

A Season of Wonder

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The US Army Chaplain Meditation Manual includes a piece written by a soldier in Afghanistan entitled, "Embraced by the Night."

It begins with, "Darkness falls. I sit outside on a clear night looking up at the vast starlit sky. One more day down. How many more to go?"

"Above, the dome of the sky rounds gracefully into the dark horizon. Beyond that, mystery and wonder. Some things are too vast to fathom. To attempt to understand them ends only in misunderstanding. Other things are finite. They have a beginning. They have an end. Our time here is one of those comprehensible things. Sometimes it can seem like an eternity, but it is not. It had a beginning. It has an end.

"One of the great mistakes is to confuse ultimate mystery with finite reality. We want to understand things, so we bring them down to our level. But some things can only be felt in our souls as awe and wonder.

"Human beings have tried to name this Truth. We have tried to capture it in words. The great religious traditions each give us a glimpse of it. But none of these words or glimpses can describe the Holy.

"We can hold the finite. We must allow the infinite to hold us. Mistaking the two leads to disappointment when the finite slips from our grasp and we are left reaching for empty air.

"For a moment, I look at the stars and long to be home. I long to hold my wife and children in my arms and feel the familiar warmth of their touch. At this moment, even one day more seems too much.

"Then I look again. I imagine I am not held captive by the finite days ahead, but embraced by the infinite Truth beyond. I know somehow that the same mystery and wonder that embrace me embrace my family, embrace all. In a real sense, if just for a moment, embraced by God, I am home."

"Some things are too vast to fathom. To attempt to understand them ends only in misunderstanding." Wonder is the name we give to the frame of mind with

which we approach the vastness of mystery. Of course, being human, we complicate the issue by having more than one kind of wonder.

There's Wonder Bread, but I won't even try to address that. But then there's what I call "false wonder." False wonder is what we are doing when we entertain a series of fantasies fueled by our prejudices or anxieties. We may have some specific ideas about what someone may have done – whether mysterious or nefarious – and we say, "I wonder what they're up to." Or it could come in the form of a false curiosity derived from our own sense of superiority.

There's a classic Zen teaching story that illustrates this kind of false wonder. It tells of Nan-in, a Japanese Zen master who received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. "It is overfull. No more will go in!" "Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

The empty cup could well be one of the first elements of wonder. Wonder requires of us that we empty our cups first. The scholar's mind was full of facts, ideas, and opinions which left no room for Zen, which is really a system for the cultivation of wonder.

After false wonder, there's something I call "small wonder," which is what we do when we wonder about things like, "Where did I leave my keys?" or "What did I say last night?" In small wonder, we know that whatever our minds contain at that moment is not useful – it can't answer these questions. So we set aside the contents of our minds, we induce and welcome a state of cognitive suspension as we "wonder," surveying the horizon of our mind in order to locate a misplaced memory.

Small wonder can also come into play when we encounter a strange object and wonder what it is. Again, the first thing we do is acknowledge that we have moved outside the realm of the known into the realm of the unknown. This move can be simple or complex, but in either case we choose to set aside the known in order to make room for the unknown to explain itself.

Then there is what I'm calling the "big wonder." This is the wonder that can take us by surprise, like when we encounter something like the Grand Canyon or the

ocean, when the vastness of natural beauty takes our breath away and strips us of our ability to cognitively process our experience for a time.

Emanuel Kant, hinted at this in his work, *The Critique of Judgment*, referring to what he called “the sublime.” It referred to a state of awe and wonder that was radically different from all other activities of the mind. Kant said that we experience the sublime when our minds perceive the limit of their ability to understand.

Wonder has been suggested as the primary source of spirituality, and spirituality as the primary source from which religion springs. It’s important to make the distinction between spirituality and religion because most criticisms of religion are based on its beliefs, forms, and doctrines. For example, when the scientific revolution produced the Enlightenment period’s primacy of reason, religion was roundly criticized for merely being a collection of superstitious answers to questions better suited to the scientific method.

In 1799, the Moravian theologian, Heinrich Schliermacher, refuted this critique, asserting that religious feelings, like wonder, were the true source, and that religious beliefs and systems were cultural constructs. This perspective places the emphasis on religious experience over religious belief.

Of course, Sigmund Freud attempted to debunk religion by placing dysfunctional human feelings of fear and dependency at the center. And, people being people, there are those for whom these emotions are their primary focus, and they produce religious systems designed to protect them from life’s existential anxieties, but none of this critique extends to the wholesome feelings of awe and wonder that provide the impetus for the religious quest in the first place.

As wonderful as wonder can be, there is one certain way to insulate oneself from its effects: certainty of belief. When your mind is made up you can be immune to the possibility of accepting its limits. In his book, *Old Path, White Clouds*, Thich Nhat Hanh shared a story from the life of the Buddha that illustrates this.

