

## Unitarian Society of Hartford

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### Radical Amazement

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In the beginning of heaven and earth there were no words, words come out of the womb of matter. When we achieved consciousness and awareness of ourselves as physical beings, we began to define the ways in which we view the world. We made a distinction between reason and wonder. Reason is a mode of interpretation that is based on attempts to explain or to adapt the world to our concepts. It is the understanding of the mind. Wonder is a mode of interpretation where we seek to adapt our minds to the world. It is an understanding of the soul. Too often we experience reason and wonder as mutually exclusive, as though one must choose to live in their mind or their spirit. Perhaps what we knew before we could speak is that true understanding comes from a marriage of the two.

Noted Jewish scholar, Abraham Joshua Heschel maintains that true comprehension, authentic understanding, comes from not only the combination of these two states of being, but a willingness to exist outside of both at the same time. In his philosophy of religion, *Man is Not Alone*, he writes: "The greatest hindrance to knowledge is our adjustment to conventional notions. Wonder, or radical amazement, the state of maladjustment to words and notions, is therefore a prerequisite for an authentic awareness of that which is."

It is an astonishing concept. In order to understand something, one must first be willing to disregard every notion that has been gathered with the mind and heart and body, to allow ones self to experience it anew. It is a state of mind where nothing is taken for granted, where reality is not viewed through the lens of memorized knowledge or experience.

This is how we are limited by words. When language is learned, physical objects are connected with specific words and definitions. Book. Table. Ball. It is with jubilation that we celebrate a child's ability to recognize an object by its proscribed name. Not simply an object, but persons as well. Mama. Papa. Nannie. We quickly become hardwired to experience a sense of safety, a sense of self in the language that we use to identify our world, both physical and emotional. It is a practical strategy, to be sure. It allows us to communicate our basic needs, to make connection with each other, to learn the languages of others. But how do we step aside from our firmly rooted views of the world to imagine a way to experience a deeper understanding?

Heschel argues that we carry the fundamental capacity to understand within us. Already the greatest experiences that we have are those for which we have no adequate expression. He asks: "What formula could explain and solve the enigma of the very act of thinking? Ours is neither thing nor thought, but only the subtle magic blending the two."

The subtle magic is the state of radical amazement, the capacity to shift our comprehension from a selected segment of reality to all of reality. We become aware not only of what we see, but to the very act of seeing. We become aware of ourselves, to the selves that see and are amazed at their ability to see.

Mystic and theologian Howard Thurman captures a moment of this state of being: "How wonderful it is to be able to feel things deeply. How moving is the sheer wonder of being necessary to the life of another." He evokes not simply a feeling, but the awareness of ourselves as beings capable of feeling, and of comprehending our capacity to feel *about* our feelings as well.

Thurman provides a gateway to Heschel and his concept of radical amazement. He speaks of his own understanding of Heschel in this way: "He is talking about the experience of encountering that which is direct, overwhelming and ineffable. It is what remains when all externals are stripped away and the individual has a naked exposure at his deepest level to something that envelopes him and stands him at attention."

Thurman's meditation continues using the metaphor of a sunset. He allows that the metaphor is somewhat hackneyed, but apt. It is a nearly universal experience to watch a sunset or other spectacular natural phenomena and be rendered speechless. This perspective of radical amazement and the experience of beauty immediately capture attention. Who can resist the possibility of an understanding of the glories of the universe that surpasses our current consciousness? Exclamations of joy and celebration come easily and with blissful abandon. How wonderful it is to be able to feel things deeply! Life is the greatest gift of all! In the beginning of heaven and earth, there were no words!

Much like the time of The Great Yellowness, the world can suddenly feel too bright, and the way has to be made for shadow. An increase in the breadth and depth of understanding of joy can be an ecstatic experience, but what of the realities of darkness? There is no life that remains untouched by struggle or pain, so how do we balance reason and wonder in those moments?

As you may know, I have been living with chronic illness for nearly half of my life, and my condition requires regular monitoring of my kidney function. At my most recent doctor's appointment, I learned that all of the nonsurgical treatment options have been exhausted, and the time has come to begin considering the appropriate steps toward an organ transplant. In the face of that announcement, I found myself speechless.

Even with seventeen years of preparation for this moment, its arrival threw me into a state that defied both reason and wonder. My experience of the world became myopic and oppressive. The great grayness became blueness and then redness and back again.

