Wondering and Wandering

BY **VICTORIA SAFFORD**, MINISTER,
WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

In a meeting the other night we lit a small chalice and someone shared a blessing to center us down and gather us in for whatever work it was, and the blessing ended with the question, "What do you welcome in winter?" Around the circle we heard lovely, poignant, funny, wintry things. One person smiled and quietly said, "I welcome my old friend, Orion." She talked about walking her dog in the dark on these December nights, with that familiar presence over her shoulder there in the winter sky.

He's up there now, even in the daylight—*he* being an arrangement of stars and nebulae light years away. Orion the great hunter, who was given this place of honor in the firmament by Zeus, according to the Greeks, with his sword and his lion's mane shield, his dog (the star Sirius) and his glittering belt.

He seems reliable up there, but astronomers assure us, just as the mystics do, that in fact everything is wandering and changing. By the year 14,000 Orion will be visible only in the southern hemisphere, and while his form will endure longer than most of the other constellations, because he's made of younger stars, one of his brightest ones is a red supergiant, very close to the end of its life. It will die soon, "soon" meaning sometime about a million years from now (which seems long perhaps to us, but is imminent for stars). This star will explode, and that explosion, say the astronomers, will be dramatic, visible even in broad daylight.

Think of that! A million years from now. Very soon. Visible to whom? Science and mythology delight equally in mystery and both have their deepest source, their purest source, in wonder.

We've been doing this a long, long time, this staring into space, imagining. Everywhere and always we have done this, and as far as we know, we're the only ones that do, or can. Cats watch the moon for hours; birds fly in its shadow; dogs howl when it's full. But no one else makes stories, none make music or art or religion out of wonder. No one else is asking *why?* Or *what if?* Or *how?* Or *what now?*

Nothing else on earth that we know of—nothing else in the universe that we know so far—looks at the stars or the land, at their own existence or their own face in the mirror, with questions and terror and reverence and awe. We're the part of all this that laughs and loves and notices, the part of the universe that can scratch its head in amazement, the part that falls on its knees in humility, in prayer. That's our job in this world, our unique calling, perhaps the most important work we do.

Our calling is not just to notice, but to make a sustained and sustaining response, to act like a god. Our calling is alchemy—to transform wonder into something that endures even after the moment of wonderment passes. The calling is to transform awe into some kind of commitment, some kind of promise to stay awake and keep alive the change that took place in you, the emotion that took hold of you, the question that astounded you when you saw the star, or the flash of a cardinal's wing, or whatever it was that amazed you. This is the practice of staying awake.

I wonder if you've ever heard of Snowflake Bentley, aka Wilson Bentley, born in Vermont in 1865. He was a natural naturalist, self-taught; as a boy he didn't go to school, but read through his mother's set of encyclopedias. He was a patient observer of beauty—grasses, flowers, insects—but what he loved most, even as a child, was precipitation: rainfall; the way dew gathers into liquid lace on spider webs; and most of all, snow.

Quest

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Wonder is the beginning of wisdom.

—Socrates

A monthly for religious liberals

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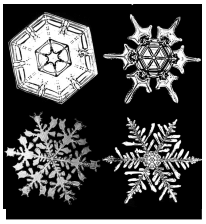
When he was 15, Wilson began studying snow crystals under a microscope, and for three years he made hundreds of drawings, trying to capture the designs before they melted. His parents were farmers, but when Wilson told them he'd read of a new camera with a microscope attached, they took all their savings and bought it, even though it cost more than their whole herd of ten cows, even though everyone in town said, "Snow in Vermont is as common as dirt." The abundance of it in no way diminished the miracle of snow for Wilson—in fact the opposite was true. How could there be so many millions and billions of six-sided designs?

Wilson had a steel-trap memory, and he guessed before it was proven that no two could be alike. The camera made pictures on glass plates, and over the rest of his life, "Snowflake" Bentley



made thousands of images. When he died, his plates went to college libraries, where they are still used not only by scientists but also by artists and designers. But most of them he gave away in his lifetime to friends, because what he loved most was sharing the beauty with others. In the summers he held slideshows for the people in the town, projecting enlarged images on a bed sheet over a clothesline, and it took their breath away. They'd lived waist-deep in snow all their lives, cursing it, and they'd never seen it.

