

The Empirical Divine
The Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
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Reflection on the Theme by Kelly Kanyid

The television show The Monkees, which originally ran from 1966 - 1968, was a series based on the eponymous “boy band” as they navigated breaking into the rock n’ roll business. I wasn’t born when the Monkees first aired on television, but I grew up singing their songs.

In the summer of 1997, when I was 15 years old, the television show began airing on Nick at Nite. That was how for one whole summer I became a teenybopper 30 years too late. I tuned in not only for episodes of The Monkees, but also for after-show interviews with the actors. Any memory of specific episodes has been lost to time, but I continue to reflect upon a snippet of an after-show interview where actor Mike Nesmith is asked a question - now also lost to time - and his answer shifted the lens with which I viewed the world. He said: "In order to dig things that are pretty, it takes no special talent. What it really takes talent to do is to dig something ugly... like a garage door. You know, I mean, how many people say, 'Oh, look at that garage door.' You know, I mean, you get a lot of this stuff (like) 'what beautiful azaleas.'"

And no shade to azaleas, or any other flower or conventionally beautiful thing for that matter.

What I took from Mike Nesmith’s comment was that appreciating something mundane, or finding the beauty in something that might not meet the conventional beauty standard was a worthy and perhaps even righteous pursuit. This outlook manifested at first as a series of photographs I began taking of garbage. I thought of this as “art photography” and I walked the neighborhood looking for things left next to dumpsters, abandoned appliances, a couch left to rot in the rain with the word “FREE” written upon a hopeful slice of soggy cardboard as if to announce the couch’s liberation.

Later as my mother sought treatment for a terminal illness and I transitioned from moody teenager to moody teenage caretaker I began taking photographs of the new kinds of garbage I found in my own home - latex gloves, iodine covered q-

tips, plastic tubing and empty IV bags - all of the mundane horrors of illness, medical intervention, and hope. And Mike Nesmith was right: it took a great effort to “dig” these things and then greater still to draw beauty and eventually meaning from them.

To this day I feel a responsibility to the mundane, discarded, and ugly things. I try to shed the bias I’ve internalized from conventional beauty standards, and I try to appreciate ugly things with all the gratitude my heart can hold. The practice has molded me into a person who can see something like God, or the cosmos in trash - which is to say I can find hope anywhere. That has been especially helpful these days, when there is so much darkness in the world and so much that inspires my heart to despair. At a time when our current political landscape has been described as a “dumpster fire” I find it especially important to find beauty within those flames. Of course I’m not always successful in that pursuit, but it feels like a worthy endeavor. As difficult as it can be to see, if I squint I can just make out the shadow of hope cast by an ugly world on fire; an ugly world still worth fighting for.

The Empirical Divine by Jacob Jaboson-Tennessee

Once I was hiking in the Andes with two friends. We wore large backpacks as we planned to camp that night above the treeline. For most of the day we were in the cloud forest, a lush land of plants growing on top of other plants, and rivers tumbling down steep slopes. Suddenly one of my friends, and avid ornithologist named Justin, spotted a quetzal, a stunning iridescent green bird, the size of a pigeon but in royal emerald garments, whose luxuriant tail feathers inspired Mesoamerican myths about the god Quetzalcōātl. Justin was gobsmacked to see this outstanding species in the wild. Then I saw it too, but our third companion was unsure where to look. So Justin grabbed him by the straps of his hiking pack and hoisted him up pointing his body in the right direction lest he miss this sublime moment. I’ll always remember seeing the bird, but what sticks with me even more was Justin’s fervent response to it. Later I commented that he couldn’t have reacted more ecstatically if Jesus Christ himself had appeared to us. It’s like you saw God, I said. Well, he replied, I kind of did.

I don’t believe in God, at least not the way that word is usually defined. I’m an atheist, a scientist, and my worldview is free from supernatural spirits or miracles. Of course I agree there are questions science can’t answer, everything from “why does anything exist at all?” to “what is consciousness?” I just don’t think any

better explanations can be found in magical stories. But still, I feel a strong religious impulse which is why I'm a member of this church. The universe is holy, even if it's nothing but physical matter. We can see the divine in the real things around us, as the quetzal and Justin's enthusiasm reminded me. But this is easy to forget. We tend to see the world as mundane, a word that literally means pertaining to the world. We are taught to contrast this ordinary, mundane world with the sacred, spiritual world of heavenly deities. Indeed, conservative religion tells us to regard the world with disgust: these filthy, squishy bodies that we must escape, into a higher realm. This distinction makes no sense to me. The mundane is sacred, and we can learn to see it that way. You can choose to be disgusted with everything, or you can choose the opposite of disgust, which is awe. The empirical world, the world revealed to us by our senses and by science, is as awe-inspiring as any epic myth out of ancient religious texts. The dust is ablaze with marvels. We should all be amazed all the time. This is a skill we can practice. Today I want to talk about this sort of perception, and the philosophy behind it known as religious naturalism.

