



## Wonder

*The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community.*

The values statement of Unity Church Unitarian reads: “In all we do, we strive to *embody* wonder, open-hearted engagement, and courageous action.” We at Unity Church want to embody wonder. Think about that for a moment. Our society, not to mention the mundane tasks of everyday life, pressure us to narrow our view, to accept the world around us without question. Our mission statement asks instead that we stay curious, stay humble, stay active, stay astonished. Embodying wonder calls us to push back against the forces of routine, to stand against conventional wisdom, to look for the extraordinary, to claim, as songwriter Peter Mayer says, that “everything is holy now.”

As Unitarian Universalists, wonder, expressed as a questioning spirit, is a core tenet of our faith. Our Fourth Principle calls us to make “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning” central to our own lives and to our church communities. We are a faith full of questions and everyone is encouraged to ask them.

Sometimes our questions lead us to a Google search or a quick check of Wikipedia. Other wondering goes deeper, taking us to places where answers are perpetually unanswerable, impossible to quantify or know for certain: “I wonder what happens after we die.” “I wonder if there is a divine force in the world.” This is spiritual wondering about what makes us holy, what makes our lives, and our deaths, worthwhile. Google cannot supply the answers.

Unitarians and Universalists have long questioned received wisdom and calcified tradition. Many of the greatest UU thinkers, though immersed in the dominant paradigms of their time, used their sense of wonder to see cracks in the system and wiggle their way through to a different understanding.

Universalist pioneer Hosea Ballou, for example, wondered why people worshipped an angry God. He read the bible closely, and when he could not find evidence for a God who promised eternal damnation, Ballou made a rational decision to embrace universal salvation instead. His sense of open wondering led him to a radical new understanding of the holy. New England Transcendentalist Unitarian Theodore Parker similarly combined a penchant for facts and data with a wonderment about life’s deepest questions. Parker’s theological wonderings spurred him to deny Biblical miracles and question the literal authority of the Bible and Jesus. His wonder changed the shape of Unitarian thought.

If one aspect of UU wonder rests in the Fourth Principle, a different understanding of wonder can be found in the Seventh Principle, “respect for the interdependent web of all existence.” This wonder often comes easier when we are outdoors. As nineteenth-century naturalist John Muir wrote, “few are altogether deaf to the preaching of pine trees.” Environmentalist Rachel Carson, best known for her transformative book *Silent Spring*, made a forceful argument for the role of the natural world in promoting wonder. Carson believed that we needed to “turn again to the earth and in the contemplation of her beauties to know the sense of wonder and humility.” When we “turn again to the earth,” we will be surprised. And humbled. Again and again, wonder and humility find themselves paired.

Maybe that is because wonder is the antithesis of control. Awe takes us away from our own ego, reminds us that we are part of something much greater than ourselves. The majesty of snow-capped mountains, the tiny feet of a newborn baby, the perfectly held note at the end of a song — each one can all evoke

a kind of stunned silence, a loss of words. In this sense, wonder cannot be spoken about, but only be spoken from. Moments of awe may make us forget the questions and just feel a profound sense of wonder at what surrounds us.

Ultimately, wonder means paying attention. Wonder is a spiritual practice helped along by structured opportunities. To make meaning of our lives’ biggest questions and our most difficult and exciting experiences, we need places and people who encourage us to ask the unanswerable questions, to ponder the beauties and uncertainties of life. Church allows us a space to be comfortable with wondering and not knowing, a chance to explore mysteries we cannot explain, to practice vulnerability and open ourselves to new questions. Our faith community offers us a gracious container where wonder can flourish.

*Hallman Ministerial Intern  
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### Wonder Theme Resources

#### BOOKS

*The Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague* by Geraldine Brooks (2002)

*Ten Poems to Change Your Life* by Roger Housden (2001)

*Infinite Wonder: An Astronaut's Photographs from a Year in Space* by Scott Kelly (2018)

#### CHILDREN'S BOOKS

*How the Grinch Stole Christmas* by Dr. Seuss (1957)

*Wonder* by R. J. Palacios (2016)

*Everywhere, Wonder* by Matthew Swantson (2017)