

Life Has Its Mysteries, and We Are One of Them—Rev. Rita Capezzi
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Our Soul Matters theme for December is “Wonder.” So let us begin our journey with the insights and advancements of scientists, with stories of the wonderful, and with our own lived experience.

I remember a late night once as a child, riding in the backseat of the family car. “Mom,” I asked, “Why is the moon following me?” She laughed and said, “It isn’t.” Her answer to my wondering was true, of course, though she likely had many more pressing and immediate matters on her mind than idle observation and speculation. It’s also likely my mother didn’t know how to explain the phenomenon to me, that the distance of the moon from the earth and the size of earth and moon relative to the rocks and trees and cars conspired to create the illusion that the moon followed me home that evening. Perhaps it’s better that my mother could not give me a scientific answer, because my wondering did not end, even with her laughter. In a way, an important way for me, it doesn’t matter that I know now the explanation for why the moon seems to follow me still. The appearance that the moon follows me keeps me full of wonder. And the wondering enabled my sense of the mystery at the heart of everyday life to persist long beyond childhood.

According to Albert Einstein, “There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.” Reductive as that might be—only two ways to live! Really?—reductive as that statement might be, it’s significant that it come from a scientist, a creator of knowledge based on data collection and the scientific method. And even though the statement seems to present a choice, it’s clear which way of living is the privileged one, the validated one, the one worth living. It’s significant that such a statement comes from a seeker of truth, of true explanations about how our universe works. And it’s significant that such a proclamation—“There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.”—comes from a thinker like Albert Einstein because we are reminded that knowing begins in wondering. Knowledge begins in mystery and in the contemplation of the miraculous, the stunning, the wonderful, the beautiful. We can know, we can have scientific explanations for how our universe and how our world works, how are bodies and minds work, and yet those explanations do not take away any of the wonder, the mystery, the miracle that continues to present itself to our eyes, if only we open to awareness.

Here we are, together, setting aside time, in this month of wonder. The word “wonder” is a marvelous thing in itself. We might say, “I wonder,” “wonder” a verb, an action signifying thoughtfulness and contemplation and curiosity about something, even something very mundane and ordinary. I remember finding my daughter once behind a hedgerow in our yard, having followed the garden hose she had dragged along with her. She was busy making a puddle, and watching her pink toes squish in mud, wet and sticky earth rising as she pressed her feet down, brown water dripping as she raised them. Mud is so ordinary, so are feet. Wondering how one’s own foot interacts with water and mud, that’s wonderful. She didn’t ask me any questions, as I had asked my mother about the moon. She just looked at me, looking at her as she looked at her toes and the mud. She was making her own answers, coming to her

own conclusions through her own experiments. I still wonder exactly what she was thinking. She hasn't told me. Have you some memory like that one, some wonderful image from your life where you wondered about something quite ordinary? I invite you to reflect on such a happening, just for a moment.

That word "wonder" is a marvelous thing in itself. We might say that some thing is "a wonder," a noun signifying something extraordinary or miraculous, something far beyond the ordinary. I call to mind those photographs coming from the James Webb telescope, showing us the far reaches of the universe. In the Western tradition, the Ancient Greeks between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE were aware that the moon (along with the Sun and the "Wanderers," what we now call "Planets") moved differently in relation to the earth than did the stars. And in this same familiar tradition, scientists give Haley in 1718 or Bessel in 1838 credit for the earliest knowledge of a star's distance from us. Scientific data builds up over time, the work of one preparing for and enhancing the work of the other or the next. That telescope, that fragile, human-made machine, it moves far beyond the reach of any one human being, past or present. Scholars and engineers use the science at our human disposal to re-create images that we can grasp with our eyes, with the processes of our brains. It is a wonder, the universe rendered this way, our home and yet a mystery to us, the sky both clear black and full of color and light at the very same time. A wonder, beyond what we can see on our own, yet we are part of what makes that seeing possible, part of the lineage of human curiosity and contemplation that makes such knowledge usable and inspiring. Have you some experience of such wonderful knowledge, when new worlds opened up, visible and yet beyond the ordinary? I invite you to reflect on such a thing, just for a moment.

The moon continues to follow me, even as I know it follows you, too. Last summer, I stood with my children and my daughter's significant other on a deck of a house on the Hood Canal outside of Seattle, Washington. The full moon had drawn me. A pathway of light shimmering across the water linked me directly to the moon above. A shimmering pathway just for me. And then, it was as if I could see the shimmering pathway linking Liam to the moon, and another linking Helen to the moon, and another linking Evan to the moon, just as the one light linked me. I could actually see only the one pathway of light, and yet I knew that we were each seeing that pathway just as if it were for each one of us alone. What a wonder and a mystery and a miracle. Yes, the scientific explanation still holds—the distance, the size, the matter of individual perspective. For that brief moment, though, I held my own vision and could see the visions of Liam and Helen and Evan, too. I can still see it now.