Bentley wrote, late in life:

> *The average dairy farmer gets up at dawn because he has to go to work in the cow yard. I get up at dawn, too. But it is because I want to find some leaf, hung with dew; or a spider web which the dew has made into the most delicate ropes of pearls…. I take my camera with me, get down on my knees in the wet grass [or the snow] and photograph these exquisite bits of nature. Because I do this I can show these lovely things to people who never would have seen them without my help. They will get their daily quart of milk all right. Other farmers will attend to that. But I think I am giving them something which is just as important.*

His vocation, his calling, was to transform his own very private experience of wonder into something tangible and generous and real. That's our calling too—to transform raw emotion into something generous and real.

We're stopped in our tracks every day by amazement.

Here is another story, more recent, but in some ways far more distant from most of us. Pedro Reyes is a Mexican artist caught up in a very different kind of wonder—the wonder that is horror, the wonder that is grief. He lives in a place that's been shattered by decades of violence. In 2008 he went to the city of Culiacan, home to one of the most powerful crime and drug cartels in Latin America. Hundreds of people have died there. With the blessing of the Mexican government, Reyes sent out a call through TV and radio ads, inviting citizens to turn in their guns, no questions asked, in exchange for vouchers with which they could buy household appliances.

The response was overwhelming: 1,527 semi-automatic weapons, rifles, pistols, shotguns of all kinds. In a public display he crushed them with an army tank, then flattened them with a steamroller while people cheered, tears streaming down their faces. Then he melted down the metal and made from the ruined guns 1,527 beautiful shovels. He sent them all around the world, to art museums, schools, campuses—they're still traveling. Wherever the shovel exhibit goes, the requirement is that the people plant a tree, toward a dream of 1,527 new trees growing on the earth.

There's more to the story of Pedro Reyes. This past year, he did a new project, called "Imagine." Again, he called for people to trade in their guns, and this time more than 6,700 weapons were exchanged. Reyes collaborated with six musicians to build from these weapons an entire orchestra of musical instruments. He created lutes and violins, clarinets and harps, marimbas, drums, trumpets. They're beautiful, and terrible. In each one you can still see the shape of the weapon, the barrel, the trigger, the magazine, the place to fix a bayonet—but it has been utterly transformed.

He commissioned composers and the music is astounding. Pedro Reyes writes:

> *The transformation was more than physical. It's important to consider that many lives were taken with these weapons; as if a sort of exorcism was taking place, the music expels the demons they held, as well as being a requiem for lives lost.*

Imagine the terror of this world.

Imagine the beauty of this world.

We're stopped in our tracks every day by amazement. How could there be so many stars, so many snowflakes, so many gestures of goodwill? Every day you see it: courage and kindness, typically in increments as tiny and fleeting as crystals of snow, common as dirt. But they accumulate, they seep into the groundwater, these gestures of kindness and courage, human creativity to rival that of any creator-God, shaping the world just as powerfully.

We're stopped in our tracks every day by amazement. 80,000 exquisite human lives blown to pieces by guns in Mexico.

We're stopped in our tracks. The winter wind wails through the silences of devastation, desecration. We wonder, as we wander out under the sky, how it came to this, how we came to this.

To stay awake, past the moment of speechlessness to speaking, past the

moment of terror or beauty, which comes in a flash and then fades. To stay awake, open eyes and open heart, open mind and hands, and somehow shift amazement into art, into music, into stories of hope, stories of outrage, resolutions, revolutions, legislation. To make amazement into sacrament and holy scripture—something useful and generous and real—that is the holy work. To make wonder into something real, to make it the source of all your commitments, the reason behind every action.

