



Searching Among Stones

BY ROBERT HARDIES, SENIOR MINISTER, ALL SOULS CHURCH, UNITARIAN, WASHINGTON, DC

The other day I found myself in the home of the president of my congregation. The board of trustees was having its annual retreat, welcoming new board members, setting priorities, etc. As a way to get to know one another better, each of us was asked to bring an object to share. Not just any old thing, but an object that was important to us, that revealed something about our spiritual lives, about our religious journey.

One member of the board, Steve, brought a stone and began by telling us that he is a scientist—specifically, a geologist, someone who studies stones. And as a scientist, he had always maintained a healthy skepticism when it came to matters religious. But one day, many years ago, Steve was out in Montana, studying the rocks out there, looking for clues to the geologic history of the area.

He was down in a valley, surrounded by mountains, digging through a bunch of rocks, when he rolled away some stones and found something remarkable. “Immediately,” he said, “I knew I’d found something special.” He knew it was special because the stone was smooth and polished; there aren’t a lot of ways that stones get polished in nature. It was a stone that wasn’t native to the geology of the particular area. It had come from someplace else.

Now, Steve has a quiet way about him, but you could tell he was getting excited remembering the moment. So we asked him, “Steve, what’s so special about the stone?”

He drew himself up in his chair, his eyes got bright and he said, “It’s a gastrolith.” What ensued was an awkward moment in which Steve had that expectant look of a high school science teacher who has just revealed something of great excitement, but his students have all received that news with a blank stare.

After a pause, someone carefully asked, “What’s a gastrolith?”

Undeterred, Steve pushed forward. “A gastrolith,” he explained, “is a stone found in the stomach of reptiles and some birds that aids in the digestion of their food. It’s a little bit like the sand in a chicken’s gizzard. It helps them break down the food.”

Well, I remember looking at the stone and thinking to myself, “That would’ve had to come from a pretty big chicken!”

Anticipating our next question, Steve continued. He held up the stone and said, “This stone came from the stomach of a dinosaur.”

Well, now he had our attention. Now everyone wanted to learn more about this gastrolith and what kind of dinosaur it had been in.

“It’s hard to know,” Steve said. “A Brontosaurus, maybe. Probably a big dinosaur.” “How old is it?” we wondered.

“Well, dinosaurs roamed the earth about 150 million years ago. So that’s when it was in a stomach. But the stone itself,” he said, “is probably 300 million years old.” The room was silent for a moment.

One board member said quietly, “Gee, that feels pretty close to eternity.” Eventually someone asked, “What’s the spiritual significance of the stone for you, Steve?”

“Well, when I discovered the stone,” he said, “it really set me to thinking. It made me ask over and over again, ‘What came before? What came before the dinosaur?’

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The possession of knowledge does not kill the sense of wonder and mystery. There is always more mystery.
—Anais Nin

A monthly for religious liberals

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What came before the stone?" It was as though the stone put me in touch with an immense mystery that kept receding further and further into the past. It was an awe-filled experience. It was a turning point in my spiritual journey."

Now, I'll bet a lot of us have had an experience similar to Steve's—a time when we unexpectedly bumped up against the mystery and grandeur of creation, the mystery and grandeur of life. When we were filled with the sense of being part of something so awesome, so large, so powerful, and so beautiful that we felt two things simultaneously. We felt small and insignificant up against this great mystery. Yet at the same time we felt strangely exalted and ennobled, because we experienced ourselves as a tiny *part* of that great mystery. And therefore we were heirs to its grandeur.

I remember when I moved to Portland, Oregon, just after I graduated from college. I had never been out West before. I'd never seen, in person, the mountains of the West. And I moved to Portland, in part, to experience those mountains because I had an intuitive sense that they had something to teach me. But I swear that it was cloudy the entire first month I lived in Portland. I never saw the mountains. I began to forget that they were the reason I'd moved there in the first place.

