

Awe

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org
January 7, 2018
Rev. Paul Beckel

WELCOME

Today christians celebrate the feast of the epiphany. Within the traditional narrative, this is the moment when 3 wanderers from the middle east arrived at a lowly stable and had an epiphany — an encounter with the holy, an experience of connection with the divine. They found themselves inescapably united with an utterly foreign presence.

Inescapably united with an utterly foreign presence: it was an experience transcending reason or explanation that changed them forever. Regardless of how we understand the nativity narrative, *awe* is something, hopefully, that we've all experienced in person. Call it wonder. Or the ache of love. Call it mindful awareness of the dizzyingly real. But instead of names, now, let's simply open ourselves to the experience.

PRELUDE

GATHERING SONG

Find a Stillness #352

LIGHTING THE CHALICE / BUF COVENANT

CHILDREN'S FOCUS

The Everything Seed by Carole Martignacco

Summary: A story of the universe unfolding from a tiny seed containing everything that is, ever was, and ever will be.

ERACISM MINUTE

Judy Pine

MEDITATION

"Far to travel" by Jan Richardson

If you could see the journey whole,
You might never undertake it,
might never dare
the first step
That propels you
From the place you have known
toward the place you know not.

There is nothing for it but to go
And by our going
Take the vows the pilgrim takes:
To be faithful to the next step:
To rely on more than the map;
To heed the signposts
Of intuition and dream

To follow the star
That only you will recognize;

To keep an open eye for the wonders that attend the path
To press on beyond distractions
Beyond fatigue
Beyond what would tempt you from the way

Each choice creates the road
That will take you to the place
Where at last you will kneel
To offer the gift most needed

The gift that only you can give
Before turning to go
home
By another way.

SILENCE (3:00)

REFLECTIONS, Part 1

The feast of the epiphany, in the northern hemisphere, is celebrated during winter. A time when we may be inclined to retreat from activity, snuggle into a warm corner, dwell in the darkness.

Any of these can close us off from experiences of awe. Retreating from activity, snuggling into a warm corner, or dwelling in the darkness. And, any of these can set the stage for a new experience of awe.

Winter is fallow time. Rest time for fields and gardens. And it's a little too early to get caught up in the 2018 election cycle.

So can this be a time of epiphany?

The Greek root of epiphany means simply "to reveal." It's come to mean more: to see something heretofore unseen. Direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder. An experience beyond insight, in which the old is new, the uncertain is unthreatening. The vast is intimately familiar.

An experience that may feel timeless only because it doesn't matter that it will never occur again. Maybe I put it that way because I think an encounter with the divine, even if we're fortunate to have more than one — or more than forty thousand — still each will be an experience never before experienced.

My understanding of the divine is that of the never ending process of transformation. From that perspective, epiphany — a moment of consciousness of my unity with the divine process —

epiphany not only changes me. That moment of consciousness of our unity changes the divine as well.

A first step that propels us from the place we have known, toward the place we know not.

My own experiences of awe have come in so many forms. There are some which, despite their matchless enormity, are very common. Sunrises to which I am truly present, salmon launching themselves upstream, the birth of my children.

These experiences are deeply emotional. And they grip my body as well.

Awe erupts within the real world, not just in our imagination. We may describe the experience in sensory terms: what we observe with our eyes, hear with our ears, what we smell, taste, feel, and all of the above.

Maybe it's a realization, not only that we must change, but that we want to.

I am in awe when in the wake of grief, sorrow prevails over bitterness. When wrongdoing invokes resolution rather than retaliation.

I am in awe when deep differences are reconciled. And when it dawns on me that someone who never calls attention to themselves is much smarter and kinder than I am.

I am in awe of the bees working in concert, the rain that can cleanse or tear lives apart.

The tenacity of nature in its infinite capacity for transformation....

The capacity for humans to disregard the forces that create and uphold life... and the earth's apparent determination to go on with or without us.

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Today I'm using the words epiphany, awe, and wonder very loosely. One might see these as distinct experiences, or put them on a continuum of intensity... but as awesome as it might be (for some of us) to build an elaborate map of the unmappable, let's let that one go for now.

Not that we need to shut off our brains to experience wonder. For there may be something wonderful about "wondering-about."

So far I've been describing what might be called "wondering-at." Wondering-at: also known as reverence or worship, humility or self-relinquishment. We might think of wondering-at as mystical or aesthetic experience.

But we don't have to be full-fledged mystics to experience wonder or its transformative power. Wondering-about, also known as curiosity, fascination, or simply interest... as much as it may be associated with heady analysis, wondering-about can also enable us to shed our ego... to

encounter that which is beyond ego.

Astronomers and brain researchers, and those of us intrigued by them, may never get to some end point of ecstatic awareness, but when we wonder-about with them, we are certainly on an astonishing journey.

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As a not-traditionally-spiritual person and a self-described religious naturalist, I want, of course, the best of both worlds. Wondering-at *and* wondering-about. Because they are both awesome.

And when they come together – wow. Just wow.

Here's where they come together, perhaps: in mindfulness. Mindfulness, remember, is conscious awareness of our immediate experience. Awareness as in observation. And conscious as in not running away from the reality of here and now. Not judging our present experience as good or bad, but accepting it as real.

