

Cultivating a Sense of Wonder[©]

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Let's try something different. I invite you to fold your hands in your lap as if you were a kid and somebody told you to pay attention. Now bring your attention to your hands and notice how you folded them. Is the right thumb folded over the left or vice versa? Now unfold your hands. Refold your hands in the opposite, non-normal or non-habitual way. If your right thumb was over your left place your left over your right. Now let's take a few moments and go back and forth between the habitual way and the non-habitual way. Ask yourself which way feels most awkward. Which way feels more secure? Which way feels the most alive?

Okay, we can let go of our hands for a few minutes. Hopefully they won't go anywhere. The first time I was asked to fold my hands in my lap. I didn't even notice my hands. I just did it without a thought, without even feeling my hands. But when I had to do the opposite of what I normally do, it got a little sloppy. It was awkward. But I noticed that in the awkwardness, and the struggle, I was more aware, more alive. This exercise reminds me that we may need to allow ourselves to feel a bit awkward, in order to feel more alive. We may need to embrace uncertainty so that wonder can grow in us.

Wonder is how we open up our ribbons of thought. If our brains and our thoughts always go the same way, along the same lines and patterns and trains of thought, then wonder can lift our minds out of the mud of rational resignation and open them into the wild relational cartwheels of insight and possibility. Wonder is the place where prejudices and preconceived notions fall away and our capacity to notice life increases, our capacity to engage with life and be affected and sometimes disheveled by life increases. We knew this as kids: We all did. But a lot of stuff has gotten in the way our engaging the world in non-habitual ways, and in the ways of wonder.

A while back, I preached on the *Tao of Willie Nelson* and was surprised at how much wisdom I found in studying his life and ways of being. One of the things Willie believes in is that we need to recapture the essence of who we were when we were children: an essence that is compromised by rationality and the every day demands of life.

A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is a misfortune that for most of us, this clear eyed vision is doomed and even lost before we reach adulthood. If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the imaginations of young children, I might ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unailing antidote against boredom, and disenchantments of later years, all the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, and alienate us from the sources of our strength. If we are immune to the wonder embedded in every aspect of the world and our lives we become bored. We are separated from the spark of creativity

and possibility that permeate the universe. We are somnambulantly satisfied with a myriad of artificial stuff: fake stuff, fake emotions, fake friends. It is easy to see when we peel back the layers of artifice why these things don't satisfy or fulfill us and we see why going through the motions with no sense of wonder and mystery is so deadening.

Cultivating a sense of wonder (or what I call being hospitable to the wonder drug) leads us away from numbness and the same old - same old ... and into living a more abundant and rewarding life. If a child is to keep alive his or her inborn sense of wonder without any such gift from the fairies, he or she needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, even grow it; rediscovering with him or her the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in.

We need to keep our sense of wonder alive for ourselves and also for all the children in our lives. I love all of my brothers-in-law and I love having so many, now that I am legally married, and yet, one of my brothers'-in-law used to make me so sad when our kids were younger. Kids are naturally filled with wonder and they ask "why?" all the time. Yet, every time his kids asked him stuff he would answer in a gravely, monotone voice. His answer would consist of an overly detailed scientific explanation about things like clouds and puddles, space travel and the moon. I felt frustrated with him and sad for his kids. I felt sad for the many ways adults seem, without even trying too hard, to squash the sense of wonder that kids have about our world.

I perhaps erred on the other side when I answered questions. I remember one time Maren, Jude and I were walking down the street at night and although it was a clear night, a cloud was passing over an almost full moon. And a four-year-old Jude said, "Look, the moon is taking a shower." Well, I thought it was the cutest thing and was delighted that he felt such a personal and magical connection to the moon. I had no desire to discuss the rational impossibility of the moon taking a shower.

Another time I had just bought Jude some bumblebee rain boots. We took him to Rattlesnake Lake near our Seattle home which for some reason, or no reason, held an air of mystery for me. It had just rained, was overcast and was about to rain again. It had been, of course, raining for days. There were literally hundreds of puddles. We spent almost an hour making our way from puddle to puddle and stepping ... sometimes even stomping our way through each and every puddle and had so much fun. What a way to celebrate new bumblebee boots and the rain! Wonder is a key ingredient in living a life of appreciation and celebration even during what I call the shipwreck times.

What do I mean about the shipwreck times? Those are the times when our lives either look like broke down fences or battered old boats damaged by howling wind, tumultuous waves, rock and reef, perhaps even crashed and grounded. I am talking about dark, lonely, painful, times. One of my colleagues told me an interesting ship wreck story. Her grandpa, the patriarch of the family had a powerful picture of a ship wreck that hung in his bedroom. As he lost his mobility he spent more and more time in his room and the picture seemed ... to hear other members of the family talk about it ... almost overbearing or overwhelming. They were shocked when she asked for the

painting and hung it in her office. Why would anybody want that doom and gloom picture on the wall? At first it reminded her of him. But then as she began to spend some time everyday looking at it, the dark overall impression of the scene shifted and a rather amazing array of subtle but bright colors emerged. As she learned how to look, the painting became suffused with light.

