

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Wonderfully Dark

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FIRST READING

from Chet Raymo, professor of physics and astronomy, and former science writer for the Boston Globe

One hundred years ago the eminent physicist Lord Kelvin confidently asserted that the work of science was complete. Newton's mechanics and Maxwell's theory of electromagnetism has been wonderfully successful in explaining a wide range of physical phenomena. There was nothing more to learn, said Kelvin. Only "two small clouds" remained on the horizon to trouble him: thorny problems regarding the behavior of light.

By the end of the nineteenth century the two small clouds had grown into thunderheads. The first bit of trouble was finally resolved by Planck's theory of the quantum; the second was resolved with Einstein's theory of relativity. Quantum physics and relativity are cornerstones for our present understanding of the world – but they were like rabbit holes that led into Wonderlands of fresh mystery.

Every accumulation of knowledge is full of rabbit holes. Enter a rabbit hole – quantum physics, say – and that hole has its own rabbit holes leading to yet other exotic terrains. One doesn't have to be a Lord Kelvin or an Einstein to find a place to enter. A leaf of grass will provide ingress to Infinity. The ancients believed that the stars were pinholes in the dome of the sky, through which shone the light of an outer, more wonderful world. And it is true: Every star is a rabbit hole into another world. In the course of a lifetime of starry night I could not explore them all.

I lie on my back and the light of 10,000 stars enters my eyes. Ten thousand subtle but distinct wavelets of energy enter my eyes at slightly different angles from out of the depths of space, and by some miracle my eyes and brain sort it all out, put each star in its proper place, recognize the familiar patterns of the constellations, and open my soul to a universe whose length and breadth exceed my wildest imagining. Starlight falls upon me like a gentle rain. It blows across me like a furious wind. I am soaked and shaken.

I have a friend who speaks of knowledge as an island in a sea of mystery. Let this then, be the ground of my faith: All that we know, now and forever, all scientific knowledge that we have of this world, or ever will have, is as an island in the sea. And still the mystery surrounds us.

SECOND READING

from Loren Eisely, anthropologist and paleontologist

There is a story about one of our great atomic physicists. This man, one of the chief architects of the atomic bomb, was out wandering in the woods one day with a friend when he came upon a small tortoise. Overcome with pleasurable excitement, he took up the tortoise and started home, thinking to surprise his children with it. After a few steps he paused and surveyed the tortoise doubtfully.

“What’s the matter?” asked his friend.

Without responding, the great scientist slowly retraced his steps as precisely as possible, and gently set the turtle down upon the exact spot from which he had taken him up.

Then he turned solemnly to his friend. “It just struck me,” he said, “that perhaps, for one man, I have tampered enough with the universe.” He turned and left the turtle to wander on its way.

“I have tampered enough,” he said. It was not a denial of science. It was a final recognition that science is not enough.

Wonderfully Dark

*Let this be the ground of my faith:
all that we know, now and forever,
all scientific knowledge that we have of this world, or ever will have,
is an island in a sea of mystery.*

Chet Raymo, now retired, is the author of more than 20 books on science and nature. He’s a physicist and professor of astronomy, he is a theological skeptic, but every line of his writing breathes mysticism and amazement. He is someone with uncommon knowledge about quasars and quarks and quantum mechanics, the mathematics of astrophysics. He knows about stars: he has studied them, sounded them, all his life, measured them from the most advanced telescopes in the most elite observatories in the world. He’s taught and lectured for decades in major universities.

And yet and still, in summer in a grassy field, in winter in the snow, he goes outside at night lies face upward on the ground, drenched in starlight and awash in wonder, bobbing on his back in the sea of mystery, and the tiny islands of his knowledge are like pinpricks of light in the vast velvet above. They don’t weigh very much, the islands of knowledge. He’s like a little kid. He’s like a shaman or an ancient priest. He’s like any of us, if we’re mindful and open and available.

Some scientists are certain and only interested in certainty; for them there is no mystery, only stuff we don’t yet know. For them the sea of mystery is not a rolling ocean. It’s a backwater of ignorance; it’s just a swamp waiting to be drained. Like Lord Kelvin, they believe that someday we will solve the last equation (not us in our lifetime, but humans); the evidence will all be in. We’ll storm into the Garden and gather all the apples from the Tree of Knowledge and feast on man-made apple pie, confident and proud, pretty happy with ourselves. But science that knows for sure is never truly science, just as faith that knows for sure (about God, about death, about love, about loss) can’t be true religion. Faith that knows for sure is not faith- it’s

fundamentalism, which is lazier and clumsier than faith, less faithful than faith; and science that imagines an end to exploration is not science, not the pure science that with deep humility and unquenchable curiosity tests every perfect theory, shakes down every elegant equation, to see if it will hold. Chet Raymo reminds us that quantum physics and relativity are the cornerstones for our present understanding of the cosmos, how it works and how it came to be, how it all holds together and how, even as we speak, it's flying apart. But quantum theory and relativity have proven also to be rabbit holes leading to Wonderlands of fresh mystery.