Mindfulness involves awareness, focus, and openness. And in so doing links science with art, head with heart, curiosity with reverence.

Maybe that's enough description for now. Let's set that aside for a little direct experience.

INTERLUDE

Quoniam, from Bach b-minor Mass

REFLECTIONS, Part 2

Notice the contrast — in that beautiful and powerful song from the Baroque era — notice the french horn playing high and highly ornamented notes, a reference to some unreachable holiness. And the very low vocal solo, a reference to lowly humanity. It conveys awe. And it conveys the dominant metaphor of its time: a vertical relationship between heaven and earth.

Since then, western theology has gradually shifted in describing the relative orientation of God and humanity. The Transcendentalists of the early 1800s began to use metaphors that described a more lateral relationship — such that humans would not need mediators (priests or sacraments) in order to be in direct touch with the sacred.¹

In the early 20th century, Jewish theologian Martin Buber drew the focus even closer. Buber described two ways of relating. One form is utilitarian: we engage with another being as a means to an end. Buber calls this an I-It relationship. And it's not awful to have a utilitarian relationship; it's not inherently disrespectful or manipulative.

¹ Transcendentalist Unitarians took it even further: that we didn't need the god-man Jesus as an intermediary either... and then eventually that we didn't even need a "God" to connect us with that which is of ultimate power and concern.

The Universalists, meanwhile, emphasized that God is too loving to condemn anyone to eternal torment. This helped to shift the imagery toward "God is Love," and is nearby, and intimately personal — rather than a distant and wrathful commander.

But there is another kind of relationship: the encounter in which we engage with one another as sacred beings, with deep recognition of one another's inherent dignity. He calls this the I-Thou relationship. *It is in these encounters that God — the eternal Thou — comes into existence.*

Then mid-20th century Unitarian theologian Henry Nelson Weiman offered a related concept: divinity expressed in the very stuff of the evolving universe. To Weiman, god is best understood as “creative interchange.” I can't go into all of the implications today of understanding the divine as “creative interchange.” You may want to dig in and ponder and wonder later today: what could it mean to experience god as creative interchange?

For right now tho I want to reflect instead on the risks of *losing* our sense of wonder, reducing our odds of epiphany, separating ourselves from the experience of creative interchange. This week I read a troubling article about the balance between consumption and creation. Specifically about media or digital consumption. It's called “Why excessive consumption limits your creativity.” Now of course there are a lot of troubling articles we might encounter these days. And I find myself at times excessively consuming them. But it's not just the consumption of *distressing* news that can shut down our resilience. Excessive consumption of information and stimulation *positive or negative* can limit our creativity ... or, as Weiman might put it: separate us from the divine.

Throughout my life I've been hearing about media reducing our attention span. I've been skeptical or at least imagined myself immune, but nowadays I know that I'm having direct experience of limited attention span. I might still argue that I have the *capacity* to concentrate for more than 10 seconds at a time... but the reality is that I often don't do it.

More recently *multitasking* has been seen as a culprit. Again I was skeptical at first, but this article put it in a way which, again, I'm beginning to become aware of within myself. The author writes about accumulating “residue” as we switch from one unrelated task to another, increasingly obscuring our focus.

What really struck me tho — and this is the last thing I'll say about the article — is the idea that excessive consumption causes “decision fatigue.” Every click, like, or comment involves a decision. Whether to read and/or respond and/or delete every email involves three decisions. And this on top of the hundreds of other decisions humans have always had to make to get through a day. A generation ago we speculated that grocery stores were overwhelming us with choices with 10 kinds of toothpaste and 30 kinds of cereal. But now those choices have grown exponentially. And I know that I am experiencing decision fatigue. Especially when I want to get the best deal. I can get stuck in a single transaction for weeks.

So upon reflection, it rings true: the more I take in, the less satisfying it is, and the less room I have for focus, attention, awe, and creative interchange.

I don't have any immediate remedies to suggest. I'm not going to go cold turkey on digital content. But the first step, to propel me from the place I've known toward the place I know not,

may be to re-read the meditation I shared earlier:

...keep an open eye
For the wonders that
Attend the path...

Press on beyond distractions,
beyond fatigue,
beyond what would tempt you
From the way

Reducing consumption is more likely to occur if we know what our priorities are and then allow ourselves to unsubscribe from distractions... when we allow ourselves to experience — in fallow times — not lack, but liberation.

SHARING OUR GIFTS

SENDING SONG

How can it be a wonderful world when all is not calm, all is not right? And heavenly peace seems a world away? In closing today let's sing to one another a proactive blessing. A prayer of gratitude for right now. For the wonders in a world of too much mess and suffering. For the wonders we might encounter with an open eye, beyond distraction and fatigue: *What a Wonderful World*, by Louis Armstrong

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

I spoke earlier about Jewish Theologian Martin Buber, who conceived of God emerging within our I-Thou encounters with another being. I'll share a quote from Buber as we extinguish the chalice: "The world is not comprehensible, but it is embraceable: through the embracing of one of its beings."

CIRCLE 'ROUND