

## **Gathered Here in the Mystery of the Hour**

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“Where do babies come from?” That’s right. Gathered here in the mystery of this hour, I begin by asking the question: “Where do babies come from?” Most parents have been confronted with this question. Most of us, when we were wee ones ourselves, we asked our own grown-ups this very question. “Where do babies come from?” This straightforward question has led to some pretty far-fetched answers. One pervasive myth, stretching across many cultures, is that storks bring babies. Another that babies come from the cabbage patch. Or from heaven. These “silly stories” certainly take the “where” of the question seriously, at least.

Some of us might confess to repeating these familiar stories. Sometimes families have made up their own silly stories. And sometimes the silly stories are deflections, efforts to put off the inevitable conversations about sex, I uh, I mean about the birds and the bees.

We begin to answer children’s straight-forward question with made-up stories, but then we do get down to answering with the facts, don’t we? We have to, as our children get older and recognize the limits of the silly stories. We have to explain the facts, as our children get older and more aware of the forces within their bodies that might draw them not only into human pleasure but also into risk—physical, emotional, and moral risk. And so, we get down to the facts of biology—eggs and sperms, the mechanics of sex, the mechanisms of birth control and of birth.

And sometimes, when we let it be so, the question “Where do babies come from?” plunges us not into myth and not into fact either, but rather the question plunges us into mystery, inviting us into a consideration of creation not at a mythic level, not at a biological level, but at a cosmic level. What is it ultimately that gives rise to life? What is life? We know a great deal about the myths and stories that human beings use to explain things we don’t understand. We know a great deal about the biological function of our bodies and how egg and sperm together create the possibility of a living human being. We know a great deal about a great many things, we human beings, and still as the American philosopher John Dewey claimed, “[Humanity] lives in a world of surmise, of mystery, of uncertainties.”

Let me be clear that I do not mean to confuse the concept of mystery with the reality of ignorance. Believe me, there is a great deal that is a mystery to me. I have forgotten most of what I learned about how electricity works, but I know there is an explanation for this technology, even if I simply must trust it when I flip on a light switch. Human beings like me can be ignorant of technology. We can be ignorant about cultures that are not our own. We can be ignorant, deeply ignorant, about our own history. And we know we are ignorant, and sometimes choose to learn. Some of us are willfully ignorant, refusing facts and knowledge that do not conform to what we already think. That is a dangerous and a destructive attitude. Some of us have been made ignorant, by misinformation perpetrated by the powerful. The powerful might voice falsehoods directly or find surrogates to do it on social media. Or the powerful might institutionalize stupidity through laws and statutes. Or the powerful might defund

education and thus withhold from us the possibility of learning beyond our own limits. These are all dangerous and destructive uses of power.

And, there is a flipside to perpetuating ignorance, however. Most of us know that no matter how many books or blogs, no matter how any articles we read or podcasts we hear or Ted Talks we watch, there is no bottom, no end, to what there is to know about the world and the humans of time. There is no limit to what there is to know about the vastness and timelessness and limitlessness of the universe. None of us can know everything. Even collectively through time and space, human beings don't know everything there is to know.

Finally, there are things that are unknowable—some because we haven't yet discovered the mechanism and the methods to know them, and some because they cannot be known, for they are not for knowing. They are rather the stuff of sensing and of being. These "unknowables," they are the stuff of meaning and purpose, conceived and reconceived and reconceived again. These unknowables are the stuff of mystery, where we answer again and again, never arriving at the myth that finally explains all or the fact that covers the issue completely. Life, the reality of living, that is a riddle and a mystery. Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? We find ourselves in the realm of the spiritual when we discern how these questions, and the asking of them again and again, are distinguishable from mere ignorance as well as from focused fact. The spiritual is not the insubstantial, not the opposite of substance. Rather, spiritual is a response to overriding and overwhelming mystery.

In her book *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, professor of biology and religious naturalist Ursula Goodenough explains in her chapter "The Origins of Earth" how scientific knowledge can give rise to the realm of the spirit. Since the beginning, as far as we know, the universe has been in flux, with dynamic forces of "enormous times and distances," elemental particles and substances and gases expanding with high energy, clumping together, exploding and imploding, colliding and merging. These forces created galaxies and stars and planets and loose bits everywhere, the materials of more possibility. These forces created, somehow, somewhere, space and time. A microcosm of the universe, our planet mirrors this universal motion, involved "in continuous geological activity, defining and redefining" the medium that long ago enabled biological life to arise. It is both humbling and terrifying to learn what climate change really is: the forces of extractive and carbon-burning ways of living becoming a part of the cosmic dynamism in endless motion, making and remaking, the earth, the universe, all that is.

When you look up at the night skies and see the vast evidence of the physics of creativity and creation, even if you look up and see patterns imposing mythological beasts and battles upon the stars, it is easy to be completely overwhelmed, to feel small and insignificant. Goodenough says this about her own experience while an undergraduate learning this universal physics: All the stars we see are just in one galaxy. "There are about 100 billion galaxies in the universe, with perhaps 100 billion stars in each one." "Each star is dying, exploding, accreting, exploding again, splitting atoms and fusing nuclei under enormous temperatures and pressures." This is happening with our Sun, too.

