

Saying “Wow”: Wonder as a Form of Worship

Sermon for October 1, 2017

Peterborough Unitarian Universalist Church

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When was the last time you said, “Wow?”

Do you have a memory of that? Hold on to it for a few minutes.

Today we begin exploring the first of our six Sources, uplifted in the bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association:

Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life

That’s quite a mouthful—a lot of words and a lot of ideas are packed into this Source. If it helps to have the language in front of you, you can find it a couple of pages before Hymn #1 in our grey hymnal.

Let’s break it into pieces. First, “direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures...” What does that mean?

Some of you know that I was in Alaska for almost two weeks this summer. In fact, some of you have been on the same trip in past years, hosted by four Alaskan Unitarian Universalist congregations. It was my first time in Alaska, and it felt like every time I turned around I found myself saying “wow” about something. Bald eagles. Moose. Whales. The intensely blue ice of glaciers. The lush forest of the Inside Passage. Those were all direct experiences of wonder...a sense of awe inspired by things I experienced with my own senses.

We may be more likely to notice things that make us say “wow” when we are on vacation somewhere new, where the unfamiliar surroundings make us acutely aware of the beauty around us. However, we can invite those moments of wonder into our daily lives by being more attentive to details of life unfolding around us.

How many of us take time to watch the sun rise or set every day? To savor the taste of the food we are eating, or the feel of a soft blanket or sweater on a cold day? To listen to the sound of rain, or to smell that rain in the air? To delight in the laugh of a young child, whether one we know and love or

one passing us on the sidewalk? To be attentive to birdsong outside our window as we work?

Whatever your “wow” moment was when I asked that question at the beginning of the sermon, was it something you experience often, or a once-in-a-rare-while delight? Could you make more time for it, pay more attention to it, and have more “wow” moments?

How often do we miss these details because we are busy or distracted?

Anne Lamott writes in her book Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers:

Gorgeous, amazing things come into our lives when we are paying attention: mangoes, grandnieces, Bach, ponds. This happens more often when we have as little expectation as possible. If you say, "Well, that's pretty much what I thought I'd see," you are in trouble. At that point you have to ask yourself why you are even here. [...]

Astonishing material and revelation appear in our lives all the time.

Let it be. Unto us, so much is given. We just have to be open for business.

In other words, when we are attentive, we are more likely to experience moments of wonder and mystery, moments that make us say “wow.”

What is the result of those moments, beyond temporary delight?

The second half of the first Source reads “which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.”

My spirit was certainly renewed by those weeks full of wonder in Alaska... but I don't have to go to Alaska for spiritual renewal of this kind.

I got a hammock a few weeks ago and spent part of one evening in it, stargazing. How might my life change if I made time to do that every clear night, to see the stars and feel the wonder of my place relative to them, and my connection to them through the very material that makes up my body?

How might your spirit be renewed if you were able to experience whatever made you say “wow” more often, perhaps even as part of your daily routine?

That spiritual renewal is what leads to the next phrase, “openness to the forces which create and uphold life.”

One minister friend of mine recently said that experience of openness, the first time it happens for each of us, is what it is to be “born again”, to discover a belief in a higher power. But what does “forces which create and uphold life” mean? That answer will vary for each of us, based on our personal theology. For some, that force is God; for others it is an innate human goodness; for still others it is the natural world, operating under its own scientific principles, many of which are still beyond our human understanding.

As Anne Lamott writes:

Let's not get bogged down on whom or what we pray to. Let's just say prayer is a communication from our hearts to the great mystery, or

Goodness, or Howard; to the animating energy of love we are sometimes bold enough to believe in; to something unimaginably big, and not us. we could call this force Not Me, and Not Preachers Onstage with a Choir of 800. Or for convenience we could just say "God".

What exactly you understand as the “forces which create and uphold life” is not the important thing. The important thing is that direct experiences of wonder and mystery can connect, or re-connect, you to those forces, to the divine.

Our group of forty Unitarian Universalists in Alaska this summer attended worship on the two Sundays we were there. The first week, in Fairbanks, the guest minister was Reverend Jason Shelton, and he talked about us—Unitarian Universalists—as a people who say “wow.”

