

“Renewing a Sense of Wonder”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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“A child’s world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement.” If you have spent much time around young children, especially very young children, you have witnessed the truth of this statement. These words, as Carolyn mentioned a few moments ago, come from Rachel Carson’s book *The Sense of Wonder*. The book was published in 1965, a year after Carson’s death. The main ideas and themes contained in *The Sense of Wonder* came from an article Carson wrote 9 years prior to the book’s publication. That article, titled “Help Your Child Wonder,” appeared in the July edition of *Woman’s Home Companion*, a magazine that, at the time, was widely available in this country. I was just 4 years old when that article came out. From the tiny bits of memory, I have of that time in my life, I recognize that what she wrote was true for me back then. Back then, the world was fresh and new and beautiful. It was full of wonder and excitement.

In preparing for this service I found myself recalling various bits of memory from my early life. As these bits of memories flitted in and out of my consciousness, I realized that my perception of the world is very different now. Since the first case of COVID-19 was identified in Montana in the spring the world hasn’t seemed as fresh or new or beautiful as it did when I was younger. Over the past several months, instead of feeling wonder and excitement about life and the world I have frequently found myself experiencing feelings of concern, sadness, worry and anxiety. From my contacts with a good number of you, I know that such feelings are common lately. Given the current state of affairs in our country and in the larger world, having such feelings is both normal and appropriate. That said, if a person becomes engulfed in feelings of concern, sadness, worry and anxiety they may find themselves caught in a downward spiral—a spiral that can leave a person drained of, or at least cut off from, feelings of joy, hope or even love. Such a spiral can lead to significantly harmful consequences.

Weeks ago, I recognized that the intensity and the pervasiveness of the feelings I was experiencing put me on shaky ground. I knew I needed to do something to shift my focus, lift my spirits and find a stable and solid foundation again. I thought about what had worked to accomplish such a shift in the past. As I recalled times from my past when I was struggling with similar feelings, memories of spending time out in nature began flooding in. Like Rachel Carson and many other people, nature has always been a place of wonder for me. Somehow, being out in nature seems to blow away my worries and sadness. Being in nature washes away my concern and my anxiety. Spending time in nature has a way of nourishing me. If I am able to spend enough quality time in nature, I always find myself feeling renewed and ready to face whatever life is bringing, or throwing, my way.

Recalling memories of spending time in nature helped me realize just what I needed to do. I needed to take some vacation time and immerse myself in the out-of-doors. So in August my wife, Sandy, and I headed off to a Forest Service cabin in the Highland Mountain range northeast of Twin Bridges. The cabin isn’t all that far away. It took us less than two and a half hours to get there. The final stretch of the trip, up a Forest Service road off highway 41, was the longest part of the journey. That 15 miles took more than an hour to drive. We only spent three days at the cabin but it seemed like much longer. After the sun would go down, we would stand outside in the pitch dark, looking up at the stars in the night sky. There were no city lights obscuring our view as we watched the Perseid Meteor shower. As I stood there watching the streaks of light flash across the sky I recalled seeing shooting stars when I was a child. I began to feel the wonder and the awe that I felt back then. Standing there with my head tilted back I recalled a quote from Albert Einstein.

“The most beautiful and deepest experience a man can have is the sense of the mysterious. It is the underlying principle of religion as well as all serious endeavor in art and science. He who never had this experience seems to me, if not dead, then at least blind.”

That time at the cabin helped me recognize that I had been going through a period of blindness, not literal blindness, but a type of blindness none-the-less. With all of the turmoil and tumult that has been going on over the past months I have been blinded to the many, many wonders in my life. As my eyes were opened to this blindness it became clear to me that I needed to write this sermon. I needed to write it for myself. This sermon will be a reminder to me of how important it is to find and sink into a sense of wonder. I hope this sermon is more than just reminder for me. I hope it reminds you of the importance wonder holds in your life, too.

As I began planning for this service, I found plenty of rich and wonderful material about wonder. Rachel Carson and Albert Einstein were just two of the people who have written about the importance that a sense of wonder can and does have in our lives. The importance wonder plays for us as humans has been written about for centuries by a vast array of people. It has been written about by scientists, novelists and poets, by those who have deep religious convictions, and by those who have little or even no use for or appreciation of religion. I want to share some of the quotes I found. These quotes spoke to me and I hope they speak to you as well.