Let yourself be moved to tears—then make something of that movement, something concrete. Make a whole religion of it, a way of being and seeing in the world that is not random, but rather deliberate and disciplined—a way of being that befits a co-creator of the universe, the part of the universe that brings goodness and the light that is hope. Out of wonder, make stories and music and justice. Make love and prayers and real peace.

We have seen and known amazing things. Our response could be a compassion to which we are so committed that in time (very soon—perhaps a million years, or less) it could almost feel instinctive, it could almost be preemptive. Born of wonder, our love of this world and each other could be a wonder in itself. ■

No one lights a lamp in order to hide it behind the door: the purpose of light is to create more light, to open people's eyes, to reveal the marvels around. —Paulo Coelho

Quest is one of those marvels in the world, calling people's attention out of despair, loneliness, and the broken world back into love, wonder and awe. **Please give $75, $100 or what you are able at clfuu.org or by calling 1-800-231-3027 to help this marvel continue to shine its light.** ■

Miracles and Wonders

BY **LYNN UNGAR**, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

A man arrives at a wedding banquet and finds that they have run out of wine. Mysteriously, plain water is transformed into wine sufficient for all the guests.

A woman with third-degree burns is scheduled for skin graft surgery by a famous doctor well known for treating burn cases of movie stars. Before the surgery she is persuaded by a friend to let a group of people experimenting in alternative healing techniques work on her. Figuring she has nothing to lose, she lies down on a table, and they practice what they call energy techniques, waving their hands in the air over her for an hour or so. When she gets up the pain is vastly diminished, and by the next morning, the burns are gone. The burn doctor, when he examines her and hears her explanation, becomes very upset and declares that there is no way that it could have happened.

A young woman, in deep depression and despair over the conditions of her life, decides to drown herself. As she heads down the beach toward the cold waters of the lake she hears a voice speaking words of comfort to her and feels restrained from carrying out her grim purpose. There is no one else there on the beach.

Do you believe any of these stories? Do you believe that any of these stories describe miracles? Does it matter to your evaluation of them that the first story is about Jesus, that the second is related by a journalist responding to an author's call for input for his book on miracles, and that the third was the experience of a friend of mine, someone I believe to be trustworthy and who had no reason to make up the story—and who, indeed, could well have worried that I would disbelieve her or think she was nuts.

What do we, who are presumably rational, well-educated people, do with the concept of the miraculous?

After all, the Unitarian tradition is not steeped in devotion to the miraculous. Our heroes are people like Clara Barton, who accomplished great feats of healing through the plain human hard work of nursing the ill, improving conditions of sanitation, and founding what became the Red Cross. We are solidly linked to the enlightenment tradition of philosophers like David Hume, who argued that since sensible people base their opinions on the weight of evidence—believing most strongly in those things which have the most supportive evidence—and since miracles, by their very nature, go against the laws of nature, therefore the sensible person will *not* believe in miracles, as the evidence against them will always be greater than any evidence that they exist.

As Unitarians we are the direct descendants of Transcendentalist Theodore Parker, who argued that the miracles of the New Testament were essentially irrelevant in their purpose of proving the divinity of the Christ. The teachings of Christianity, he argued, must be true in and of themselves to be worth following, and not depend on the authority of the man who revealed them any more than the truths of geometry depend on the personal authority of Archimedes.

And yet, and yet, our faith tradition also goes back just as solidly to Universalist George DeBenneville, who believed that the truth of universal salvation was revealed to him by angels in the course of a near-death experience. We are the inheritors of the early Universalist John Murray, who was led by either miraculous intervention or a series of really amazing coincidences from an English debtor's prison to the doorstep of an American

farmer who was praying for the arrival of a Universalist preacher.

So what do miracles have to do with us: contemporary, sensible, Unitarian Universalists with open minds and a distaste for the gullible?

I have a considerable degree of ambivalence about this subject. I am leery of miracles and angels as the subject of TV shows, and impatient of miraculous images of Jesus appearing on tortillas or car fenders. After all, how do we know what Jesus looked like? I have a hard enough time recognizing people I've met when I bump into them at the grocery store. You can just bet I wouldn't have a clue whether someone was Jesus or not if I happened to see a face in the clouds.

