

“The Infinite Stretch of Mystery”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

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Reading

Chet Raymo, professor of physics and astronomy, and former science writer for the Boston Globe. Selections from his book, *Honey from Stone: A Naturalist's Search for God*.

...[E]very accumulation of knowledge...is full of rabbit holes. Enter a rabbit hole – quantum physics, say, or relativity – and that Wonderland has its own rabbit holes leading to yet other exotic terrains...One doesn't have to be a Lord Kelvin or an Einstein to find a place to enter...A leaf of grass will provide ingress to Infinity. The ancients believed that the stars were pinholes in the dome of the sky, through which shone the light of an outer, more wonderful world. And it is true: Every star is a rabbit hole into another world. In the course of a lifetime of starry night I could not explore them all.

I lie back on this grassy bank and the light of 10,000 stars enters my eyes... Ten thousand subtle but distinct wavelets of energy enter my eyes at slightly different angles from out of the depths of space, and by some miracle my eyes and brain sort it all out, put each star in its proper place, recognize the familiar patterns of the constellations, construct a Milky Way, and open my soul to a universe whose length and breadth exceed my wildest imagining. Starlight falls upon me like a gentle rain. It blows across me like a furious wind. I am soaked and shaken.

I have a friend who speaks of knowledge as an island in a sea of mystery. Let this then, be the ground of my faith: All that we know, now and forever, all scientific knowledge that we have of this world, or ever will have, is as an island in the sea...And still the mystery surrounds us.

Sermon

It was a beautiful summer evening in August and close to two thousand people had been drawn to the streets of St. Johnsbury with one goal in mind. To beat the Guinness Record for the World's Largest Astronomy Class. People entered through turnstiles and were directed into neatly defined corrals on the lawn of the United Community Church before the lesson began. Those in attendance were able to follow along on a giant screen as an educator from the Fairbanks Museum and Planetarium talked about constellations and other wonders of the night sky. I was actually out of town that weekend, but my family was there. My son especially remembered the laser pointer that seemed to reach all the way to Mars as the red dot circled around it as if the planet was being projected onto a screen. As I have heard, there was a palpable excitement through the crowd, partly due to the prospect of putting St. Johnsbury, Vermont on the map in the Guinness Record books, but also from joining with hundreds of other people in a time of celestial splendor.

(In case you're wondering, yes, the August 10th gathering at the Fairbanks Museum and Planetarium DID set a new world record at 1,580 people counted in attendance for that astronomy lesson.)

[slide 1 - This is a photo taken in 2009 near Tromsø, Norway. This image shows auroras shimmering in the sky and the flash of a fireball meteor from the Geminid meteor shower.]¹

What compels us human beings to understand the world of stars and planets, the expanse of universe beyond the earth?

I think in part it has to do with the mystery in darkness. As we approach the winter solstice, the longest night of the year in the northern hemisphere, we know that darkness is part of our existence. Darkness seems to contain within it the unknown. It is teeming with possibility - this possibility held in darkness can seem frightening at times, but it is also a possibility that is fertile in its seeming emptiness.

The impulse to seek illumination and knowledge in the dark has been with human beings for a very long time. Our earliest ancestors, like us, tried to make sense of both the world around them and also the world beyond - the world represented by the inky, starry sky. Early cosmologies told of gods that controlled natural phenomena or of the

¹ <https://apod.nasa.gov/apod/ap181209.html>

“cosmic egg” in which the entire universe is contained or of an eternally unchanging universe with the Earth at its center.

Over time, human beings developed scientific methods and tools to create and test our theories and to develop an empirical knowledge of the world and universe.

And, at the same time, religions developed to produce and understand entirely an different kind of knowledge of the world and universe.

Last week, when I spoke of “the holy among us” I limited my scope to our human community. The Mystery of Christmas for Christians lies in the belief that we, human creatures, are the dwelling place of the holy, the divine.

Another perspective on the role of mystery and wonder in our lives comes from religious naturalism. Naturalism is simply a set of beliefs and attitudes that focus on the natural world. Religious naturalism encompasses many different nuanced beliefs, but the general orientation of religious naturalism is that religious meaning and feeling can be found through a focus on the natural world. Any of you who may have felt a sense of awe witnessing a spectacular sunset or a deep feeling of connection watching a deer grazing in a field may find resonance with this orientation of religious naturalism. Some religious naturalists believe that God or some Divine Power is the Creator and is the reason the natural world exists. Other religious naturalists hold no belief in a divine, supernatural power. All religious naturalists find the religious depths of wonder, awe, gratitude, reverence, and ultimacy from nature itself.²

Within religious naturalism, religion and science are not in conflict, but go hand in hand. It is through the discoveries of science that religious and spiritual experience take place.

As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm the place of science in helping us to understand the great mysteries of the world and the universe and to help us ask even bigger questions. Our religious tradition embraces both the knowledge and the questions that science brings to light.

Though they may seem at odds to some, religion and science share this in common: they are both vehicles for exploring the unknown. The mystery of the unknown

² <https://uurn.weebly.com/index.html>

continues to draw us human beings into both religious and scientific ways of studying, explaining, and celebrating the larger world.

Albert Einstein spoke to the connection between religion and science when he said: “It was the experience of mystery – even if mixed with fear – that engendered religion. A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, of the manifestations of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty, which are only accessible to our reason in their most elementary forms – it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute the truly religious attitude; in this sense, and in this alone, I am a deeply religious man.”

When taken together, religion and science can work in tandem to answer the question, “where do we come from?”