And then one day I woke up and finally the skies were clear. As I walked to work looking down at the sidewalk ahead of me, minding my own business, I happened to lift my eyes and I saw Mt. St. Helens for the first time, looming like a celestial palace over the city. I gazed at her trademark flat top, a reminder of the volcanic power within her that had torn 3000 feet of stone right off of her during her 1980 eruption. And right there on the sidewalk I felt a sense of wonder and awe, that sublime sense of being both insignificant and ennobled—part of something infinitely larger than myself, something so beautiful and so powerful that the

only name I could give it that would even *begin* to do it justice...was God.

But I had a little problem to overcome. I grew up with a pretty clear sense of God as a sort of law-giving father-figure, an anthropomorphic being. And what I was *now* experiencing as God was something much less well defined, much more mysterious. Yet at the same time something much bigger than any God I'd grown up learning about.

A problem with too much of religion today is that some people want to take the mystery out of God, to make God literal and concrete.

And so I began to read. And I discovered that there were others who spoke of God less as a person and more as an immense mystery. I learned that medieval monks used to address God with the chant "O Magnum Mysterium." O great mystery. Beyond our ability to comprehend. Powerful. Awe-inspiring.

I read modern theologians like Jewish mystic Martin Buber and German theologian Rudolph Otto, who called God "Mysterium Tremendum." (I'm not sure why they always use Latin. Maybe it adds to the aura of mystery.) Mysterium Tremendum—tremendous mystery.

These folks formed a tradition that said God is most fundamentally a mystery—an immeasurable mystery that inspires awe, praise, fear, even, and always more questions. It's a way of understanding God that always leads to more questions. After that, I grew to appreciate how God would remain a mystery. That all my questions wouldn't be answered, and how my life might be richer for being able to live in that mystery.

After he told us the story behind the gastrolith, Steve passed it around and I

watched as each person in our small group received the stone with a certain reverence. No one could keep from rubbing its smooth surface in their hands, as if it were a magic lamp on whose polished surface the answers to our questions might be revealed. Everyone wanted personal contact with that mystery.

A problem with too much of religion today is that some people want to take the mystery out of God, to make God literal and concrete. They want to pretend that we can know, at every moment, God's will, God's intent, God's laws and ways. And we've forgotten that God is, first and foremost, a great mystery. *O Magnum Mysterium.*

Many of us have walked away from God because we believed that the tidied-up and certain version of God was the only god available for us to embrace. We were led to believe that our doubts and our uncertainties about the nature of the Holy were heretical, that a questioning faith was somehow a lesser faith. We were taught that doubt was the opposite of faith. But that's not true.

The opposite of faith is not doubt; it's certainty. Faith is a trust you feel even though you entertain doubts and questions. It's an abiding sense of the possibility of God amid the mystery of God. Faith wouldn't be faith without doubt and uncertainty.

Let me commend to you this God who is both known and unknown. Let us be assured that it is a valid religious calling to spend our lives amidst the mystery. Let us trust that such a religious life will indeed bear fruit and imbue our lives with richness and meaning and excitement. Let us rub the smooth stones of our earth and seek answers.

Let us live with the sense of hope and possibility that comes from never knowing what will be revealed when we go searching among the stones. ■

Face to Face with Mystery

BY CHRISTINE ROBINSON,
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So you've got a bunch of really pressing, life-changing, love-soaked problems, and you've tied yourself up into knots of anxiety. Desperate for relief, perspective and a change, you take yourself to the foothills to walk. You stump along for an hour, rehearsing your options, your anxieties, your angers and fears, and finally you drop into an exhausted inner silence.

You mount the crest of a hill and notice, down the path a ways, a family of deer close enough that you can see their beautiful eyes. You come to a startled halt, and for one moment every fiber of your being is simply present. The deer look at you; you look at them. A smile plays on your lips—perhaps the first smile in days. A weight drops from your shoulders and you watch in wonder, feeling somehow deeply related to these companions and their peaceful ways.

The deer amble off. You resume your walk, but it's all different now. The weight is gone, the anger and anxiety lessened. You find yourself thinking, "It's going to be all right. Whatever happens, it will be all right." There's no logical reason for you to think this; your problems are just as dire as they were an hour ago. But you have no doubt of this larger wisdom.

And so the most important part of your problems—your reaction to them—has changed, and you are content to simply do what seems best and await the outcome.

