

**“To Infinity and Beyond”**  
**29 February 2004**  
**Unity Church–Unitarian**

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**SERMON: To Infinity and Beyond**

It was one of those perfect nights. Our parents had gotten so wrapped up in their conversation with friends from the church that they seemed to have forgotten about us. We were safe playing kick the can around the house and the neighborhood. I'm sure they found the reassuring “Allie, allie in free!” call permission enough to continue discussing the pressing events of the day.

We played, invigorated by the illicit nature of playing so late. For once, there was no sibling bickering or any calls of “unfair” that so often punctuated our games. After we had all had our fill of running, chasing, hiding and finding, we all went out to the backyard and laid down in the brown grass. The sky was crystal clear. We looked up, awestruck by the expanse of sky and twinkling lights. Suddenly, a light moved slowly across the sky. My brother cried, “It’s Sputnik!” We had tried to see it in the sky the first night after its historic launching, but we couldn’t see it. Here it was, a visible link between the heavens above and our life here, grounded on the earth.

I was filled with wonder as I watched the light move slowly across the sky. The innocence of our youth became tinged with the wonder that space travel elicited. It was incomprehensible to us that human beings were capable of placing a satellite in space. That night all things seemed possible and we wondered what did we have to do with all that. In that moment we did not feel insignificant, rather our deep curiosity and wonder nourished our sense of beauty and challenged our sense of who we were and the size of our world.

It was at this same time that my class at church was studying a curriculum called, “Miracles Abound.” Every week, we would explore some miracle of the natural world. That year I looked forward to going to church every Sunday, which was miracle enough for my parents! The class was taught by a physicist and a musician, both of who clearly believed their work was fueled by wonder.

One week we searched for spider webs, and having found them, we examined them with magnifying glasses, as the physicist explained the science and math of the miracle we beheld. His explanation did not detract from the miracle and mystery, it simply added to it. Because of his ability and others like him to communicate their own wonder coupled with scientific facts simultaneously, I never understood the split between science and religion, the chasm between mystery and math. The great majority of scientists I have had the privilege to know have been securely grounded in the wonder of creation.

It is wonder that keeps them humble, as if they comprehend that to understand many things does not mean one understands all things. As Max Planck, the founder of quantum physics wrote, “Science cannot solve the ultimate mystery of nature. And it is because in the last analysis we ourselves are part of the mystery we are trying to solve.” I would add the further complicating factor that we are also mysteries ourselves.

Timothy Ferris, science writer and author of the best selling books, *Coming of Age in the Milky Way* and *The Mind's Sky: Human Intelligence in a Cosmic Context*, finds the image of the hourglass to be helpful when thinking about the dual and interacting universes each person contains: the perceived world at one end of the hourglass and the interior world at the other, with the flow of information between the two represented by the neck of the hourglass. The flow of information is constantly flowing, with each world impacting the other. But we can't grasp it all because we are a part of both worlds. And to complicate matters, both ends of this hourglass contain equally mysterious universes.

Artists have long understood this and many scientists do as well. The universe that we encounter is not *the* universe, but rather the universe we have constructed, imagined or partially understood. If you think about a Salvador Dali painting, or the work of any surrealist painter, what they seem to be telling us when we view clocks melting outside the frame, is that no one can grasp reality whole, that each person's universe is uniquely their own. Everything is framed, by the limitations of our perspectives, beliefs, particular prejudices, assumptions and the restrictions language inevitably imposes.

But despite our limitations, there are two majestic and mysterious universes — one outside and one inside. Both contain imperfections, pain, and suffering and many things we simply can't understand or name. Both are vast universes, full of mystery and paradox. We can never know them completely. We are saved by this inability to completely understand or comprehend, because it brings us back, bring us back humbly to the heart of the mystery that lies at the center of life. We cannot know all things, which means we cannot control all things and that, my friends, is a very good thing.

Do you remember the science movies they used to air that showed the brain as one unified system run by a group of people at a control panel? The latest brain research demonstrates repeatedly that this image of the brain, as a single, unified, integrated agent is an illusion. What is emerging in their research and findings is that each of us, like the wider universe, is made up of many entities. We are discovering scientifically what the poets and the artists perhaps have always known that the infinite world exists inside us as well as it does in the outside world. And that there are many things we will *never* understand.