The scientific imagination, like the mystical imagination, is untroubled. It floats on its back in an ocean of unknowing, glad to touch new islands, paddling toward them all the time, but mostly humble and exhilarated in the sea of questions. We do lean, naturally, toward the bright light of certainty and evidence, the sunshine confidence of proof and fact, and maybe most of all the shiny gleam of mechanics and applied technology. We like the light. We feel a little less afraid knowing what we know; we feel less vulnerable, less insignificant and small. That's true in matters of the spirit as well as cosmic questions. We like bright light - but our true home is in the dark. Sometimes the glare of our accomplishments distracts us from what we most deeply know within, and from the world of wonder from which we came and to which, before long, we return.

Einstein said, when he was old, "Do not grow old, no matter how long you live. Never cease to stand like curious children before the Great Mystery into which you were born. The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe in contemplation of eternity, of life, the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if you try merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day. Never lose a holy curiosity."

Barbara Pescan, Unitarian Universalist, says

*High above us the sun shines
and beyond the sun the stars of night
hide in the daytime sky.*

(They're out there right now.)

*Somewhere
between the stars and the earth's core*

(somewhere in between, but not the center of all things – somewhere between these ancient fires)

*we live
and weep
and laugh
and answer.*

*Such wonders abounding,
how can we not be amazed?
Let the light and darkness
bless each other and bless us.*

We live in a moment appallingly hostile to science, true science. If this were not the case, global leaders would not need to be meeting in Paris this week, desperately devising late fixes to the catastrophe of climate change. They would have met twenty years ago, or thirty, or more, without resistance from lobbyists and lawmakers who've insisted for reasons political, financial or religious that the world is flat, the sun spins quietly around it, and if things are warming up, well – that must be God's will. They swim in the shallows of ignorance. Meanwhile, in the sea of mystery, the islands of knowledge are small, but they are mountains underneath, layer upon layer of hypotheses tested for soundness, tested for truth. Knowledge is evolving all the time, just as we are; it is never fixed, but it is so much more substantial than speculation and superstition, deception and denial. There's humility in that island image: what we know, we know deeply and by certain kinds of methods, and what we don't know is even more profound. I think the spiritual task is to hold the mystery, all that darkness, with tremulous excitement, as befits a tiny creature full of wonder and intelligence, to stay open to it with a holy curiosity, trying always to be neither frightened nor arrogant as we sail our blue boat home. It's wonderfully, wondrously dark out there.

What do we ever know for sure? I love the story told by Loren Eiseley, who was himself a distinguished scientist, about a colleague who was a famous physicist, a designer of the first nuclear weapons, who lived to see them used against a human population. Walking in the woods this man found a little tortoise, and picked it up, delightedly, to bring it home and show it to his children. He walked a ways, and then he stopped and put it down. "It just struck me," he said, "that perhaps, for one man, I have tampered enough with the universe." Maybe there are limits. Maybe we don't need to touch everything, tamper with everything just because we can; maybe we don't need to change everything, know everything, own and master every living and inanimate thing, split every single atom. Maybe sometimes it's better to let the mystery be. "I have tampered enough," he said – and maybe that was the most brilliant realization of his entire career, his bravest, most human contribution. We're here to garner not only knowledge, but wisdom and reverence, awe, an understanding of our rightful place, which sometimes you can only see in the dark, floating on your back in that infinite ocean of mystery and stars, everything we cannot know.

I knew a couple once who were old when I met them, in their 80's or 90's, but they were young in the Einstein sense. They quivered with holy curiosity. He was a fourth or fifth generation Unitarian, the grandson and great-grandson of Unitarian ministers in Boston, a quiet person, deeply kind; all his life he taught elementary children in public schools, which was a rare thing for men born in the early 20th century. He was very gentle. She was... not. She was an art historian, staid, stern, impeccably formal, a devout Episcopalian steeped in liturgy and ecclesiology; her rigorous religion found poetic voice in the language of the King James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer. They both loved music. He had a large collection of recordings from the Smithsonian: folksongs gathered on farms and in prisons in the 1920's: slave songs, ballads, spirituals. She preferred *The Handel and Hayden Society*. They co-existed, companionably, in parallel universes, and for the length of their very long marriage, in the most courteous, respectful way, they sustained a take-no-prisoners battle over theology. They loved this – thrived on it, she with her coffee, he with his tea, at the kitchen table every afternoon. He did not believe in God, he said, and never had, even as a child. He was "at best" agnostic, a

humanist with feet planted firmly in the natural world. She feared for his soul, out loud, and argued an angle we would now call the theory of intelligent design, regarding the Creation and Creator. He told me once, “My wife believes that I will burn in hell. I wish that I could cheer her up.” They read books and articles to sharpen their positions. They learned from one another, conceded certain points sometimes and sometimes altered their positions, on eternity, mortality, transubstantiation, the divinity of Jesus, the words to hymn tunes they both loved. They kept peering down the rabbit holes of wonder, gently pushing one another over the edge. And then he died, and she told me, when we were planning his memorial, that on that day, after more than 60 years, she let it go, took off her sparring gloves. She said, “It’s hard to know now which of us I hope is right. But I have to leave it there, because in the end I know we cannot know. We both knew that all along. And I have no one now against whom I can hone my belief. My certainty is weaker without him here to challenge me and balance me. We grew in faith and doubt together.” She said she “consigned his soul to mystery,” and her own as well. When she died, a year later, I was surprised, but not entirely, that she left a note saying she felt her service should be held in the Unitarian church, not the Episcopal church of her childhood, the one she still belonged to. She said it just like that: not “I want it held there,” but “I feel it should be.”

