

Mystery Solved?

By Bruce Tomsovic 12/31/2023

Some people take the mystery of life way too far. Rene Descartes is sometimes called the father of modern philosophy. The French mathematician and philosopher at the end of his 1637, *Discourse on the Method*, concluded the only thing he can be sure of is that he thinks, therefore he exists. "I think Therefore I am". He reasons he could be a brain on a table being fed all the stimuli he was experiencing by someone like God. He knows he is thinking, but everything else is a mystery. Now, I am pretty sure I am standing up here in front of you, my stomach is grumbling from too much coffee. I'm sweating a little because I'm nervous. But all this feels very real to me. And you guys you don't much look like an illusion. Besides I don't believe in God so there is no one to feed me all these stimuli ... unless maybe Google. For the purposes of this presentation, we will assume Descartes was wrong.

However, a little mystery in one's life is a good thing. After all aren't we exploring the mystery of life together? Universal Unitarians are encouraged to go out and explore the mysteries of their choosing; then come back and tell everybody what they find out. This is why many of us bring our collective wisdom and experience to service and take turns sharing it.

Both UU Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz in her sermon *Let the Mystery Be* and UU Rev Sarah Richards in her sermon *Transcending Mystery* read by Dave Carlson on the second Sunday of this month, they both reference the first and fourth source of our living tradition. The first source states Unitarian Universalism invites us to be drawn towards "direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life." The fourth source "Humanist teachings which counsels us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warns us against /idolatries of the mind and spirit." Beautifully written, the first source promotes the question, "Will religion (mysticism) or science answer the mysteries of life?" The fourth source answers the question, science! Referring back to the first source, we realize for any of the mysteries or questions science can't solve we are going to transcend our need to know. Transcendence is easy enough to understand. Could be hard to accomplish.

I sometimes I wonder how many people in our UU fellowship believe in God or at least hold some small hope somewhere in the recesses of their minds. Would they be comfortable sharing those feeling with the those of us who seem to know there is no God? If you are like me, at some time in your life you could no longer hold on to the idea that God existed. Well, “daing” my consciousness will disappear from the universe. It is not easy to just let go, without explanation of those profound questions. For some people it is impossible.

For thousands of years Medicine Men, Mystics and religions have accumulated power, wealth and prestige solving mysteries for those who need explanation. This is especially true or organized religion. Just ask the Catholic Church. Mysteries of life no problem. All mysteries will be solved and all questions are answered in this book or by the Pope. Well, except those that aren't. But be assured those mysteries not solved and questions not answered are things God believes it is best that you do not know. Ok? got it???

The definitions of mystery on most religious sites were similar to the definition found on CatholicCulture.org. Mystery is “A divinely revealed truth whose very possibility cannot be rationally conceived before it is revealed and, after revelation, whose inner essence cannot be fully understood by the finite mind. The incomprehensibility of revealed mysteries derives from the fact that they are manifestations of God, who is infinite and therefore beyond the complete grasp of a created intellect. Holly cow, what a definition! They do not want to give humans much credit for figuring stuff out on their own.

After reading the Catholic definition of mystery I was feeling somewhat finite and the owner of an inferiorly created intellect. I decided it would help my self-image to lookup or Google some other definitions of mystery.

Mystery can range from the mundane, “where are my car keys” to the paramount “Why am I here, where am I going.” Looking at definitions on the internet showed a variety of wordings. The term comes from the Latin *mysterium*, meaning “a secret thing.” Some common synonyms of mystery are conundrum, enigma, problem, question, riddle, and secrecy.

When I start thinking about it, mystery is in everything. All sorts of questions come up. Is mystery good, is it bad, are people drawn to it, or are they fearful or

repulsed by it? Is it a driving force of accomplishment or is it an inhibitor? Well, it ends up as with most things in life. It depends.

