the cosmos.³

The sacred, the holy – our God of many names and our God of no names – is a mystery, a sacred mystery. Theologian John Haught writes, “God is the depth of existence... religion is a confident search for this depth.”⁴ That is why we join together here, today, and every day as a people of faith – to journey together with one another and our sacred on a path towards greater depth.

Let us pause for a moment and ask, what does it mean to be a people of faith? Haught offers that a self-identified atheist can live a more holy, sacred life than one who identifies as Christian, Buddhist, or Muslim. It is how we live our lives, not what we believe is or is not in the beyond. If God is synonymous with depth, as we are exploring, then an atheist committed to justice and peace, who lives a life immersed in compassion, is more holy than the superficial one who calls herself devout.⁵ Religion becomes a way of life – a search for depth – not a set of beliefs. Religion becomes a guideline - a “way,” as Tillich noted - a way to depth, or a way to truth, or a way to beauty. May we touch the depth of each moment, immersing ourselves in goodness and curiosity – akin to that of an innocent child.

And so we touch God in a sunset or feel the presence of the divine when snow descends from the sky above. And yet ultimately, God is hidden. God is beyond the realm of sense objects which are far too narrow to grasp this sacred, wildly unknowable essence – and so we create wonder in what we cannot perceive by engaging with those things that give us a glimpse, a

¹ *What is God? How to Think About the Divine* by John Haught pg. 88

² *Ibid* pg. 21

³ *Ibid* pg. 88

⁴ *Ibid* pg. 24

⁵ *Ibid* pgs. 32-33

peak, a glimmer of this thing that is deeper than any reality we can ever experience.⁶ This is sacred wonder – this is awe. Haught describes God as, “always receding, encompassing, illuminating, but never falling within our comprehending grasp.”⁷ Is this not parallel to the beauties and mysteries of the tangible that surrounds us? The ever-cycling routine of nature, the love felt deep in our hearts and souls for the beloveds in our midst. The sacred becomes synonymous with beauty, love, and wonder. I question, as does Haught, whether this presence may understand us more than we understand it.⁸ What does the night sky know of our souls? What can love understand of us that we can never understand of ourselves? I wonder – can these mysteries become our sacred companions, never leaving our sides, just as a child grasps on to her own miracles? Scientists are finding that even the trees whisper and converse with one another. Can our sacred – that which is nature and that which is beyond – converse with us as well?

I marvel at the overlap of wonder and the sacred alongside experiences of beauty. This beauty is nature, yes – mountain peaks white with snow, glaciers floating in the arctic, towering evergreen trees offering color amidst waves of brown. And, this beauty is beyond that, found in companionship or love or art or the wonder of New York City – and we fully experience it when we allow ourselves to be “carried away” by all that is – to immerse ourselves so deeply and completely that time itself pauses in wonder.⁹ I have a vivid memory of being carried away – for several minutes, or perhaps many minutes, deep in the wilderness on a hike with my husband Eric. It was snowing – one of the first snowfalls of the season, and we paused on our trek through the wilderness to simply enjoy. I sat, snowflakes descending upon my face, branches layered with inches of powdery, white snow, the utter silence piercing my ears, animals nearby yet deep in hibernation. I sat in wonder, beauty, awe, and reverence, for I know not how long, carried away by the sacred. Or the wonder of wonders on Christmas day as a child – rushing down the steps to see how many cookies Santa ate, to see what packages lay beneath the

⁶ *What is God? How to Think About the Divine* by John Haught pg. 86

⁷ *Ibid* pg. 15

⁸ *Ibid* pg. 16

⁹ *Ibid* pg. 69

tree. What if we engaged with each morning, and each sunset alike, as a child engages with Christmas, or Hannukah, or solstice? How can we allow wonder to carry us away, to bring us beyond ourselves, to see the ordinary as beautiful, to connect with something greater than we could ever be – as a child does? This is one thing we do – that I do – in the month of December. Making a point to stop – to pause – to remember my treasured feelings of Christmas mornings of years past and connect, today, with that same delight.

I see the parallels of our quest for beauty as with our own quest for the divine – or how a child’s search for the next curiosity, the next delightful mystery, mirrors our own journey towards the sacred. Could beauty simply be a synonym for the divine, for the holy? Are we drawn to beauty – do we yearn for beauty – in a similar way as we are drawn to the sacred? Perhaps the search itself is synonymous with the word “God” – we encounter the divine in those peaks and valleys we experience. In December we bring little hints of beauty to the forefront – decorating front yards for all to enjoy or appreciating an intimate moment by the fire with cocoa, which evoke a wider and deeper beauty, working with intention to bring beauty into our midst. These seemingly small experiences fuel our longing for deeper encounters with all we hold sacred. I think these occasions are experiences with the divine – even if we do not interpret it as such at the time.¹⁰ Again, are these small glimpses into something beyond that our senses cannot comprehend?

I return to a question I posed earlier: Will goodness and beauty ultimately prevail? I believe there is an unending regeneration of wonder and beauty and awe in the world. John Haught, the theologian whose ideas we have been engaging with, argues that, yes, beauty prevails, even if beyond our “present comprehension.” To Haught, beauty is the depth of existence, beauty is our hope for the future, beauty is our freedom to engage in the world uncoerced by a higher entity. The author argues that this will prevail – always.¹¹ To me, this runs parallel to keeping childhood wonder alive. How can we engage with our lives as if each day holds within it

¹⁰ *What is God? How to Think About the Divine* by John Haught pg. 71

¹¹ *Ibid* pg. 91

unceasing curiosity and innocent wonder? As if we hear the sounds of reindeer hooves on our rooftops?

I do not think we can have a conversation about the sacred and about wonder without touching on divine love – as our Universalist predecessors did. I think love connects us to a wonder that cannot be comprehended. We do not fully know and grasp what love is as it relates to a partner, to our children, or to the sacred. But it is there – unceasingly – an unassuming presence. The divine can offer an unconditional love that mortals are not capable of. Where Haught argues beauty prevails, I offer that love prevails – love can never be ended, love can never be eliminated. Love – as found in the sacred – always offers itself as a guiding force – a force of wonder. Haught argues that the one truth in our lives is the unconditional love of God.¹² I see this loving God as an entity – perhaps you see this sacred love in a tulip peeking through the crusty earth each spring.

Mystery and love and wonder run parallel – each sacred, prevalent, and open to curiosity. Again, I think of this wonderment through the eyes of children. Imagine what appreciation could be present in each moment, in each experience, if we encountered every intricate flake of a snowfall as beautiful and full of awe. We never lose these abilities, but we forget them. Let each December beckon us to remember.

May it be so, and Amen.

¹² *What is God? How to Think About the Divine* by John Haught pg. 102