Stunned by this knowledge, Goodenough quotes physicist Steven Weinberg: “The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it seems pointless.” Rather than residing fearfully and painfully in such nihilism, Goodenough reimagines this cosmic play of the infinite and the infinitesimal as the locus of Mystery. She defines Mystery in these terms: Why there is anything at all, rather than nothing. Where the laws of physics came from. Why the universe seems so strange. Another way to say it, using the words of artist Paul Gauguin: Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? Or in my words: Where do babies come from?

“Mystery,” Goodenough writes. “Inherently pointless, inherently shrouded in its own absence of category. The clouds passing across the face of the deity in the stained-glass images of Heaven.” She goes on to say that “The word God is often used to name this mystery.” Many faces of god, many attributes of god or gods or goddess. Myths and stories attempting to explain the mystery of creation. We human beings like explanations—mythic ones as well as factual one. But the mystery that is the universe and the arising of life, that mystery is irreducible in its enormity and its strangeness, in the way the universe is always exceeding our grasp. The more we learn the less we know, learning always leading on to more to figure out. Goodenough invites us into her epiphany, that we “needn’t seek [final] answers to the Big Questions. Rather, she invites us to choose, as she has, to “take in forces and symmetries and [let them] caress [us], like Gregorian chants, the meaning of the words not mattering because the words are so haunting.”

Leaving behind the efforts to come to answers is very hard to do, especially when we are confronted by the enormity of the universe and the rise of abundant and various life. It is hard to do when we face the personal enormities of our own lives, the deep sadnesses that overcome us when we lose to death people we love, the sadness when we witness the sadness of others. Naming answers is hard to give up as we acknowledge the reality of climate crisis and the full effects, at all human levels, of the current pandemic. The weight can be unbearable, and so we seek answers.

And some of the answers we have are Catholic answers, as from St. Teresa in our meditation hymn: “Nothing can trouble. Nothing can frighten. Those that seek God shall never go wanting. God alone fills us.” And we have Sufi Muslim answers, as from the mystic Rumi in his *Massnavi*, volume I verse 3809: “When I seek to please God, I do so consciously, without any doubt. When I carry a burden, I know where I am destined to go. I am the moon and the Sun is my guide.” And we have humanist answers, as from philosopher and explorer of psychology and Eastern religions Alan Watts: “Through our eyes, the universe is perceiving itself. Through our ears, the universe is listening to its harmonies. We are the witnesses through which the universe becomes conscious of its glory, of its magnificence.”

Any one of these answers, and any one of many other answers, could be the answer that you favor, the answer that gives you peace with the mysteries of life that are spiritual in nature, rather than the result of ignorance or explainable by science. And some of us, like Ursula Goodenough and singer Iris DeMent, we “just choose to let the mystery be.” In DeMent’s words, “Everybody is a wonderin' what and where they all came from. Everybody is a worryin' 'bout where they're gonna go when the whole thing's done.

But no one knows for certain, and so it's all the same to me. I think I'll just let the mystery be." In fact, DeMent sings, "I believe in love, and I live my life accordingly. [So] I choose to let the mystery be."

Within the mystery which we cannot finally know or solve or resolve, we can make choices about how we live. We can live by love and let the whys and wherefores go. And when we live for love, when we decide upon love as the non-answer to the mystery, then our choice for love brings us humans into relationship, brings us into community. And don't we need community to explore the questions that the mystery rises up within us? Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? Those questions are too big, too frightening, too perplexing, too overwhelming to think about, to experience alone. Those very questions presuppose that we will not face the mystery alone. We simply cannot, whether we easily admit it or not. We need our Unitarian Universalist faith. Our tradition invites us to seek the wisdom of many different lenses for making meaning within the unsolvable mystery of life. Our tradition invites us to listen to each other and to question each other, to join with each other as we journey together with our own ideas engaging each other's ideas, giving rise to new combinations and meaning that we cannot arrive at alone. Mystery, this life of spirit, it thrives in community, as long as we each resist our own certainty, as long as we cease to believe our understanding of the facts, which can be ignorance of the facts, too, is a final answer. Mystery will thrive, inviting us into the open space of inquiry and creativity, that space of enlivening liveliness and loveliness, that space where babies are made, when we are willing to humbly accept our human limitations and to grow in relationship with each other.

And so for your own sake and for each other's sake and for the sake of living within creative love, we chose to gather here in the mystery of the hour, to gather here in one strong body, to gather here in the struggle and the power, inviting spirit to draw near. All of us, together, where our hearts can unite, our hands can set us free, and our words can be heard. We gather in Unitarian Universalist communities where we can all just be, part of the great living mystery. Hands, hearts, and minds, vibrant and strong. Different, the same, in community, were we all belong." Soon we will depart this company, but may you remember to gather again. May the mystery continue to call you into spirit and into community 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 the people all say, "Amen."