

Remembering the Mystery and Wonder

BY LINDY GIFFORD, interfaith chaplain & member, Midcoast UU Fellowship, Damariscotta, Maine



My first memory of what the first of our UU Sources calls “transcending mystery and wonder” is an experience I had when I was quite little, maybe five or six years old. Every summer, my family and I sailed the coast of Maine in our wooden sailboat. Our boat had a nice fat bowsprit (the mast-like thing that sticks out in front of the bow). My two sisters and I thought it was just made for riding on like a horse and we did—as much as our parents would let us.

That day, the surface of the water was very smooth and clear, but there were big, rolling waves—my Dad called them swells—made by a storm way out at sea somewhere. We sat astride the bowsprit, hanging out in front of the bow of the boat, as it glided up one side of a smooth, clear, green hill of water, over the top and whooshed down the other side, over and over again. It felt as if I was flying or riding a sea serpent. It felt as if I were part of the boat and the boat were part of the water and everything was part of everything. It was as if *I*—the *me* I thought I was, did not exist anymore, except as part of the boat and the green-blue waves, and the whole universe.

Then I noticed an amazing thing. I looked at the shadow of my own head in the water and I saw that I had a halo! All around my shadow, there was a ring of golden wavy light. I thought to myself, “That’s why I feel so magical. I am magical! I have a halo!” I looked at my sister’s shadows and did not see any halos. I was the only one with a halo! As you can imagine, I thought I was pretty special.

Of course, my halo was simply an effect of the sun behind me. A total solar eclipse of the head. So it turns out I was wrong when I thought I was the only one with a halo. It must have seemed to my sisters that each of them was the only one with a halo. But, in fact, each of us was part of the mystery, part of the wonder.

I was raised Unitarian Universalist in the 1960s. I did not learn to pray, or really to think or talk about God at all. In Sunday school I enjoyed the lessons about other people’s gods, and they may have had something to do with my becoming an archaeologist, but church was not where I connected with the mystery. For me, that happened in nature. Sailing, on long hikes, keeping a nature journal with my Dad, free-range exploring and playing outside—these were the times I felt most myself and most connected to life.

By high school I had stopped attending church—in buildings. For many years, nature was my only church, and I found great solace there. But often life seemed overwhelming. I felt and saw the brokenness of the world very deeply, but felt paralyzed. I was lucky to find a similarly disillusioned husband, who also enjoyed being outdoors a lot. We put off having children for a long time, feeling that they would cramp our canoeing and bike-riding style, but it also seemed like madness to bring more children into such a messed up world. Thankfully, we eventually came to our senses and had two wonderful daughters.

The births of both our daughters were profoundly moving experiences. Suddenly there was a new person who had not been there moments before. Exactly where did she come from? On one level I knew only too well—on another, it was a mystery. I will never forget their soulful eyes regarding us moments after their births. Steve and I coined a phrase for those newborn eyes: we call them whale eyes.

Quest

Vol. LXXIV, No 7

July/August 2019

Wonder
rather than doubt
is the root
of all knowledge.
—Abraham Joshua
Heschel

A monthly for religious liberals

THINKING ABOUT WONDER

- REMEMBERING MYSTERY AND WONDER
Lindy Gifford
- EARTH’S CRAMMED WITH HEAVEN
Elizabeth Barrett Browning
- WITNESS TO WONDER
Dan Schatz
- MY BFF, JACK
John
- SEQUENCE
Mark Belletini
- WONDER REDUX
Kat Liu
- THE GIFT OF UNCERTAINTY
Scott
- FROM YOUR MINISTER
Meg Riley
- RESOURCES FOR LIVING
Lynn Ungar
- O WONDER!
Ibn al-Arabi

They seemed to peer out from the depths, from another realm or dimension. And perhaps they did. Perhaps part of them was still wherever it was they came from, that place I had somehow forgotten and longed to remember.

Having my daughters, watching them grow and witnessing their unjaded delight in life helped me begin to do just that—to remember. I still felt worn down and sad for them growing up in a relentlessly materialistic world. But they reminded me of something. Exactly what, I could not say, but I could half feel it, around the next corner, just outside my peripheral vision...a dream? a memory? Like a lost paradise...

The more I pay attention to life and the miracle it truly is, the more I understand that paradise was not in fact lost—just forgotten.