Augustine of Hippo, more commonly known as St. Augustine, wrote the following more than 1700 years ago.

“People travel to wonder at the height of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motion of the stars; and they pass by themselves without wondering.”

The 19th century poet Walt Whitman seemed to be looking at life through a religious lens when he wrote; “Every moment of light and dark is a miracle.” The 19th century Unitarian minister, Ralph Waldo Emerson, similarly referred of miracles when he wrote that; “The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common.” Seeing the miraculous in the common takes a sense of wonder that encompasses what we often come to take for granted, our very life and the everyday moments of our lives.

In his 1998 book, *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder*, Richard Dawkins seems to echo what St. Augustine and Emerson were asserting.

“There is an anesthetic of familiarity, a sedative of ordinariness which dulls the senses and hides the wonder of existence. For those of us not gifted in poetry, it is at least worthwhile from time to time making an effort to shake off the anesthetic. What is the best way of countering the sluggish habituation brought about by our gradual crawl from babyhood? We can't actually fly to another planet. But we can recapture that sense of having just tumbled out to life on a new world by looking at our own world in unfamiliar ways.”

By looking at the common or familiar elements of our own world in unfamiliar ways we gain new insights—insights that often lead to wisdom.

Dawkins, who is a scientist and an avowed atheist puts a very high value on both science and wonder. He writes:

“The feeling of awed wonder that science can give us is one of the highest experiences of which the human psyche is capable. It is a deep aesthetic passion to rank with the finest that music and poetry can deliver. It is truly one of the things that make life worth living and it does so, if anything, more effectively if it convinces us that the time we have for living is quite finite.”

Betty Smith, author of four 20th century novels, including *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, suggests that how we look at things through a lens of time can increase the sense of wonder we experience. She writes; “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.” I don't know about you, but I certainly could use more glory during these challenging times.

And on the note of difficult times and the importance of wonder, here is something from the English theoretical physicist and cosmologist Stephen Hawking.

“Remember to look up at the stars and not down at your feet. Try to make sense of what you see and wonder about what makes the universe exist. Be curious. And however difficult life may seem, there is always something you can do and succeed at. It matters that you don't just give up.”

Quite early in his life, Hawking was diagnosed with a slow-progressing form of motor neuron disease sometimes referred to as Lou Gehrig's Disease. He spent a significant portion of his life confined to a wheelchair as the disease slowly robbed him of the ability to control his muscles. He even lost his ability to speak using his vocal cords. In these challenging times we could all benefit from remembering the last two lines of this quote. “...however difficult life may seem, there is always something you can do and succeed at. It matters that you don't just give up.” If we are able to shift our focus from our feet to the stars, if we can move from feelings of concern, sadness, worry and anxiety to curiosity, wonder and awe, we may just discover what we can do to make a positive difference, not only in our own lives but also in the world.

And on the note of making a positive difference, not just in our own lives, but also in the world, I return to Rachel Carson. In 1952 Carson was awarded the John Burroughs Medal for her book *The Sea Around Us*. Here is a small segment of what she said in her acceptance speech.

“The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us the less taste we shall have for the destruction of our race. Wonder and humility are wholesome emotions, and they do not exist side by side with a lust for destruction.”

I believe she is correct when she claims that a lust for destruction cannot exist side by side with wonder and humility.

My recent time staring up into the night sky, along with the eloquent words of Carson, Einstein, St. Augustine, Whitman, Emerson, Dawkins and Hawking, have helped me re-engage my sense of wonder. I remember now how vital a sense of wonder is to my well-being. So in the days ahead I intend to focus my attention, as best I am able, on the wonders and the realities that are present every day of my life. I will seek out wonder wherever I can find it. From my past experiences involving awe and wonder, I am confident that the more wonder I experience the more humility I will feel. And from a place of wonder and humility, I will seek to find what I can succeed at as I strive to address the challenges that I, that we, face today. It is my hope that from what I have shared with you this morning you will be moved to join me in discovering again the benefits of feeling a deep and abiding sense of wonder.

So may it be.