



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Awake to Wonder”

© by the Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen

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Centering Thoughts

From wonder into wonder existence opens. Lao Tzu

You shall find a fuller satisfaction in the woods than in books. The trees and the rocks will teach you that which you cannot learn from masters. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux

Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement.get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed. Abraham Joshua Heschel

Thank God I have seen an orange sky with purple clouds. How easy it is to forget that we have the privilege of living in God's art gallery. Erica Goros

Sermon

How's the morning going for you? Still feeling good? Being together, that's wonderful. I was with fellow UU Ministers this past week in Florida, but don't be envious. Only the first day was warm, the rest of our time was cold and windy. It was an inspiring time full of challenging workshops and inspiring worship. One night after kirtan chanting Hindu deity names for half an hour which made our spirits sing, my roommate and I decided we weren't ready to call it a night. We went down to the beach for a walk by the pounding surf and under the twinkling stars and nearly full moon. The sand felt cold on our bare feet as we gazed up at the night sky. Orion with his belt and dagger were clearly visible, but we couldn't name the bright light we knew was a planet.

My friend pulled out her smart phone crying, “I have an app for that!” In a moment she aimed her phone at the sky. It displayed imaginary lines connecting dots to create Orion and it identified Jupiter as the bright light. For a moment, we gazed and worshiped the ancient gods and heroes in the sky. And how awesome—science and technology serving religion and spirituality. What a combo!

Wondering about the nature of the universe and our place in it is one of the most basic religious or spiritual acts. Before science offered explanations, people developed mythologies,

sacred stories explaining life and experiences. Even as science continues to help us understand, we must add personal meaning to our lives. Science doesn't do that for us, not completely.

Another basic religious or spiritual feeling is awe and wonder which springs forth when we see the beauty of the earth, the power of love even though it gives both joy and pain, and, when we face whatever makes us humble. For some this is God, for some this is the divine within however we understand these words. For some, it is the incredible, amazing, awesome, wondrous, fantastic, and yes, miraculous, universe we live in. When I contemplate that I am just an infinitely tiny speck, one of many, within the immeasurable, unbounded universe, I am brought to my knees. I am nothing in comparison to all that exists. *

And yet, I am one with all that exists. You are one with all that exists. We are the stuff of the stars and moon, we are the stuff of the mountains and valleys and rivers and oceans. We are the stuff of gently swaying palm trees in a summer breeze and the heady fragrance of gardenias wafting into our nasal passages. We are the stuff of the daylight star that shines on our faces and warms us with its life-giving caress. "Source of all to thee we raise, this our hymn of grateful praise!"

Let's sing the first stanza of Hymn 21, "For the Beauty of the Earth" in your gray hymnals. We're going to sing the hymn in sections so you may remain seated. However, if the spirit moves you, feel free to stand. Let us sing.

*For the beauty of the earth
For the splendor of the skies
For the love which from our birth
Over and around us lies
Source of all to thee we raise
This our hymn of grateful praise.*

Do you stop and notice what lies around you? Don't miss out seeing Earth's glories because your head is bowed down from the weight of stress or responsibilities you can barely carry. The wonders of creation exist, maybe not exclusively for our pleasure, but certainly for our noticing. Be awake to wonder. Stop, smell the roses, and lighten your burdens.

The Navajo observe in their 'Night Walk' chant the following:

In beauty may I walk
All day long may I walk
Through the returning seasons may I walk
Beautifully I will possess again
Beautifully birds
Beautifully joyful birds

On the trail marked with pollen may I walk
With grasshoppers about my feet may I walk
With dew about my feet may I walk
With beauty may I walk
With beauty before me may I walk

(continued)

With beauty behind me may I walk
With beauty above me may I walk
With beauty all around me may I walk

In old age, wandering on a trail of beauty, lively, may I walk
In old age, wandering on a trail of beauty, living again, may I walk
It is finished in beauty
It is finished in beauty.

[Taken from historian John Bierhorst's writings of the Navajo,
http://www.native-american-market.com/navajo_beauty_way.html]

Yesterday morning fourteen people came to my photo storytelling workshop. I reached back to draw on expertise I gained when many moons ago I was a picture editor for the National Geographic Society. Because I sent elite photographers to the far corners of the world to capture amazing photos for my review, I joyfully walked in beauty every day I went to work. I loved peering at a close-up of a cheetah with its distinctive tear-like lines running down its face. Or the beautiful orange-and-black striped Bengal tiger which made me want to reach into the photo to touch its glorious fur. But the powerful big cats were no more wonderful than the intricate tiny beetles whose exoskeletons flashed iridescent rainbow colors in sunlight or the chameleon that miraculously changed color as it moved from tree bark to leaf.

