

**First Reading**  
**Excerpt from "What I Believe" by Albert Einstein**

Strange is our situation here upon earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to divine a purpose. From the standpoint of daily life, however, there is one thing we do know: that man is here for the sake of other men—above all for those upon whose smiles and well-being our own happiness depends, and also for the countless unknown souls with whose fate we are connected by a bond of sympathy...

To ponder interminably over the reason for one's own existence or the meaning of life in general seems to me, from an objective point of view, to be sheer folly... To make a goal of comfort or happiness has never appealed to me; a system of ethics built on this basis would be sufficient only for a herd of cattle. Without the sense of collaborating with like-minded beings in the pursuit of the ever unattainable in art and scientific research, my life would have been empty...

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed... To know that 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... It is enough for me to contemplate the mystery of conscious life perpetuating itself through all eternity, to reflect upon the marvelous structure of the universe which we can dimly perceive, and to try humbly to comprehend even an infinitesimal part of the intelligence manifested in nature.

**Second Reading from Yo-Yo Ma**

While I'm on stage, you're all my guests because that's sort of the unsaid agreement. So while you're my guests, if something bad happens on stage...everybody's with you. They're not gonna let that moment spoil their evening. It's like "oh well...this happened. But that's not why we're here...to watch the bad things happen." So whatever

you practice for--on the engineering side--that fails is alright. Because we have a greater purpose. The greater purpose is that we're communing together and we want this moment to be really special for all of us. Because otherwise, why bother to have come at all? It's not about proving anything, it's about sharing something.

### **Third Reading, "In Those Years" by Adrienne Rich**

In those years, people will say, we lost track  
of the meaning of we, of you  
we found ourselves  
reduced to I  
and the whole thing became  
silly, ironic, terrible:  
we were trying to live a personal life  
and yes, that was the only life  
we could bear witness to

But the great dark birds of history screamed and plunged  
into our personal weather  
They were headed somewhere else but their beaks and pinions drove  
along the shore,  
through the rags of fog  
where we stood, saying I

### **Expect Magic**

**by Jack Gaede**

The other night, I took a walk right over there, plodding unbelievably through wet snow. I went all the way to the labyrinth and circled round its snowy trails, still visible

under at least three inches of snow. I was there, hoping to find inspiration for this very sermon. I think I was expecting magic. And by expecting, I don't mean anticipating. I mean something closer to hoping. I didn't anticipate results that could be verifiable and unassailable. I was looking for a note of hope.

On my way back, I had the sudden urge to hang a left and retrace the steps that some of us took this December during our winter solstice service. I'm not sure which evening was colder or had more snow, but I was reminded of that moment where we walked along a path lit by lamps and huddled together on the shortest day of the year. We assembled in a circular fashion and spoke to the spirit of the four directions. We called on winter and bid it to come. I wonder if maybe we should have welcomed it less aggressively this particular winter--maybe fewer people or quieter voices. I'll make a note for next year.

But while I was out there, the other night, feeling the echo of our winter solstice celebration, I started thinking about magic. What is the magic that is at play in a winter solstice ritual? Do we believe ourselves powerful enough to actually bring about the onset of winter? Do we believe that it wouldn't have come if we hadn't welcomed it? And if not, why did we do it? What possible value could there be in calling forth the inevitable or calling forth the magic? And by magic, I don't mean the opposite of science. I mean...that which is ineffable and mysterious. Those things that might be unexplainable, especially if with childlike wonder you continue to ask "but why?"

Which brings me to the topic of prayer. Some people define a prayer as a wish addressed to a supernatural being and then argue that prayer by that definition is useless. One might even expect a brilliant scientist like Albert Einstein to agree. But listen to this...In 1936, a young sixth grader wrote him a letter in which she asked him if scientists pray. He began his answer with some beautiful and technical words about the laws of nature and the ambitions of research scientists, but then he took an interesting detour, admitting that "our actual knowledge of these laws is only imperfect and fragmentary, so that, actually, the belief in the existence of basic all-embracing laws in nature also rests on a sort of faith." He goes on: "Everyone who is seriously involved in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that a spirit is manifest in the laws of the universe--a spirit vastly superior to that of man, and one in the face of which we with

our modest powers must feel humble.” For Einstein, this pursuit of science led him to a religious feeling of a special sort, but not a naive or superstitious religiosity.

Einstein--one of the best and brightest--argued passionately for humility. Einstein! Humility! I may have to think some more about this concept of humility. It comes from the same root as “human” and “humus,” as in earth, soil, ground. To be humble is to be grounded. To know that you have come from the earth and to the earth you will return. As we just sang: “My blood doth rise in the roots of yon oak.” To know that you are mortal and that many things have existed long before you and many will outlive you--including but not limited to the perpetual mystery of conscious life, the structure of the universe, bright stars, bleak years, the universal song of life, the ocean’s tide, and the rising green of spring.