"When I look up into the night sky, I am in awe of all that is. There in a faraway galaxy, a star has died, yet it is still bright for my eyes to see. I peer out into the endless horizon, knowing the presence of places beyond where I can see. When I sit around the fire, I feel its warmth enter me, without ever touching me. Wherever I am, I take in a breath, and I know I am in the present moment, in all of these wonders. My fervent wish is that generations upon generation to also have the chance to look beyond the horizon and marvel at the wonder of existence." Our reality offers so much variety and diversity, complex patterns of beauty creating the web that holds us all, outside of which we do not exist. Sometimes we have to imagine an outsider's view, an alien visiting from another planet, in order to see the up-close miraculous that over-familiarity can obscure. And still, "There are lots of things we don't

know, like where we were before we were born or where we go when we die. But right this minute. We are here together on this beautiful planet.” Science has not explained those larger questions, not yet and maybe not ever: Why we are here. What our purpose is. Why we are born and why we die. What happens after. Why we care about each other. Science tells us much about how and when, not so much about why, not so much about why we are moved to tears by moonbeams and sunrises, by children playing in mud.

Experiencing mystery at the center of the everyday is a crucial frame for living. Our togetherness matters—amplifying the vision that creates science and makes for the wonderful and miraculous. That word “wonder” is a marvelous thing in itself. We might say that someone is “wonderful,” meaning that they are terrific, pleasing, delightful, perfect, brilliant, other words of that sort. Someone so good, so great, miraculous even. That person is both a wonder in themselves and makes the rest of us feel full with wonder. I believe you have we all have person like that our lives, someone who brings wonder and joy with them because of the way they experience life. I invite you to reflect on such that person, just for a moment.

Perhaps wonder is intrinsic to the universe. Perhaps it is intrinsic because we are part of the universe, and we are full of wonder and wondering. We are the universe wondering about itself. We are wonderful because we continue to open in awareness and gratitude to mystery and miracle, and that makes us miracles, too. Especially so, especially our living is miraculous when our personal concerns and situations overwhelm us, when the world news continues to alarm and to batter us, when some of our siblings in this life—Queer siblings, Jewish siblings, Black and Brown siblings, poor and ill and addicted siblings—are threatened and abused, when we fear for our lives and those of future generations on a changing planet, when we feel as tiny specks in a vast universe going about its eternal and impersonal business. When all these truths are real and impactful and still we choose, again and again, to seek community with each other, to work together for the common good, to love each other. Our ability to wonder is creative and sustaining, miraculous, regardless of explanation, when we see the mud through the toes and the eyes of a child. When we allow ourselves to truly participate, to revel in the everyday miracle of moonbeams and sun rises. And we are most miraculous, most wonderful, when we honor our different perspectives, build new perspectives from our proximity and our differences, when we allow ourselves to revel in the everyday miracle of each other and how together we put a world together, how we build a reality in which to live together, with shared values and a sense of decency toward each other, most especially when we disagree.

“Mystery Beyond Our Understanding, wondrous and miraculous, we face questions that we know can’t be answered and tragedies that we know can’t be explained.” “There are lots of things we don’t know, like where we were before we were born or where we go when we die. But right this minute. We are here together on this beautiful planet.” “Morning has broken, like the first morning,” morning is always breaking. Should we not praise it, all that it is—the light, the sound, the sweetness of ever-new possibility? As our lives flow on, mixed and mingled with those before us and those ahead of us, like scientists building knowledge upon knowledge, can we not listen for an endless song of wonder, above our lamentations of grief, of oppression, of injustice, of destruction? There is a real, if far-off, hymn of

new creation, of a wonder we can together, in compassion and companionship, sing into existence, in the here and now. "May the living breathing creatures that we are feel the breath of life moving in us and through all things, bringing us into greater union with the mysterious universe of which we are a part," as you remember, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so, may it be so, and may we say together, "Amen."

<https://coolcosmos.ipac.caltech.edu/ask/177-Why-does-the-moon-follow-me-when-I-move#:~:text=Why%20does%20the%20Moon%20follow%20me%20when%20I,appear%20to%20move%20between%20you%20and%20the%20Moon.>