Small children innately see the world this way. Everything is astounding and alive, because everything is new. Even things that we adults regard as mundane. My little brother and I were quite young when we took a family trip to Denali National Park in Alaska. Everyone on our tour bus was fascinated when we saw a grizzly bear, but nobody was as thrilled as my toddler brother who wasn't even looking at the bear. He was shouting with glee because he had spotted another bus. And why not? Why don't we all shout when we see a bus, a marvel of engineering our ancestors could scarcely imagine? As adults we grow out of this phase, but then wonder why we're distraught and seek to rekindle our awe. Some achieve this with meditation, others with psychedelic drugs, but I'm more partial to what Connie Barlow calls the Way of Science: the more we learn about natural processes, the deeper the urge to revere. In Chet Raymo's metaphor, knowledge is an island, and the larger we make that island with science, the longer becomes the shore where knowledge is lapped by mystery: stretching before us, boundless, unexplored.

But there's a resistance to the idea that science can inform spiritual practice. Science and religion are often depicted as rivals. Even if you don't dispute science, you still might associate it with complicated inscrutable instruments and noisy machinery, dangerous technology that can harm the vulnerable, combined with an amoral nihilism. It doesn't seem to have much to do with peace, serenity, and

love. An anti-science movement in this country has painted science as the bad guy, persuading people that tools like vaccines or wind turbines are nefarious threats. This movement has now pervaded the federal government, defunding research and dismissing scientific expertise. But of course this anti-science movement is itself the evil it claims to be fighting against: it's a means for powerful people to dupe and exploit the common citizen. It's been successful in part because science is seen as unaligned with religious truth. Forced with a choice between science and sacred, people are inclined toward sacred. But it doesn't have to be that way. You can have both.

I once attended a panel discussion at Harvard Divinity School featuring university faculty as well as African religious leaders discussing the problem of malaria, a research focus of mine. The now-departed Rev. David Njovu, an Anglican bishop from Zambia, was seated next to professor Dyann Wirth, a world-renowned Harvard malaria scientist from Wisconsin and pretty much the opposite of a Zambian clergyman. The bishop explained that superstitious beliefs about the disease are prevalent in his country: people want to pray it away, and he has to teach them that the role of spirituality is a little different than that. "Real faith healing," he said, and I'm paraphrasing, "means you pray, God gives wisdom to ..." and here he embraced the parasitology professor next to him, "and they deliver cures."

Dr. Wirth seemed to endorse this framing, and I do too, even though I don't believe in a literal higher power who listens to a prayer in Zambia and then tells malaria scientists like me what to study. Or do I? Nancy Abrams uses a metaphor about ants in an anthill sensing a benevolent higher power shaping their lives. "I was hungry, and the Power provided." "I was lost, and the Power guided me home." "Praise be to the Power." Of course for the ants there is no higher power, just the combined effect of all individual ants working together for the good of the colony. An emergent intelligence too large for a single ant brain to understand. As someone with a larger brain, are my actions any different? Maybe Rev. Njovu was right, but the God he spoke of is us. As medieval mystic Meister Eckhart said, "The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me."

Science, too, is about seeing: learning truth through observation. You don't have to work in a lab to do this; anyone can practice observing. You don't even need good eyesight; any of the senses can be used. Mary Oliver says she doesn't know what a prayer is but she does know how to pay attention, as she falls down into

