

“You Make Me Wonder”
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
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The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.

Reading Excerpts from *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*
by Valarie Kaur

“In the beginning, there was wonder. Out in the country, far from city lights, the night air was clear enough to gaze into the long shimmering galaxy that stretched across the sky. I would stand in the field behind our house and talk to the stars like they were my friends, just like I talked to the cows over the fence or the horses across the road...

Back then, there was no question: The earth under me, the stars above me, the animals around me, were all part of me. And wonder was my first orientation to them all, the thing that connected me to them: *You are a part of me I do not yet know...*

Wonder is the wellspring for love. It is easy to wonder about the internal life of the people closest to us. It is harder to wonder about people who seem like strangers or outsiders. But when we choose to wonder about people we don’t know, when we imagine their lives and listen for their stories, we begin to expand the circle of those we see as part of us.”¹

Sermon

One Sunday several years ago during coffee hour here at church, I noticed three women standing together who didn’t look familiar to me. I went up to say hello to them, and they very politely thanked me for the service noting how warm and loving the community seemed to be.

They told me that they were visiting from Alabama and were here on a mission trip planning to volunteer at some local organizations including the food pantry that used to be across the street.

Hearing that they had come from Alabama and knowing that the density of UU congregations in the South isn’t quite as high as New England, I asked if they had ever been to a UU congregation before. “No, ma’am,” they replied. “This is our first time, but we very much enjoyed the service.”

¹ Valarie Kaur, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love* (One World, 2020), 7-11.

I wished them well during their visit and moved on to another conversation.

A couple of weeks later, the phone in my church office rang, and I noticed it was an out of state number. I answered the phone, and it was one of the women I had spoken with that day. I'll call her Sandy. Sandy told me that she had been thinking about us ever since she had returned to Alabama. She was very respectful and referred to me as Pastor.

"Pastor," she said, "everything in the service was just so lovely. It was so warm and welcoming and loving. But, what about Jesus, Pastor? Do you ever talk about Christ?" She told me how she worried deeply for the souls of the children, for the souls of all those in the cemeteries around town that she passed on her visit. For her, she explained, salvation in the afterlife is of the utmost importance and belief leads to salvation. "You can't be saved if you don't believe in Christ," she said.

Now, you can imagine, that as a former Catholic now Unitarian Universalist minister, there are a lot of reactions I could have been having in that moment.

I did feel the flaring up of indignation and defensiveness rising in my body and warming my cheeks. I noticed the litany of very rational responses that I could interject beginning to form in my mind. But, I tried hard to stay curious and to focus on the deep and sincere caring and concern this woman was sharing with me which was so apparent.

I gently explained that in our congregation people hold a diversity of theological beliefs and for many people salvation in the afterlife is not their focus. I explained that no, one does not have to believe in the saving power of Jesus Christ, to be a part of our religious community. I explained that yes, some people do read the Bible here, but they come to their own conclusions of what that scripture means.

I told her that in our religious community we hold open the possibility for multiple sources of theological meaning and truth and that, with these differences, we can remain united in our grounding in love for one another and our planet and our commitment to making our world a more loving and compassionate place.

In the end, Sandy was still worried about our souls. I acknowledged her anguish and suggested that perhaps we could continue to pray for one another. I did this knowing that we probably had very different understandings of what prayer means and what prayer might look like.

Nonetheless, I acknowledged how much she seemed to care about us and that keeping all of us in her prayers could be a way to show that care. And, I said, I would do the same for her.

I haven't heard from her since then, and I don't know if I will again.

People are truly fascinating. With all the sources of wonder there are in the world, humans, I believe, are among the most captivating. We can be so different from one another in myriad ways - how we think, the food and music we create and enjoy, what we believe. And I find that these differences can truly be a source of wonder.

Each human life, from the moment we are born until the moment we take our final breath, unfolds in mystery and wonder with layers upon layers of genetic predisposition and beautiful and brutal life experiences evolving and becoming a single human existence that is the source of incredible creativity and agency, passion and care.

And when we are together, humans can do the most wondrous things. This past Thursday, I attended the Montpelier middle school winter concert and felt a deep sense of wonder as I watched and listened to seventh and eighth graders playing the coolest, funkiest jazz music on stage. Wow!

At the same time, it is so easy for us to stop wondering. To stop being fascinated. To instead become fixed and rigid in our assumptions about others.

The sociologist Arlie Hochschild calls this an “empathy wall.” She writes, “An empathy wall is an obstacle to deep understanding of another person, one that can make us feel indifferent or even hostile to those who hold different beliefs or whose childhood is rooted in different circumstances. In a period of political tumult, we grasp for quick certainties. We shoehorn new information into ways we already think.”²

In my conversation with the woman from Alabama, I could sense my own empathy wall creeping up, brick by brick. This wall so easily emerges for me when I am faced with a worldview that is drastically different from my own, whether it is a view based on religion, theology, identity or politics or all of the above. Valarie Kaur describes this empathy wall as the failure to wonder.

She writes: “Wonder is where love begins, but the failure to wonder is the beginning of violence. Once people stop wondering about others, once they no longer see others as part of them, they

² Arlie Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (The New Press, 2016), 5.

disable their instinct for empathy. And once they lose empathy, they can do anything to them, or allow anything to be done to them. Entire institutions built to preserve the interests of one group of people over another depend on this failure of imagination.”³

We witness this failure of imagination and rigid empathy walls taking hold in many parts of our society, don't we, leading to more pain and unnecessary suffering.

So, what can we do to keep this part of our imaginations alive? To continue wondering about one another and to cross the empathy wall?

I am inspired by the words of the activist and public theologian Ruby Sales. In engaging with others, Sales encourages us to ask the question, “Where does it hurt?” This is such a humanizing question. It automatically forces us to move beyond the labels and assumptions we might make of others because of certain opinions they hold, or the clothes they wear, the car they drive, or where they sleep at night. Asking, “Where does it hurt?” beckons us to find connection in the common reality of our suffering.

If we can wonder about one another's pain, we might just find our way to that place of compassion that fuels connection rather than alienation.

In my brief conversation with Sandy all those years ago, I sensed that we shared a number of things in common. We both believe that helping our neighbors is a good thing to do. We both value warmth and welcoming in community. We both worry about what the future might have in store for our children.

There is so much more that I know I need to do to, and we all need to do, to nurture wonder and to bring down the walls that divide us. Yet, I hold hope that we can each find those places where our own walls can come down, where curiosity and compassion can emerge in unlikely conversations, where we can hold to what and whom we cherish and also make space for the love that begins in wonder. We can begin to witness in one another a part of ourselves we do not yet know.

I hold hope that this world of wonder is still possible.

Let us make it so.

³ Kaur, 11-12.