From Oxford Languages, Mystery a novel, play, or movie dealing with a puzzling crime, especially a murder. Nearly everyone likes mystery in literature and film. It's predictable. In nearly all works it is solved or resolved. Even though a good mystery can draw you in almost like its real, it's not. There is a reason Agatha Christie is the best-selling author of all time.

Some definitions of mystery might be called lighthearted. From Websters; Mystery is something that baffles or perplexes. These are Life's little mysteries. This is the kind of mystery I and most of you encounter almost daily. What was the name of that couple we met last night? Where are my shoes? Why did she marry him? How many hours of Fox News did he have to watch to talk like that? For me most of these mysteries are solved by consulting the oracle. Patsy, have you seen my coffee cup? You all probably have your own methods but this one works pretty well for me. And with this definition I can assure you I and some of you are getting more mysterious with age.

Urbandictionary.com says Mystery is something you have to find out, or you don't know. This is more the explorers' definition. Intellectual, emotional, or physical explorers embrace mystery and the unknown. Curiosity, a sense of wonder, encourages adventure. For me the Big Horn Mountains and particularly the wilderness area have provided the excitement of mystery and the unknown. The high glacial valleys of the Big Horns massive formations of granite deeply incised by massive glaciers is other worldly. The excitement of experiencing those environments can for me be mystical and life affirming. If you live in Wyoming for any length of time you will eventually find yourself in the middle of nowhere and be slightly confused about where you are going. This is essence of mystery and exploration. We are fortunate to have this kind of mystery so close.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines mystery as something strange or not known that has not yet been explained or understood. This defines a more serious mystery. For some people mysteries like, "Why do people not see that the current rate of environmental degradation is not sustainable. Why do people vote for Trump?" For others, "How did they steal the election? Why is Biden making

storms worse and the oceans rise?" This type of mystery is going to take a lot more effort to solve than Life's Little Mysteries.

If you thought that was heavy or possibly depressing, check this out. Merriam Webster claims mystery is something not understood or beyond understanding. "The mysteries of outer space". This is the serious stuff. What created the universe, intelligent design or random combinations over unimaginable periods of time. And why? This is probably a good time to mention that neither science, mysticism, religions or Jesus will give you a good reason why. This is one of those things, mentioned earlier, that God does not want you to know. Apparently, humans need a reason for doing things the universe does not.

I am not sure of all the influences that made me a "nonbeliever" but I believe science was a big factor. My parents were not religious. They didn't discourage or encourage me to attend church. When I wanted to go, they accommodated me. They encouraged me to pursue whatever I thought was right for me.

When I was growing up, in the 1950s and 60s, science particularly astro physics and quantum mechanics was explaining how the vast universe worked right down to the smallest of subatomic particles. It was like the explanation of the whole universe was being rolled out before you. My dad loved science. Before I left grade school I had a telescope, a microscope, a chemistry set an anatomical model of a man. A periodic table and maps of the solar system and the world hung on my walls. Also, a picture of Albert Einstein with the inscription "The most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it's comprehensible" I was sold on science. From a young age my view of the world would best be described as a religious naturalism. However, when I was 11 or 12 the realization of my own death occurred. From that time to my early 20's I tried to find God. I tried to find answers to the mysteries in religious works and charismatic religious teachers.

General relativity and quantum mechanics are the two models of our universe widely accepted by physicists. Relativity involves extremely large distances, very high speeds and massive objects. It's a beautifully coherent model of the larger universe. It predicts phenomena with names like simultaneity, length contraction, time dilation, a universal speed limit, mass-energy equivalence and the speed of

causality. Time going slower and mass growing bigger with speed. Time and space bending. When you read about this stuff, they seem like there right out of a science fiction movie but all have been verified by experiments. Quantum Mechanics on the other hand deals with the infinity small. Protons, electrons, neutrons and now thanks to the Hadron Collider the God Particle, Higgs boson. Not to mention six different types of Quarks in three different colors.