Gazing at gorgeous, multi-colored gaseous nebulae, the birthplace of stars, and at brilliant supernova explosions following the death of massive stars billions (and billions) of miles away from planet Earth—these images also made me ‘ooh’ and ‘ahh’ with wonder and awe. I worshiped the universe I was privileged to encounter through astoundingly beautiful photographs. I walked and held in awe all creation, whether writ small in the trailings of earthworms below, or writ large in the star-trails in the heavens above. God or no god, the universe is awesome and not to be ignored because of our busy-ness with the mundane.

Let's sing the second stanza of Hymn 21.

For the joy of ear and eye

For the heart and mind's delight

For the mystic harmony

Linking sense to sound and sight

Source of all to thee we praise

This our hymn of grateful praise.

The great Hasidic Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “Never once in my life did I ask God for success or wisdom or power or fame. I asked for wonder, and he gave it to me.” Heschel believed the goal of life was to live it with ‘radical amazement’. Each day we wake we should take nothing for granted. Everything should be seen as phenomenal, incredible. Heschel believed, “To be spiritual is to be amazed.” I say Amen.

Whatever your particular ideas about God, to be amazed at life is to see something outside yourself that is more wonderful than yourself. Too often we act as if we are the most amazing

thing around. A little humility, a little less self-importance on the part of politicians and entertainers could go a long way; and yes, with us, too.

In the scriptures of the three Abrahamic faith traditions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, it is written and taught that God created the world by speaking a word. Speech is exhalation. Words require breath. Perhaps not coincidentally, the ‘om’ chanted by Hindus is understood to be that word or sound of creation. In Hebrew *ruach* (roo-ahhkh) means not only breath but spirit, wind, and even mind.

Can you say *ruach* with me three times, breathing out audibly as you say the word. *Ruach, ruach, ruach*. Now say *Om—om, om, om*. You can’t say either word without exhaling breath. We share our life’s breath, our spirit, with those we love. We even share our breath with those we aren’t intimate with, icky as that sounds. Our exhaled carbon dioxide changes into oxygen by plants, trees and algae, which we then breathe in a cycle of breath between species. This holy communion or exchange proves our interconnectedness and interdependence.

Let’s sing the third stanza of “For the Beauty of the Earth”.

*For the wonder of each hour
Of the day and of the night,
Hill and vale and tree and flower,
Sun and moon and stars of light,
Source of all, to thee we raise
This our hymn of grateful praise.*

We need the breath of air to live. We also need the breath of spirit. We can understand spirit in many ways, just as we understand God and love in many ways. But something must raise our spirits, lift our mood. Something must give us renewed energy—psychic, emotional, and physical energy, so that we can keep going in the face of life’s trials and tribulations. Sleep may partially restore us, but if our spirits are not renewed, I think we’ll sleepwalk through our days. We won’t notice where we walk or whether wonder or tragedy surround us. If we are to transform the world into the beloved community, we need the restoration of our spirits which nature’s wonders can provide.

In her final book, *The Sense of Wonder*, environmentalist Rachel Carson agrees. She wrote, “Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts.” Again, I say Amen.

Maybe it’s not the natural world that restores you, as it does me. What then renews your spirit? What inspires you to struggle against obstacles? To give love when it is not readily returned? To be patient and untiring in transforming yourself or the world? Do you connect with this source often enough?

All too easily we lose touch with that which sustains us. We take loved ones for granted. We forget that intimate relationships require effort, worthwhile effort. We forget to put down the stack of bills to be paid or set aside the work to say ‘thank you’ for what we have been given—for friends, family, pets, community. These are the things in life that are most important to us, and even they can amaze.

Sometimes when we feel most unworthy, someone reminds us we’re special. When we feel most undeserving of forgiveness, someone generously does just that. These may seem like small

gestures, but they are not. We are special. You are special. I am in awe of you most days! You inspire us when you share your lives with me and this community, how you've overcome illness or sorrow, for example. You share new love and joys. How awesome! Our lives are as worthy of celebration as the new spring blossom or the rare late winter snow—which I'm still waiting for!

Join me in singing one final stanza.

For the joy of human care

Sister, brother, parent, child,

For the kinship which we all share

for all gentle thoughts and mild

Source of all to thee we raise

This our hymn of grateful praise.

'This is the day we have been given. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.'

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What evokes feelings of awe and wonder for you? Share such a time.
2. How do you renew your spirit and/or emotional energy to work on difficult tasks?
3. Do you feel humble in the face of what causes feelings of awe and wonder? Why or why not?