He went on to explain that for him, “wow” stands for Wonder Occasions Worship. In other words, the feeling of wonder or awe leads to worship. Not formal worship like we’re having now, but an internal moment of worshipfulness, of reverence...of something that may feel like prayer.

We Unitarian Universalists, as a group, are perhaps not as enthusiastic about formal prayer as many other people of faith. Some of us pray, some of us meditate, some of us do neither...or at least, we don’t call it by those names.

Anne Lamott, as you might suspect by now, would disagree with those of us who find ourselves saying “wow” and who also claim that we do not pray. As the title Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers suggests, Lamott proposes that there are really only three prayers, if you break them down to their most basic message. We are either asking for help, saying thanks, or expressing awe by saying “wow.” She writes:

When we are stunned to the place beyond words, we’re finally starting to get somewhere. It is so much more comfortable to think

that we know what it all means, what to expect and how it all hangs together. When we are stunned to the place beyond words, when an aspect of life takes us away from being able to chip away at something until it's down to a manageable size and then to file it nicely away, when all we can say in response is "Wow," that's a prayer.

That "place beyond words" Lamott mentioned, that's the place of transcending mystery and wonder that is the heart of our first Source.

For those among us who are not theists, or who do not believe in the specific kind of God who hears and answers our individual prayers, we may not actually pray the "help" and "thanks" prayers, at least not in a form recognized by most people as prayer. We may instead find ourselves feeling a sense of need or of gratitude.

I think we do, however, as human beings regardless of faith tradition, all say "wow"—sometimes out loud and sometimes internally—when we experience something that we might call mystery or wonder. That's what I

think of when I hear the “affirmed in all cultures” phrase in our first Source. As Kathleen Rolenz said in this morning’s reading, “We have these experiences and realize that they know no creeds and have no bounds.”

What inspires that universal reaction might be in the natural world, or it might be a very human moment. I mentioned in a sermon last month that beginning in childhood, I felt mystery and wonder in nature, as my family camped, canoed, and hiked, and also that as a teenager I came to experience it in a variety of sacred spaces from a wide range of religious traditions. In adulthood, I have also felt that sense of awe holding my newborn baby, singing with a women’s choir at the Winter Solstice, and sitting with my father as he died.

While it is dangerous to believe that all faith traditions hold the same core values, it is worthwhile to recognize that people of all religions and of no religion experience awe. Religious belief is not a requirement for awe and wonder—rather, awe and wonder may lead us to spirituality or religion.

Beyond that, what are the implications of this Source in our daily lives?

For me, “openness to the forces which create and uphold life” means that I, too, am charged with upholding life rather than death, creation rather than destruction...that I am called to be life-affirming rather than life-limiting so that I am part of the greater work of creating a world in which life, all life, is not only respected but cherished. The key is that the life I am affirming instead of limiting is not just my own or that of someone I love, but each life. All life.

This ties in to our first and seventh principles, on the same page of your hymnal as the sources, which refer to the inherent worth and dignity of each person, and to the interdependent web of all existence. Life as a whole matters, and each individual life must also matter. Human life, yes, and also all the other kinds of life with which humans coexist.

It is from this place that we declare that Black Lives Matter, that we join in the struggle for immigrant rights, that we fought for marriage equality nationwide, that we continue to fight for other LGBTQ+ rights, and that we engage with work for climate justice.

Not all of that work flows directly from experiences of wonder, but some do. Direct experiences make abstract ideas that we may already support more real, more tangible, more visceral for us.

When I see a whale or a bald eagle, and am moved to say “wow” by their majesty, I am inspired to protect them and their habitats from harm, especially that harm caused by humans.

When I see a glacier and am stunned by both its strength and the beauty of the deep blue ice within it, and then learn how much the glaciers have receded in recent years, my commitment to working for climate justice is strengthened by that experience of wonder.

When I see a newborn baby and am moved to tears by the thought of all that is possible in this new life, and by all that can stifle that possibility, I am fiercely devoted to working for that baby to have full rights and equal opportunity without regard to race, gender, sexual orientation, or any other demographic description.

Anne Lamott wrote, “Wonder takes our breath away, and makes room for new breath. That’s why they call it breathtaking.” What will we use that new breath for?

May we use it well.

Amen, and blessed be.