

Soul Matters 2013
December

What Does It Mean to be a Person of Wonder?

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Wonder means different things to different people. This month our Sunday services will explore wonder as reflection, and wonder as magic and mystery. We'll wonder about what it is that makes a home, and we'll wonder about the story of the birth of a baby that has meant so much to so many for so long. We'll wonder about what's coming next, and how best to meet it.

Wonder as magic and mystery is beyond intellect, beyond what science and reason can define for us. There is wonder in this season, that brings such joy to so many hearts, with or without Christian or Jewish or pagan faith, and there is wonder in the fact that, in this immense universe, we exist at all. Wonder is perhaps like another dimension, like miracle, something ultimately unknowable.

It is foreign to many UU's to think that we must sometimes let go of knowing, science, and reason. And yet, to experience wonder, that may be what is required. A song in our hymnal, *I Seek the Spirit of a Child*, speaks of seeking the wonder of a child, a child who sees delightfully, the child who sings the world alive. To have child-like wonder is to open ourselves to the incredible beauty and unknowable mystery that is life.

The first source of Unitarian Universalism 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 that create and uphold life."

In Soul Matters this month we will look at the mysteries and wonders that we have directly experienced, and plumb the depths of wisdom there. The famous scientist Albert Einstein said, "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." Einstein believed that everything is a miracle.

Wonder need not be reserved for the extraordinary, for children, or for the holiday season. Life is a wonder! Everything is a wonder! Saint Augustine wrote that "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."

You are a wonder. What does it mean to truly appreciate the miracle and mystery that you are? Author Kelly Vicstrom wrote, "Each of my days are miracles. I won't waste my day; I won't throw away miracle." May your holidays be filled with wonder and miracles leading to renewal of your spirit.

With gratitude for the wonder of all of you,

Beatrice

Questions To Wrestle With:

Read over these questions and find the one that “hooks” you. And then let it take you on a ride. Don’t wait until the last minute to pull these questions out. Look them over early and live with them during the entire month. Tape them to your bathroom mirror. Carry them in your wallet or purse. Post them on your refrigerator door. Find a way to make sure they break into--and break open--your ordinary thoughts. Come to your meeting prepared to share which question engaged you the most and the story of where it took you.

1. When you were young was your sense of wonder encouraged or squashed?

What were you taught as a child and young adult about wonder? In the introduction to this packet, Einstein was quoted as saying that we can live as if nothing is a miracle or as if everything is a miracle. Which way were you encouraged to live?

2. What did you teach your children (or other important young people) about wonder?

Using the Einstein quote again, think about your own influence on the young people in your life. How have you impacted their perception of the world? Because of you, do they look around and see the world light up with wonder? Do they feel a sense of awe about the gift of being alive? Do they marvel at ordinary things? Or have you, intentionally or unintentionally, had the opposite effect?

3. What’s your objection to wonder? When does wonder become something you can’t get behind?

Let’s not assume that everyone gets along glowingly with wonder. When wonder takes the form of “miracles,” many skeptics jump off the wonder wagon. Wonder is fine as long as it doesn’t ask us to leave reason and science behind. When it comes to wonders and miracles, how do you separate out the “reasonable” from the “ridiculous”?

Or maybe your objection is different. Maybe it’s not doubt and skepticism that gets between you and wonder. Maybe it’s plain old numbness. Or your busy life. Indeed, we all go blind, at times. We may go through spring with a yawn. We may curse our “boring, ordinary lives.” When you go numb to the wonder of it all, what’s the cause? What, most often, wakes you up?

4. What do miracles mean to you?

Do you believe in miracles? If so, what does that mean? And have you always found the word “miracle” useful? Or did you only start to use it after one special, life-changing day? How do you react when others use the word “miracle”? Be honest, what does that voice inside your head really say? Or is it the other way for you? Do you get most annoyed at the skeptics, who want to drain the mystery and marvel out of everyone’s days?

5. What has been the biggest wonder of your life?

What tops the list? What were the one or two “greatest wonders” you’ve ever experienced? When were you “struck dumb” by something awesome? “Knocked to your knees” in reverence? Humbled or scared by something you simply could not explain?

Or was it more subtle than all that? Just as “big” but something that came on more quietly? Something that was ordinary but suddenly seen in a whole new light?

