

March Theme

Blessing: The Practice of Wonder

To believe in blessing is to believe that our being here, our very presence in the world, is itself the first gift, the primal blessing.

~ John O'Donohue

Introduction

Blessing, according to poet John O'Donohue, 'is the art of harvesting the wisdom of the invisible world. From day to day it offers us new gifts.' Imagine if we all could live recognizing the blessing that exists in merely waking each day, breathing and being alive, and sensing the wonder of the world around us? What if we spent moments contemplating each new day with a sense of creative expectation and open heartedness? Blessing is defined as 'the act or words of one that blesses.' And it's not just ministers and religious professionals who have the power to bless. Each of us has the power to bless one another, and to bless the world. To give someone or something our blessing may be to bestow our approval. More often, the blessings we offer and the ones we receive carry with them seeds of encouragement and inspiration that enable growth and healing to take root, so that a new perspective can spring forth, a seeing with fresh eyes, with eyes of wonder. A blessing is a grace, a gift freely given. Whether the mystery and gladness of a blessing is recognized is entirely up to us.

Wonder is defined as 'a cause of astonishment or admiration; a miracle; the quality of exciting amazed admiration'. Children have this attitude of awe and applause in abundance. Perhaps it's easier to practice wonder when so much of the world is being discovered for the first time, our fresh 'beginner's mind' eyes still connected to our hearts and the attitudes of mind and habits of overthinking not yet taken over. How can we as adults cultivate a sense of wonder, and reclaim and renew this sense in our lives? How can we come, as little children, to the moments of our life with curiosity and amazement?

Wonder begins in the senses and comes alive in the imagination. A sense of wonder may arise when we cultivate our natural curiosity about the grand adventure of life, about the blessing that being alive truly is, each day. The natural world provides a bounty to awaken our sense of wonder and remember our blessings, from the majesty of the night sky to the bright red cardinal in the snowy winter tree, to the smell of flowers in the spring, to the surprise and delight in a child's eyes. The first step in a spiritual practice of cultivating wonder is to rejoice in the play of our senses: smell, touch, taste, hear, and see. We can feel a sense of wonder if we slow down and tune in to the blessings that surround us. Even our own body is a tremendous source of wonder, if we only pay attention through engaging our senses.

Occasionally, wonder can be distorted becoming more like its two shadows: sensation-seeking and cynicism. When we are always seeking something new, something different, it may mean that something is out of balance in our spiritual lives. The practice of cultivating wonder is good, but we cannot always meet the world with breathless delight. Wonder must learn to exist as appreciation and fidelity. Wonder's second shadow, cynicism, can manifest as we become hardened or indifferent, or when we are overwhelmed. If nothing gives us a sense of wonder or lifts our spirits, it may be a signal that we need to rest, to restore our souls, or take better care of ourselves. Perhaps in winter we are reminded that even in the darkest of times there is hope; perhaps we can discover through connecting to the blessings that surround us, like the glow of the clear blue moon and the radiant warmth of friends and faces we enjoy, that there exists a place inside of each of us for the blessings of wonder and the renewal of the spirit.

Wonder is a vital element of our Unitarian Universalist faith. Our UU Association's Statement of Principles and Purposes affirms, 'The living tradition we share draws upon direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.' The richness of practicing wonder and pondering the blessings in our lives may move us to a newfound lightness and joy of spirit and an openness to the world around us. May our spirits be renewed through a rediscovery of wonder in our lives, of our connectedness to humanity, to our UU faith and community, and to the world.

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

1. What does it mean to live a life of wonder?
2. Have you stopped seeing the world through eyes of wonder?

This month's theme was composed by Alex Businger, Katherine McHugh and the Worship Associates.

3. Was there a tragedy or hardship in your life that decreased your sense of wonder?
4. Do you feel as though you are blessed? If so, what does that mean to you?
5. Do you 'count your blessings'? What does that phrase mean to you?
6. When you were young, was your sense of wonder encouraged or squashed?
7. What have you taught your children about wonder? What about blessing?
8. When is wonder something you can or can't get behind? And what about blessing?
9. What are you finding to be amazing wonders in your life now? Are you noticing "smaller" wonders in your life right now/in the world around you? It might be helpful to write them down.
10. Can you recall a time when a situation you thought of as a curse actually turned out to have blessings as a part of it too?
11. Does humility have a role to play in wonder? What about in blessing?
12. How do you define mystery and its relationship with the theme of Blessing and Wonder?

