

Let the Mystery Be
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Every month I get an email inviting me to participate in a brainstorming session with other ministers and worship leaders, to contribute worship ideas for the Soul Matters theme that will be coming up in a couple of months. These suggestions are then put together into a packet and sent out to all the churches that use Soul Matters themes in worship.

Soul Matters is a kind of UU church cooperative that shares ideas for monthly themes for worship, Religious Education, and small group discussion.

So in mid-September, UU worship leaders from across the country participated in an online conference about the theme for December, which is Mystery. Callers made suggestions for sermon topics, readings and poetry, ritual, and music that might work well in services on Mystery.

The folks who facilitate these minister brainstorming sessions were amazed at how many people enthusiastically suggested the Iris Dement song we just heard: Let the Mystery Be.

For one thing, they had never heard of it – which amazes me! But then, we do tend to feel like if we are really familiar with something, everyone else must be, too.

But they also were amazed because, though the song does have the word Mystery in the title, the lyrics seem to be saying, “If something can’t be known for certain, just don’t worry about it. Let it alone, don’t think about it. Let the Mystery be.”

Which is one of the things that attract me to it. It’s such a UU view of the world. “Don’t tell me what to believe, and for sure don’t tell me I’m wrong or bound for purgatory if I don’t believe it!” In fact, as I’ve discussed before, the one belief that I can say with some confidence

that Unitarian Universalists embrace pretty universally, is that we do not ever dictate the spiritual beliefs of others. “Let the Mystery Be” could be seen as a kind of UU theme song.

And yet I think that in this letting go of setting stakes around our beliefs, there is room for embracing Mystery, too.

Rev. Victoria Stafford, in her sermon “Dreams and Bones,” tells the story of a little boy, visiting the museum with his parents for the first time, looking up, up, up at the skeleton of a dinosaur, bigger than his house, and exclaiming, in his sharp little New York accent, “Oh my god! Oh my god! Oh my god!” “Museums are really quiet, and everybody looked at them,” Victoria says, “but his parents didn’t shush him, any more than you would shush a child saying his prayers. And the person who told me this said she could hear that kid for a long time, as that family moved from room to room, exhibit to exhibit, his voice just kept bouncing off the marble walls, ‘Oh my god!’”

As a kid, I spent many, many Saturdays in the Denver Museum of Natural History, and I remember feeling that way, looking at all the amazing wonders of our world that were on display. I still feel it when I go to a museum, and maybe you do, too. We just try to express it in a more age appropriate way.

Rev. Stafford in that same sermon relates the story one of her congregants told her. His child called to him late at night because he couldn’t sleep. His mind kept thinking about galaxies and time and space and God...I can’t sleep when my mind is like an open window and I feel like I am flying out.” The father expressed gratitude for his first grader’s UU Religious Education class, where he could be at home in the world of endless questions and the windows of the house of inquiry are wide open.

This seems to me a pretty good description of what we aspire to in our Unitarian Universalist congregations: the windows of this house are wide open to inquiry of all kinds.

But if, as we have said before, this is the place where we have questions to your answers, then how do we come to believe what we think we know? What kind of church would teach its children on a Sunday, “Nobody knows...anything?” We’ll never know how it all began. But, we can guess, we can theorize, we can look at the fossil record, we can measure the stars, and when each answer leaves us with a dozen more questions, we can keep asking and answering and asking some more. We teach our children that what matters most, is that our hearts and minds stay open, that we follow the tracks and traces wherever they lead us. There are many ways of knowing truth.

Italian physicist Carlo Rovelli says, “Sacred stories are different from scientific knowledge. Scientific inquiry is not the same as mystical devotion. But they share the same prerequisites, they both require *extraordinary* openness, and the suspension of presumption. You enter the laboratory and the prayer chamber with the same suspension of presumption. Science and faith, good faith, both require courage, because the likelihood of being wrong is extremely high; both require solitude and collaboration, honoring the experiments and experience of others and building on shared wisdom. Both require integrity, there is just no room for deceit.”

As Unitarian Universalists, we honor the sacred stories from many traditions. At this time of year, we often recall stories from our Christian and Jewish sources of faith and inspiration. The story of the Macabees, returning to the Hebrew temple after a foreign power had desecrated it, and relighting the holy lamp that was never to go out, only to find that they only had one day’s worth of oil, which lasted eight days until they could replenish their supply. The story of a young woman pregnant with promise, and the birth of a divine baby who would save us all.

These are ancient stories. These are honest stories. Not because we think they are factual; stories are not the factual method of conveying truth. That is science’s job. But these stories are honest because they

convey truth. The truth that the light of hope can last and last, even when we think we don't have enough to keep us going. The truth that each baby is divine and can give saving gifts to the world, whether that baby becomes a scientist, a doctor, a teacher, a parent, a story teller, someone who offers a smile of love and encouragement. Both stories replenish our oil of hope and keep our flame burning bright.

William Wordsworth wrote,

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

*(Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On
Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798)*

The natural world, to me, is deeply interfused with truth. Like that boy in the museum, the world amazes me and moves me, sometimes to the point that I have to exclaim, "O my god!" Like Victoria Stafford, "I've always been not just amazed, but moved, and sometimes a little unhinged, by the magnitude of what I know and everything I don't know about this natural world. Amazed and moved, by the way the answer to one question opens up a thousand other ones. And I'm committed, not just intellectually but morally, to this way of wondering that is called the scientific method. For me it's religion. Doubt is not cynical, or weak, or a sign of incompleteness. It's a sacred obligation." To let the Mystery be...Mystery, always just a little beyond knowing for certain.

So I'll close with the words of Richard Rohr: "Mystery is not something you *can't* know. Mystery is *endless knowability*. Living inside such endless knowability is finally a comfort, a foundation of ultimate support, security, unrestricted love, and eternal care. For all of us, it takes much of our life to get there; it is what we surely mean by "growing" in faith. I can't prove this to you. Each soul must learn on its own, hopefully aided by observing other faith-filled people. (from *Holding the Tension: The Power of Paradox*)

Mystery is welcoming what is.
May we always welcome what is.