6. What is your most common source of wonder?

The “big wonders” are well and good, but it’s the ordinary wonders that are most precious. What most often wakes you up to the “wonder of it all”? What ridiculously “regular” thing always strikes you as amazing? One woman says that it’s eggs for her. She raises chickens. And almost everyday when she goes out to collect the eggs, she just can’t get over “what amazing things these are!” Why eggs? She can’t tell you. It just is. Another person will tell you it happens to him every week during choir practice. Yet another says it happens to her when her daughter gets off the school bus and runs up to her screaming, “Mommmy!” and give her a giant hug. Each of them struck dumb with the wonder of it all. So what’s it for you? What “continually amazes you”?

Our Spiritual Exercise: AMAZE YOUR FRIENDS!

We've all had the experience. A friend comes running into the room and breathlessly shouts, "I've just discovered the most amazing thing...!" or "The most amazing thing just happened to me...!"

And who of us doesn't feel grateful for the gift of what comes next?! Their newly discovered amazement suddenly opens our eyes to the stunning miracles all around us.

This month's exercise asks us to return the favor. We all stumble across amazing things in our lives. Indeed, we regularly stumble across them. So, to put it simply, here's your assignment:

**Bring in a recently discovered marvel/wonder/miracle...
and amaze your soul matters friends with it!**

Make it relatively recent to help your friends reaffirm that wonder is lying all around and always waiting to surprise us, if only we have eyes to see.

And while it should "amaze" them, don't let yourself get intimidated. If it's an actual miracle or magic trick, that's marvelous. But ordinary marvels count just as much. The standard should be your own amazement. If it fills you with wonder, if it fascinates and captivates you, then that's it! There isn't a prize for the most amazing item. The gift--as your friends will tell you--is mainly getting to watch your excitement and see you amazed.

Finally, don't get caught up on having an actual item to bring in. Yes, something to "show and tell" is great, but if all you've got is a great story about an experience that awoke wonder in you, then that's just as good.

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RECOMMENDED RESOURCES:

As always, these are not “required reading.” We will not analyze or dissect them in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started--and maybe to open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to be a “person of wonder.”

Wise Words:

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed

-Albert Einstein

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.

“I saw the GEVA play "Over the Tavern" yesterday and thought about the wonder of it all. In it a 12-year-old boy is taking instruction from a strict ruler-wielding Nun to learn the "correct" answers for his catechism ceremony. He is uncomfortable with the answers he is supposed to give, wants to shop around to form his own truth, wonders why there are so many rules, and questions a god who allows so many terrible events in god-fearing people's lives. In the play, the boy speaks up. Of course I think these are all good questions that any reasonable person would have. But more than that, there is truly wonder in the variety of religions and philosophies people adopt, and the deep-down reasons we adopt them. There is wonder in thinking for yourself . . . not easy at all in the face of life itself. There is wonder in courage and strength of character. The audience, in unison, drew in a breath as the boy rebelled . . . I believe in shock and awe...and wonder...”

-- A Soul Matters Facilitator

"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 event in the world."

-- Anonymous

"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. "

-- Saint Augustine

"Everything is a miracle. It is a miracle that one does not dissolve in one's bath like a lump of sugar."

-- Pablo Picasso

The universe is full of magical things patiently waiting for our wits to grow sharper.

-Eden Phillpotts

"As for me, I know nothing else but miracles, Whether I walk the streets of Manhattan, Or dart my sight over the roofs of houses toward the sky, Or wade with naked feet along the beach just in the edge of the water, Or stand under the trees in the woods, Or talk by day with any one I love, Or sleep in bed at night with any one I love, Or watch honey bees busy around the hive of a summer forenoon... Or the wonderfulness of the sundown, Or of stars shining so quiet and bright, Or the exquisite delicate thin curve of the new moon in spring... What stranger miracles are there? "

-- Walt Whitman

"The miracles of the church seem to me to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always. "

-- Willa Cather

"In order to be realist you must believe in miracles."

-- David Ben-Gurion

"If we could see the miracle of a single flower clearly, our whole life would change."

-- Buddha

You need not leave your room. Remain seated at your table and listen. You need not even listen; simply wait. You need not even wait; just be quiet, still, and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked. It has no choice; it will roll in ecstasy at your feet. -Franz Kafka

The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw and knew I saw God in all things and all things in God.
~Mechtild of Magdeburg

"We are the miracle of force and matter making itself over into imagination and will. Incredible. The Life Force experimenting with forms. You for one. Me for another. The Universe has shouted itself alive. We are one of the shouts."