Quotes and Short Readings

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
 And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
 Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
 And Eternity in an hour.
 ~ *William Blake, Auguries of Innocence*

There is a lovely idea in the Celtic tradition that if you send out goodness from yourself, or if you share that which is happy or good within you, it will all come back to you multiplied ten thousand times. In the kingdom of love there is no competition, there is no possessiveness or control. The more love you give away, the more love you will have.
 ~ *John O'Donohue, Excerpt from Anam Cara*

If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children I should 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 unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength.
 ~ *Rachel Carson, The Sense of Wonder*

I think us here to wonder, myself. To wonder. To ask. And that in wondering about the big things and asking about the big things, you learn about the little ones, almost by accident. But you never know more about the big things than you start out with. The more I wonder, the more I love.
 ~ *Alice Walker, The Color Purple*

Look at everything always as though you were seeing it either for the first or last time: Thus is your time on earth filled with glory.
 ~ *Betty Smith, A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*

A blessing is a circle of light drawn around a person, to protect, heal and strengthen.
 ~ *John O'Donohue*

Wonder is the beginning of wisdom.
 ~ *Socrates*

The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common.
 ~ *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

For more on this month's theme go to: <http://uuac.org/worship/themes-for-spiritual-practice/>

The Worship Associates are: Jen Ryan Brown, Alexandra Businger, Alan Cantor, Erin Collier, Jess Jonas, Katherine McHugh, Megan Momtaheni, and Gary Strichartz.

I would rather have a mind opened by wonder than one closed by belief.

~ *Gerry Spence*

The pursuit of truth and beauty is a sphere of activity in which we are permitted to remain children all our lives.

~ *Albert Einstein*

If we could see the miracle of a single flower clearly, our whole life would change.

~*Buddha*

When you ask the Universe to bless you in your effort to align yourself with your soul, you open a passageway between yourself and your guides and Teachers. That is what a blessing is: the opening of a passageway between you and nonphysical guidance.

~ *Seat of the Soul by Gary Zukav*

Why, who makes much of a miracle?

As to me I know of nothing else but miracles,

Whether I walk the streets of Manhattan,

Or dart my sight over the roofs of houses toward the sky,

Or wade with naked feet along the beach just in the edge of the
water,

Or stand under trees in the woods,

Or talk by day with any one I love, or sleep in the bed at night
with any one I love,

Or sit at table at dinner with the rest,

Or look at strangers opposite me riding in the car,

Or watch honey-bees busy around the hive of a summer
forenoon,

Or animals feeding in the fields,

Or birds, or the wonderfulness of insects in the air,

Or the wonderfulness of the sundown, or of stars shining so
quiet and bright,

Or the exquisite delicate thin curve of the new moon in spring;

These with the rest, one and all, are to me miracles,

The whole referring, yet each distinct and in its place.

~ *Walt Whitman*

The beauty of the world is the first witness to blessing. In a land without blessing, no beauty could dwell.

~*John O'Donohue*

As we have been blessed, so we bless one another to be a blessing. Breathe in, breathe out, this breath we share with all that breathes. Feel the love of the universe flowing through this community, into you, and out into the universe again. Let the love of all the universe—your love—flow outward, to its height, its depth, its broad extent. You are more than you know, and more beloved than you know. Take up what power is yours to create safe haven, to make of earth a heaven. Give hope to those you encounter, that they may know safety from inner and outer harm, be happy and at peace, healthy and strong, caring and joyful. Be the blessing you already are. That is enough. Blessed Be; Amen.

~*Adapted from the Karaniya Metta Sutta (Sunna Nipata 1.8) of the Pali Canon*

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Some Modern Beatitudes – A Sermon For All Saints Sunday

