

GREAT MYSTERY

A sermon given for the ‘Touchstone of Mystery’ Service

by the Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason

at UU Wellesley Hills on

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In my mind, every single one of my sermons starts with the working title, “The Great Mystery.” It’s been a shorthand of mine since seminary. One of my mentors there had told me an old joke about the minister who drove the church staff to distraction by his routine neglect of deadlines, so when he failed to meet them, other people had to get creative on his behalf. If the weekly newsletter went out before he had settled on his sermon topic, the staff simply listed “The Great Mystery” as the title. “We have no idea what subject the minister is preaching on this week,” the staff quipped. “It’s a complete mystery. But we are certain it will be great!”

So it’s bit of comic relief to have a Sunday where the placeholder actually points to something timely, or rather, timeless. Our Unitarian Universalist tradition draws from several different sources of faith, but the one we first pay tribute to is that “direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit,” as our congregational covenant declares. Our shared religious experience begins with a profound sense of the mystery of all existence, the marvel of there being something — anything, everything — instead of nothing.

“This universe is shot through with mystery. The very fact of its being, and of our own,” neuroscientist and philosopher Sam Harris writes, “is a mystery absolute...” As people of faith, we are asked to inhabit is a space of not knowing in a spacious, wondrous way. That feels like a countercultural stance in our information age, when smartphones and laptops put search engines and the whole World Wide Web at our fingertips. Questions that we pose can be answered almost immediately, provided they are questions of a certain kind.

Our how questions are generally easier to address than our why questions, and questions posed about the past seem more straightforward than those about the future, presuming that they do not reach back to prehistory and beyond, to the origins of time itself. As astrophysicists uncover more about the workings of our cosmos, we contemplate a scope and scale to the universe that is utterly astounding. We struggle to comprehend its complexity, even as we acknowledge that ourselves as contributors to that.

We humans are such curious creatures. There is, as the late UU minister the Rev. Jacob Trapp noted, “a mystery within us reaching out to the mystery beyond”, no matter how far beyond our grasp that mystery lies. Living in this information age means that our knowledge is gaining exponentially and also accelerating; at this point in history, we are all struggling to keep pace with shifting consciousness.

At a recent panel discussion at Harvard Divinity School on how our lived experience of religion is rapidly changing, I was introduced to the concept of VUCA. That is an acronym which stands for volatility,

uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, and it is becoming more common in academic literature, as increasingly, we all face conditions in our world that involve these four factors. In the presence of VUCA, it does not seem that we are contemplating the mysterious; instead, it seems we are confronting a crisis — both in terms of what we can readily anticipate and what we can reliably predict. Is there any known cure for future shock?

The earliest cosmological myths were an attempt we humans made to tame an unruly reality by domesticating the unknown and making the unfamiliar familiar. Several different cultures had a mythical World-Bearing Turtle like that one we encountered in our Story for All Ages, a massive turtle standing on one turtle standing on another turtle, with turtles all the way down. Perhaps what we modern types find funniest about this now is the notion that anything would be endlessly replicated, never morphing, never evolving.

“Most people would find the picture of our universe as an infinite tower of tortoises rather ridiculous, but why do we think we know better? ...Where did the universe come from, and where is it going?” the late cosmologist Stephen Hawking asks in his work A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes. “Recent breakthroughs in physics, made possible in part by fantastic new technologies, suggest answers to some of these longstanding questions,” he observes. “Someday these answers may seem as... ridiculous as a tower of tortoises. Only time (whatever that may be) will tell.” Whatever else it may be, time is decidedly not stopping, nor is it slowing.

Because time is neither slowing nor stopping, we need to do these things ourselves. Our minds inevitably scan for points of stillness. For ages, people found them looking skyward and contemplating the stars up in the heavens. But we have other options here on earth. Spiritual writers Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat suggest that we all adopt the practice of embracing mystery. “The wisdom traditions challenge us to live within a cloud of unknowing,” they state. The Brussats entourage us to “to cherish the baffling, curious, hidden, and inscrutable dimensions” of our existence and to learn to live with its countless paradoxes.

The couple recommends that we take cues from the interruptions of daily life and pause for contemplation as they present themselves in random occurrences: whenever we notice that a sock or glove has gone missing, for instance; whenever we unexpectedly pass by a funeral home or graveyard; whenever someone offers us a neat explanation for unlikely good fortune. “To be spiritual is to have an abiding respect for the great mysteries of life — the profound distinctiveness of other souls, the strange beauty of nature and the animal world, the ineffable complexity of our inner selves, the unfathomable depths of the Inexplicable...” the Brussats write. “Blessed is the Creator of the Universe who lurks in mystery.”

Some of us are more inclined to bless the mystery than others. The mystics among us have a natural tendency to do this. They recognize that — as spiritual teacher and clinical psychologist Ram Dass notes — “Every religion is the product of the conceptual mind attempting to describe the mystery.” Mystics are less concerned with describing the mystery than merging with it. The renewal of their spirits depends

upon their “direct experience of that transcending mystery” and they will not keep a critical distance from it; however paradoxically, they yearn to know what the unknowable in a profound and intimate way. Perhaps you do, too; perhaps you are one of the mystics in our midst.

In the pop anthem, “Mysterious Ways”, the lead singer in the rock band U2 sings, “If you want to kiss the sky, [you] better learn how to kneel... We move through miracle days; Spirit moves in mysterious ways.” Whether to bow or bend to the mystery is our ultimately choice, but we never, ever exist outside it. It’s sometimes hard to surrender our suspicion about whatever seems mysterious. Can we be blamed for wanting an account of what that first turtle is standing on, for instance, and that second one, too, and the third, and so on?

Yet we must also recognize that there is something in the human gaze that is always trained on the vanishing point and beckons us to peer beyond the limits of our vision. We cannot curb our innate curiosity about what is all the way down in the depths of things, or what resides in their vaunted heights. We want to shine the sort of light that will show us what kind of company we keep in this cosmos riddled with VUCA, with such tremendous volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. We want to discover its secrets for reasons we do not even entirely understand, maybe because we believe that it somehow yearns to be understood, that we are needed for and called to that task.

Whenever we gather together for worship, we declare our own faith in “The Great Mystery” that we participate in by virtue of simply being alive here and now. We cannot deny this inkling that we have there is

a majesty inherent in all creation and that we at least owe it our attention, if not our complete comprehension. Where once there were not people and places, now there are, seemingly ex nihilo, out of the void. Where once there were no songs or sermons or prayers or psalms, no singers or speakers or sanctuaries, now there are. What else is there to say on that score? Well — we shall see. We shall see...

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