Your spouse died yesterday, in a sudden accident away from home. The police came to the door. It was all over. You did all the things one must do in such cases, with calm demeanor and dry eyes, and fell into bed that night, physically and emotionally numb and

exhausted. Later, you awaken to see a bunch of magnetic alphabet letters on the floor beside your bed. You know you are awake, and you know that there are no such things by your bed, or in your house, for that matter, and as you watch, the letters shift around and arrange themselves to form the word, L O V E. You know that this is the doing of your spouse. You know this in spite of the fact that you don't believe in an afterlife, or spirits or souls or anything beyond what we can see and touch in this material world. "I love you, too," you say, through your tears. And then the letters are gone.

You get up, make tea, weep, and the next day you go to see your minister. You want her to tell you that it was just a dream, or a grief reaction, or incipient schizophrenia, because, frankly, even that would seem preferable to having a lifetime's philosophical underpinnings knocked out from under you. But when you get there and you tell your story and she asks you what you think was going on, you say, absolutely sure of yourself, "It was him. It just felt like him. I can't explain it, but I know it." And instead of telling you that it's just your grief, she tells you how glad she is that you had that experience. She has heard stories like that before, she says, enough to have come to believe that our world is wider and more mysterious than anything we can explain. You tell her that explaining things is very important to you, but she just encourages you to enjoy the fact that you had that last goodbye with your beloved, that understanding it is not necessary and may not be possible, and you both weep together.

A mystic is a person who, first and foremost, relies on their own inner experience to decide what is true and meaningful in their lives. For that reason, mystics are looked at with some suspicion in traditions that value priests, scripture, and tradition. Mystics often find themselves accused of heresy. That is to say, they are guilty of choosing their beliefs based on their

own inner authority rather than relying on external authorities. That's what "heresy" means—*choosing*—especially, *choosing what people (who think they have authority over you) tell you is wrong*. Think Joan of Arc.

But you know, it seems to me that mystical experience is right down the UU alley. We give religious and spiritual authority to individuals and ask each person to look at their own mind and heart, at their own experience of life, to choose how to express their own beliefs. We believe that the divine speaks uniquely into the hearts of individuals, and that those encounters with mystery and wonder form one of the bases of our faith. Very heretical!

Of course, mysticism, like any kind of rabid individualism, can lead you astray. There are other kinds of inner experiences that arise out of our wounded or damaged or ill selves, and it can be important and helpful to confide in others to get their perspective when we have questions. But very often it seems that mystical experiences feel and indeed *are* true to the one who has them. Often they change lives for the better.

So all that I'd ask of you rationalistic, heretical, feet-planted-firmly-on-the-ground folks is to base your faith on the whole of your experience, even the parts that you can't explain. They are encounters with mystery and wonder, after all, not equations on a math test. The point is not to explain and solve. The point is to ask yourself what you've learned, and what kind of meaning that gives to your life.

And to do that, you have to start by expecting these experiences to happen, and then to remember, cherish, and ponder them when they do come along. Let your experiences connect you to the rest of the world's religious people. Let them guide your life, comfort you in difficulty, help you make decisions, mold the philosophy of your life. Let them lead you in the path of mystery and wonder. ■

Mysterious Ways

BY MICHAEL
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When my husband Eric and I traded in our old cell phones for iPhones we noticed a subtle but profound change in our lives.

Wherever we go, we now have instant access to the internet in our pockets. With Google, Wikipedia, the Internet Movie Database and other sites at our fingertips at all times, most questions that come up in conversation can be answered in a matter of moments. Our shorthand for this phenomenon is “no mysteries.”

There are many fewer mysteries in our lives since this technology attached itself to our hips. And that’s not always a good thing.

You see, I love mystery.

I love being surrounded by the unknown and the unknowable.

I love living in a universe whose known parts are dwarfed by the immensity of parts yet to be discovered.

I love being a human whose knowledge is just deep enough to reveal all the things I do not know and never will.

As a child, I devoured mystery books by the dozens, graduating quickly from the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew to Agatha Christie and beyond. I was invariably upset at the end, when everything was neatly tied up together.