And this spirit that is superior to humankind is something I call Spirit of Life, Spirit of Love, Spirit of Mystery and Wonder. And for many (including Einstein) science is one way of connecting with this spirit--with this mystery of existence. Theoretical physicist Marcelo Gleiser argues that “by understanding how science advances, science really becomes a deeply spiritual conversation with the mysterious, about all the things we don’t know.” And he makes a distinction between science and scientism, which he defines as “the notion that science can solve all problems.” He postulates that we should think about science in a more pluralistic way--which sounds like an ideal project for a Unitarian Universalist. “We cannot solve all the world’s problems,” he says, “using a strict scientific approach...because the world is too complex, and science has methodological powers as well as methodological limitations.”

He wrote a book about this exact dynamic in science called “The Island of Knowledge,” where he uses that central image to argue that “as that island of knowledge grows, so do the shores of our ignorance.” Another perspective on these growing shores of our ignorance comes from cognitive scientists Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach. They argue that we think we know more than we actually do, just because we collaborate so well with others who have different and specific areas of knowledge that we lack. In their book “The Knowledge Illusion: Why We Never Think Alone,” they assert that “As people invented new tools for new ways of living, they simultaneously created new realms of ignorance; if everyone had insisted on, say, mastering the principles of metalworking before picking up a knife, the Bronze Age wouldn’t have amounted to

much. When it comes to new technologies, incomplete understanding is empowering.” For instance, I couldn’t create any component of my phone (or even explain it with any degree of accuracy), and yet I am deeply grateful every day for its magic, and I trust it.

You see...the thing I’m still learning about is how to expect magic from the spiritual technologies available to me. I can feel a real and tangible difference in my day when I make time for a morning walk. I can also feel a real and tangible sense of stuckness (especially in the winter) when I neglect my spiritual practice of a moving meditation--whether the morning walk, yoga, running, or skiing. Why would I expect to see change or transformation when I repeat the same unhealthy patterns and resist the impulse to move my body and engage my spirit?

Yesterday, I went on another walk--this time near my house. There’s a pond by my house that usually takes about 5 minutes to circumnavigate. There’s a paved unbroken sidewalk all the way around it with no curbs or sharp edges--but simply a few slight turns and the occasional vertical undulation of the ground. I’ve been trying to bring some magic to my walks lately by paying close attention to different aspects of the walk. One day it’s the birds, the next...airplanes. A different day the trees and shrubbery catch my eye, and the next day the houses and mailboxes. To pay close attention to one specific thing, though, you have to let go of your attention to many other things.

In this spirit, I decided to walk very slowly with my eyes closed and to pay close attention to the sounds and the feeling of my shoe against the pavement of a walk that I know very well. Feel free to close your eyes for just a moment. Feel your seat below you and maybe feel your feet on the ground. Imagine that you’ve joined me on this walk. I could hear ducks landing on and departing from the pond, little songbirds high up in the trees under which I walked. I heard someone bring the trash out to their bin or a child a block away playing with their friends. I could hear the traffic go by on the square surrounding my circular path (which helped me stay somewhat oriented). But during my first loop, there were too many sounds that startled me and I was completely unaccustomed to the practice of walking this path with my eyes closed. Whenever my foot went off the pavement, I opened my eyes (even though all I needed to do was adjust my course slightly). Just like some of you may have opened your eyes already because we are unaccustomed to keeping our eyes closed together in a public place for this long, but I’m going to invite you to close your eyes once again.

On my second loop, I committed to keeping my eyes closed no matter what. If I stepped off the path, I just slowed down and righted my course. I had to go deeper into my non-sight senses--listening even closer to the traffic and remembering the peaks and valleys of my route. In order to expect the magic, I had to trust. I was beginning to feel pre-embarrassed: what if I encountered someone silently walking on the same path? Would they wonder about the man zigzagging across the sidewalk with his eyes closed? And did I care? And is this really that different from life? When I expect magic in everyday life, it requires so much trust and humility. And if that magic doesn't come, I might feel foolish...or even humiliated. But I would rather feel foolish than die the death of never expecting the magic and mystical moments of life. And I don't mean some sunny naive optimism...I am talking about engaging with the mystery of the universe fully and not just closing oneself off to the possibilities--to the hope that spring comes after winter.

Go ahead and open your eyes if they're still closed. With my eyes open for the third time round the pond, I actually did end up encountering some other life forms. I saw some dogs walking their humans--and one even nipped at my outstretched hand. I saw ten ducks, two geese, songbirds, a robin on a power line, and a crane in the distance. And I saw the vibrant colors of the homes AND the trees. I found a different level of visual attention after having completed one loop without the use of my vision. How about you? Are there things in your life that are right next to you that you're failing to notice because your attention is elsewhere? Are you open to incorporating a daily or weekly spiritual practice into your life in the spirit of accepting (or even expecting) change?

