Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan
Andrew Frantz, minister
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Awe and Wonder in Science and Religion

Good morning.

The saying, "take time to smell the roses," is a very familiar one. We could add, from the story we just heard by Kathleen McTigue, "take time to look at the stars." Take time to enjoy the music. Take time to appreciate your loved ones. Take time to look at the fall colors on the trees, to look at the beauty of ice and snow in the winter. Take time to wonder.

One of the hymns in our hymnal is a poem set to music, but I like it as a poem. The author is William Henry Davies.

> *What is this life if, full of care,*
> *We have no time to stand and stare.*
> *No time to stand beneath the boughs*
> *And stare as long as sheep or cows.*
> *No time to see, when woods we pass,*
> *Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.*
> *No time to see, in broad daylight,*
> *Streams full of stars, like skies at night.*
> ** * **
> *A poor life this if, full of care,*
> *We have no time to stand and stare.*[1]

William Henry Davies and Rev. Kathleen McTigue are both expressing it more eloquently than I can: slow down and take time to wonder.

I love Rev. Kathleen's story, "Bathing in Starlight," because it captures one of the quintessential things about being human and about wonder and awe. It is our gift as humans to be in wonder at the beauty and mystery of life. And it is our nature as humans that we often forget or lose touch with this gift. Like the mother in the story, we are busy rushing about with our so-called important lives and our so-called important to-do lists—until beauty and mystery grab us, like a sky full of stars that can't be ignored.

Another poet also talks about stars, and here I will quote a poem by Walt Whitman--but he is talking about being in a classroom or a lecture hall hearing someone talk about the stars. His poem is called "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer:"

> *When I heard the learn'd astronomer,*
> *When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,*
> *When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,*
> *When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture room,*
> *How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,*
> *Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,*
> *In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,*
> *Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.*[2]

Blessed be the words of Walt Whitman. Now, I love this poem…and I have to argue with this poem. Brother Walt, I hope you will forgive me. To me the poem sets up a familiar conflict: on one side is the scientist, who has to dissect everything, to analyze everything, and by doing that kills the joy and beauty and awe. From the perspective of the poem, walking outside to see the stars is the right and good way to appreciate the stars, and the scientist, the astronomer, is bad and wrong because he is trying to capture the stars in charts and figures.

This duality is familiar to me, and I think we see it all around us. The math major is a thinker; the English major is a feeler. The scientist takes the flower to the laboratory to put it under a microscope; the artist enjoys the flower. This duality is familiar, but I am saying today that it is a false duality. These two things which seem to be opposite—science and art or science and religion—are actually closer to being one and the same when it comes to awe and wonder.

To illustrate this, I'm going to quote Albert Einstein, the most well-known scientist of our age, and as you'll see, he talks here about wonder and awe and religion.

> *The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom the 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. The insight into the mystery of life, coupled though it be with fear, has also given rise to religion. To know what is impenetrable to us…, 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.*[3]

These are the words of Albert Einstein.

If you take on one hand science and reason; and on the other hand you have art and spirituality and religion—these things seem to be opposite, but both roads lead to the same place when it comes to awe and wonder.

As an example, consider a scientist studying black holes. I'm no scientist, so I don't know the latest about black holes, but I know that light can't escape from a black hole's gravity. I think there is some question as to whether time exists in a black hole. But when a scientist makes one discovery about a black hole, or about the big bang, or any other scientific question, the discovery always leads to more questions. We will never come to the end of our understanding about a black hole—or about the mystery of a flower, or the mystery of the human mind and emotions. Each discovery points the way to more unknowns. If we understand more about the big bang, then what about what happened before the big bang? Or what caused the big bang?

In this way, the deepest scientific questions become the deepest religious questions: what is life? what started everything? how are things connected and how are things separate?

Einstein's quote hinted at that: nature is awesome, vast, unknowable.

> *The insight into the mystery of life, coupled though it be with fear, has also given rise to religion.*

Here I think Einstein is saying that religion comes from contemplating the unknown—and from the fact that it is scary. And he continues:

> *To know what is impenetrable to us…, 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.*

We are religious, Einstein says, because our minds can glimpse the big mysteries of life, but can't grasp them fully.

This insight into the connection between science and religion is something I learned in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Another one of the gifts of UUism for me, since I became a UU 20 years ago, is Humanism. Humanism is often associated with atheism, and many humanists are atheists, but they are not one and the same thing. Humanists are scientists, however.

And in our religion, Unitarian Universalism, Humanism is explicitly one of the six sources of wisdom and inspiration that we claim. These six sources are listed in the front of our hymnals. Along with mysticism, and right after "Teachings of the Judeo Christia tradition" is "Teachings of humanism." And it reads,

> *Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.*[4]

This is one of the sources of our religion—science and reason! Take that, add mysticism, and you get Unitarian Universalism. The wisdom of Humanism is that you don't have to believe in god to have a sense of awe, nor to have a sense of right and wrong. Here's a quotation form the Humanist Manisfesto:

> *We aim for our fullest possible development and animate our lives with a deep sense of purpose, finding wonder and awe in the joys and beauties of human existence, its challenges and tragedies, and even in the inevitability and finality of death.*[5]

To come full circle in my remarks this morning, I want to return to Rev. Kathleen McTigue and repeat some of the words from the reading:

> *My awe at the immensity revealed in a clear night sky doesn't leave me feeling diminished or irrelevant. Instead it reminds me that if we can be present exactly in the moment we are living, we can step outside of time altogether. We live immersed in that eternity, after all—we just forget, until something like starlight wakes us up to it again.*[6]

My prayer is this: may we all be open to the wonder and awe that is before us when we experience life's beauty and mystery, and when contemplate and understand life's beauty and mystery. May we know that we have within us both the desire to understand, like a scientist, and the desire to enjoy, like the artist. May those parts of us be in harmony.

May it be so.

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[1] William Henry Davies. #94 in Singing the Living Tradition. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association. 1993.
[2] Walt Whitman. Teaching with Heart, Sam Intrator and Megan Scribner, eds. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014. p. 97.
[3] Albert Einstien, quoted in Goodreads website. Retrieved at https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/282814-the-most-beautiful-thing-we-can-experience-is-the-mysterious

[4] Singing the Living Tradition. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association. 1993.
[5] American Humanist Association: Humanist Manifesto III. Retrieved at https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto3/

[6] Kathleen McTigue, "Bathing in Starlight." Shine and Shadow: Meditations. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2011. p. 12.