What makes a good novel, I guess, isn’t the stuff of real life, in which the right answers are, more often than not, never known. I’m pretty sure there’s not a single book in which Hercule Poirot or Miss Marple gather people together at the end and pronounce: “I haven’t the foggiest idea who did it.”

Now *that* would be a mystery. And I’d love it.

I knew I had found the right college for me when the required application essay asked me to ponder “a question with no provable answer.” I should have re-examined my intended major, though, when I wrote my essay on belief in God—it would have saved me lots of time.

I became a scientist not because I thought it would be a way to find answers, but because it was a field based on questions.

I love being surrounded by the unknown and the unknowable.

I loved asking questions, probing their depths, removing successive layers of ignorance to reveal deeper and more numerous questions at every turn.

I loved the mysteries of science. I loved making guesses at the unprovable, amassing evidence for the unseeable, moving deeper into the unthinkable, and asking more questions than I ever answered.

I loved contributing to the mystery of the universe.

Ultimately, the mysteries of science weren’t enough for me, though. I moved on to being part of a greater mystery, into a greater question: What is the purpose of our existence?

I know that there will never be an answer to that question that satisfies me. Rather than turning me off from the pursuit, though, it ignites my love, my passion and my drive. I am energized and fed by the pursuit of unprovable knowledge. I am inspired to pay closer attention to all that I experience, lest I miss a clue, a path to the ultimate or an experience of the true.

I love mystery, and I love thinking that there is an unknowable love that surrounds us all—a love that can be sensed, but whose source remains

beyond our comprehension. It is this mysterious love that drives my ministry and asks me to seek connections with all of the beings with whom I share this universe.

In their 1991 song “Mysterious Ways,” the group U2 sang of love that came from an unknown and unknowable source. Their song has the added bonus for me of mysterious meaning: people have debated for decades now whether the song is about love between two humans or the love of God, referred to in the feminine. The band members aren’t saying. Good for them.

In “Mysterious Ways” they sing:

*One day you’ll look back, and
you’ll see*

*Where you were held now by this
love.*

*While you could stand there,
You could move on this moment,
Follow this feeling.*

That mysterious love holds us now—and yet we have no idea where it comes from. One day it might be clear. But for now, just go with it. Follow this feeling, just kneel before it and make yourself humble in its presence. Wherever it comes from, whatever it means, whoever or whatever is its ultimate source—just let the love surround you.

It’s all right, they conclude, she moves in mysterious ways. ■

In a sense, what it means to be UU is to continually embrace mystery—mystery of the divine, mystery of the sacred, and even the mystery of what is the right language to grapple with these concepts. The CLF is a place to embrace and explore mystery. Please make your contribution of \$100 (more if you can, less if you can’t) to support the CLF by visiting www.clfuu.org/give or by calling 1-800-231-3027. ■

god is no noun

BY GLEN THOMAS RIDEOUT,
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god is no noun.
and certainly not an adjective.
god is at least a verb,
and even that shrinks her.

god is not so much a woman
as she resides in the improbable
hope of brown mothers.

god is not so much a man
as he is at work in the memory
of my grandfather's laugh.

god is not trans.
god swims in the tears
of the one who sees
her real self,
at long last,
in the bathroom mirror.

god is not black; neither is he white.
god is wading in the contradiction of songs
from slave shacks.
and I have seen god in the alabaster smiles
of children at play.

we're getting michelangelo all wrong.
god is not the bearded one surrounded by angels,
floating over the sistine.
he is not adam with his muscled back pressing the earth.
no.
god is the closing inch of space
between their reaching fingers.

don't believe for a moment that god is catholic.
for god's sake, he isn't even human.
have you heard the wood thrush
when the sun glistens the huron?
can you see the flowers,
how they speak to bees without a word?

still, god is no spring blossom, no wood thrush.
god is neither the sun nor the bee.
god is what you *see* in the blossom.
god is when you hear the river
and suddenly discover how
much of it is part of you.

to be clear,
god is not *you*.

god is somewhere in the 14 billion years
which have come to mean that you *are*.
god is, after all, at least a verb.
she is neither pharaoh's rod nor moses' staff.
we must be the ones to cease our slavery.
she is not interested in blame, neither does she offer praise.
truth, gratitude are ours to breathe.