the grass and holds insects in her hand. Maybe try that. Go turn over a decaying log and uncover a writhing community of millipedes, ants, and grubs. You could recoil with disgust. Or you can choose awe. Look at one of the ants, really look at it, with a magnifying glass if you can. Look at its legs and jaws and eyes, so different from your own and yet built from the same organic stuff, the heritage of your shared great-grandparent crawling on the sea floor hundreds of millions of years ago. The ant's eye and your eye both belong to the universe, and the universe is merely looking at different parts of itself as you and the ant gaze at each other. If your eyes aren't up for focusing on tiny things, you can still feel a bug in your hand. If you want to feel like an insect, go fall down into the grass at dawn with your face to the sky. The Earth is speeding around the sun at 18 miles per second, and though below you you feel no motion, you're right in front, like a bug on a windshield, riding a gargantuan vehicle you can't hope to control. Nothing to do but trust the process. But it doesn't hurt to grab onto some grass for safety. It's thanks to science that you know about Earth's path through space and your common ancestor with the ant: science only enhances the sanctity of the experience. Science confirms what ancient Buddhists could only take on faith: that we are temporary assemblages of the same atoms that make up everything else, and the self has no qualitative distinctiveness. Can the Way of Science foster a full mystical experience, when the ego dissolves into the oneness of everything? Maybe. Environmental Sciences professor David Haskell spent a year observing the same one-meter section of woods in Tennessee, invoking the meditative mandalas of Eastern religion. In his book *The Forest Unseen*, quoted in this morning's reading, he wrote of his intimate bonding with this tiny patch of ground. For myself, I've occasionally felt an unexpected sense of reassuring connectedness when contemplating nature. An inspirational way of perceiving my existence as an infinitesimal component of an unfathomably large universe, in a manner that doesn't invoke despair but rather belonging. I don't think the reveries of prayer are all that different.

One of the easiest ways to blow your mind is with simple math. Consider this ordinary deck of 52 cards. This isn't a magic trick, it's the opposite, a non-magic non-trick. If I shuffle them, how many different arrangements are possible? It turns out the number of ways these cards can be ordered is larger than a 1 with 67 zeros after it. That number is so big, that if every star in the observable universe had an Earth-like planet full of Earth-like animals, and every animal on every planet down to the tiniest bug had their own deck of 52 cards, and they all had been shuffling once per second since the universe began billions of years ago,

they would not have found every combination. It's unlikely that they would have ever generated this particular order that I now hold in my hand. And it's just cards. You are an arrangement of atoms indescribably more complex than that. The chance that those atoms would ever come together to form you is so incomprehensibly small that it takes my breath away to even try to imagine that tiny number. And yet, here you are. Against all odds. You can understand that intellectually here in this room, but if you go outside amid the birds and the bugs and the trees and ponder it, then you can really feel it in your bones. The far more likely fate for you or the ants was to have been, as Dr. Seuss puts it, a Wasn't. "A Wasn't just isn't. He just isn't present. But you... You ARE YOU! And now isn't that pleasant!" If you can wrap your head around that, your experience of wonder will rival the most enlightened mystics.

The emergence of science in human history didn't come from a desire to destroy religion, but to enhance it. The first real scientists were medieval Muslims seeking to reveal the glory of God. When science reached Europe it was turbocharged by people of faith like Isaac Newton. Newton rejected the trinity and was therefore arguably a Unitarian, though he probably didn't use that word. But he absolutely believed in God and wanted to uncover the details of God's creation. The battle between science and religion that we associate with the Catholic Church denouncing Galileo, or the Scopes Monkey Trial, is really just a side story about power. If your religion isn't about controlling people, and is willing to learn and change, it's in no danger from science. The conflict was never about science versus religion per se. It was about bravely embracing the truth versus hiding behind a wish. A person who wants to praise and wonder at the ultimate powers of the universe, whether conceived of as God, Allah, Brahman, or mindless physical forces, will celebrate every new discovery: every time they can discard one of their prior beliefs. They are getting closer to seeing these ultimate powers as they truly are. Closer to spiritual fulfillment. Fundamentalists oppose scientific findings because they want God to fit a certain template, and they get scared when their preconception is threatened. Religious naturalism says, I don't know what the nature of the divine is, let's go look and find out!

It's all a bit like a secret admirer dreaming about a would-be lover from afar. What science does is bring your crush to your doorstep to invite you on a date. The mature and sensible decision, indeed the dream-come-true, is to accept the offer. Get to know this person even if you learn some flaws that shatter your fantasy. Rejecting scientific findings is like slamming the door, preferring to live in

the dark with your infatuation rather than to try for a real relationship. But it's possible to have both. You can find out new things about your beloved that you never imagined, while discarding some of your old convictions, yet continue to worship them. You might even come to worship them more than ever before.

I said I don't believe in supernatural spirits or miracles, but it's just the supernatural part that's the problem. We are spirits, spirits made of matter, the same matter that makes stars and birds and buses. And all of those things, and you and me, are miracles, defying infinitesimal probabilities just to exist. We just need to hoist each other up sometimes, so we can see the astonishing divinity of everything.