Our theme this month is mystery, which calls us to the practice of keeping open, open mind, open heart, open eyes.

The darkness in our corner of the planet at this time of the year calls us inward, to deep questions, old stories. We wonder as we wander in December dark, listening for the lost voices of loved ones, and ancestors. We revisit all kind of ancient mysteries and we keep lovely, strange traditions, whose origins we cannot trace, regarding light and stars, angel wings and wonder. The stars hang lower in the evening sky; they seem closer to us now, and it doesn’t matter, really, if they are lumps of molten rock a billion miles away, or magical portents of miracles and grace, signs for kings to travel by. The nights blanket us early, and even in this noisiest of seasons, mystery abides. Our house faces a small alley and there are no streetlights on any side; it’s a black hole, right in Mahtomedi. It is wonderfully, wondrously dark, and at this time of year I try to keep open, try not to feel oppressed by the cold and closed in by the night, try to look at stars in the evening and the morning, and welcome mystery as an old companion, one I loved when I was small.

Jessica Banks, a member of our congregation, wrote a meditation at solstice time last year:

Every good, new thing comes out of darkness: the womb, the earth, the depths of our dreams and imagination. Darkness harbors things that could not survive the harsh, bare light of day, things that just aren't ready for the relentless energy of sun and wind and other people's expectations.

Darkness is soft and warm. It presses like blankets, soft wings, and loving arms. It's not as lonely as the light can be; other souls can be as close or as far as we need them to be, when we don't have the evidence light delivers to our eyes.

It's not that darkness can't be scary. Often, the scariest thing in the dark is the closeness of ourselves, with nothing to distract ourselves from our thoughts and memories and regrets. And

we're still ingrained with that deep, primal urge to light the fires against the night where wild animals and enemies lurk.

But I say: Don't be so quick to light the first spark on Midwinter or Christmas Eve. Dwell in the darkness for a little while. More than any other animal in the deep winter, we have faith that the light will return, so we can afford to give the darkness its time, too.

The winter night is beautiful.

There are things we know and things we don't and things we can't and things we can still learn. Some we learn by measurement and calculation, establishing new shores of knowledge, the dry land where we mostly live. And other things we learn by story, our own experience and that of other people; we learn by myth and metaphor and thereby build up wisdom, build compassion, reverence, thankfulness. There are many ways of knowing what we know, keeping mind and heart and eyes as open as we can.

Mark Nepo, a poet and teacher, has a poem that is really a prayer, a mediation on all the many, many things, terrible and beautiful things we hold at once and must respond to somehow, in the brief days we are given, while all the while our planet earth gently spins through space, and all the while we're held in mystery. There are things that neither science nor religion ever can explain; truths which shine more brightly in the dark. Breathe deep. Close your eyes.

Listen to the images he paints. Imagine a blue ball spinning through the black dark.

Between the City and the Sea

*An old president died just
hours after a young
man from Idaho was shot in his sleep in Iraq,
and now in the Sundarban east of the Himalayas, a tiger licks the eyes of its newborn yet to see,
and further east in Vietnam, a young woman who has worked very hard
to learn how to read is reciting a sutra from Buddha,
in awe how presence moves through words across the centuries, .
At the same time, an unwed mother in Chicago thinks about stealing a blanket as winter stiffens,
and moments after this,
a manta ray in Ecuador wakes because of the sun's heat on its back
and its sweep over coral startles the moray back into its nook,
and as the old president's body cools,
a sergeant finds the boy from Idaho.
And just now, in Chile,
a tired couple re-see each other and make love in the afternoon while clouds come in from the
Pacific.
And just now, you stir,
the dog stretches,
and far away,*

*two stars collide, a new world forms,
and somewhere between the city and the sea,
a child is born with an untempered capacity to love.
In time, he or she will want to love us all. Remember their face, though you have never seen it.
Speak their name, though you have never heard it.
Mistake everyone for them.
Love everything in the way.*

There are things we know and things we don't and things we can't and things we can still learn.

How much love is possible?

How many stars in the December sky?

As the darkness deepens now, may we not be afraid,
nor be too quick to light our candles and our lights.
Companioned in the weeks ahead by old stories and old music,
and by the distant light of ancient suns,
which the first tellers of those stories saw with all-too-human eyes,
in the crowded clutter and the clamor of these busy days,
these sad and anxious days,
may we make room for mystery and wonder,
room for grief and fear and gratitude and courage,
room for beauty,
room for holy curiosity, burning like a star,
and room as well
for the quiet and resilient hope
that waits in the soil of the soul.
As the great wheel turns
and darkness deepens all around,
may we be reminded that the greatest mystery
is that we're here at all,
here and now,
and undeniably together.
Our greatest work,
and all we know for sure,
is love.