she will not have your answers.
she is too large for answers.
she dances too wildly to be fastened to them,
and answers are nouns anyway.

god is at least a verb,
twirling in the radiant reds of spring
blossoms,
singing in the rare silences between rapid
opinions,
attending the tears of dark-skinned deaths,
learning in tiny, alabaster smiles.

god is waiting in the space between fingers
that might connect.

he is waiting for us
to stop naming her.
she is waiting for us to
see all of him.

god is waiting

to be un-shrunk ■



From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY
SENIOR MINISTER,
CHURCH OF THE
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

My physicist father drove me crazy. I would ask him what rainbows were made of, and by the time he had pontificated for 15 or 20 minutes I would be desperately bored, sorry I asked, squirming to get away. The rainbow itself would be long gone.

Later, I drove him crazy, too. Year after year, I would gift him with books like *The Tao of Physics*, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*, and other popular books that turned physics into something of a ... well, a religion. He would thank me politely. After he died, I brought all those never-opened books back to my house.

My father studied physics, it became apparent, because it solved problems and he liked that. Physics was orderly. Uninterested in scientific theories that bordered on the mystical, he was broken-hearted that none of his four kids opted to study math or science. Once, I told him with excitement, I was actually interested in a math theory class. This was because a student had told me that in their math class they could start from the ground up, doing equations that were true, true, true, and then, building on these truths, reach a point out over the horizon somewhere that was FALSE! That, I told my father, was a truly compelling reason to study math! He studied my face as if to see if I was joking and then said with more sadness than scorn, "That's the dumbest reason to study math I ever heard of."

It wasn't only my father who responded to me this way. For my college thesis, I proposed to study Platonic dialogues. My particular interest was

the times when Socrates pointed to a myth as an important source of learning, rather than hammering away with question after question, because the myth was the closest thing to truth that could be uttered. My philosophy professor looked at me with about the same face my father had and then said simply, "It does not mean that."

So I did what everyone who was met with such facial expressions did in those days: I studied English Literature. Even that, though, I found a rather sad pursuit. Rather than look at

Where do students get to meditate on the mystery of life? Where are the schools for mystics?

how the whole piece of artistry was consistently greater than the sum of its parts, rather than pause to look in awe at the sheer beauty of a poem or novel, we picked them apart. Pick, pick, pick, into such tiny particles that soon we didn't know what the whole thing even looked like. The only classes I really loved were Allegory, where the words on the page pointed to something bigger behind the story, and Romantic Poetry, where the weather could represent how someone felt and it was OK. Classes that let the mystery be.

Where do students get to meditate on the mystery of life? Where are the schools for mystics? I am not at all sorry that prayer was taken out of public school, but I do think there's something good about pausing for a moment of gratitude for all that is life. I don't think "Intelligent Design" is real science, but I do share the impulse to marvel at the symmetry, at the eloquence, at the precision of nature which points to something beyond the broken-down particles.

What I longed for was a world that offered both—that lifted up the beauty

of the whole, pointed to the edges of what we could know, and still devoted itself to moving as far down the road of knowledge as the students could go.

I like to think. I like to analyze what people are doing, and why, and how cultures are shaped, and how power is built and used, how patterns emerge. I like to learn how to use social media, how things work, and what bird species look and sound like. I like to be challenged intellectually and to think hard. I like to read books and interesting magazines and consider something I never thought about before. None of that learning diminishes mystery for me. In fact, the more I learn, the more I see that I don't know. The more mystery emerges as a constant. The topics that I know the most about are the ones in which I am also the most aware of what I don't know.

Socrates was declared the wisest man in Athens by the Delphic Oracle, because he knew that he knew nothing. My philosophy professor would say that Plato didn't mean that. I'd say he did. I'd say that my philosophy professor missed a great deal of what was interesting, and beautiful, and true, by closing his mind to the mystery.

As for me, I'm honestly not that interested in those cosmic physics books either. I'm going to trust that my ever-increasing acceptance of the mystery means I'm heading in the right direction, that I'm getting wiser. I don't need to research mystery—it finds me. I can go about my business, trying to get along in the world, and I'll never be without it.