But of course having children was not always about close encounters with Mystery. We were working parents raising two small kids while attempting to renovate an old neglected house with very few skills or resources. Our long hikes, bike rides, and canoe trips were no more. Meanwhile the world situation appeared to be only worsening with each passing day. This was the time of the first Gulf War, 9/11, the war in Iraq, an Inconvenient Truth—and I found myself in a kind of numb, helpless despair.

Thankfully, once again help was beamed in from the Mystery. This time it came in the form of Sophie, my dog and guardian angel. I had been working at home as a freelance graphic designer for several years, but I had never allowed myself to do anything but work when the kids were off at school. Suddenly a midday walk in the woods was mandated and Sophie was punctilious and insistent with her reminders.

Together we began to explore the uncharted woods and marshes behind our new home. Walks with my silent spirit guide dog became the center of my spiritual life. And winter, a time when I usual became even more depressed, was the best. That was when we would go on snowshoes deep into the frozen marshes, into a strange, stark landscape much like a desert, that was inaccessible at any other time of year. Walking, contemplating and photographing the same few square miles of creation, season in and season out, was a truly healing spiritual practice. Gradually I became more connected to the reality that underlies and imbues everything, but that was so hard to remember when I was up to my eyeballs in housework, deadlines, and children's homework.

Around the same time, I started attending a Unitarian Universalist church again. I found it comforting and familiar and like home, but at first I didn't find there what I found in the woods. One day our then-minister, Kitsy Winthrop, offered a sermon based on the book *Epiphanies*, by Ann Jauregui, a practicing therapist with a PhD. As I read it I felt a sudden shock of recognition. The stories in the book seemed hauntingly familiar—stories of people's nearly forgotten childhood experiences of a transcendent joy and an abiding sense of connection to—something. Something huge. It was through reading the book that I retrieved the lost memory of the bowsprit ride.

Ann Jauregui says in her book:

Shyly, we venture out with our songs and stories into a world still in the thrall of a reluctant science. Yet even now, science is encountering astonishing non sequiturs of its own, surprises that beg us to reinstate all of our stories and include them in our explorations. Above all, these are sacred tales, profoundly healing as they remind us of—and restore us to—our innate all-right-ness.

Sometimes it felt as if I had to dig pretty deep into Unitarian Universalism to find what resonated for me. I did a lot of that digging in small covenant and adult religious education groups at Fellowship. But I was still thirsty for more. And then there was that part of the first source about how wonder and mystery is “affirmed in all cultures.” So I started studying at ChIME, the Chaplaincy Institute of Maine. ChIME is an interfaith wisdom school and is not affiliated with any one denomination. There I learned to become more comfortable with words and practices that would seem quite out of place in a UU service. Words like mystical, which I now use to describe some of my experiences. I could even imagine calling myself a mystic!

I learned that there are mystical traditions in every religion, and that the language used to describe the experiences is amazingly similar across traditions. “The mystery and wonder affirmed by all cultures.” The most important thing I have learned is that I cannot understand everything with intellect. My rational mind can talk me *out* of believing in my own direct experiences of ultimate reality, but it can't experience it. That happens with some other part of me. This revelation, this conversion, is ongoing. I don't know where it will lead me, but it appears to be picking up speed.

The last section of that first Source says that the direct experience of the wonder and mystery “moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.” The more I pay attention to life and the miracle it truly is, the more I understand that paradise was not in fact lost—just forgotten. It is not around the next corner, but all around us, all the time, right here, right now. Not just in mystical peak experiences, and not just in nature. Not just in a newborn's eyes, but in everyone's eyes, could we but see it. Letting this understanding sink deep into my soul is not only my best defense against despair and the result-

ing paralysis, it is also the only way I can find my true self and my best part to play in life. As I come to feel deeply that I am connected to something bigger than myself, and something essentially good—no, miraculous—I find I might just be able to aid and abet that something, work with it instead of against it. Like catching a wave just right. And that's when I remember that feeling of riding up one rolling green hill of water and down the other side, just in time to catch the next one, my halo shining around me as I go. ■

Earth's Crammed With Heaven

And truly, I reiterate, . . .
nothing's small!