Whatever miracles may be, I am sure that they do not take the place of the day-to-day work of dealing with reality as we know it.

Besides, what seems to be our society's obsession with miracles often feels a little too close to the American need for a quick fix. *Got a problem? Just stand back and God or your guardian angel will fix it up in a jiffy, whether you need a parking place or a medical cure.*

Whatever miracles may be, I am sure that they do not take the place of the day-to-day work of dealing with reality as we know it. I am charmed by the story of the Buddha meeting someone who has practiced meditation for twenty years and now can walk on water. Buddha says: "Why didn't you just pay three rupees and take the ferry across?"

Any miracle worth its salt, as far as I'm concerned, provides an invitation not to wallow in spookiness, but to turn to a deeper, more aware, engagement with the things of this world. The Greek of the New Testament refers to miracles by two words most accurately translated as *signs* and *wonders*.

A miracle is something that points, as a sign, beyond itself. And it inspires wonder or awe. In some sense, then, the presence of miracles in the world depends on our willingness to find meaning and wonder in what we see.

"There are only two ways to live your life," wrote Albert Einstein. "One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as if everything is."

And why not live in a world of miracles? George Howe Colt writes in a *Life* magazine article on angels about talking with someone who runs "angel awareness" seminars. This person teaches people to watch for subtle clues of angelic presence, such as pennies on the sidewalk, feathers in the air, the tinkling of bells, the flickering of lights. While acknowledging his skepticism, Colt also notes, "It feels pleasant to be on alert for angels—as opposed to, say, muggers." As with angels, I suspect that it feels better to be on the lookout for miracles than for muggers. Living as if everything is a miracle might lead one to feel, like Colt, "more aware, more hopeful, more open to the possibility of magic. And, he adds, "the idea that serendipitous details of daily life might be tell-tales of some larger presence is alluring."

Alluring, indeed. I suspect that the abiding appeal of miracles has less to do with any proof of divine powers given to a particular individual (such as Moses or Jesus) than with the prospect that the divine continues to show itself in our time and place—that however alienated or alienating the world may be, we are still deeply loved and noticed, even to the point of natural laws being pushed aside for our benefit.

The Christian theologian C.S. Lewis speaks of the natural world as a kind of sphere that is pierced by the divine, where miracles happen when God invades the natural world, and nature moves over to accommodate it. I don't entirely agree with Lewis, and I can't say that I particularly care for the idea of a supernatural God shooting miraculous arrows through the fabric of nature. But I've heard enough miracle stories—stories not only wonderful but also scientifically unexplainable—to suspect that science as we currently understand it might fail to capture the whole picture. In the same way that miracles in the Bible not only provide for the comfort or survival of their recipients, but also serve to point to an engagement of the divine in the world, I suspect that the various ordinary miracles many of us witness serve to point toward a deeper reality. In a world where the prevailing attitude so often seems to be "Get yours and hang on tight before someone tries to take it from you," miracles might offer a nudge to consider that "you" and "yours" could be relative terms, that our lives might be much more difficult to disentangle from one another than we generally think.

If nothing else, whether you believe that God reaches in from outside the world, or that the universe is made of threads of connection that twist themselves to help place us where we need to be, or whether you trust in the plain laws of cause and effect, the notion that miracles of connection take place can serve as an invitation both to make miracles and to find them.

In gifts of presence and compassion, in the work of justice and mercy, we can make miracles any time we like. With an open mind and a heart tuned to receive, we might even find that miracles happen to us all the time as well. Given that we're more likely to find what we look for, I'd rather look for miracles than muggers any day. ■

God Crashes the Wedding

BY **JAKE MORRILL**, MINISTER, OAK RIDGE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH, TENNESSEE

Was it only dumb luck in that wedding, out at the state park, when I happened to call thunder and lightning down out of the sky? Or was it a sign from God?

