

BUILDING A MYSTERY  
Sermon by Audette Fulbright  
Sunday, December 9, 2018  
All Souls Unitarian Church, NYC

Spending time on this sermon was one of those confluences of grace and opportunity that is the best part of ministry. Back in the 1970s, the author Richard Bach wrote, in his “Messiah’s Handbook,” “We teach best what we most need to learn.” Time and again, this small axiom proves itself. After a very long and somewhat hectic few weeks of moving and travel and work, the coming of Sunday morning absolutely required that I stop everything that had me running hither and yon, sit down with a cup of tea, a small collection of materials for inspiration, and meditate on mystery, on wonder and awe. This process, of rest, reflection, contemplation and writing, was the very act of building a mystery: the mystery of that alchemy which transforms these disparate pieces of music and prayer and sermon and reading into a time of worship and renewal.

Neuropsychologist Paul Pearsall defined awe as an “overwhelming and bewildering sense of connection with a startling universe that is usually far beyond the narrow band of our consciousness”.<sup>1</sup> No greater prophet than American astronaut Neil Armstrong said, “Mystery creates wonder, which is the basis of our desire to understand.”

But let’s back up a moment. Perhaps we can agree that mystery, awe, moments of transcendence or deep understanding - all these are, indeed, grace-filled and wondrous. But the notion of “building” a mystery...why would we want or need to do that?

The American physicist Alan Lightman believes that a sense of mystery is the essential ingredient in transformative work in both science and art. Indeed, he wrote a book of essays titled *A Sense of the Mysterious*. In his essay “Prisoner of the Wired World,” “[he] argues that our technological culture became the tool of a capitalistic society and makes us prisoners. He writes about the dangers of our becoming “hamsters on the wheel of capitalism, production, demand, consumption, and work.””<sup>2</sup>

Lightman isn’t alone in this concern. Jessa Crispin, in her In These Times article “It’s Getting Harder to Think,” talks about an ongoing argument she has with a good friend. He has stopped watching most news. She argues that he should be informed about the world around him. “Why?” he asks. “What would I be able to do about Syria, or failing schools in Chicago?” She says, “My friend was not ignoring the news so he could live a carefree life and enjoy a glass of scotch without having to be bummed out by the day’s atrocities. He was, he argued, ignoring it so he could work on his dark and funny novels. He needed a respite from the onslaught of news so he could access greater truth about how humans, by their nature, committed atrocities....The news was a symptom of the larger issues, and it distracted him from the source.”

We already know this, from our own lives and experience. Those of us who live in the wired world, where texts come in at any hour, and terrible Tweets can disrupt the entire news cycle for hours or days at a time, and the news cycle itself or simply the culture of immediacy distracts

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<sup>1</sup> “Cultivating Awe,” by Kara Xavia <https://www.good.net.nz/article/cultivating-awe>

<sup>2</sup> “Cultivating Awe: A Shared Sense of Wonder,” by Carolyn Cohen. MIT Technology Review, Sept. 2005. <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/404621/cultivating-awe-a-shared-sense-of-wonder/>

and absorbs time and attention. It shortens our attention span, clutters our mental landscape, and keeps us busy 24/7 while at the same time reducing our productivity and in too many cases, our capacity. “Berardi, an Italian Marxist philosopher who has been documenting the dehumanizing shift to postindustrial capitalism for decades, writes, “We no longer know what is relevant and what is irrelevant in our surrounding environment, this is what we call ‘chaos’: the inability to attribute meaning to the flow, the breakdown of our framework of relevance.””<sup>3</sup>

What to do, then? This is the world we live in. There are accommodations we must make for work or to connect with children, friends, others. We may want to have some awareness of what is happening in the world, or our country, or community. “Switching off” is too simplistic a prescription. It’s like Nancy Reagan’s “Just Say No to Drugs” campaign: it’s never quite that easy.

Consider, then, the holiday season. Across generations and cultures, when the days shorten and turn dark and cold, humans seek a source of heat and light. Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa, Las Posadas, Diwali, Yule...all celebrations in which we kindle a flame to light the way. And we tell stories that build a mystery -- the oil that burned for far longer than it should have; a star that shone in the East; the light shines out for one who has attained enlightenment.

Sacred or secular, holidays are holy days in which we are invited to step out of the ordinary round of our days, and to seek the company of family or friends. There are familiar songs calling out for us to sing them. It is a time when many of us cook foods that were passed down to us from beloveds who fed us in days gone by. It is a time to pause and simply pay attention to what is happening right here, right now.