-- Ray Bradbury

"Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside our control--God, truth, justice, nature, even death. The capacity for awe, as it grows, brings with it the capacity for respecting fellow human beings, flaws and all. This in turn fosters the ability to be ashamed when we show moral flaws exceeding the normal human allotment. The Greeks before Plato saw reverence as one of the bulwarks of society, and the immediate followers of Confucius in China thought much the same. Both groups wanted to see reverence in their leaders, because reverence is the virtue that keeps leaders from trying to take tight control of other people's lives. Simply put, reverence is the virtue that keeps human beings from trying to act like gods. To forget that you are only human, to think you can act like a god--this is the opposite of reverence."

**-- Paul Woodruff, from his book,
"Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten
Virtue."**

The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes. -Marcel Proust

Forgiveness is the answer to the child's dream of a miracle by which what is broken is made whole again, what is soiled is made clean again. -Dag Hammarskjöld

The Unitarian Universalist faith draws from six sources:

- 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.
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.
- Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Mystery

by Fredrick Buechner
From *Wishful Thinking*

There are mysteries which you can solve by taking thought. For instance a murder-mystery whose mysteriousness must be dispelled in order for the truth to be known.

There are other mysteries which do not conceal a truth to think your way to, but whose truth is itself the mystery. The mystery of your self, for example. The more you try to fathom it, the more fathomless it is revealed to be. No matter how much of your self you are able to objectify and examine, the quintessential, living part of yourself will always elude you, i.e., the part that is conducting the examination. Thus you do not solve the mystery, you live the mystery. And you do that not by fully knowing yourself but by fully being yourself.

To say that God is a mystery is to say that you can never nail him down. Even on Christ, the nails proved ultimately ineffective.

From "A Song for Occupations" by Walt Whitman

We consider bibles and religions divine-I do not say they are not divine,
I say they have all grown out of you, and may grow out of you still,
It is not they who give the life, it is you who give the life.
The sum of all known reverence I add up in you whoever you are,
The President is there in the White House for you, it is not you who are here for him,
The Secretaries act in their bureaus for you, not you here for them.
All architecture is what you do to it when you look upon it.
All music is what awakes from you when you are reminded by the instruments,
It is not the violins and the cornets, it is not the oboe nor the beating drums, nor the score of the baritone singer
Singing his sweet romanza, nor that of the men's chorus,
Nor that of the women's chorus,
It is nearer and farther than they.
Will you seek afar off? you surely come back at last,
In things best known to you finding the best, or as good as the best,
In folks nearest to you finding the sweetest, strongest, lovingest,
Happiness, knowledge, not in another place but this place,
not for another hour but this hour.

From *Amazing Grace*
by Kathleen Norris

I once heard a Protestant clergywoman say to an ecumenical assembly, “We all know there was no Virgin Birth. Mary was just an unwed, pregnant teenager, and God told her it was okay. That’s the message we need to give girls today, that God loves them, and forget all this nonsense about a Virgin Birth.” A gasp went up; people shook their heads. This was the first (and only) gratuitously offensive remark made at a convention marked by great theological diversity. When it came, I happened to be sitting between some Russian Orthodox, who were offended theologically, and black Baptists, whose sense of theological affront was mixed with social concern. They were not at all pleased to hear a well-educated, middle-class white woman say that what we need to tell pregnant teenagers is, “It’s okay.”

I realized that my own anger at the woman’s arrogance had deep personal roots. I was taken back to my teenage years, when the ‘demythologizing’ of Christianity that I had encountered in a misguided study of modern theology had led me to conclude that there was little in the religion for me. In the classroom, at least, it seemed that anything in the Bible that didn’t stand up to reason, that we couldn’t explain, was primitive, infantile, ripe for discarding. So I took all my longing for the sacred, for mystery, into the realm of poetry, and found a place for myself there. Now, more than thirty years later, I sat in a room full of Christians and thought, My God, they’re still at it, still trying to leach every bit of mystery out of this religion, still substituting the most trite language imaginable. You’re okay, the boy you screwed when you were both too drunk to stand is okay, all God chooses to say about it is, it’s okay.