No lily-muffled hum of a
summer-bee,

But finds some coupling with the
spinning stars;

No pebble at your foot, but
proves a sphere;

No chaffinch, but implies the
cherubim:

And, — glancing on my own
thin, veined wrist, —

In such a little tremour of the
blood

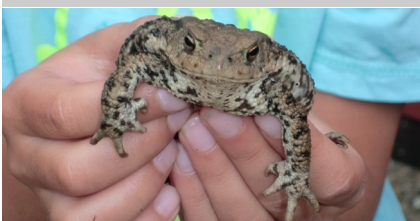
The whole strong clamour of a
vehement soul

Doth utter itself distinct.

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire
with God:

But only he who sees, takes off
his shoes... ■

Excerpted from "Aurora Leigh"
by *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*



Witness to Wonder (Excerpt)

BY DAN SCHATZ,
MINISTER, UNITARIAN
CONGREGATION OF

WEST CHESTER, PENNSYLVANIA

I believe this firmly—that we are sacred beings in a sacred world. No part of our living is divorced from that reality; this life and all that surrounds it is holy, from beginning to end. Every human being—whatever category or description they might belong to—is a sacred being.

I believe this firmly—that the world we inhabit, from the primordial slime that gave rise to the air we breathe to the American chestnut trees in my backyard, from the thistles and groundhogs, also in my backyard, that will not go away, to the grass that grows through the cracks of crumbling pavement, and even the pavement itself, is sacred. All of it is. All of life is wondrous, and we are part of life. With our very breath, we are witness to wonder.

But we forget. It's easy to do. I suppose on some level that's a good thing. We probably wouldn't get much done if we spent every moment staring in rapturous wonder at dandelions, appreciating the miracle of sneezes even as we breathe in the ragweed. And perhaps that too is a miracle of sorts, as the author Terry Pratchett once commented. "Human beings," he said, "make life so interesting. Do you know, that in a universe full of wonders, they have managed to invent boredom?"

When I think about things that way it astonishes me that any of us can manage to be bored, but we do. It is in such moments, when I become aware of them, that I try to rise from the sleepwalking of day-to-day getting by and look around me. It is in such moments that I might pick up an instrument and practice that miraculous art which is music, or I might listen to someone else

practice that art. Perhaps I will step outdoors for a few moments and walk under leaf and sky. Maybe I'll pick up the telephone—another miracle—and call someone I love, with whom I have not spoken in too long a time. Maybe I will play with my son. Or perhaps I will simply soldier through, getting done what needs to get done, and wait until later to be grateful for the sacredness of life.

It is common, these days, for people to say that even if they are not religious, they are spiritual, or that they are seeking a deeper spiritual life. Sometimes it's not exactly clear what we mean when we talk about spirituality. But if by that word we mean a sense of connectedness with something greater than ourselves, or a feeling of wonder and gratitude, or a motivation to step out from familiar patterns of thought and view ourselves and everything around us in a different way, we could do far worse than pay attention to this world as it is.

Then, perhaps, together we can all learn to love this world, this life, this sacred existence into which we were born and in which we will live until the end of our days, and after which the tissues of our bodies will slowly transform back into soil and nourish new life, new wonder, new experiences, new marvels. Perhaps we can learn to do more than live well in this world—we can also learn to praise it. ■

What opens you to wonder?

We hope that *Quest* and the many other resources from the CLF help to turn toward the wondrous. If you value the wonder that the CLF brings to your life, and to many others around the world, it would be wonderful if you could support the CLF by sending a check in the enclosed envelope or by giving online at www.clfuu.org/give. ■



My BFF, Jack

BY JOHN, CLF MEMBER
INCARCERATED IN OKLAHOMA

Jack and I met accidentally: He flew into the open hand at the end of my out-stretched left arm. You see, Jack is an adult male house sparrow who had been trapped in the dayroom of my residential living unit. It's unclear how he came to be inside the dayroom, but it was abundantly clear that he wanted back outside because he kept smashing into the floor-to-ceiling windows that covered parts of two sides of the room.

While Jack flew from window to window, I silently sent him messages to come to me—where he'd be safe and I could take him back outdoors. In my mind's eye, I saw him receiving my ESP messages, flying over, and landing on my shoulder, after which we would triumphantly march out of the room. That didn't happen.