Things had started to fall apart the night prior, at the rehearsal. The bride arrived with the late-breaking idea that what the ceremony needed was some open flame. She wanted to walk with her groom in a circle around what sounded to me like a barbeque grill. The internet, she informed me, said ancient people did this kind of thing all the time. When it comes to wedding officiants, I'm of the school known as "not-so-finicky." As long as they promise to hang in there? And seem to mean what they say? I can live with a lot. Heck, it's their wedding. Still, the introduction of fire at this stage of the game did give me pause. It was hard to hold at bay visions of flaming tuxedos.

The groom, for his part, had arrived at the rehearsal already in some kind of a mood. So, when I accidentally lined up the groomsmen to my right, instead of my left, it did not go over well. You know how some people like to do their tantrums very quietly? And it's kind of unnerving? Well, that was the groom. He muttered something about tradition. How groomsmen may not matter to some people, but for other people, groomsmen were important. Really important. The groomsmen all sheepishly shuffled to my other side.

In the ministry, I have found, authority comes when people have the vague sense that you know what you're doing. This was not the case here. The bride couldn't fathom that I hadn't heard of the fire ritual that the ancients had delivered unto the internet. The groom eyed me with suspicion: if I didn't know where groomsmen were supposed to stand, what else would I fumble? My feelings toward them were of equal good cheer.

The next day was overcast. This was Norris State Park, north of Knoxville. The park is built alongside Norris Lake, which itself is stopped up by Norris Dam, built in the '30s, when the Tennessee Valley Authority brought power to the region. The park has an outdoor amphitheater: a half-acre bowl in the earth, with stone benches stuck in it, leading down to a small stage. And so it began. The tinny boom-box prelude. I stepped onto the stage. Then the groomsmen and the groom, standing where grooms and groomsmen should stand. Then the bridesmaids, and then, at last, the bride. Behind us, the steady warmth of the sacred barbeque grill. I opened my book.

"Friends," I began. "We gather this day in the presence of God."

What happened next sounds like it's out of the Bible, or else a cartoon. With the timing of an old stand-up comedian, right as I said, "in the presence of God," the whole sky flickered white, like a black-and-white movie. There was a vast crack of thunder, which rumbled out into nothing, leaving us standing there.

"Be still," says the forty-sixth Psalm, "And know that I am God." Which is what happened. We were still. Something shifted among us.

And yes, I will tell you it was a sign from God. To which you might say, "Whoa." By which you might actually mean, "Are you nuts?" Because you'd want to tell me about the water droplets and ice chips up there in the clouds that bang around, building up static electricity. You'd want to say that, at some point, the charge gets too much to be contained, and so is released as lightning and thunder. Which might be loud, or majestic, or all sorts of things. But is not, even when it coincides with the words of a preacher, any old sign from God.

There are those, after every earthquake and hurricane, who scuttle out into the light to say that the victims deserved it. The way they figure, God controls everything, so if your house has been flattened, you probably had it coming. And I don't mean that, either.

What I mean is this life leaves us open and fragile. Hang around long enough, and we're going to get hurt. So, we arrange things to fake a degree of control. We build dams to hold back the water, and we call this power. We use certain words, certain ways, to hold back the icy torrent always rising within us. This is why it matters where the groomsmen will stand, or why we want our wedding day to have fire. It's why we hold up a view of the universe that makes perfect sense: a God who controls everything, or no God at all.

> Maybe a sign is not the same as a message. Maybe it only comes as a simple reminder.

But then comes the heartbreak, the hurricane, or the moment of grace that defies explanation. And our ideas all fail, and our words fall to dust.

Maybe a sign is not the same as a message. Maybe it only comes as a simple reminder. That, no matter the occasion, we gather this day in the presence of God, in the vast whirl of creation whose nature is love. And that, when we set about to commit radical and scary acts—like saying we'll be with some lovely knucklehead the rest of our days, or like having any hope at all, after all we have seen—we do well to be still. To pause. To see that our tiny lives unfurl as part of a larger life, from which we receive, and to which we greatly add. To remember that, in the trials to come, we can rely on more than our willpower. Sometimes, we forget. So, some lightning can help, and some thunder won't hurt. ■

From Your Minister

BY **MEG RILEY**
SENIOR MINISTER,
CHURCH OF THE
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

When I was a kid, I pictured the part of the Christmas story about "no room at the inn" as a kind of neon no vacancy sign, blinking from the ancient motels of Biblical days. Kind of like the times when my family, on our rare summer vacations, hot and cranky after a long day with each other in the VW microbus, tried to find a motel with a pool and they were all full. Annoying.