The job of any preacher, it seems to me, is not too dismiss the Annunciation because it doesn’t appeal to modern prejudices but to remind congregations of why it might still be an important story. I once heard a Benedictine friend who is an Assiniboine Indian preach on the Annunciation to an Indian congregation. “The first thing Gabriel does when he encounters Mary,” he said, “is to give her a new name: Most favored one.’ It’s a naming ceremony,” he emphasized, making a connection that excited and delighted his listeners. When I brood over the story of the Annunciation, I like to think about what it means to be “overshadowed” by the Holy Spirit; I wonder if a kind of overshadowing isn’t what every young woman pregnant for the first time might feel, caught up in something so much larger than herself. I think of James Wright’s little poem, “Trouble,” and the wonder of his pregnant mill-town girl. The butt of jokes, the taunt of gossips, she is

amazed to carry such power within herself. “Sixteen years, and / all that time, she thought she was nothing / but skin and bones.” Wright’s poem does, it seems to me, what the clergywoman talks about doing, but without resorting to ideology or the false assurance that “it’s okay.” Told all her life that she is “nothing”, the girl discovers in herself another, deeper reality. A mystery; something holy, with a potential for salvation. The poem has challenged me for years to wonder what such a radically new sense of oneself would entail. Could it be a form of virgin birth?

From *A Haunting Reverence*
by Kent Nerburn

The earth is slow. It sheds its winter sleep gruffly, like a bear shaking off the night.

The first to notice are the birds. Their song has brightness – a music played upon the light. A month ago, if they called at all, it was a lonely sound against the dark. There is excitement now, like a child breathless to reveal a secret.

It is movement we feel. The birdsong moves along the wind. Beneath our feet an ancient rumbling struggles to be heard, with springs and rivulets, and rocks releasing their icy grip upon the ground. One by one, we free ourselves from the common stillness. Something new will be born.

The animals move now with new purpose; their actions are designed less to protect than to discover. They raise their heads, paw and claw and chew at tiny objects revealed by the retreating of the snow. They roll and leap and tumble; in their movements is a sense of play.

Life peers out from every place. The squirrel peers from around a tree. The earth peers through the patchy snow. Where all was one, we once again are many, celebrating the self and the commingling of our growing hopes.

“We have survived. We have survived,” is our common song. And none – the bud, the child, the animal at play – can contain our common glee.

Soon our song will break in full. The birds will fly, the dogs will bark. The children will dance across the gurgling ground. Ice will crack and break in concert with the wind. Clouds will race and roll like puppies tumbling in the sky.

We will run through the rain, shrieking, pulling coats above our heads.

This is all we need to know of grace. Even the infants laugh.

Two Hearts
by Brian Doyle

Some months ago my wife delivered twin sons one minute apart. The older is Joseph and the younger is Liam. Joseph is dark and Liam is light. Joseph is healthy and Liam is not. Joseph has a whole heart and Liam has half. This means that Liam will have two major surgeries before he is three years old. The first surgery—during which a doctor will slice open my son's chest with a razor, saw his breastbone in half. And reconstruct the flawed plumbing of his heart—is imminent.

I have read many pamphlets about Liam's problem. I have watched many doctors' hands drawing red and blue lines on pieces of white paper. They are trying to show me why Liam's heart doesn't work properly. Blue lines are for blood that needs oxygen. Red lines are for blood that needs to be pumped out of the heart. I watch the markers in the doctors' hands. Here comes red, there goes blue. The heart is a railroad station where the trains are switched to different tracks. A normal heart switches trains flawlessly two billion times in a life; in an abnormal heart, like Liam's, the trains crash and the station crumbles to dust.

There are many nights just now when I tuck Liam and his wheezing train station under my beard in the blue hours of night and think about his Maker. I would kill the god who sentenced him to such awful pain, I would stab him in the heart like he stabbed my son, I would shove my fury in his face like a fist, but I know in my own broken heart that this same god made my magic boys, shaped their apple faces and coyote eyes, put joy in the eager suck of their mouths. So it is that my hands are not clenched in anger but clasped in confused and merry and bitter prayer.

I talk to God more than I admit. "Why did you break my boy?" I ask.

I gave you that boy, he says, and his lean brown brother, and the elfin daughter you love so.

"But you wrote death on his heart," I say.

I write death on all hearts, he says, just as I write life.

This is where our conversation always ends, and I am left holding the extraordinary awful perfect prayer of my second son, who snores like a seal, who might die tomorrow, who did not die today.

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Lately, I have been reflecting on the quality of wonder. Children are born with it but over time it seems to fade away. What a responsibility we have as adults to keep wonder alive for our children and for ourselves.

Wonder and amazement at the incredible world we live in keeps us humble and filled with a positive hope for the future. When my daughter stops and comments on how beautiful the clouds or mountains are, I feel blessed that she notices these things. She'll say, "Mom! Look at those clouds all pink and orange! They look like rainbow sherbet!" Sometimes she wonders about how things work, like how the light switch makes the lights turn on and off. So I got out our electric experiment kit and we put the batteries and wires and tiny light bulb together to build a circuit. She noticed it was the shape of a circle! Then we turned the little bulb on and off, on and off by connecting and disconnecting the wires. She got it! But now she wonders how you build the circuits for the big, fancy chandeliers in hotels.