Between relativity and quantum mechanics there is a lot of complicated math. Without advanced degrees in Astro Physics and Quantum Mechanics I doubt I am really understanding all of this. I suppose I will just have to trust those with advanced degrees that they have it figured out, that the entities they say are out there and in there really are there, that the actions and reactions they calculated are really happening. Considering a single observation can invalidate a theory and physicists have not been able to get the theories and equations in general relativity and quantum physics to agree or unify, my embrace of science is starting to look a little like a leap of faith.

In philosophy, a leap of faith is the act of believing in or accepting something not on the basis of reason. The phrase is commonly associated with Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. A leap of faith into the arms of a loving God. Kierkegaard maintains we're just overthinking everything. Just like the Catholics he says we can never figure it out. You're never going to be fulfilled or satisfied without taking this leap. In my case taking a leap into the arms of science was another valid choice.

Kierkegaard would be the first to admit that the smaller you can make your leap the better. To me the leap to science or nonbelief was much smaller than the leap to God. Surveys seem to indicate that more than half the people in this country believe or say they believe in God. All of this does not say you can't believe in God and science at the same time. If you view religious work as myths, powerful works that form cultures it should be easy. If you are depending on a literal translation of the Bible or most religious works it can be difficult. What we have to keep in mind about religious work is, that other than the ten commandments in stone, God doesn't write, men do.

Losing God didn't change the way I acted or what I believed was right or wrong. As Soren Kierkegaard said "The choice to obey God unconditionally is a true

existential 'either/or' decision faced by the individual. Either one chooses to live in faith (the religious stage) or to live ethically (the ethical stage). In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard insists that the single individual has ethical responsibility of his life." I have wondered would I act different if I knew there was a god. I would like to think not.

The loss of God didn't change the way I viewed the world and all its mysteries. Even though I did not know it at the time I had always been a religious naturalist, a perspective that finds religious meaning in the natural world.

This fellowship helps me transcend the mysteries of God and the universe and embrace the mysteries of life on this planet. I find Buddhism not to be a religion but to be a collection of methods and traditions with the goal of transcendence from worldly concerns and attachment. Mindfulness helps embrace the mystery of the unknown. Being present in the moment helps reduce anxiety about the uncertainties of the future. I'm not sure I would be doing anything different if I had answers to the "mysteries of life".

The thing is, the natural world is full of mystery, mysticism and is pretty awe inspiring without a super natural presence. As I was reminded several times this month at fellowship, we all came from "Star Dust". All those protons, electrons, neutrons, bosons and quarks present at the beginning of the universe have wandered through trillions of miles and billions of years to be present here in my body at this time. With these subatomic particles in this form, I am a little beacon of consciousness in the universe just reflecting back on itself. Reads like science fiction! Even more incredible is there are about eight billion little beacons of consciousness in the universe contemplating existence right along with me. Even though the scientists tell us we are not that special as other life must exist in the universe. When I look out there, I feel very special and very unique. I am grateful to be have this experience, even if it is for a relatively short time.

Chet Raymo, Professor of Physics and Astronomy at Stonehill College in Easton Massachusetts. writes: "As I lie on my back and the light of 10,000 stars enters my eyes. Ten thousand subtle but distinct wavelets of energy enter my eyes at slightly different angles from out of the depths of space, and by some miracle my eyes and brain sort it all out, put each star in its proper place, recognize the familiar patterns of the constellations, and open my soul to a universe whose length and

breadth exceed my wildest imagining...I have a friend who speaks of knowledge as an island in a sea of mystery. Let this then, be the ground of my faith: All that we know, now and forever, all scientific knowledge that we have of this world, or ever will have, is as an island in the sea.”

Soren Kierkegaard said “Life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced.” So, when my wife picks up the guitar and with the help of Iris Dement urges you to “let the mystery be”, I can tell you from experience it is best to listen to her. While it is ok to “let the mystery be”, never think you know it all, and never cease to wonder or explore the mystery around you.