It took me years to realize that innkeepers saying there was "no room at the inn" was more like turning away someone in a Minnesota blizzard: an act of flagrant indifference about the survival—or not—of those turned away.

At each door to each inn, rather than a blinking neon sign, Mary and Joseph read the signs that marginalized people see all the time: looks of disgust and indifference, the power to slam a door with righteousness. "Let the likes of *you* in? Why, you are probably diseased, illegal, crazy, violent…"

So Joseph and Mary-great-with-child are surrounded by signs from the powers that be, telling them they are nobody. They do not matter—because they are poor, because they are homeless, because they are young and physically vulnerable.

But—and here's where the story gets really compelling—they refuse to read those signs, or to believe them. Right from the beginning Mary—an unwed teenager when she learns she is to become a mother—believes that this coming child is holy. She listens not to the wealthy powers that say the baby and she are unworthy, but to the angel who whispers the baby's holiness in her ears. She believes the angel! And she acts on her belief. I like to imagine her sending energy to the life growing inside her all those months: *You are holy. You.*

We humans depend on signs to stay alive. We come into the world, whether in a stable or in a hospital or in a flotation tank, as scrawny, screaming, animal bodies. Immediately, we begin to develop into humans through the interactions we have with the people around us. Those early signs our caretakers give us then create viewfinders that we use to figure out which signs are meant for us as we wade through the morass of signage that surrounds us throughout our lives.

> We humans depend on signs to stay alive.

If we're driving to New York City, we really don't care about road signs that direct us to Buffalo or Poughkeepsie. We know our destination, and we look for signs that will help us get there, the signs that matter to us.

Similarly, as we walk around with the question, "Who am I?" we look for signs to help us answer that central question. As we do so, we are always choosing which signs to read. Mary chose to read a sign that said, "The child you are going to birth is holy, a child of God." No matter her poverty or her uncertain social status, she claimed the holiness of her child as his birthright. And it was into that birthright that he came, the harsh opinions of kings and innkeepers being irrelevant. Perhaps it was because of Mary's confidence in her baby's place in the world that he could live with such courage and joy and compassion.

We walk around with the question "Who am I?" and the world gives us all kinds of answers besides "a child of God." We are told that we are bad, we are not enough, we are unworthy. Sign makers get paid billions of dollars to encode these signs into our cells.

What if, like Mary, we refused to read those signs? What if we walked around reading only signs that said "You are a child of God"? Or, if you don't like the word God: *You are a part of everything that is alive and healing and interconnected. You matter. You. Right where you are. Right as you are. Even though you are poor, or homeless, or pregnant and unmarried, or don't have the right papers, or are fat, or imprisoned, or unemployed, or sick, or speak with an accent, or are trans*, or all of the other things that the corporate sign makers denounce—still and all, you are holy. You matter. And not only you, but everyone else. Holy. One Kin-dom.*

"Each night a child is born is a holy night," as Unitarian Universalists often say in our Christmas services. And what if we believed it? What if we believed that each child, including us, was holy not only when they were cooing and freshly powdered, with a tiny bit of drool coming out of their toothless smile onto a bright clean bib, but also when they were covered with excrement and screaming, projectile vomiting on our best clothes? What if we believed they were holy as teens with acne and attitudes and drug problems, and as adults with every struggle known to humankind?

What if, in our complicated, wildly imperfect lives, we looked only for signs that pointed us to our own and everyone else's holiness?