Because I like to imagine Jesus here standing among us saying

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the agnostics. Blessed are they who doubt. Those who aren't sure, who can still be surprised. Blessed are they who are spiritually impoverished and therefore not so certain about everything that they no longer take in new information. Blessed are those who have nothing to offer. Blessed are they for whom nothing seems to be working. Blessed are the pre-schoolers who cut in line at communion. Blessed are the poor in spirit. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are they for whom death is not an abstraction. Blessed are they who have buried their loved ones, for whom tears are as real as an ocean. Blessed are they who have loved enough to know what loss feels like. Blessed are the mothers of the miscarried. Blessed are they who don't have the luxury of taking things for granted any more. Blessed are they who can't fall apart because they have to keep it together for everyone else. Blessed are the motherless, the alone, the ones from whom so much has been taken. Blessed are those who "still aren't over it yet" Blessed are they who laughed again when for so long they thought they never would. Blessed are Bo's wife and kids and Billy's mom and Amy Mac's friends. Blessed are those who mourn. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who no one else notices. The kids who sit alone at middle-school lunch tables. The laundry guys at the hospital. The sex-workers and the night shift street sweepers. Blessed are the losers and the babies and the parts of ourselves that are so small. The parts of ourselves that don't want to make eye contact with a world that only loves the winners. Blessed are the forgotten. Blessed are the closeted. Blessed are the unemployed, the unimpressive, the underrepresented. Blessed are the teens who have to figure out ways to hide the new cuts on their arms. Blessed are the meek. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the wrongly accused, the ones who never catch a break, the ones for whom life is hard – for they are those with whom Jesus chose to surround himself. Blessed are those without documentation. Blessed are the ones without lobbyists. Blessed are foster kids and trophy kids and special ed kids and every other kid who just wants to feel safe and loved and never does. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are they who know there has to be more than this. Because they are right.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are those who make terrible business decisions for the sake of people. Blessed are the burnt-out social workers and the over worked teachers and the pro-bono case takers. Blessed are the kids who step between the bullies and the weak. Blessed are they who delete hateful, homophobic comments off their friend's Facebook page. Blessed are the ones who have received such real grace that they are no longer in the position of ever deciding who the "deserving poor[2]" are. Blessed is everyone who has ever forgiven me when I didn't deserve it. Blessed are the merciful for they totally get it.

~ *Nadia Bolz Weber*

How does one address a mystery? *A Meditation By Gordon B McKeeman*

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.

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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.

~ *Robin Tanner*

When you don't cover up the world with words and labels, a sense of the miraculous returns to your life that was lost a long time ago when humanity, instead of using thought, became possessed by thought.

~ *Eckhart Tolle, A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*

The secret of beginning a life of deep awareness and sensitivity lies in our willingness to pay attention. Our growth as conscious, awake human beings is marked not so much by grand gestures and visible renunciations as by extending loving attention to the minutest particulars of our lives. Every relationship, every thought, every gesture is blessed with meaning through the wholehearted attention we bring to it. In the complexities of our minds and lives we easily forget the power of attention, yet without attention we live only on the surface of existence. It is just simple attention that allows us truly to listen to the song of a bird, to see deeply the glory of an autumn leaf, to touch the heart of another and be touched. We need to be fully present in order to love a single thing wholeheartedly. We need to be fully awake in this moment if we are to receive and respond to the learning inherent in it.

~ *Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield, Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart*

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.

~ *Albert Einstein*

It is a wholesome and necessary thing for us to turn again to the earth and in the contemplation of her beauties to know of wonder and humility.

~ *Rachel Carson*

When I was in theology school, we had to take two semesters of the Old Testament (The Hebrew Bible). The professor, a Kentucky Baptist and a natural orator, walked into the lecture hall and said, 'How would like it if I just sum up the whole of the Hebrew Bible in one sentence and then we can all go home?'

Everyone laughed and said, "Yes!" He replied, "OK- Here it is. Every blessing is mixed.' What a wonder.

~ *Anon*

A Thanksgiving Prayer

On this day of days,

We have more for which to be grateful than we will ever know:

More cause to bless and cherish

And bend our knee in wonder,

More call to lift our hearts on wings of praise.

So let us set aside our shopping list of grievances,

Resist the nattering of egos,

And crack our parched lives open like a seed.

~ *Rev. Forrest Church, adapted*

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I believe that life is chaotic, a jumble of accidents, ambitions, misconceptions, bold intentions, lazy happenstances, and unintended consequences, yet I also believe that there are connections that illuminate our world, revealing its endless mystery and wonder.

~ *David Maraniss*

All That We Share Is Sacred Blessing

This blessing was written in honor of two Unitarians, Martha and Waitstill Sharp, who during WWII dared to risk their own comfort in order to help save the lives of those in desperate need.

As we gather together,
May we remember
When you share with me what is most important to you,
That is where listening begins.
When I show you that I hear you,
When I say your life matters,
That is where compassion begins.
When I open the door to greet you,
That is where hospitality begins.
When I venture out to bring you to shelter,
That is where love begins.
When I risk my comfort to ease your suffering,
When I act against hatred, violence, and injustice,
That is where courage begins.
When we experience the full presence of each other,
Because of our shared humanity,
Because of our differences,
That is where holy gratitude begins.

May this space be a table
that is not complete
until all are welcome.
May this table be a space of beauty
where together
we create a series of miracles, and
where all that we share is sacred.
May it be so.
~ *Andre Mol*

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