Turning to Howard Thurman again, I began to argue with him and his universal sunset metaphors. In my scattered, uncomprehending state, it seemed a reasonable outlet for my wordless feelings. "Tell me, Howard. Tell me how wonderful it is to feel things deeply when you are not celebrating the rediscovery of your fountain pen. Tell me how amazing it is to be enveloped and stood at attention by grief and rage."

The benefit of arguing with deceased mystics is that sometimes one can imagine they answer you. In this case, Howard's response came in the form of another meditation: "We are most alive when we are brought face to face with the response of the deepest thing in us to the deepest thing in life."

We are most alive when we are brought face to face with the deepest things, not only in joy but also in fear, also in pain. There is a clarity that can come from suffering; a shift in consciousness that reveals what is ultimate to the self. For just a moment, I was able to consider the possibility of a transplant as an answer to a prayer rather than the next ordeal to be borne.

Life is the greatest gift of all the riches on this earth, treasure it and measure it with deeds of shining worth.

With that in mind, I began the daunting task of asking my brothers if they would be willing to have their tissue tested in the hope that one would be an appropriate kidney donor. And I thought the stewardship committee had a hard job!

I was once again struck speechless when not only both of my brothers but my parents, my cousin and five friends stepped forward to be included in the testing process. Even a fellow student in my Howard Thurman class, a woman I have known only four months, came forward to offer not only her support and encouragement, but the potential of her kidney as well.

How moving is the sheer wonder of being necessary to the life of another.

Ultimately, I came to realize that radical amazement does not simply apply to the ecstatic beauties of life, but the horrible sorrows as well. In fact, attempting to view a tragedy through a lens where nothing is taken for granted can offer the relief of the possibility of an alternative perspective. It does not take the pain or fear or grief away, but allows for a shift in consciousness that may offer a deeper, more authentic understanding of the situation.

Another of Thurman's great gifts to the pursuit of understanding is the concept of mysticism and social change. Thurman, as an African American man who lived in the early twentieth century was no stranger to the painful challenges of living and the impact of oppression. Yet he did not see the darkness in the world as an obstacle to obtaining a deeper understanding, to living with radical amazement. He was known for his tremendous capacity for maintaining a deeply meditative and reflective state in the most trying of circumstances. A telling anecdote about Thurman is that the president of the university where he worked to attend a lecture offered by a visiting dignitary invited him. The speaker was known to be both long-winded and soporific and the president apologized to Thurman in advance for the tedious hours ahead of him. The speaker lived up to expectation, and several hours later the two men were driving home from the event discussing it. The president apologized again, and Thurman responded with surprise. Was the speaker boring? He asked. The president, astonished that Thurman could have missed the experience, inquired where Thurman's mind had been. He responded: "I was a pumpkin. First I imagined myself as a tiny seed in the ground, being nurtured by the soil. Then I felt myself begin to shoot up and up until my tendrils broke through the soil in search of the sun. I grew and grew into a beautiful orange pumpkin, happily entwined with others in the patch. By the time I was baked into a pie and eaten, the speech was over."

Thurman's ability to shift his consciousness to a new understanding was profound, and provided him a way to cope with the darkness in the world. And yet, he did not use his experience with the mystical to allow himself to turn away from the social realities of our country. In fact, he argues that it is the moral responsibility of the mystic to create social change where they can. In his mind, increased understanding was coupled with duty to act on behalf of justice.

We all choose our perception of the world with each action that we take. We can decide to live in The Great Grayness or Blueness or Yellowness or Redness. We can understand our place in the world through devastating inertia or sadness, through blinding cheerfulness or anger. Or we can choose to see the world as a place of ever changing color, of joy and grief, of activity and rest. We can decide that we each have the capacity to create change in the world, perhaps through the giving of a gentle word when you did not know that such a word was desperately needed; or the sharing of so little at the crucial point of acute urgency. Action, however small, is not only a mystical act, but also the physical expression of radical amazement. Even a momentary disruption in our conventional notions can allow for an experience of wonder, for an authentic awareness of that which is. In the indelible words of William Blake, understanding is to see the world in a grain of sand, and a heaven in a wild flower, hold infinity in the palm of your hand, and eternity in an hour.