As thirteenth century poet Kabir wrote:

*Inside this clay jug there are canyons and pine mountains  
and the maker of canyons and pine mountains!  
All seven oceans are inside and hundreds of millions of stars.  
The acid that test gold is there and the one who judges jewels.  
And the music from strings no one touches  
And the source of all water.*

Our own unique perceptions and assumptions limit our knowledge of that infinite mystery. We only see partially as the Apostle Paul reminds us. People frequently see us more clearly than we do ourselves, particularly when it has to do with our gifts and talents. We are experts when it has to do with our limitations and shortcomings, however. In the field of perceptual psychology there is a way of understanding the differences of perception and it is called Johari's window. The window is divided into four equal quadrants: one is filled with the things that only you see and understand, the second with the things that others see and understand, the third with the transparent things, those things that everyone sees and understands, and finally the last contains those things that no one sees or understands.

Our limited and partial vision of the infinite is saved by the visions of others. This is one of the ways that life in community and in conversation in the life of that community saves our lives. Our fractional and incomplete picture is augmented by the partial view of others. In those combined views, we have still an incomplete view, but it is at least more complete. We can take comfort in the fact that there are things none of us will ever, can ever know in both universes. We are saved by mystery.

Astronomers Morrison and Coccini wrote in a paper justifying the early attempts to make contact with other civilizations in other universes in 1959: "We listen to the stars not because we will hear something, but because we think we might. The probability of success is difficult to estimate, but if we never search, the chance of success is zero." We search and listen to the stars because we yearn to have our limited view of the universe augmented by other views—even if we never make contact, the vision of our planet as seen from the moon is enough to shake up our world."

Space, the final frontier... we do need the deeper knowledge that space exploration provides. We need to know about the cosmos of which we are apart. Exploration in itself encourages curiosity, imagination and the increase of knowledge, understanding and perspective. Exploration of the unknown has always captivated the imagination of humanity. But the exploration must be done in a responsible manner, in a way that doesn't tax succeeding generations or promote the superiority of one nation over another.

If we need to learn one thing from the view from space it is that we are all in this together. Ecological scientists have proven this fact repeatedly. The destiny of one species is linked to the destiny of another. We can't keep acting as if our actions in the world do not have their consequences. I tell you it concerns me a great deal that a number of fundamentalists in the current administration believe that the world is predictably coming to an end. How scary is it to contemplate that these people are making decisions about our space programs?

The word universe comes from the Latin for "all things turned into one." It is here that the two worlds come together. We are linked because we are all part of the interconnected web of all existence. According to Timothy Ferris, "The search for life may be regarded as an expression of faith in cosmic unity, insofar as it presumes that even so exotic a phenomenon as human intelligence may find its semblance elsewhere."

The deep and profound insight that we are all connected and part of a great unity lies at the foundation of all mystical inspiration and experience. Throughout history, mystical insight has remained largely unchanged. "We are one."

William James remarked that the mystical tradition has hardly been altered by differences of climate, creed. Through all religious traditions, and through the centuries of human history, we find the same reoccurring note and qualities in the mystical experience: the certain conviction of what has been experienced, a sense of ineffability and the feeling of unity of the universe. As William James wrote, "Everything is made of one hidden stuff."

Neurophysiologists speculate that the mystical experience occurs when the brain momentarily perceives reality whole, without the veil of our assumptions and partiality. Once that wholeness has been glimpsed, life is never the same. As Albert Einstein wrote, "The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mystical. It is the source of all true art and science. He or she to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead."

Unity arises out of the individual life, emerging from the diversity of all the disparate parts of our past, our perceptions and our differing capacities and capabilities. Unity also exists in the world, connecting all life to one another. Diversity flows from this essential unity. The seventh principle of The Purposes and Principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association states that we are all a part of the interdependent web of existence. We are all connected through and by enduring and eternal threads of unity. When we think about the implications of this connecting unity for the world and our planet we are faced with many questions.

Unity is a powerful force in the world and I wonder if we have not underestimated its role in the evolution of life? I wonder, could Charles Darwin have missed something? Early evolutionists stressed the role of competition and the survival of the fittest, but could they have missed some essential element, which is the extent to which organisms were attuned to their environment?

Perhaps our ancestors survived not only because they could survive in a demanding world, but also as a result of their ability to live in harmony and resonance with their world. Do we have a powerful and life-enhancing truth to give to the world? If people could see the world a little more expansively, then perhaps they could open themselves to the underlying unity that does exist and help shape the world through the principle of unity and connection rather than competition and warfare.

May we be powerful guardians of the mystery that lies at the heart of unity and may we live in ways that make the principle of connection and unification an ever-present reality in our lives.