To prepare for and expect that change, we must resist some beliefs. First, that we are perfect and second, that perfection is even attainable. I've chatted with numerous people here in this congregation that are longing for connection and who feel that this community is imperfect, that there's a lot of room for growth, and that there are better ways of existing and being in community than are currently being employed. And of course, many of those things are true. We are imperfect; we do have room for growth, and we want to do that transformational work with you. We are like oak trees standing together in close proximity, whose roots are beginning to intertwine and reach for other roots. In our most recent This I Believe service, we heard that scientists have discovered

that trees can actually communicate with each other using their roots and the fungi surrounding them. Now if that's not magic, I don't know what is.

It can be scary to come to a new place, to talk to strangers, and to admit (either explicitly or implicitly) that you can't do it alone, that you need help, that you need a community and a system of support. But that is exactly what we are here--a community bound together by a covenant that asks us to help one another, to break out of our selfishness, to commit to serving one another and this community in some capacity. And this covenant exists essentially under the surface, like a tree's root system. Perfection is not demanded, nor is it expected in this covenantal community. But change and growth are expected. Otherwise, why are we coming?

When we do make mistakes or fall short, can we follow the advice of Yo-Yo Ma and say, "oh well...that happened. But we're not here to watch the bad things happen. We're here for a greater purpose." We're here to commune together in all of our strengths and our vulnerabilities. We are intentionally sharing life and this space together, which is way harder than just staying home. We're coming here with expectation--hoping for change.

We must also upend the beliefs that we have nothing new to learn and that the world revolves around us. I know it's obvious and doesn't sound profound, but you'd be surprised how many people (present company excluded of course), how many people forget that every other person around them also has a deep and complex narrative, filled with joys and sorrows, shame, pride, loss, hope, addiction, strength, and loneliness.

I recently heard an episode of a podcast called "Should This Exist?" which explores some new technologies and asks the very human questions: Should this exist? Is this good for humanity? The episode analyzed a new technology called a woe-bot. It's an online therapist app for your phone which isn't unheard of--I see ads for these already. But the difference with the woe-bot is that the therapist app is powered not by a human but by a robot--an algorithm--albeit one programmed by humans well versed in cognitive behavior therapy. You tell your woes to the bot, and it asks appropriate and relevant questions similar to ones that a human therapist would ask. In all honesty, it didn't seem all that different from a well-trained and emotionally intelligent bartender or hair stylist.

I went back and forth about the ethical questions posed by the host of the podcast, but the aspect that really struck me was that a woe-bot might be helpful for a social person who could utilize it almost like a journal, but a journal that asks really thoughtful and probing pre-programmed questions. And this person could use it at any hour without needing to make an appointment.

But the danger here comes for the less social person. Woe-bot might not be as helpful to a person whose main problem is that they already feel isolated. As Adrienne Rich says,

In those years, people will say, we lost track  
of the meaning of we, of you  
we found ourselves  
reduced to I  
and the whole thing became  
silly, ironic, terrible...

Will Woe-bot be able to help pull us out of that deep and dark self-obsessing spiral? I doubt it. But I don't want to get stuck here on this specific bio-ethical question of whether or not this product should exist. Let's step back to ask a more basic (and possibly more relevant) question: Should the need for this product exist? What would it look like for a community like ours to be a place where people can find a safe and healthy space to process their questions about life, meaning, and existence? A place where we can actually seek the truth in love and feel supported. That is the magic that can be found in community when we agree to come with humility and trust. And when we regularly look outside of and beyond ourselves.

Even right now in this moment, you might be thinking that these words are just for you or you might only be focused on the way that you're hearing them. But these words are for the people around you too. Take just a moment to look around this room and notice who else these words are for. Think about what this message means for them. This is why we come to a place like this, isn't it? We find value in being together, learning, asking, wondering, challenging. We believe in the magic of community. Otherwise, we wouldn't come. We would stay home and read books and listen to sermons online and watch TED talks. And we may do those things too, but we also come

here. In just a moment I'm going to ask you to turn to a neighbor and ask each other a question. Feel free to lean into the trust that is necessary to be open and a little vulnerable. Believe me, it takes a lot of willpower to walk a whole loop with your eyes closed, but we got this. Try to take just about one minute each. Your question is this: when is the last time you went through a significant change? And what did you learn? I'll ring the bell to call you back.

We can see connection and support shoot up through the winter of our discontent and isolation. We can see hope rising green to bring a new day. From deep despair and perished things, a green shoot always, always springs and something always, always sings. That is the great promise that rings through the ages. Spring always returns. So be it. See to it.