In this holiday season, that's the gift that this radically incarnational faith offers us. To know that each of us is an embodiment of the holy. May our lives help to point one another to this truth. No matter how hard we have to work, may we follow signs that affirm our very being, and presume that other signs point to destinations we do not want to visit. ■

REsources for Living

By special guest contributor **Kari Kopnick**, family ministry fellow, Church of the Larger Fellowship

Some days are special not because there is a birthday or a holiday—although those are very special days. Some days are special because if you are paying close attention, you get a sign. To me a sign is something a little different that says "Pay attention! This is something that matters!"

Even though I believe that what makes our world turn can be explained by hard science and good people, when a sign comes along it makes me stop and remember to open my heart and watch with big, wide-open wonder about this one life we have to live.

Eleven years ago my family and I moved across the country from a place with freezing cold winters to a place where it rains most of the winter. We missed the sparkly snow and the brilliant blue skies of our old home. We missed our family and our friends. We missed our house and our yard. For months we looked and looked but we couldn't find a new house that was just right to buy, so when the Christmas season came we were still living in a tiny apartment. We had found a new church but hadn't made a whole lot of real friends yet. It was a lonely time.

One drippy winter day we were walking along a path in the wet, green woods, enjoying the alive smells and what might have been the sun glowing through the clouds, when we noticed—growing a few feet off the path—a plant with bright red berries. The bush had shiny green leaves with sharp points and was as tall as some of the trees. It was growing in the middle of a huge, dead, fallen tree. The green and red in the middle of all that tan and grey made us all turn off the path and pick our way through the branches of the fallen tree, all the way to the bright green bush.

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure, but I like it."

"It reminds me of Christmas."

"OH!" I said, "It's holly!"

And so it was. Holly—the stuff of Christmas carols and plastic wreaths and illustrations on holiday cards, and it was growing in the little woods we walked through almost every day.

We learned that holly wasn't meant to grow in our area and when it does, it grows too fast and takes over where other plants should be; it's an invasive species. So we decided to pick as much holly as we could from the woods.

> Holly was a sign that even in the middle of the dark, grey winter, when the sun never seemed to shine and when nothing felt familiar, there was still hope.

We filled huge bags with holly; we decorated our whole apartment with holly—which was especially nice since we had none of our regular winter and holiday decorations with us, as they were all still in storage. The holly was bright and cheery and looked like the fresh winter woods had joined us inside our little apartment. We felt connected to our new state, and we had found a new family tradition, the gathering of the holly.

Now, every year right after Thanksgiving we walk up the same big hill, along a dry creek bed, and make our way into that little woods and then we fill a few bags with holly. We bring the holly home to our house and decorate everything with it. Even though my sons are grown men now, we still go. Every year.

Those bright red berries and glossy green leaves became a sign to me. Holly meant the joyful winter holidays filled with carols and baking and happy family times. Holly also meant this was our new home and that winter was cloudy, with rainy days that smelled like a garden instead of bright sun and sparkly snow. Holly meant family and a cozy feeling in the middle of lots of dreary grey.

Every single time I see holly it also reminds me that it's important to think big, wide open thoughts about life. When we moved away from everything and everyone we knew, I was sad. I wanted to have an adventure and to live in a new and beautiful place, but I missed my old life. I felt like this new place would never be home. Then we found the holly and the whole winter seemed to open up into a new world where I could make new friends and make new holiday traditions and maybe I wouldn't always be lonely.

Holly was a sign that even in the middle of the dark, grey winter, when the sun never seemed to shine and when nothing felt familiar, there was still hope. The sign meant to leave room for big, wide-open thoughts and to trust that everything would work out.

In the end, things really did work out in my new home. I learned to appreciate my own little family and our time together without dozens of other family members around. I made new friends—lots and lots of new friends. After a while some of them started to feel like family. The grey days even started to feel like the perfect winter weather.

This year I am trying to look for a sign like the shiny green leaves with bright red berries waiting in the grey winter rain, and I'm trying to remember to open up my heart big and wide to the wonder of new things. Maybe, if you watch closely, you'll see a sign, too! ■

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When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.■

By **Walt Whitman** (1819-1892) from *Leaves of Grass*