A colleague told me that his three-year-old son loves to quote Scooby Doo: *Looks like we have another mystery on our hands!!!* This kid says it when things are broken and there is no mystery at all about who broke them. He says it when he really doesn't know something. I think this three-year-old has the right idea: *Looks like we have another mystery on our hands!!!* ■

REsources for Living

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

As part of trying to define who we are and what we are called to do, Unitarian Universalists have come up with not only seven Principles that list the things that we "covenant to affirm and promote" but also a list of six Sources of our living tradition. And the very first item on this list of where we come from is "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 for a person of any age, so let's break it down a bit. This first building block of our UU tradition is not Christianity or Judaism or any of the world's many sacred traditions or texts. The starting place for who we are comes from each and every one of us: our own direct experience. It's not something that anyone else can give us or take away.

And this statement, the first source of our living faith, declares that everyone, in every culture, has experiences of mystery and wonder. Whoever you are, whether or not you would say that you believe in God or gods, you have had some kind of experience of touching Mystery.

Maybe it was looking up at a sky full of stars and remembering just how small each of us is in this unimaginably huge universe. Maybe it was witnessing the birth of a child, or the death of someone you loved. Maybe it was sitting in the crook of a giant tree or hearing music that engulfed and held you, or reading a poem that you couldn't explain but totally understood in your heart. Maybe it was watching a flock of birds swoop



and turn all together in the air, as if each bird were just one cell in the larger body of its flock. Maybe you experienced mystery

and wonder looking at—or swimming in—ocean waves.

We tend to think of mystery as meaning *things we can't explain*. And certainly there are mysteries to be solved, like in a whodunnit novel where you want to figure it out so that the mystery isn't a mystery anymore.

But really, our direct experiences of mystery and wonder go far beyond the question of whether you can fully explain something, even scientifically.

Transcending mystery and wonder starts with recognizing that we belong to something so much bigger than ourselves that we can only touch it in imagination and music and art.

Astronomers know a tremendous amount about stars and planets and supernovas and black holes and galaxies and many more amazing features of our expanding universe. But all that knowledge only adds to the great mystery that each of us is somehow living a complete and conscious life, that we are creating our own story and loving and learning, even though we are so tiny in the whole scheme of things that you would think we didn't matter at all. Physics can explain the shape of a wave and how long it takes to curl over and crash on shore. But that doesn't detract from the sense of mystery and wonder you feel when you stand face to face with something so powerful and beautiful.

Whatever our beliefs, whatever our knowledge, mystery and wonder belong not just to our human experience, but also to our human *religious* experience. That's what makes it *transcending* mystery and wonder.

When you *transcend* something you go beyond a limit or boundary, as in *mercy transcends justice*, or *this chocolate decadence transcends all other desserts*. Transcending mystery and wonder is something that moves beyond our ordinary categories of who we are and what life is like. That's religion.

Religion starts with the experience of mystery and wonder that transcends all the everyday ways we categorize things by how they work and how they are useful to us. Transcending mystery and wonder starts with recognizing that we belong to something so much bigger than ourselves that we can only touch it in imagination and music and art. But it goes beyond that recognition to something more. The statement of our first source says that it "moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life."

Experiencing mystery and wonder, remembering that we are connected to something bigger than we can completely explain or describe, does something to us—or something for us. When we touch that mystery we are somehow refreshed. We remember that whatever particular problems we are obsessing about at the moment are not the whole picture. We are just one drop in the wave,



one bird in the swooping flock, one star or tiny planet in the great galaxy. We stop trying to make everything in life fit into the cramped box of our small ideas about how things should be and let go into the mystery and wonder of it all. ■



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The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. [Those] to whom the emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand wrapped in awe, [are] as good as dead — [their] eyes are closed. The insight into the mystery of life, coupled though it be with fear, has also given rise to religion. To know what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty, which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms—this knowledge, this feeling is at the center of true religiousness. ■

by **Albert Einstein**, from his book
Living Philosophies, published by
Simon and Schuster in 1931.

