

Welcome to Mystery

Psalm 8

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First Central Congregational UCC
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I grew up in a religious tradition that did not value science, except on the rare occasion when it was felt that science in some way confirmed a tenant of conservative biblical interpretation.

But I was a child and adolescent fascinated by science, and I benefited from an excellent high school chemistry and physics teacher, Ken Harvey. Like most kids, I thought I knew more than I actually did. Harvey was one of those people who revealed a wider world to me. When I'd state an opinion, he might offer a different way of looking at the topic. My many hours in conversation with Harvey both inside and outside the classroom opened my mind to new possibilities. He was one of the most influential persons in my life.

As I entered college I had compartmentalized my intellect—religion was in one compartment and science in another—I couldn't see how to make them fit together, but I didn't want to cast either one aside.

In college I encountered the historical-critical method of reading the bible and the rich diversity of theological interpretation. I abandoned the biblical literalism of my childhood and embraced a more open and inclusive faith.

At the same time I began to study more in-depth the scientific advances of the twentieth century, particularly the developments around quantum mechanics, which seemed to open the door for more connections between science and religion.

Somewhere along the way I read the book *God and the New Physics* by the physicist Paul Davies. In the introduction to that book, Davies makes the startling claim that "science offers a surer path to God than religion."

I ended up reading most of the books Davies had written to that point. I wrote my undergraduate thesis on his concept of God, a concept derived not from theology but from the discoveries of physicists.

Our culture has a mistaken notion that science and religion are in conflict with one another. There are of course those extreme religious fundamentalists who denounce many scientific conclusions, all the while benefiting from technological advances, of course. And there are the reductive materialist atheists who denounce all religion and with it all sense of mystery and awe.

But most of us lie somewhere in the middle between these extremes. There are atheistic scientists who believe that science evokes wonder and awe, something akin to spirituality. And there have always been people of religious faith who have embraced scientific advances as revealing God's truths.

In fact, a good reading of the history of science will reveal all the ways in which modern

science was given birth by deeply religious people, like Sir Isaac Newton. What so often appear as conflicts between science and religion were often conflicts between competing value systems or new paradigms with religious people actually lining up on both sides of the conflict.

In our day we seem to be living through another era in which scientific conclusions are dismissed by a wide segment of our society, and sometimes for religious reasons. I find it strange that in 2016 highlighting the continuities between science and spirituality remains a unique endeavor.

Last year David Nichols came to me and said, “We need to be having more conversations about the connections between science and spirituality.” As he and I talked he expressed more of what he meant. For him science reveals mysteries and wonders and for him exploring those mysteries is a spiritual experience.

At the time the UCC’s pastoral letter on religion and science was released—the letter an excerpt of which Barb read a moment ago—the Rev. Dr. John Thomas, the former General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, was interviewed. Listen to this excerpt from the interview:

Science ultimately welcomes more mystery—not less—into the life of faith, Thomas believes. . . . the sight of seeing dividing cells through the aid of a microscope “encourages singing, not arguments” . . .

The outcome of scientific inquiry, therefore, is “a greater sacramental understanding of our life together,” Thomas says.

Thomas then asks an interesting question, “Isn’t it exciting that God wants God’s creatures to be curious creatures, exploring and imagining?” John Thomas, by the way, will be preaching here next month for Katie Miller’s installation service.

God wants us to be curious, to explore, to imagine. I believe this very sentiment is expressed by the psalmist. We humans are humble creatures, a fragile bit of matter, yet this lump of clay has the most amazing brain. We can reason and imagine, dream and create, make and fashion. This is the divine glory within us.

Last year I stood in awe of our species as we watched the New Horizons probe beam back to us pictures of Pluto. Here were mountain ranges and icy plains revealed in stunning photographs—beauty that might have laid unrevealed through all eternity. Yet, our brains could design a satellite that traveled 3 billion miles away and take pictures and send them back to us. I’ve never been so in awe of what it means to be a human and to have our brains. Crowned with glory and honor, indeed.

But that moment of revelation also inspired a greater sense of wonder. What all else exists in our cosmos unrevealed to us? We have so many more worlds to explore and millions, billions even that we will likely never reach in the entire history of species and our planet. And that, for me, is a mystery of deep spiritual import. For while God has lavished such honor and glory upon us in our obscure little corner of the cosmos, what other wonders has God created?

The UCC's pastoral letter on science says, "God yearns for us to understand nature more fully and to love it more deeply. God speaks in many ways and through many voices. Today, one of God's many provocative voices is science. We listen and respond, grateful that our theology is enriched by new ideas."

Let us listen to God speaking to us today. Let us be a people who embrace truth, open to new ideas, welcoming the mysteries.