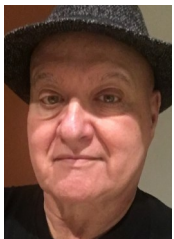
What did happen is this: One of the residents tossed an empty laundry bag at him, hoping to entangle him long enough to be captured and released. Instead, it caused him to fly diagonally across the room toward a small window where another resident attempted to grab him. Jack escaped that attempted capture and flew off at a different angle—this time toward me—

and I reached out and plucked him from the air. (Later, yet another resident would liken it to a Yankee center-fielder snagging a line drive.)

I carried Jack outside in my cupped hands. While walking I put my lips next to my hands and whispered to him. Later, someone asked me if I was kissing the bird. My first answer was, "No." But after thinking about it, maybe I was. I whispered the Buddhist mantra *om mani padme hum* to him, so although I didn't give him a physical kiss, I did give him a spiritual one.

Much to my surprise, he did not immediately fly off when I uncupped my hands. Instead, he just sat on my palm, hunkered down, breathing heavily. I walked across the courtyard to a bench bathed in bright sunlight and sat down. He remained squatted on my palm for several minutes with his left eye staring up at me all the while. Was he staring because he wanted to remember my face in case we met again? Or was he, like me, just totally in awe at the wonder of this unusual being-to-being encounter?

I'll never know. But I do know he was safe and unharmed and that's what mattered. After those few minutes of bonding, my new BFF—best feathered friend—fluttered down to the ground, looked around, glanced back at me, and then flew off to join his buddies. ■



Sequence

BY MARK BELLETINI, MINISTER EMERITUS,
FIRST UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF
COLUMBUS, OHIO

O Love, here I am, at this moment, on this planet, in this place, utterly in awe that I am alive and that everything is. In awe

because I know I *would not be here at all* except for what has been revealed in a grand and sacred text written in strata, stars and grateful observation:

That I am here proclaims the tale of billions of years of gathering stardust, solar birth, gravity and other forces scooping the dust into the solid orb on which I stand; thunder and lightning and boiling seas for countless years; lava, proteins, cells, unnamed early blobs of what we now call life; a billion, billion trilobites in warm seas; soft molluscs in their spiral shells, bony fish, and a hundred million years of shiny amphibians, centipedes the size of my body; ferns and trees that no longer exist; a hundred million years of great reptiles, feathered creatures morphing into birds; great sloths and woolly mammoths and wide-eyed lemurs grabbing onto branches with almost-human hands; early humans gathering around waterholes on the African veld; pyramids and reed

boats, star-watching and calendar-making, the vain smoke of sacrifices, the groan of chants curling into songs, the taming of horses and dogs, the refinements of cruelty and their antidote, empathy; the mutation of genes and chromosomes, the cry of language, the prophets, farmers, sea-farers and laborers in stone and wood; the struggles and wonders of genders, sexualities and spiritualities; war, peace, famine, greed, critique, abundance, loss and love. And all of these things together lead to this moment, and to me and you, fragile leaves on the tree of life who now keep silence before this wonder. ■



© Toby Armstrong

Wonder Redux

BY KAT LIU,
OWNER,
WIZDUUM.NET,
SAN FRANCISCO,
CALIFORNIA



If you look in the dictionary, there are two uses of the word “wonder.” The first meaning is *curiosity*, as in “I wonder how that works.” And the second meaning is *awe*, as in “They gazed in wonder at the stars.” The two meanings feel different to me. When we wonder about something, there is the sense—whether it’s true or not—that we can use observation and reason to eventually discover the answer. When we wonder at something—marvel, behold in awe—there is more the sense that this is something so grand, so amazing, that all we can do is experience it. Yet the two definitions of wonder are clearly related, as both start with the recognition of not knowing.

It was wonder as in curiosity that caused me to first pursue a career in science. I wanted to understand how the world works. And it was wonder as in awe that caused me to leave science for religion. I realized that while I loved asking questions and designing experiments, I was almost always a little disappointed by the answers.

What I was seeking was what Christian theologian Rudolf Otto called the numinous, that feeling of awe in the face of the transcendent. *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Terrifying and fascinating mystery. For me, the world reduced to materialist explanations seemed far less magical than my initial wondering questions.

