

Reclaiming Wonder
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

“The Mirror of the World” by Mahmud Shabestari (1250-1320)

Every particle of the world is a mirror,
In each atom lies the blazing light of a thousand suns.
Cleave the heart of a raindrop,
 a hundred pure oceans will flow forth.
Look closely at a grain of sand,
 The seed of a thousand beings can be seen.
The foot of an ant is larger than an elephant;
In essence, a drop of water
 is no different than the Nile.
In the heart of a barley-corn
 lies the fruit of a hundred harvests;
Within the pulp of a millet seed
 an entire universe can be found.
In the wing of a fly, an ocean of wonder;
In the pupil of the eye an endless heaven.
Though the inner chamber of the heart is small,
 the Lord of both worlds
 gladly makes home there.

“The Common Good” by Rev. Kathleen McTigue

We breathe the common wind of the earth
no matter where we live, who we love,
what language we speak.

We drink the common water of the earth
no matter the color of our skin, how long we live,
the coverings we drape on our forms.

We follow the common paths of the earth
no matter our beliefs, how far we move from home,
the gold that we carry, or its lack.

May we live from these truths, our hearts
open to the holiness all around us,
our hands turned always toward the common good.

Sermon

I've been trying to cut back on my news intake – just enough to be a good citizen has been my mantra.

Even so, it is hard to avoid occasional feelings of helplessness in the face of this or that disaster or war or injustice. This, even though by some measures human well-being on the planet has been improving: less hunger, more literacy, less overall violence (in spite of front page appearances), better health, reduced air and water pollution in many parts of the world.

But there is still too much suffering that could be addressed with enough will and resources. And there are of course also great dangers that must be averted, from nuclear holocaust to runaway climate change.

So that feeling of individual helplessness is understandable, and comes with natural enough questions: How are we to live in this world as it is, joy and woe intertwined politically and personally?

Well, as you know, Earth Day was this past Sunday, and today we are taking part in the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee's Justice Sunday, which this year has as a focus those people who are most vulnerable to the effects of climate change on our home planet.

And both in relation to Earth Day and to Justice Sunday, it is tempting and understandable to "celebrate" by making a list of things we should be doing in this world we live in, a "to do list": recycle, drive less, write our members of congress, contribute to the UUSC, write emails for Amnesty International, and so on... and on and on.

All good things on a very good list.

But it can begin to feel like a burden. And if it feels like a burden – on top of helplessness! – we probably won't get very far down our list.

What if instead we honored Earth Day and Justice Sunday not with a list, but by tapping into what Rachel Carson called "the sense of wonder"?

In much of her book with that very title, she tells stories and shares photos of wandering the woods and seashore with her little grandson Roger, beginning not long after he was just starting to walk.

She would take him out in all sorts of weather and they would simply marvel at this or that – a sandpiper at the beach, lichen on the rocks, brief glimpse of fox. Sometimes she would tell Roger the name of what they were seeing, but these expeditions were less about naming and cataloguing and much more about waking up to the amazing world in which we live.

Halfway through her book, Carson wrote that "A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement" – and then she lamented that most of us pretty soon lose this "clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring..."

So she wished for what she called the "good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children" to give "to each child in the world... a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength." And what later in the book she described as "inner contentment" and ever "renewed excitement... something infinitely healing..."

I would add something that Carson did not directly address, which is that the sense of wonder is far better grounding than a list of “shoulds” for whatever we choose to do in the world to heal and help. Indeed, the sense of wonder, as she did write and as you just heard, is one of the “sources of our strength.”

I would in fact venture to say that it was Rachel Carson’s own grounding and source of strength. As you may know, she had written *The Sea Around Us* and *The Edge of the Sea* before writing her famous call to action, which gave birth to the modern environmental movement: *Silent Spring*. For those earlier books were filled not only with good science but with a sense of wonder. Indeed, *Silent Spring* itself was grounded in wonder and in love for, among other things, the birds who were being silenced by DDT.

Yes, we would do better to begin not with a list, with marching orders, but with wonder.

And not only in relation to so-called environmental issues.

As you know, the UUSC is primarily a human rights organization. And it strikes me that when it comes to human rights every bit as much as when it has to do with care for the earth, wonder is a very good place to begin.

Our poet of democracy, Walt Whitman, wrote from his sense of wonder in the midst of the sea of humanity. He described and honored every sort of human being, whatever their occupation, gender, color of skin. And then these verses of utter amazement at his own human being:

Each moment and whatever happens thrills me with joy.

I cannot tell how my ankles bend nor whence the
cause of my faintest wish...

To walk up my stoop is unaccountable I pause to
consider if it really be,
That I eat and drink is spectacle enough for the great
authors and schools...

