



STARR KING
UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH



Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website

Awe, Wonder, and Appreciation of the Numinous

Hayward, CA, Wednesday Evening Group, Kathryn LaMar, 02 August 2017

CHALICE LIGHTING:

(1 min)

Religion is among the most beautiful and most natural of all things--that religion which 'sees God in clouds and hears Him in the wind,' which endows every object of sense with a living soul, which finds in the system of nature whatever is holy, mysterious and venerable, and inspires the bosom with sentiments of awe and veneration.

William Godwin

OPENING WORDS:

(2 min)

Suppose you were told there was a tiger in the next room: you would know that you were in danger and would probably feel fear. But if you were told "There is a ghost in the next room," and believed it, you would feel, indeed, what is often called fear, but of a different kind. It would not be based on the knowledge of danger, for no one is primarily afraid of what a ghost may do to him, but of the mere fact that it is a ghost. It is "uncanny" rather than dangerous, and the special kind of fear it excites may be called Dread. With the Uncanny one has reached the fringes of the Numinous. Now suppose that you were told simply "There is a mighty spirit in the room," and believed it. Your feelings would then be even less like the mere fear of danger: but the disturbance would be profound. You would feel wonder and a certain shrinking—a sense of inadequacy to cope with such a visitant and of prostration before it—an emotion which might be expressed in Shakespeare's words "Under it my genius is rebuked." This feeling may be described as awe, and the object which excites it as the *Numinous*. C. S. LEWIS

CHECK-IN:

(32 min)

Please let us know how you are in this moment. Perhaps you can share something you put aside in order to be fully present here, or, if you are comfortable, share a significant joy or sorrow, ending, or new beginning in your life recently.

DISCUSSION / FEEDBACK:

(5 min)

INTRODUCTION TO AWE, WONDER, AND APPRECIATION OF THE NUMINOUS

(5 min)

In his influential 1917 book *Das Heilige*, which appeared in English as *The Idea of the Holy* in 1923, Rudolf Otto wrote that while the concept of "the holy" is often used to convey moral perfection . . . it contains another distinct element, beyond the ethical sphere, for which he uses

the term numinous.

He explains the numinous as a "non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling whose primary and immediate object is outside the self". This mental state "presents itself as *ganz Andere*, wholly other, a condition absolutely *sui generis* [like no other] and incomparable whereby the human being finds himself utterly abashed."

Otto argues that because the numinous is irreducible and *sui generis* it cannot be defined in terms of other concepts or experiences, and that the reader must therefore be "guided and led on by consideration and discussion of the matter through the ways of his own mind, until he reach the point at which 'the numinous' in him perforce begins to stir."

The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its "profane," non-religious mood of everyday experience . . .

It has its crude, barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of—whom or what? In the presence of that which is a Mystery inexpressible and above all creatures.

READINGS:

(10 min)

Mystery creates wonder and wonder is the basis of man's desire to understand *Neil Armstrong*

Scientific views end in awe and mystery, lost at the edge in uncertainty, but they appear to be so deep and so impressive that the theory that it is all arranged as a stage for God to watch man's struggle for good and evil seems inadequate. *Richard P. Feynman*

Divinity is an emotion of being lifted out of yourself and being part of something much bigger than yourself that makes you go, 'Oh my God.' And that sense of awe? It's the second rule of science. *Howard Bloom*

If you think of feelings you have when you are awed by something--for example, knowing that elements in your body trace to exploded stars--I call that a spiritual reaction, speaking of awe and majesty, where words fail you. *Neil deGrasse Tyson*

A Hubble Space Telescope photograph of the universe evokes far more awe for creation than light streaming through a stained glass window in a cathedral. *Michael Shermer*

I'm in awe of the universe, but I don't necessarily believe there's an intelligence or agent behind it. I do have a passion for the visual in religious rituals, though, even though they may be completely empty and bereft of substance. The incense is powerful and provocative, whether Buddhist or Catholic. *David Bowie*

In short, chronological connectivity puts us in touch with the holy. It is at once humbling and exhilarating. I say this as someone who has never followed any formal religious practice. Connection with the past and the future is a pathway that charms us in the direction of sanity and grace. *James Howard Kunstler*

If every moment is sacred, and if you are amazed and in awe most of the time when you find yourself breathing and not crazy, then you are in a state of constant thankfulness, worship and humility. *Bernice Johnson Reagon*

I believe very deeply in the human spirit, and I have a sense of awe about it. I look around and ask, 'What makes the difference? What is it?' I've known people the world has thrown everything at--to discourage them, to kill them, to break their spirit. And yet something about them retains a dignity. They face life and they don't ask quarters. *Horton Foote*