At its best, Christianity calls us to stop thinking that we can understand (i.e. control) everything, and to surrender to mystery. To be open to wonder as in awe. At its worst, that surrender to mystery becomes unquestioning acceptance, and that unquestioning

acceptance becomes certainty. The opposite of wonder.

On one level Buddhism, like science, is highly empirical. Knowledge is based on observation. And we practice in order to see more clearly, so we can know more truly. If one believes the sutras, they tell us that when Siddhartha became the Buddha—the Awakened One—he could see everything. Every past life. Every karmic consequence. The entire interdependent web, past, present, and future. He didn’t teach about those things because they are not relevant to the goal of Buddhism, which is to liberate us from suffering. But if the sutras are to be believed, with ultimate awakening comes perfect knowing.

Yet for those of us who are not yet Buddha, the path to perfect knowing lies through not knowing. Followers of Zen are taught the value of not-knowing, or beginner’s mind, which isn’t the same as confusion or ignorance. Not-knowing means always being aware that we don’t see the whole picture, that our interpretations may be skewed, and thus always approaching each situation with curiosity, wonder. In order to learn, it’s necessary to first recognize that we don’t know. When we think that we already know, we miss things due to preconceived ideas, filter out due to interpretations, and dismiss due to judgments.

The Tao Te Jing tells us, “To know that we do not know is health. To not know, yet think we know, is disease.”

Let us practice not knowing. Let us wonder what might be possible. ■

Thank You, Janet!

Janet Lane, who has done the layout and design work for *Quest* for the last 32 years, is retiring from the position following this issue. We are deeply grateful for her many years of bringing beauty and clarity to these pages.

The Gift of Uncertainty

BY SCOTT, CLF MEMBER
INCARCERATED IN CALIFORNIA

Certainty is a thorny issue in religion. We humans have sought it in signs, moving words, transcendent states and in authorities. We want something solid to ground us, to orient us in a world where much happens that we do not understand. Some have preferred blind faith—a trust without justification. All of us live at the murky boundary between knowing and doubt.

Personally, I have come to think that full certainty is overrated. Doubt brings us closer to truth. Our beliefs evolve and improve as our knowledge improves. In exchange for the anchor of certainty we get something far more fulfilling: wonder. Wonder is the gift of uncertainty, for it allows us to discover the richness of life beyond our limited perspectives.

Albert Einstein said: “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious.” The wondrous, the mysterious, is the province of the scientists *and* the mystic. It opens to us if we become like Nietzsche’s Cosmic Dancer—willing to leave the safety of our known world and thoughts in order to explore the unknown as the one who lives with one foot in the realm of the certain, and the other in the uncertain. It is a dance of wonder.



by Janet Lane



From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY
SENIOR MINISTER,
CHURCH OF THE
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

*Out of your heart, cry wonder,
Sing that we live.*

These are the final words of one of my favorite readings in the UU hymnal, “Out of the Stars,” written by Robert Weston. I love the words because they have a beautiful rhythm when you read them, a gait which seems to lift up the miracles that they spell out: That we exist! That we are connected to everything! That we love!

I have always been moved by those words because, for me, the stars are such an immediate and consistent source of wonder. Stars elicit mystery from our youngest age. Every two-year-old who speaks English learns that expression of wonder, *Twinkle, twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are...* a simple way of expressing wonder and awe.

One of the great blessings of stars is that they are always there, a constant. Even if it is a cloudy night and we can't see them, we know they are there. Thousands of years ago our ancestors learned to follow them in order to sail, plant, migrate and mark earth transitions.

And even in this time when governments and corporations have devised ways to own rivers, oceans, airspace, water, even the very cells of plants and animals and our own bodies, no one has figured out how to own the heavens. (OK, I know, corporations are working on this in various ways, but they still haven't gotten there.) Stars are there for everyone. They are there for the rich and the poor, people in refugee camps and prisons, people in slavery, right up in the sky shining their light on all who have a window to see out from. Sure, pollution may dim

the lights in some places more than others, but no one needs to buy a ticket to look up. So they are present for all of us, in constancy and in radical egalitarian generosity.

And here's another mystery—something scientists say which is so weird it's hard to even believe—we come from the stars, all of us here. That's not just poetry, it's science!