I think as long as I can appreciate the wonders of our world, I will be glad to be alive. Even when I am very tired, looking at the majestic mountains as I am driving to and from work fills me with a sense of contentment and happiness. It is good to live in a beautiful place. And it is good to spend time in beautiful places.

I heard a speaker from Chicago last summer who talked about how he had created beautiful buildings for people struggling to get out of poverty. He built a school and training center that was a show place filled with art and light and color. By creating a beautiful environment, he showed respect to people who had often been treated with disrespect because their poverty. People had assumed they would be grateful for any old building, any old materials. But when they were surrounded by beauty and fine things, they started respecting themselves more. They were more motivated and productive. They became successful because they believed they were worthy. Beauty and wonder can make positive things happen.

Taking the time to reflect on the wonders around us, and to really wonder about how things work, and why things are, helps us to slow down in an insanely busy world. Taking time to wonder builds within us the skills of personal reflection, thoughtfulness, and intentionality. It can help us solve the problems that continually swim around in our heads, it can give us purpose and direction in our lives. But most important, it can bring joy.

Wonder brings a sense of joy and pleasure. The human brain is stimulated by thinking about and experiencing new things. Not only is wonder a pleasant feeling, it is healthy for us. New experiences, new ways of trying things, new thoughts and emotions deepen our capabilities. Wonder creates wonder. Wonder is part of the joy of living.

From a Soul Matters group facilitator, HPCUU



**“Encounter”**

by Czeslaw Milosz

We were riding through frozen fields in a wagon at dawn.  
A red wing rose in the darkness.

And suddenly a hare ran across the road.  
One of us pointed to it with his hand.

That was long ago. Today neither of them is alive,  
Not the hare, nor the man who made the gesture.

O my love, where are they, where are they going  
The flash of a hand, streak of movement, rustle of pebbles.  
I ask not out of sorrow, but in wonder.

White Heron  
by John Ciardi

What lifts the heron leaning on the air  
I praise without a name. A crouch, a flare,  
a long stroke through the cumulus of trees,  
a shaped thought at the sky-then gone. O rare!  
Saint Francis, being happiest on his knees,  
would have cried Father! Cry anything you please,  
But praise. By any name or none.  
But praise the white original burst that lights  
the heron on his two soft kissing kites.  
When saints praise heaven lit by doves and rays,  
I sit by pond scums till the air recites  
It's heron back. And doubt all else. But praise.

**“What Goes On”**

by Stephen Dunn

After the affair and the moving out,  
after the destructive revivifying passion,  
we watched her life quiet

into a new one, her lover more and more  
on its periphery. She spent many nights  
alone, happy for the narcosis

of the television. When she got cancer  
she kept it to herself until she couldn't  
keep it from anyone. The chemo debilitated  
and saved her, and one day

her husband asked her to come back—  
his wife, who after all had only fallen  
in love as anyone might  
who hadn't been in love in a while—

and he held her, so different now,  
so thin, her hair just partially  
grown back. He held her like a new woman

and what she felt  
felt almost as good as love had,  
and each of them called it love  
because precision didn't matter anymore.

And we who'd been part of it,  
often rejoicing with one  
and consoling the other,

we who had seen her truly alive  
and then merely alive,  
what could we do but revise  
our phone book, our hearts,

offer a little toast to what goes on.

## Online Videos:

"We Are All Connected" - Symphony of Science (A YouTube Video):

<http://www.youtube.com/user/melodysheep#p/u/4/XGK84Poeynk>

Try to not be moved by this! I dare you!

What can an atheist possibly celebrate? (A YouTube Video) :

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ptwEV0xhTzI&feature=related>

Jill Bolte Taylor's stroke of insight (A TED Talk): Jill Bolte Taylor got a research opportunity few brain scientists would wish for: She had a massive stroke, and watched as her brain functions -- motion, speech, self-awareness -- shut down one by one. An astonishing story.

[http://www.ted.com/talks/jill\\_bolte\\_taylor\\_s\\_powerful\\_stroke\\_of\\_insight.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/jill_bolte_taylor_s_powerful_stroke_of_insight.html)

## BOOKS

*Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*

by Paul Woodruff