We can enter the season frantically; we can spend our time focused on material concerns and meeting other peoples’ expectations or unreasonable ones we set for ourselves. We can, of course, spend the holidays distracted and overextended. Or - we can accept their invitation to pause, set aside our daily worries, and offer the world and those we love our whole attention. We can breathe deeply, create or enjoy beauty, invoke wonder, build on the mystery of love.

One of my very favorite movies is the film *Mindwalk*, a film written by Bernt Capra and based on a book by his brother Fritjof Capra, author of *The Tao of Physics*. The film follows a long afternoon and the conversations when an American politician, his disaffected poet friend, and a physicist meet on the isle of Mont St. Michel. There they argue the nature of reality, each from their own perspective. But the moment that resonates like a crystal bell for me, again and again, is when Sonia, the physicist, explains to the men that she has come to Mont St. Michel to “think one thought all the way to its end.”

This is the mystery of our age: how can we separate the signal from the noise? How can we determine what we shall devote the entire portion of our hearts, minds, and hands to? What is the good and the true? If we are busy and careless and distracted, how can we think one thought all the way to its end, and then orient our lives around it?

You have already committed to a practice, which is some small part of that process. You are here, at church. Setting aside an hour each week, to see familiar faces, sit in contemplation of music, prayer, word...this is time apart; it is a way of declaring what is important to you. You have made the choice to set aside time in your work to practice your faith. This is a powerful act in a world that wants your every moment.

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<sup>3</sup> “It’s Getting Harder to Think,” by Jessa Crispin, pps. 37-39, *In These Times*, December 2018.

In the *Dhammapada*, the Buddha says, “Our life is shaped by our mind; we become what we think. Suffering follows an evil thought as the wheels of a cart follow the oxen that draw it. Our life is shaped by our mind; we become what we think. Joy follow a pure thought like a shadow that never leaves.”

How can we become aware of our thoughts, and choose what we become? We need quiet, space and time for thinking one thought all the way through to its end...or to practice not-thinking, allowing the mind to quiet and to simply be.

The prophet Mohammed said, “From morning until night and from night until morning keep your heart free from malice towards anyone.” How can we achieve this, if we are not persistent in creating space in our lives each day for spiritual growth?

In Judaism, one of the most important practices is keeping the Sabbath. Setting aside a day for prayer, family, and religious reflection is an essential part of a faithful Jew’s week. Engaged faithfully, this is the fruit of some of the wisest religious minds in history, those who understand that clear prescription can be an incredibly effective way give people the space in their lives, as well as permission and encouragement to spend time in contemplation of their values, and their relationship with God and the world.

Some of you may be aware that over the past two weeks, our family has made a rather laborious move from the West side over here to the Upper East Side. Before our move, however, we were blessed to sublet a lovely apartment where our next door neighbor was Don Shriver, the former President of Union Seminary, and his wife Peggy, who is a scholar and poet of some renown. They are gracious and friendly neighbors, and Don gave me a book of Peggy’s poetry. Her work is powerful, often sharp, frequently funny. On the subject of the holidays, she wrote “Cornucopia and Christ”:

The span between Thanksgiving  
And the birth of Christ  
Is measured out in shopping days,  
Rounded at each end by turkey feasts.  
More pertinent than candles,  
Televised balloon parades of bloated fantasies,  
Symbolize the Advent of the holidays,  
Thanksgiving cornucopias  
And Santa’s bulging bag seeming  
Less the magnanimity of God  
Than human generosity.

Yet, for the faithful,  
Gratitude and joy connect these holidays,  
As thankfulness for harvest past  
Begins the exultation  
For the greatest gift of all.  
Creation and creator dance  
In field and orchard,  
Marketplace and farm,  
A prelude to the manger mystery  
Of God-with-us.

Any of you who have ever written a poem understand it as that practice which requires time, attention, care and yes, a little inspiration. It must be nurtured; it cannot be rushed. Its art is mystery; it often inspires awe. These are the true grace notes of our lives - these moments that come, unbidden, and touch us deeply. Jiddu Krishnamurti is believed to have said, "Enlightenment comes as an accident, but some activities make us accident-prone!"

Consider approaching the holidays, or daily life, as an exercise in being counter-cultural. Let go of one stream of distraction each day; make time for one more walk, or deep conversation, or poem, or time of silent reflection. Set aside thoughts of perfection; embrace what brings you joy. Explore the contours of your own mind - discover something new about yourself, and in what you deeply believe. Set an alarm for the top of each hour, and let it call you to into full awareness of the moment. Give thanks for all you have received.

We are people who long for wholeness, who are traveling in some form or fashion, a path we hope will help us experience the fullness of the great mystery of life. I wish for you the power of intention and the will to make it so.

*Amen, ashe, blessed be.*