



Horizons Journal

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix
November 2013



Living a Life of Wonder

Reverend Susan Frederick-Gray

Two weeks ago, I visited my friends' newborn twins. The girls were born at just 27 1/2 weeks and so they will spend the next couple of months in the hospital as they get bigger and stronger. When they were born, each weighed around 2 pounds. Both are doing well, but they still have a lot of growing to do and a long road ahead.

I had never seen babies so small, and to see them filled me with wonder. So small, yet still, everything was there – eyes and ears, fingers and toes, and a precious little cry. It really was beautiful to see them and to watch my friend hold her daughters close.

The English author and poet D. H. Lawrence wrote, “There is a sixth sense, the natural religious

sense, the sense of wonder.” This is certainly true for Unitarian Universalists. In fact, one of the sources of our living tradition is “direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life.” In addition to scriptures and teachings of world religions, in addition to science and humanist teachings, this experience of wonder and mystery is a key piece of our religious inspiration.

I appreciate this naming of wonder, without much explanation, for this direct experience of wonder is something amazing, which cannot fully yield to explanation – and if it does, it still does not become less wonderful.

For example, before entering ministry, I studied Molecular Biology. I studied the processes of

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Crocus, Cacti, and Mysticism

Reverend Linda Lawrence

Long solitary drives seem to help me express grief. My daughter was a senior in high school when I commuted to Geneva, IL for my ministerial internship. I shed many tears during those drives in anticipation of an emptier nest.

Years before that, I had a rather unique experience on a different drive. I was in the midst of a divorce and filled with despair. I wasn't sure how things were going to turn out for me emotionally, financially, or in almost any other way. Suddenly, out of the blue (it seemed), I felt myself surrounded by white light. I experienced an immediate sense of peace and calm. I heard (not literally, maybe) or sensed the following words: “All is well. All is well. Everything shall be well.” While the words were unfamiliar and unbidden, I found out later that they are similar to the phrase that Julian of Norwich, a

Christian mystic, claimed to have received from God after some serious troubles in her life.

I don't talk about this white light experience much, though I've had one other like it. Words can't sufficiently describe the impact and intensity of a “mystical” experience, which is what some people would call it. I also don't often share these experiences because many people – perhaps many UUs in particular – tend to think you're a little nutty when you talk about them. I don't consider myself a mystic or believe that I directly heard words from God as Julian of Norwich claimed she did. However, I do believe many people have had “mystical” experiences similar to mine. Writer Anne Gordon says, “All of us are born mystics, for the capacity to experience wonder and a primal sense of connectedness with all of life is our birthright.”

Even if you are a mystic, you can't really plan

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Follow the Lead of Wonder Experts

Anne Byrne

Director, Children's Ministries

Expert: *n.* person who has authoritative knowledge of or skill in a particular area. When it comes to wonder, I'm pretty sure the most authoritative knowledge is found in children aged 2-6. Developmentally, these kids are drawn to magic and life's mysteries. Every new day and experience has potential for wonder. They find it in ordinary things, often experienced through multiple senses, things that adults take for granted, overlook or don't recognize as important.

A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood. If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children, I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantment of later years...the alienation from the sources of our strength.

Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder*

If it is true that wonder is the source of our strength as Carson suggests, how can we adults help our children maintain this indestructible sense of wonder, while at the same time enhancing our own perceptions of wonder? Follow the lead of the wonder experts – let children be the guide. Here is what young children would advise:

1. Use all your senses – Listen, look, smell, feel. Play with play dough. Dig in the sand. Smell the leaves. Feel the needles on a cactus. Listen to the birds.
2. Be curious – Examine a leaf through a magnifying glass and count the veins. Conduct an experiment to see just how many wood blocks you can stack up-right without them falling over. Laugh when they do.
3. Play and Pretend – Be silly and pretend you are a queen for the day or a spy on a secret mission. Sus-

pend reality to enter a fantasy world of your own design.

4. Move your body – Sitting still is boring! Play outside as often as you can, even in the rain. Move your arms and legs and take a risk.

5. Be present in the moment – This is the most important advice of all. It is tough to experience wonder if your thoughts are a million miles away. There is wonder everywhere, but you will likely miss it if you are not paying attention!

Young children are indeed the experts in wonder, so follow their lead and use your senses, be curious, play, move your body and be present in the moment. And, if you want to help your children continue to experience wonder, follow this advice from Rachel Carson:

If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in.