I loved 'Fantasia' as a kid because it filled me with wonder, enchantment and awe. It was my first real introduction into classical music. It was totally inspiring to me. *Nicolas Cage*

For me, the reason why people go to a mountaintop or go to the edge of the ocean is to look at something larger than themselves. That feeling of awe, of going to a cathedral, it's all about feeling lost in something bigger than oneself. To me, that's the definition of spectacle. *Diane Paulus*

Darkness might seem to obscure what's happening, but I find it's always pretty revelatory: it brings out the awe in us, the fear in us, the excitement of exploring the hidden or unknown. It seems to conceal, but it really shines a light on what we want, what we need, and what we'll do to get it. Especially when we think no one can see us. *Kathe Koja*

It is as though nature is a wonderful symphony that science sits in awe of. It looks closely at each player, how the tubas are tuned and how the strings are strung. Creationism lets out a loud 'shush' at such excitement. Just enjoy the show and stop asking questions. *Kyle Hill*

Every natural object is a conductor of divinity and only by coming into contact with them. . . may we be filled with the Holy Ghost. *John Muir*

Cats are the runes of beauty, invincibility, wonder, pride, freedom, coldness, self-sufficiency, and dainty individuality--the qualities of sensitive, enlightened, mentally developed, pagan, cynical, poetic, philosophic, dispassionate, reserved, independent, Nietzschean, unbroken, civilised, master-class men. *H. P. Lovecraft*

Wonder knows that while you cannot look at the light, you cannot look at anything else without it. It is not exhausted by childhood, but finds its key there. It is a journey like a walk through the woods over the usual obstacles and around the common distractions while the voice of direction leads, saying, 'This is the way, walk ye in it.' *Ravi Zacharias*

To be more childlike, you don't have to give up being an adult. The fully integrated person is capable of being both an adult and a child simultaneously. Recapture the childlike feelings of wide-eyed excitement, spontaneous appreciation, cutting loose, and being full of awe and wonder at this magnificent universe. *Wayne Dyer*

Wonder is that possession of the mind that enchants the emotions while never surrendering reason. It is a grasp on reality that does not need constant high points in order to be maintained, nor is it made vulnerable by the low points of life's struggle. *Ravi Zacharias*

Wonder blasts the soul--that is, the spiritual--and the skeleton, the body--the material. Wonder interprets life through the eyes of eternity while enjoying the moment, but never lets the moment's revision exhaust the eternal. *Ravi Zacharias*

BREAK (10 min)

SHARING ON TOPIC: Awe, Wonder, and Appreciation of the Numinous (32 min)

Please share whatever you would like the group to know about how you make room in your life for awe, wonder, and appreciation of mystery and the numinous.

QUESTIONS/SUGGESTIONS FOR SHARING

1. Did any of the short readings above especially appeal to you, or give you a new insight into your own feelings of awe and wonder?
2. What is numinous to you? How are these objects or circumstances related in your mind (if they are)?
3. Do you actively seek or avoid things that inspire awe and wonder in you? How so, and why?
4. Describe one or more times in your life when you were overwhelmed by a feeling of awe or wonder. How did you react—both immediately and after a period of time? What changes did it bring to your life?
5. Does your personal spiritual practice incorporate the numinous? How and why?

DISCUSSION / FEEDBACK ON TOPIC (3 min)

CHOOSING TOPICS FOR FUTURE DISCUSSIONS (5 min)

SESSION FEEDBACK (2 min)

How did things go for you tonight?

CLOSING SONG: (3 min)

Wonders Still the World Shall Witness (Jacob von Trapp) No. 139 in Gray Hymnal

Wonders still the world shall witness never known in days of old,
Never dreamed by ancient sages, howsoever free and bold.
Sons and daughters shall inherit wondrous arts to us unknown,
When the dawn of peace its splendor over all the world has thrown.

They shall rule with winged freedom worlds of health and human good,
Worlds of commerce, worlds of science, all made one and understood.
They shall know a world transfigured, which our eyes but dimly see;
They shall make its towns and woodlands beautiful from sea to sea.

For a spirit then shall move them we but vaguely apprehend
Aims magnificent and holy, making joy and labor friend.
Then shall bloom in song and fragrance harmony of thought and deed,
Fruits of peace and love and justice where today we plant the seed.

CLOSING WORDS (1 min)

God does not die on the day when we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason.

Dag Hammarskjöld

EXTINGUISH THE CHALICE OR CANDLE / SOUND A CHIME