Taking time to look at things and wonder about them, seeing everyday things and people and situations with new eyes, inviting and embracing a sense of wonder in our lives as if we were young children is useful as adults. It opens up habits of habituation that if unchecked lead to premature closings of possibilities and new life. Even in the dark times, ... even in the shipwreck times.

In the book, *The Sense of Wonder*, Rachel Carson laments about our neglecting nature and its power as a conduit to wonder. She remembered walking outside on a summer night in southern Maine and noticing the stars:

...If this were a sight that could be seen only once in a century the little headland would be overflowing with spectators. But it can be seen on many scores of nights in any year, and so the lights burned in the cottages and the inhabitants probably gave not a thought to the beauty overhead; and because they could see it almost any night, ... perhaps they will never see it.

How often is this true of us and how we engage the world. Because we think we can see something almost any night or any day, we, in fact, end up never seeing it.

It's not that the value of the stars had dimmed or that their supply had in any way diminished. It was that certainty had triumphed over scarcity. What had dried up and disappeared from the mind's riverbed was the flow of attention. Because with certainty can come the complacency of pseudo-certainty or false certainty. Knowing from repeated experience that we can count on the stars to be there and that their continuing presence is not an immediate threat, we begin to think we can say with the same level of confidence that we know what they are. Attention is withdrawn and moves in a different course. Some people know a great deal about the stars others next to nothing. There is always more to find out. But habituation - not noticing something that seems unchanging and harmless - covers both knowledge and ignorance with the same coating of indifference: oh yes, the stars. ... something we have a word for.

Indifference, though tempting as a way to smooth our fragmented souls with numbness, does not in any way contribute to our freedom. But wonder is; and offers release. We can not have a sense of wonder if we are closed. So when we find something to wonder about we are free, even if it is free in a small way.

Wonder frees us: It opens us. Wonder is an inoculation against certainty. It is tempting to crave certainty but all too often certainty is a door closing on possibility, not a door opening, not new life and new possibilities new light and new love breaking forth.

What a great message for us here at UUCOD! Looking back at the big storms that this congregation has faced with the death of Rev Suzanne, the untimely departure of the interim minister, and the resignation of the music director and key board members, the congregation came close to being shipwrecked. Truly the sky was dark and the waves were huge and unruly. People were anxious. Why would anybody want to go through this and why would someone want a picture of a shipwreck on their wall? First, it speaks of a lived truth. If we lived fully engaged lives and even if we don't ... there is no escaping the shipwreck times. Yet, if we look with new eyes, eyes that are well proportioned ... balanced and yet open to newness, we will see like the women who took the shipwreck painting (But then as she began to spend some time everyday looking at it, the dark overall impression of the scene shifted and a rather amazing array of subtle but bright colors emerged. As she learned how to look, the painting became suffused with light.)

It is timely for this congregation as well because we are entering into another time of uncertainty as your valiant search committee comes together to find your next minister. As this process unfolds and the new minister is chosen, maintaining a sense of wonder will be crucial. Yes, things will change and there will be a time of disruption. And it can be a disruption like how you paid attention to how you folded your hands yet it has all the potential to be a creative disruption. I invite and encourage you to bring your child eyes to this next transition.

And speaking of child eyes, I am reminded of two more stories. The first is the one about the emperor's new clothes. You know the one... The emperor had the biggest hands, and the most orange hair ever, and was so popular and had the biggest coronation I mean inauguration attendance ever. Anyway, one day as the emperor was walking down the street in a military parade after having had his entire cabinet tell him how great his outfit was heard the words coming from a child ... perhaps a Floridian child who said, "The emperor has no clothes".

Or think of Jesus the teacher who said that we must be like children to enter heaven. We must be open and free to be in the living heaven which is what living a life of love wonder and connection is.

Yes the children will lead us and we are seeing that as a reality now, not just as a metaphor.

We are ... all of us... creatures of the earth and sky, sun and moon, ocean and river. Let us lift our voices high, in celebration of all we have been given ... even in ... especially in our dishevelment. When things are good for us and when we find ourselves shipwrecked and broken. No matter how hard we desire them, there are few certainties in life ... and yet there are numerous opportunities to engage our surroundings with wonder.

May our sense of wonder and our capacity for wonder grow and bless our world. Blessed Be. Amen.

Reference

Carson, R. (1998). *A sense of wonder: a celebration of nature for parents and children*. New York: NY. Harper.