You see, why, after all, would we be concerned with an indigenous community in Louisiana or with the plight of the Rohingya people or with anyone other than our circle of family and friends?

I would suggest it’s less because of some moral injunction or list of what we should do emanating from the UUSC or anywhere else, and more because of our innate sense of wonder when encountering with amazement another human being or sense of our own conscious being, wonder giving birth to compassion and love. As we heard my colleague Kathleen McTigue say in the second reading:

our hearts
open to the holiness all around us,
our hands turned always toward the common good...

Now, coming at some of this from another direction:

A very long time ago, Plato has Socrates say (in the *Theaetetus*) that “wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder.”

Well, Plato was interested in philosophy (which literally means the love of wisdom) not as merely abstract ruminations for the leisure class, but rather as explorations into the meaning of our lives so that we might discern how we want to live our lives as human beings who are moral beings, beings who, most of us, most deeply, want to be good and decent.

And Plato, as well as his pupil Aristotle, these ancient Greek philosophers, affirmed that this all begins with wonder.

So... when do you experience wonder in your life?

It seems to me that we naturally enough are catapulted into wonder – or “dazzlement” as someone posted on our Facebook page in response to my post about wonder – in a variety of circumstances: certainly with a newborn in our arms, but also on a walk in the woods coming upon a fox or great white heron on a pond, or stunned by a particularly beautiful sunrise or sunset or particularly bright night sky. Someone else posted on Facebook that simply seeing daffodils plow through the sidewalk she finds awe-inspiring.

But we can train ourselves too, to experience wonder just about any time, simply by paying a little more attention in the moment to what’s going on around us, to our neighbor – this amazing other human being, or to our own thoughts and how they can lead to a movement of our hand or fingers on the keyboard to words on the screen, to our breathing in and breathing out.

It is all quite amazing indeed... wondrous indeed.

Do we, after all, pay enough attention to anything? To anyone?

If we did, we would be swimming in a sense of wonder!

And if we did, a desire to care and heal and help would be as natural as our next breath, wouldn’t it.

Now, some of you might recall that it was fifty years ago later this year, in December, that the Apollo astronauts circled the moon and sent back photographs of a half-Earth rising over the bleak lunar landscape.

And we have photos like this one on the flag behind me of the whole earth from the distance of deep space.

Do not these images evoke wonder too? Images of our home planet, circling the sun, so small in relation to the vastness around it; yet we know, as Carl Sagan once ruminated, that all our hopes and dreams, our worries and fears, our triumphs and failures... not to mention the material sources of our lives... are here... along with all the music and art and literature, scriptures and rituals of innumerable traditions, spiritual sustainers of our lives.... all on this blue green ball circling the sun.

Wonder!

Wonder... amazement... dazzlement...: A powerful antidote to begin with, as Rachel Carson suggested, if we’re feeling depressed about the state of the world or the condition of our own lives. And a far better place to start our helping and healing of earth and of each other than a list of things we “should” do to make the world a better place.

Children, as so often, intuitively know all this better than we. Now and then on my day off I play music for 4- and 5-year olds at the Hingham Nursery School. As Earth

Day approaches I teach them a little song. We've sung it here at one time or another. It starts with these words: "What can we do to make the world a better place..."

But before I can get any further, the kids start answering! Pick up the trash, they say; recycle, they say.

Which, in fact, leads to the second verse: "Clean up our own mess, clean up our own mess, recycle the good stuff, dispose of the bad stuff, clean up our own mess."

If we manage to get to the third verse, the kids sometimes have a little trouble: "Love your brother, love your sister, love one another, that's what we all can do."

But their trouble is only because they might not have the best relationship with their siblings, or because they don't yet really understand the broad and deep meanings of "love." But when a five-year-old encounters a baby – most of you have seen this – they are entranced, they feel that wonder, and it might as well be "love" by whatever name; in any case they know to handle the baby with care.

And someday they will understand that this is love if anything is, particularly if we adults continue to help them keep alive their innate sense of wonder leading to compassion and care.

One final brief thought this morning.

I invite you to call to mind the Genesis creation story, and to remember that at the end of each day of creation in this mythic telling, "God saw that it was good."

Well, however we understand the Biblical telling, we are clearly meant to get the message that the creation is good, and therefore, in today's terms, worthy of wonder... worthy of care.

Naturally enough then the text enjoins us to be good stewards of the creation, something like gardeners.

And like gardeners, and here departing a little bit from Genesis, it seems to me that this stewarding is meant to be a joy, maybe sometimes hard work, but a joy to tend to the creation around us, to our sisters and brothers, to all life – whether as simple as the kind word, simple as recycling, simple as consuming less and enjoying more, writing a check to UUSC or Amnesty... and in any case loving more and always.

It is, you know, from such simple things that grand dreams are born... and fulfilled.

So may it be.