

## Wonder

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In her poem, *Primary Wonder*, Denise Levertov wrote:

Days pass when I forget the mystery.  
Problems insoluble and problems offering  
their own ignored solutions  
jostle for my attention, they crowd its antechamber  
along with a host of diversions, my courtiers, wearing  
their colored clothes; caps and bells.

And then  
once more the quiet mystery  
is present to me, the throng's clamor  
recedes: the mystery  
that there is anything, anything at all,  
let alone cosmos, joy, memory, everything,  
rather than void: and that, O Lord,  
Creator, Hallowed one, You still,  
hour by hour sustain it.

The vastness of primary wonder must at some point overtake us when we realize just how little we know. I mean, we know enough to find our way home, anyway, most of us do. But we don't know how to digest our food or pump our blood or even how we actually think our thoughts. We usually compensate for this through the odd magical trick of taking everything for granted – things just the way they are – and avoiding that gaping chasm in the midst of our understanding.

It's been said that "The wonders of nature do not seem wonders because they are so common. If no one had ever seen a flower, even a dandelion would be the most startling thing in the world."

When we wonder where consciousness comes from, we decide, often, that it must be an accident of nature, a byproduct of biology. Some even set out to prove this product of our imagination. What wonders might be available to us if we were to accept the vastness of our unknowing?

It seems that wonder is the opposite of knowing. In order to really understand wonder, you've got to let go of knowing, or at least hold it a bit more loosely. Openness, not understanding, is the point. If knowing has the feel of figuring out a puzzle, then wonder might best be described as having the feeling of receiving a gift.

The first of the six sources of our Unitarian Universalist faith is "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.

In the recovered lost *Gospel of Thomas*, that great teacher we know as Jesus is quoted as saying, "If the flesh came into being because of spirit, it is a wonder. But if spirit came into being because of the body, it is a wonder of wonders. Indeed, I am amazed at how this great wealth has made its home in this poverty."

I think this is reflected in the words of Saint Augustine, who said, "People travel to wonder at the height of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motion of the stars . . . and they pass by themselves without wondering." When we, like Denise Levertov, wonder that there is anything at all rather than nothing at all, we must turn that wonder back upon our own selves. What are we? How can it be that we exist at all?

Albert Einstein said, that "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. [A person] to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead. [Their] eyes are closed."

For millennia, people have looked upon the face of wonder and called it “God,” meaning that which underlies all creation and is forever beyond our capacity to understand. As our curiosity and determination has removed portions of our ignorance, many have entertained the fashionable idea that the whole category of the unknowable and unknown, the very idea of “God” be tossed aside as a primitive delusion.

I want to challenge this fashionable idea. I believe that it’s the product of narrowing our field of vision and closing our minds to wonder. As we sharpen our tools of reason and logic, we sometimes overlook the fact that life, the universe, and everything is not rational. This isn’t to say that they’re irrational, but non-rational. Rationality has proven to be quite a useful tool in dealing with the challenges of life, but we need to bear in mind that our minds are the products of life, the universe, and everything – and not the other way around. We may create our understandings, but we do not create ourselves.

We may rail at the misuse of the concept of “God,” but we’ve not come up with a suitable replacement. And without the word, the idea is hard to hold, because it’s a concept that is necessarily beyond reason. The relationship between mind and reality is beautifully recaptured in the famous poem, *Trees*, by Joyce Kilmer.

I think I shall never see  
A poem lovely as a tree.

A tree whose hungry mouth is prest  
Against the sweet earth’s flowing breast;

A tree that looks at God all day,  
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;

A tree that may in summer wear  
A nest of robins in her hair;

Upon whose bosom snow has lain;  
Who intimately lives with rain.

Poems are made by fools like me,  
But only God can make a tree.

I'd like to close with *Morning Poem*, by Mary Oliver:

Every morning  
the world is created.  
Under the orange  
sticks of the sun  
the heaped  
ashes of the night  
turn into leaves again  
and fasten themselves to the high branches  
– and the ponds appear  
like black cloth  
on which are painted islands  
of summer lilies.  
If it is your nature  
to be happy  
you will swim away along the soft trails  
for hours, your imagination  
alighting everywhere.  
And if your spirit  
carries within it  
the thorn  
that is heavier than lead  
if it's all you can do  
to keep on trudging

there is still  
somewhere deep within you  
a beast shouting that the earth  
is exactly what it wanted  
each pond with its blazing lilies  
is a prayer heard and answered  
lavishly, every morning,  
whether or not  
you have ever dared to be happy,  
whether or not you have ever dared to pray.

May our hearts and minds be opened. Amen.