

Human Attention and Divine Intervention

A Sermon Delivered on December 15, 2019

by

The Reverend Axel H. Gehrman

*“We may choose something like a star
To stay our minds on and be staid.”*

-- Robert Frost

Unitarian Universalist Church
of the Monterey Peninsula
490 Aguajito Road
Carmel, CA 93923
(831) 624-7404
www.uucmp.org

Meditation: by Marni Harmony, entitled “If We Do Not Venture Out.”

If, on a starlit night,
with the moon brightly shimmering,
We stay inside and do not venture out,
the evening universe remains a part of life we shall not know.

If, on a cloudy day,
with grayness infusing all
and rain dancing rivers in the grass,
We stay inside and do not venture out,
the stormy, threatening energy of
the universe remains
a part of life we shall not know.

If, on a frosty morning,
dreading the chilling air before the sunrise,
We stay inside and do not venture out,
the awesome cold, quiet, and stillness of
the dawn universe remains
a part of life we shall not know.

If, throughout these grace-given days of ours,
surrounded as we are by green life and
brown death, hot pink joy and cold gray
pain and miracles—always miracles—

If we stay inside ourselves and do not venture out
then the Fullness of the universe
shall be unknown to us
And our locked hearts shall never feel the rush of worship.

First Reading: Our first reading is by the great American poet Walt Whitman. Whitman was born two-hundred years ago, in 1819, and grew up in Brooklyn, NY. This is from his poem “Miracles.”

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 my mother,

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 sun-down—or of stars shining so
quiet and bright, ...
To me, every hour of the light and dark is a miracle,
Every cubic inch of space is a miracle, ...
Every spear of grass ...
All these to me are unspeakably perfect miracles.

Second Reading: Our second and final reading is by the UU minister Victoria Safford, from a piece entitled “Wondering, Wandering, Under the the Sky.” She writes:

In a meeting the other night we lit a small chalice and someone shared a small blessing to center us down and gather us in for whatever work it was, and the blessing ended with the question, “What do you welcome in winter?” Around the circle we heard lovely, poignant, funny, wintry things. One person smiled and quietly said, “I welcome my old friend, Orion.” She talked about walking her dog in the dark on these December nights, with that familiar presence over her shoulder there in the winter sky.

He’s up there now, even in the daylight: “he” being an arrangement of stars and nebulae light years away. Orion the great hunter, who was given this place of honor in the firmament by Zeus, according to the Greeks, with his sword and his lion’s mane shield, his dog (the star Sirius) and his glittering belt.

He seems reliable up there, but astronomers assure us, just as the mystics do, that in fact everything is wandering and changing. By the year 14,000 Orion will be visible only in the southern hemisphere, and while his form will endure longer than most of the other constellations, because he’s made of younger stars, one of his brightest ones is a red supergiant, very close to the end of its life. It will die soon, “soon” meaning sometime about a million years from now (which seems long perhaps to us, but is imminent for stars). This star will explode, and that explosion, say the astronomers, will be dramatic, visible even in broad daylight.

Think of that: A million years from now. Very soon. Visible to whom? [I wonder.] Science and mythology delight equally in mystery and both have their deepest source, their purest source, in wonder.

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Did you catch the meteor shower this week? This past Friday to Saturday night, the sky was lighted up over 120 times every hour by the Geminids. Elaine alerted me to an article in the New York Times this week, that told us what to expect. The Geminids is the name of the field of cosmic debris the earth passes through at this time of the year, on its journey around the sun. "Cascades of cosmic waste," the science reporter Nicholas St. Fleur calls it. Bits of debris that can be as small as grains of sand pierce the sky at such a speed that they burst in the earth's atmosphere and create a celestial fireworks display.

One of the fringe benefits of living at the edge of the ocean, is that the night sky to the West is very dark. There are no city lights there to drown out the light of the stars, and planets. This is a great place from which to watch a meteor shower.

Friday evening we were on our way home from a meeting in Sebastopol to the north. When we reached Reservation Road, I reminded Elaine to pull over, so we could admire the Geminids shower at its peak from Marina beach.

I was hoping to see something like this. (show slide) Or this (next slide).



Alas, what I saw was this (next slide).



The downside of living at the edge of the ocean, is the frequent fog.

Yesterday evening Elaine and I walked down to the beach in Seaside, to try our luck again, even though we are now past the peak of the shower. Elaine thought she saw a few streaks of light. I missed them. But still, I cherished the opportunity to stand outside together, and look at the stars.

* * *

Humans have been observing stars for a long time. Before the first history books were ever written, our forebears knew how to use the lights in the night sky as compass, calendar, and clock.

In this country, two centuries ago, Maria (ma-RYE-ah) Mitchell was among our early astronomers and first photographers. She was born in 1818, in Nantucket, and as a child already took a special interest in the movement of the stars. Her parents were Quakers, her father a teacher and amateur astronomer, who supported his daughter. When she was twelve, she and her father together calculated the exact moment of the solar eclipse of 1831. At a time when only few women were able to gain access to higher education, she became a teacher, and librarian, and scientist.

When she was in her twenties, she was the first astronomer to discover a comet that was invisible to the naked eye, visible only with the help of a telescope. This was in 1847. She was awarded a gold medal from the King of Denmark for her discovery. And the comet was later called “Miss Mitchell’s Comet.”