Stars are in some cosmic sense our ancestors. We are stardust! This can give us a very big perspective on ourselves as humans—who we are and who we might be. It could fill us with pride, and it could also fill us with humility—are we manifesting stardust well? Are we shining radiantly, ever present for all? Imagining that we come from the stars can call us to enter the world of mystery and wonder.

Stars also call us to contemplate the mysteries of time and space. We might not be astrophysicists ourselves, but simply trying to understand how time and space are reflected in the night sky can be an exercise in profound and complex thought. Consider these words of Damian Audley from the “Ask an Astrophysicist” team, about how long it takes for a star's light to reach the earth:

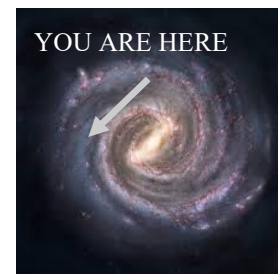
The nearest star to us is the sun and it takes about 8.3 minutes for its light to reach us here on earth, traveling at 186,000 miles per second.

Other stars are so much farther away that it is convenient to express the distance to them in units of the distance traveled by light in one year. This unit is called a light year. The next closest star to us is Proxima Centauri. This star is 4.3 light years away, which means that light from it takes 4.3 years to reach us. Our galaxy is about 100,000 light years across. This means that it can take tens of thousands of years for light from some stars in our galaxy to reach us. For stars that we can see in nearby galaxies it can take millions of years.

I don't know about you, but imagining that I am seeing something that travels at 186,000 miles per second and still takes tens of thousands of years to reach earth completely boggles my mind.

But Audley isn't done with the boggling. He continues: “The farthest objects we can see are quasars. They are so distant that the light we see from them today left billions of years ago. So when we look up at the stars we are looking back in time.”

We are looking back in time and we are looking across an incomprehensible amount of space! I have driven across this country and that has seemed like taking a huge amount of time to cover a vast amount of space to me, traveling by plane or train or car, none of which gets in the neighborhood of 186,000 miles per second. And yet, every time we look into the night sky, we are seeing this vastness.



I used to have a postcard above my desk with a photo of the Milky Way galaxy, in all of its

splendor. To one side, an arrow pointed into the midst of the galaxy with the words, *You are here*. When we see our troubles or worries with this kind of perspective, they seem very small indeed.

We can feel our very cells open, our body connect more deeply to earth, our soul begin to emerge from its hiding place, when we stand quietly under a night sky, take a breath, and pause. Stars connect us with both our own finitude and the world's vastness. With both the edges of what we can know and see and the preciousness of that. With both the improbability of our life and the fact that here we are—*out of the stars we have come*. ■



REsources for Living

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

I love science. I think of science as a pathway to wonder, with that path of discovery and learning leading us to a deeper understanding of who we are and how we relate to the rest of our universe. I'm a proud English major, a poet, a minister with more education in mysteries than proofs, but the fact that humans go exploring to understand how things work, where things started, how things change—I love that.

Which is not to say that I'm always happy about what science tells us. The fact that something is true doesn't make it wonderful. Or at least it doesn't make it likeable. For instance, the more science teaches us about climate change, the less happy I am. The news is somewhere in between grim and devastating, and I'd kind of rather not know—except that knowledge, and the willingness to act on it, are crucial for our survival.

But there are other things that science has shown us to be true that are just really annoying. Take, for instance, the Dunning-Kuger effect. Psychological studies have demonstrated that people who have very low abilities tend to think that they are experts in subjects they know nothing about. The less capable you are, the less ability you have to recognize just how little you know and how poorly you are likely to do. *Being bad at things actually makes you think you are good.* This effect has become much better known lately because of a president who regularly declares that he knows more than anyone else about military tactics or climate change or a wide range of subjects on which he has no expertise.

I find the Dunning-Kruger effect annoying not just in my frustration with how it's being played out on a political

level. No, what really gets to me is the question *How do I know if this is me?* After all, there are some subjects (OK, very few) on which I think I know quite a lot. But what if my thinking I'm an expert really means that I'm deluding myself? What if I don't know that I don't know? Remember, the inability to recognize your limitations is the hallmark of the Dunning-Kruger effect.

The willingness to wonder takes us out of the realm of arrogance or false humility and into a world ruled by science, which is, after all, the systematic application of wondering.

