

June Theme

Mystery: The Practice of Expectation

“In our lives, we encounter far more mystery than we experience.”

~ Rachel Naomi Remen

Introduction

The role of *Expectation* and the experience of *Mystery* have a curious relationship with each other. Our individual survival depends on learning that underlies expectation; learning about the most basic skills, like crawling and walking, and more nuanced activities, like speaking and listening, plus the challenging intricacies of social dynamics. Without expectations – those models of the universe that allow us to anticipate and to plan – we would have to spend much more time figuring out what is happening at any moment, where we are, what is safe and what is dangerous. In a fundamental and all-inclusive way, we *are* the sum of our past experiences and the world we apprehend is framed by our expectations built on those experiences.

Then, what of the unexpected (and previously un-experienced) events that inevitably occur? Are we limited to interpret them only in terms of our expectations, or do we have the freedom to allow them to exist in a dimension of wonder, without trying to make meaning of them? Is it possible for us to put expectation aside, even for a little while, and return to that state of naiveté, that infant mind, when every experience was new and the unfolding world was a constant source of wonder, of mystery?

The meaning of the word expectation is ‘a strong belief that something will happen or be the case in the future’ and the etymology is ‘to look forward to beyond what is presently visible’ or ‘seeing into the future’. Mystery means ‘what is obscure or unknown’ and synonyms are mystique, mystic, mist, secret rites. Mystery has different values in different cultures and different contexts. In literature and movies, mysteries are problems that don’t have obvious solutions but need to be solved (“Nancy Drew and the Mystery of Lilac Inn”). Our human minds delight in solving these puzzles, or in having them solved for us.

Religious mystery is often set as some event or essence that defies solution, sometimes appearing in the form of miracles. Defying any rational explanation, (i.e., contradicting our usual experience and thus our expectations), religious mysteries may be cited as evidence for the existence of God, whose supernatural powers achieve unnatural things that we can neither comprehend nor accomplish on our own.

Questions for discussion and discernment on your own, or with each other:

1. How do expectations influence your ability to perceive, and to accept, things that are mysterious?
2. Do you have a positive or a negative association with things that are mysterious? Why?
3. How are your expectations about what you think you should achieve, possess or accomplish shaped by your past experiences?
4. When have you tempered your expectations? How do you keep your expectations "in check"?
5. Do you hold the same expectations for yourself as you do for others? Why or why not?
6. What do you see as the difference between a “mystery” and a “miracle”?

This month’s theme was composed by Gary Strichartz, Jen Ollington and the Worship Associates.

7. Does the experience of mystery exist in a different mental dimension than other experiences? Is it an emotional rather than a cognitive experience?
8. How do you react when faced with a mystery?
9. What mysteries in your life or in the larger world would you like to solve? To resolve?
10. What are the unexpected things that happen when you're in church?
11. Are you comfortable with the expectations you have, or would you like to change them?
12. How do your expectations facilitate, or prevent, solving a mystery?

Quotes and Short Readings

A mystic is no more than a realist who is paying attention.

~*Anonymous*

A sense of Mystery can take us beyond disappointment and judgment to a place of expectancy. It opens in us an attitude of listening and respect. If everyone has in them the dimension of the unknown, possibility is present at all times. Wisdom is possible at all times. The Mystery in anyone may speak to them and heal them in the grocery store. It may speak to us and heal us too. Knowing this enables us to listen to life from the place in us that is Mystery also.

~*Rachel Naomi Remen, from "My Grandfather's Blessings"*

Thou art greatly wise, my friend, and ever respected by me, yet I find not in your theory or your scope, room enough for the lyric inspirations, or the mysterious whispers of life. To me it seems that it is madder never to abandon oneself, than often to be infatuated; better to be wounded, a captive, and a slave, than always to walk in armor.

~*Source: Free Hope, p. 131., Margaret Fuller*

If your heart is a volcano, how shall you expect flowers to bloom?

~*Kahlil Gibran*

God give us rain when we expect sun.
 Give us music when we expect trouble.
 Give us tears when we expect breakfast.
 Give us dreams when we expect a storm.
 Give us a stray dog when we expect congratulations.
 God play with us, turn us sideways and around.

~*Michael Leunig*

I remember being three, standing at eye level with the drawer in my mother's night table, the white porcelain knob pierced by a tarnished screw, saying When am I ever going to be four?

When I was four I went with a group of children into a nature preserve, where someone pointed out items of interest.

With great excitement, he reported the discovery of a lady's slipper, a highly-endangered thing.

Each child was led to an opening in the bramble. High branches shaded us.

I was led to the opening. A hand must have pointed to a bloom, but I didn't know to look for a flower. I stood, solemn, seeing nothing, brooding on the phrase "lady's slipper", wondering what it was. I never saw it. The mystery was enough. It was better. Then I moved aside for the next child.

~*Sarah Manguso, from her book "Ongoingness"*

How Does One Address a Mystery?

Cautiously—let us go cautiously, then, to the end of our certainty, to the boundary of all we know, to the rim of uncertainty, to the perimeter of the unknown which surrounds us.

Reverently—let us go with a sense of awe, a feeling of approaching the powerful holy whose lightning slashes the sky, whose persistence splits concrete with green sprouts, whose miracles are present in every place and moment.

Hopefully—out of our need for wholeness in our own lives, the reconciliation of mind and heart, the conjunction of reason and passion, the intersection of the timeless with time.

Quietly—for no words will explain the inarticulate or summon the presence that is always present even in our absence.

But what shall I say?

Anything—any anger, any hope, any fear, any joy, any request, any word that comes from the depth of being addressed to Being itself—or, perhaps, nothing, no complaint, no request, no entreaty, no thanksgiving, no praise, no blame, no pretense of knowing or of not knowing.

Simply be in the intimate presence of mystery, unashamed—unadorned—unafraid.

And at the end say—Amen.

~ A Meditation by Gordon B McKeeman

May we be reminded here of our highest aspirations,
and inspired to bring our gifts of love and service
to the altar of humanity.

May we know once again that we are not isolated beings
but connected, in mystery and miracle, to the universe,
to this community and to each other.

~ Chalice Lighting #434 in *Singing the Living Tradition*

Song lyrics

Everybody's wonderin' what and where they all came from.
Everybody's worryin' 'bout where they're gonna go when the whole thing's done.
But no one knows for certain and so it's all the same to me.
I think I'll just let the mystery be.

Some say once you're gone you're gone forever, and some say you're gonna come back.
Some say you rest in the arms of the Saviour if in sinful ways you lack.
Some say that they're comin' back in a garden, bunch of carrots and little sweet peas.
I think I'll just let the mystery be.

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Some say they're goin' to a place called Glory and I ain't saying it ain't a fact.
But I've heard that I'm on the road to purgatory and I don't like the sound of that.
Well, I believe in love and I live my life accordingly.
But I choose to let the mystery be.

Everybody's wonderin' what and where they all came from.

The Worship Associates are: Carly Baker, Alexandra Businger, Alan Cantor, Margaret Homer, Jess Jonas, Maria Kempner, Julien Lafleur, Megan Momtaheni, Jennifer Ollington, Nevin Shanabrook, and Gary Strichartz.

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~Theme song from 'The Leftovers'

<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/watch-leftovers-new-opening-credits-829084>

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