The Buddha said that, “Once a person is caught by belief in a doctrine, he loses all his freedom. When one becomes dogmatic, he believes his doctrine is the only truth and that all other doctrines are heresy. Disputes and conflicts all arise from narrow views. They can extend endlessly, wasting precious time and sometimes even leading to war. Attachment to views is the greatest impediment to

the spiritual path. Bound to narrow views, one becomes so entangled that it is no longer possible to let the door of truth open.”

The Buddha went on, “Let me tell you a story about a young widower who lived with his five-year-old son. He cherished his son more than his own life. One day he left his son at home while he went out on business. When he was gone, brigands came and robbed and burned the entire village. They kidnapped his son. When the man returned home, he found the charred corpse of a young child lying beside his burned home. He took it to be the body of his own son. He wailed in grief and cremated what was left of the corpse. Because he loved his son so dearly, he put the ashes in a bag which he carried with him everywhere he went. Several months later, his son managed to escape from the brigands and make his way home. He arrived in the middle of the night and knocked at the door. At that moment, the father was hugging the bag of ashes and weeping. He refused to open the door even when the child called out that he was the man’s son. He believed that his own son was dead and that the child knocking at the door was some neighborhood child mocking his grief. Finally, his son had no choice but to wander off on his own. Thus father and son lost each other forever.”

The Buddha concluded, “You see, my friend, if we are attached to some belief and hold it to be the absolute truth, we may one day find ourselves in a similar situation as the young widower. Thinking that we already possess the truth, we will be unable to open our minds to receive the truth, even if truth comes knocking at our door.”

When we realize that all religious ideas, doctrines, and beliefs are only like fingers pointing at the moon, then we can overcome our tendency to take them literally. Since, by definition, the experience of big wonder can’t be expressed in language, we need to free ourselves from the temptation to think that language can convey the essence of spirituality. Spirituality, then, becomes more something we do rather than something we think.

Have you ever tried to direct a dog’s attention by pointing? I’ve tried, and the dog only looks at my finger. The harder I try to point, saying, “Look, look!” The more certain the dog is that I’m trying to get it to pay attention to my finger.

Religions get bogged down in this problem all the time. People tend to take their religion as seriously as the dog takes my finger. They can end up missing the

moon altogether because they believe that religion is the object rather than a collection of metaphors constructed in the effort to get them to look up at the moon.

This shift from the finger to the moon is what radical spirituality is about. It always entails stepping into a larger frame of reference than one previously held. Like suddenly seeing the inspiring vision in the reflecting pool that pulls you into a new relationship with your surroundings; like the experience of being overcome by a depth of feeling at the Vietnam Memorial; like suddenly stopping in the midst of our busy activities to be overwhelmed by the timeless beauty of the full moon.

The thing that takes us beyond ourselves in each of these cases is a sense of wonder – wonder as a verb. For a second, you become a living question mark: “I wonder!” The act of asking that kind of existential relational question entails throwing open the doors of our minds to see new implications that await us within the depths of the present moment.

And this is where spiritual practices come in. They help us to learn to set aside the primacy of our thinking minds to open ourselves to the first source of our Unitarian Universalist tradition, which is the 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 that create and uphold life.

In his book, *Radical Spirituality*, Roger Walsh describes what he calls a basic set of spiritual practices. They are:

- Transform your motivation: reduce craving and find your soul’s desire.
- Cultivate emotional wisdom: heal your heart and learn to love.
- Live ethically: feel good by doing good.
- Concentrate and calm your mind.
- Awaken your spiritual vision: see clearly and recognize the sacred in all things.
- Cultivate spiritual intelligence: develop wisdom and understand life.
- Express spirit in action: embrace generosity and the joy of service.

Rumi, the founder of the Sufi Order, expressed this in a poem:

*Little by little, wean yourself.
This is the gist of what I have to say.
From an embryo, whose nourishment comes in the blood,
move to an infant drinking milk,
to a child on solid food,
to a searcher after wisdom,
to a hunter of more invisible game.*

Wonder is the essence of this more invisible game.

So this month, I invite you all to hunt for the more invisible game that abound in this season. Everywhere we'll be seeing evidence of doctrines and beliefs that may or may not speak to our spirit, but remember, they're only fingers pointing at the moon, not the moon itself. There's a savior born in a stable, angels descending from heaven, wise men from the East, and more. But they're all pointing to something quite beyond: the ineffable wonder of the birth of every child, the shelter of community in a season of cold, and the return of hope in the form of life and light.

We can dismiss all this or we can take a suggestion from Albert Einstein, who said that "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."

And so, this Advent season, as you see nativity scenes, angels, shepherds, and more, I invite you to look beyond these fingers pointing at the moon to the real moon of spirituality's awe and wonder. They don't just feel good; they're good for you.

I invite you to join in Christmas carols in the same spirit. Let them lift you up beyond their mere words and beliefs to the transcendent experiences they offer.

There's one Christmas carol that I've always loved that makes no reference to Christian beliefs at all, and yet still evokes the emotions of the season: *Silver Bells*. We'll close with that.

I invite you to let yourselves be filled with the generosity, hope, and wonder of the season. Merry Christmas.

May it be so.