She was active in the suffragist and abolitionist movements, and counted Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony as friends. She knew Henry David Thoreau, and Theodore Parker, and invited Emerson to see the stars from her own rooftop observatory. She was the first woman elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

And as an adult she attended the Unitarian Church of Nantucket. She was never much interested in church doctrine, but did believe religion and science were compatible. She wrote: “scientific investigation, pushed on and on, will reveal new ways in which God works, and bring us deeper revelations of the unknown.”

Thanks to Mitchell’s observations, her teaching, and her photography, she helped many others discover the wonder and beauty of the stars. She was in good company. It was during these years in the mid-1800s that the first photographs of spiral galaxies were made. This one (show slide), known as the Whirlpool Galaxy M51, became one of the most reproduced astronomical images in Europe.



Thanks to images like this one, countless women and men, young and old, learned to look at the night sky with new eyes. Eyes opened to unimagined beauty, hearts opened to new wonder.

This image inspired the Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh. Van Gogh was a brilliant artist and a troubled soul. Toward the end of his life, struggling with emotional illness, van Gogh admitted himself to a

mental asylum in the French Provence. In letters to his brother he wrote: “I need a starry night with cypresses or—perhaps above a field of ripe wheat; there are some really

beautiful nights here.” And though van Gogh was disillusioned by traditional faith, he wrote, I have a “tremendous need for, shall I say the word—for religion—so I go outside at night to paint the stars.”



This picture (show slide), “Starry Night,” which van Gogh painted in the last year of his life, is one of the most recognized paintings in Western culture.

Art historians say it is a deeply religious painting. Meyer Shapiro sees in it the theme of a “woman in pain of birth, girded with the sun and moon and crowned with stars, whose newborn child is

threatened by the dragon.” Sven Loevgren sees in the painting van Gogh’s “religiously inclined longing for the beyond,” and compared it to the poetry of Walt Whitman.

Inspired by the same astronomical images, and deeply moved by the splendor of the Milky Way on a clear winter night – Whitman called it “a river of stars,” and celebrated it as “some superhuman symphony, some ode of universal vagueness, disdain[ing] syllable and sound – a flashing glance of Deity, address’d to the soul.”

* * *

The short days and long nights this time of year often feel challenging to me. Getting up before sunrise in the morning, having dinner in the dark is a little disheartening. And on these chilly, damp days, my spirit itself feels dampened. What I read in the news doesn’t help. The signs of the times, across the country and around the world, don’t look good. And, finally, the winter holiday season turns my thoughts to family members and friends, many of whom are far away, many of whom have passed away – and so feelings of joy and love are mixed with a sense of sadness, loneliness and loss.

These are indeed the darkest days of the year. And it’s because of the darkness that stars are so significant. In this day and age, we have GPS navigation in our cars, paper calendars in our pockets, and clocks on our walls – compass, calendar, clock – and all three on our smartphones, too. We don’t need to pay attention to the stars at night, the way our ancestors did.

And yet taking time to see the stars today is as important as ever. We may not need them as compass, calendar and clock to find our way in the world around us. But the stars can still help us navigate the world within us.

Even when we can’t see them, even when the stars are obscured by clouds, or hidden in the light of day, stars can remind us of our place in the universe: We are not the center of the universe. The world does not revolve around us humans.

It always takes me a moment to realize this, every time I look at the stars, and the sun and the moon, moving across the sky every day. They seem to be circling the earth, but this is

an illusion, a trick of the eye: we are the ones who are moving. We humans on earth are the ones who are spinning... sometimes almost out of control.

Meteors aren't falling stars, dropping from heaven to earth. We are the ones speeding through the solar system, on this spinning planet, blasting through fields of cosmic debris.

When I look at the stars, it always takes me a moment to remember that I am not the center of the universe, but rather twirling through it. And for a second I feel dizzy. But once the dizziness passes, I feel a deeper sense of balance, of connection, and of peace.

The stars we see at night - some of them billions of light years away - they seem eternal and unchanging. But astronomers assure us that everything is wandering and changing. And mystics say the same: everything is moving and changing, spinning from light to darkness and from darkness to light. From joy to sadness, from grief to gladness. From life to death, to new life as yet unimagined.

Scientists, saints and sages, uncover ever-new revelations of the unknown, revealing new ways in which God works. And so do we, each in our own way. We can see God's work. We can do God's work.

If we open our eyes, and open our hearts, we can see miracles.
We can see miracles when we walk the streets Manhattan or Monterey,
And turn our sight over the roofs of houses toward the sky.
Or when we wade with naked feet along the beach,
Or stand under trees in the woods.

We can know miracles when we talk with anyone we love,
Or look at strangers, ...at friends,
Or the wonderfulness of the sun-down - or of stars shining so quiet and bright.
Every hour of the light and dark is a miracle, every cubic inch of space a miracle.

In these dark days, may we open our eyes
To the beauty of a starlit night.
Let us not stay inside, but venture out
That we might know the fullness of the universe.

Let us follow a star of wonder,
a star of light, a star with royal beauty bright.

Let us bring our gifts, and our hopes and our dreams,
To this day,
To celebrate life's beauty and find healing for its pain
so that together we can join in the holy work
of creating a more compassionate world

So be it. Amen.