May we all be wonder companions to one another. □

Unicare News

Serious illness/hospitalization:

- Caroli Peterson had back surgery on Oct 6
- Barb Voth DeWitt fell and injured her hip Oct 5

Other news:

- Matthew Wheaton returned to school for half days to a patient and engaging teacher. The Copeland-Wheatons are now proud and thankful owners of a wheelchair van that can accommodate Michael's power wheelchair
- Gary Lawrence's first book was released at the Short Story America Festival in Beaufort, SC
- Terry and Glen Lockwood visited with Diana Saylor and Tom Brookshire in San Francisco – Diane and Tom send their love to UUCP
- Irma Murphy, founding member of UUCP and 98 years young, visited the congregation for Sunday Service on Oct 6

Ceyshe' Napa, Unicare Coordinator

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life and the process of gestation and human development from a single egg to birth. But all that science, all that knowledge, was not what struck me as I looked upon my friends' daughters – these brand new lives unfolding. In fact, I wouldn't describe my experience as thinking at all, but feeling – a feeling of wonder and reverence that filled my consciousness. It was not that I forgot the science. Caught by a feeling of wonder, it seemed even more impressive – awe-inspiring – knowing the science behind it. All that knowledge didn't diminish the wonder at the sight of a new child.

Recently, someone asked me what I thought about science versus religion. My answer is that both are better off being informed by each other. For religion without accepting the discoveries of science becomes detached from the reality of our lives. Its ability to engage and speak to our world is diminished when it denies science. And science

without a fundamental reverence for life more easily falls prey to serving only material or commercial purposes. It can even become harmful to the natural world, rather than serving a larger purpose of service to life and humanity. Religion and science, together – not controlled, but informed, by the other – make each better. This is something particularly wonderful about Unitarian Universalism. Its ability to find inspiration in the mysteries we explore through science, while also leaving room for wonder to remain.

This month we will explore in depth the places where wonder breaks into our lives and how nurturing a great sense of wonder might help us in living the lives that we seek, that we want for ourselves and for our future. Over this month, I invite you to be more mindful of the times that wonder or mystery break into your consciousness. And what does that feeling of wonder teach you? □

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to be dazzled by a sense of wonder. Sometimes a spiritual discipline will take you there. Sometimes contemplation of nature or beauty acts as a catalyst.

There are other more unexpected avenues to wonder. In my pastoral care work, I've heard many stories from people who have recaptured moments of reverence and awe. I've noticed that there is something about hardship, grief, and despair that breaks through our defenses, cracks us open, and leads us to a kind of surrender. That surrender, that recognition that we just can't control everything, makes room for the experience of wonder.

I used to have a favorite poster in my office – a picture of a lovely purple crocus blooming through a patch of snow. The quote at the bottom was an adaptation from the philosopher Albert Camus: "In the midst of winter, I found in myself an invincible summer." Yes, wonder is like that. Have you noticed?

In Arizona I often think of Camus' sentiment

– a reality I've experienced in my own life – when I see fragile, gorgeous cactus blossoms burst from mean-looking plants in harsh desert surroundings. I know people who are like those crocus and cactus blooms, and I am continually amazed by the triumph of the human spirit even in the most tragic of circumstances. It is a wonder to me that people find courage and strength, hope, forgiveness, and even joy during emotionally painful circumstances, serious illness, and the process of dying.

Now I am not advocating self-flagellation, vows of poverty, or any other austere practice as a path to wonder. Realistically, though, each of us faces disappointments, challenges, hardships, and losses in our lives. Knowing this to be true, I wish for you crocus blossoms and cactus blooms in the midst of your winters (or summers, as the case may be). I want you to know that you, too, have an invincible capacity for wonder. You have internal resources just waiting to be discovered, and ultimately, you will know that all is well, all is well, and everything – everything – shall be well. □

"In the midst of winter, I found in myself an invincible summer." Yes, wonder is like that.



Real Magic
Heidi Parmenter
Business Administrator

We practice magic in the office. Good magic. The kind of magic that makes highly overqualified people of all ages come in week after week, year after year, to answer phones, retrieve voicemails, send letters, make phone calls, sort the mail, update our database, file paperwork, mail out bills, prepare the deposit, restock the brochure rack, clean and straighten Office 2, the lobby, and the pulpit, and to put together our many mailings.

The kind of magic that makes a 34-year-old forget many times that one is talking to someone who could be her parent, grandparent, even great-

grandparent, because everyone is ageless in this office. Until they mention their 40-year-old “kid” or 30th college graduation anniversary and then you wonder surely they are not old enough for all that. The kind of magic that provides a daily reminder that the work we do is important because these volunteers would not be here every day if it weren't so. These volunteers are a busy lot. One wonders if they use a magic energy drink that gives them the energy and drive to volunteer in all the ways they do and to spend quality time with friends and family as much as they do.

We practice a good magic here. The kind of magic that inspires the deepest kind of wonder because no matter how hard you look, there are never any strings or hidden compartments, only the real magic of community. □

November Worship Theme: Wonder

Services bring our community together every Sunday at 9:30 AM and 11:15 AM



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