This larger story, sometimes called the Great Story, the Universe Story, and the Epic of Evolution is a story of intricate and interdependent connection amongst the human story, the life story, the earth story, and the story of the cosmos wrapped into a sacred whole. [slide 2 - star trails in the sky]³

The Unitarian Universalist minister David Bumbaugh writes of this connection this way, “Our beings are intimately related to every living thing that creeps, or crawls or flies, to every living thing that is rooted in the earth and reaches for the sun, to every living thing that inhabits the dark depths of the oceans. We are but one form life has taken, one expression of Gaia’s living process...The heat of our bodies is the heat of stars, tempered to the uses of life. The salt in our blood and in our tears is the salt of ancient oceans...The past is not dead. It lives in us even now. The evolutionary universe, the ancient environment, the emergence of complex life—all are recapitulated in every moment of our existence.”

If we see ourselves this way, all of our actions can take on new meaning.

Again, the words of David Bumbaugh: “We are not encapsulated, separated, isolated beings. Whatever we are, the universe is. The reality inside of us and the reality outside of us are ultimately one reality. In us the universe dreams its dreams. In us the universe struggles for a moral vision. In us the universe hopes for new possibilities. In us the

³ <https://pixabay.com/en/star-trails-star-night-light-sky-2234343/>

universe strives for self-understanding. In us the universe seeks the meaning of existence.”⁴

Of course, we aren't the only way the universe has found expression. But, if we consider even the fact that we are one way it has and does, well, for me that is mysterious and awe-inspiring enough.

The meaning that we make of our existence ultimately goes back to this greater mystery.

The mystery of who we are is part and parcel of the mystery of the universe. We cannot be separated.

If we, Unitarian Universalists, have any gospel, or good news at all, it has to be this. That mysteriously and through no doing of our own, we are intimate and intricate parts of a large and wondrous universe.

It is through this cosmically-bound existence that we seek knowledge, create beauty, express love, and cling to hope. And, if the mystery of that doesn't fill you with wonder, awe, and reverence, well, I'm not sure what would.

To feel reverence is to recognize with humility our place within the larger story of the universe. This is what keeps us connected to the vastness without losing ourselves in it.

Especially when our lives start to take on a feeling of narrowness and confinement, I think it's worth taking a moment to revel in the mystery. To take a cosmic view. To remember that the arc of the universe is long.

The trials and tribulations of our human existence matter greatly. Doing what we can to make our world more humane, just, sustainable, and peaceful matters greatly.

And, we can remember that the forces surrounding us are greater than we can imagine. We are a part of that mysterious whole.

Our response to this truth is what shapes the character of our day to day existence, and so we can continue to ask ourselves, how do we respond to this mystery that surrounds us?

⁴ “Toward a Humanist Vocabulary of Reference,” David Bumbaugh, http://www.uua.org/documents/bumbaughdavid/humanist_reverence.pdf

Ursula Goodenough, a religious naturalist and cell biologist, offers this response. She says, “I revert to my covenant with Mystery and respond to the emergence of Life not with a search for its Design or Purpose, but instead with outrageous celebration that it occurred at all.”⁵

What if we could respond with outrageous celebration to the mystery that the emergence of life occurred at all?

This celebration takes shape in the rituals we develop to honor the natural world and to take part in its rhythms and cycles (like the rituals that will take place this Wednesday evening in celebration of the solstice). And, it takes shape in how we care for all of life.

Ultimately, in engaging with the mystery that surrounds us and embracing our wonder and awe, we feel what it means to be fully human.

This awe, wonder, and gratitude connects us deeply to what it means to be human. Whatever we might believe is the source of the emergence of life, we can all respond with outrageous celebration at the continuing and evolving emergence that has brought us to this moment and the mysterious miracle and blessing that we are even here.

Just about fifty years ago, on December 21, 1968, NASA sent out Apollo 8 with a mission to complete a full orbit around the moon and back to Earth. The three astronauts who were aboard the spacecraft - Bill Anders, Frank Borman, and Jim Lovell - were recently interviewed by The New York Times about their experience as part of that mission.⁶

They describe what it was like to be on the “dark side” of the moon. The side on which the sun was completely blocked out. How gray and colorless it was. One of the astronauts said it felt like they were back at the beginning of time. And then as their orbit continued, they could see the horizon of the moon opening up to the endless darkness of space.

⁵ Ursula Goodenough, *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, pp. 29-30 (Oxford University Press, 1998). <https://books.google.com/books?id=5KHmCwAAQBAJ&lpg=PP1&dq=ursula%20goodenough%20sacred%20depths%20of%20nature&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false>

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/02/opinion/earthrise-moon-space-nasa.html>

And as they continued their orbit, a small bluish orb began to appear glowing bright amidst the vast, black expanse. They hurried to get the camera out feeling instinctively that this was a moment to capture on film. [slide 3 - image of the earthrise]⁷ This is the now famous photo taken by Bill Anders now 50 years ago.

They were taken aback by the awesome-ness of the moment. It put into perspective our place amidst the vast cosmos.

One of them put it this way: “We’re just a small piece of an almost infinite universe.”

May the mystery of which we are a part inspire our awe, our reverence, our humility, and our gratitude.

May we know that in the darkness lies the possibility of discovery and the promise of illumination shining brightly.

May we find ourselves held by our pursuit of knowledge and by one another in the sea of mystery.

⁷ <https://www.nasa.gov/image-feature/apollo-8-earthrise>