But it isn't just me. How does any one of us move through the world in a way that isn't basically a declaration of our ignorance? It seems like maybe our choices are either to assume false modesty and pretend to know less than we really do, or to act like an expert and maybe prove (or have people believe) that we know far less than we think we do. You understand my frustration?

But I think there is a way out through that thorny thicket—a kind of magical password that can get you through. That magic phrase is *I wonder....* The willingness to wonder takes us out of the realm of arrogance or false humility and into a world ruled by science, which is, after all, the systematic application of wondering. When we start with wondering we are never wrong. How many times has a teacher told you that there are no bad questions?

I wonder how we might change our lives to lessen the effects of climate change.... I wonder what is the most effective way to deal with the threat of North Korea.... I wonder how the person I'm arguing with came to their conclusions.... I wonder what my

crying child really wants.... I wonder whether my pasta sauce would be better with cream in it....

Declarations are right or wrong, true or false. And when we disagree with someone then either that person is wrong or we are wrong ourselves. Which is not to say that no one should ever commit to believing any particular truth. But science has a grand work-around for this problem of whether we are able to declare the truth. Science, after all, is looking for the opportunity to declare things as true. But you start with a particular kind of assertion of truth—a hypothesis.

A hypothesis is a declarative statement: The earth is round. Measles is caused by a virus. Birds migrate to find food. There are multiple universes. But what makes the statement a hypothesis is that it is presumed to be surrounded by a cloud of wondering. How can we test this statement to see if what we observe matches up? How does this statement mesh with other things we know? What might be other explanations, and how might we find out which explanation best fits with what we see?

For Unitarian Universalists, these hypotheses, these statements wrapped in wondering, extend beyond the realm of science and into the world of questions that cannot be definitively answered. I wonder what God might be like.... I wonder what my life means.... I wonder what I owe my fellow human beings—and the non-human beings of this planet.... I wonder how I can come to the end of my life feeling that I have fully lived.... Each one of these questions deserves a hypothesis, a statement of belief that exists within a cloud of wonder, a field of exploration.

No religious statement we might make will ever be proven beyond a reasonable doubt—that's the nature of religion. But the beauty lies in our capacity to wonder, to ponder, to try to work our way toward an understanding that feels whole and holy, that allows us to see the wonder that is all around us. ■



Church of the Larger Fellowship
Unitarian Universalist

24 Farnsworth Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02210-1409 USA

Address Service Requested

NONPROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
BOSTON, MA
PERMIT NO. 55362

You can listen to audio recordings of *Quest Monthly*, read back issues or get electronic versions of the text to share with friends (and much more) at questformeaning.org

Quest Monthly Editorial Team: Adrian Graham, Stefan Jonassen, Janet Lane, Kat Liu, Beth Murray, Niala Terrell-Mason, Meg Riley, Arliss Ungar, Lynn Ungar, editor

Copyright 2019 Church of the Larger Fellowship. Generally, permission to reproduce items from *Quest Monthly* is granted, provided credit is given to the author and the CLF. ISSN 1070-244X

CLF Staff: Meg Riley, senior minister; Jody Malloy, executive director; Lynn Ungar, minister for lifespan learning and *Quest Monthly* editor; Rodney Lemery, acting director of prison ministries; Lori Stone Sirtosky, director of technology; Beth Murray, program administrator; Judy DiCristofaro, fiscal administrator; Hannah Franco-Isaacs, social media coordinator and administrative assistant; Andrea Fiore, webmaster.

Learning Fellows: Margalie Belizaire, Antonia Bell-Delgado, LaShea Dent, and Eli Snider

Web Site www.clfuu.org — Email clf@clfuu.org — Toll-Free Line 800-231-3027 or 617-948-6150

CLF Jewelry at *inSpirit*, The UU Book and Gift Shop 800-215-9076

CLF Unitarian Universalist, 24 Farnsworth Street, Boston MA 02210-1409 USA



O Wonder!

A garden amidst the flames.
My heart embraces every form.
It is a pasture for gazelles
and a convent for Christian monks,
and a temple for idols,
and the pilgrim's Kaaba,
and the tables of the Torah,
and the book of the Quran.

I follow Love.

Whatever way Love's camels take—
that is my religion
and my faith.

by *Ibn al-Arabi*, Sufi Muslim poet, mystic
and philosopher, 1165-1240 ■



© Toby Armstrong