

"How Wrong Can You Be?"

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First Unitarian Church of Wilmington

Invocation: by Joy Atkinson

The womb of stars embraces us; remnants of their fiery furnaces pulse through our veins. We are of the stars; the dust of the explosions cast across space.

We are of the earth: we breathe and live in the breath of ancient plants and beasts. Their cells nourish the soil; we build our communities on their harvest of gifts.

Our fingers trace the curves carved in clay and stone by forbears unknown to us. We are a part of the great circle of humanity gathered around the fire, the hearth, the altar.

We gather anew this day to celebrate our common heritage. May we recall in gratitude all that has given us birth.

Reading: adapted from the writing of Albert Einstein

"A human being is part of the whole, called by us 'Universe,' a part limited in time and space. We experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest - a kind of optical delusion of our consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself a part of the liberation, and a foundation for inner security."

As we sit together in silence, let us open our hearts to the people sitting near us, and then let the circle of compassion widen to embrace the whole town, and all living creatures. Let us escape the prison of our consciousness until we feel we are a part of the whole.

READING: by Chet Raymo from *The Soul of the Night*

Once, when I was very young, my father woke me in the dead of the night to see a comet. He had heard on the radio that a comet would be visible in the eastern sky in the hours before the dawn. Slipped and jacketed, dragging sleep behind me like a comet's tail, I followed my father into the yard. Together we stood among the black pines and searched our little patch of starry sky.

It is clear now, in the light of that memory, that my father did not know exactly what it was that we were looking for or where we might find it. He imagined, I suppose, that the comet would announce itself, trumpeting like an angel, trailing a train of light. He imagined swoosh and glitter. He expected a sky on fire, and he wanted me to see it.

We did not see the comet. It was probably one of those dozen-a-year comets of the astronomers, visible only with binoculars or telescope or photographic plate. Or perhaps it was a faint naked-eye comet hidden from us by the pines. We did not see it. We stood in the frosty air and searched the sky until dawn lighted the east. I carry from that night my first memory of the stars, nameless, uncountable, flung like a cold net across the pines, beautiful and nameless. [Chet Raymo, *The Soul of the Night*, p. 13]

SERMON: "How Wrong Can You Be?" - Rev. Alison Hyder

Even as a child, I was a night person. As a kid, I would read under the covers until my parents came to check. I had a hard time falling asleep, and spent a lot of time looking out the window, watching the night sky from my bed, waiting for the moon to pour her light across the walls. Even now, the sound of a faraway dog barking in the night reminds me of those warm summer nights when the screen window channeled a world of mystery and imagination and soft, friendly winds. I still don't like air conditioning. I want to feel life entering on the breeze.

The world has always felt safe to me. I wasn't fed with fears and admonitions. Back then, my brother and I often had to walk the mile and a half to school, across busy intersections through town. I spent a lot of my time wandering New York City with my grandmother. I learned to recognize landmarks and find my way around.

I have an aptitude for visual perception - shapes and patterns and logistics. Mathematics completely escapes me, which curtailed any career in science. But physics makes sense. I can often picture the way the experiments look, how two balls in motion would interact, for instance, or the qualities of light. But what really intrigues me is quantum physics, which deals with the origins of creation and space and the mystery of time. Why do certain patterns repeat throughout nature? What energy animates us all? Is time an illusion? And if so, does it really matter (so to speak)?

For me, these are more than abstract questions. They are deeply moving theories that teach us that we all share the same starry matter. They remind us of the importance of our actions in a fragile and sacred universe. Our culture is transient and petty, limiting our imagination and weighing us down with greed and cynicism. We can manufacture magic, but not hope. Yet without a sense of wonder and awe, we lose perspective. Our own problems and beliefs seem unique. But the universe gives proof of our unity. We all share the same fate.

As Albert Einstein explained, "A human being is part of the whole, called by us 'Universe,' a part limited in time and space. We experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest - a kind of optical delusion of our consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself a part of the liberation, and a foundation for inner security."

Albert Einstein is the archetypical genius. His general theory of relativity paved the way for modern physics, the discovery of black holes and the chaos theory. He may have been the most important man of the twentieth century. But Albert Einstein he was far from the heroic ideal. He was an average student. He had an illegitimate daughter, and only married her mother years after the baby had been given up for adoption. His first wife eventually left him, taking his two sons. He was indifferent to his appearance and had problems with authority. Scientist Temple Grandin believes that Einstein had Asperger's Syndrome, a mild form of autism. Grandin should know. She, herself, is autistic. Autism is an early-onset disorder. Grandin says, "He did not learn to speak until he was three... Einstein silently repeated words to himself until he was seven and did not freely associate with his peers. Whereas some prodigies develop at an early age, Einstein did not exhibit any great genius as a young child. Some people thought he was a dullard. He was a bad speller and did poorly in foreign languages."

"His dress and hair were typical of an adult with autistic tendencies, most of whom have little regard for social niceties and rank," she states. "When he worked at the Swiss patent office, he often wore green slippers with flowers on them. He refused to wear suits and ties in the days when professors dressed for teaching. I wouldn't be surprised if his dislike for dress clothes was sensory. The clothes he preferred were all soft, comfortable clothes..." Most autistic people, Grandin included, are hypersensitive to sensory information.

"Einstein was interested in the relationships between objects far more than in relationships between people," she says. And like Grandin, during the week he could give talks and act social, but he preferred being solitary. Both valued tangible results over emotional depth. Most tellingly, though, was Einstein's visual mind. Like Grandin,

Einstein thought in pictures. He said, "[my] thoughts did not come in verbal formulation. I rarely think in words at all. A thought comes, and I try to express it in words afterwards." [Temple Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures*]

Einstein's visual perception was the key to his genius. When he developed the theory of relativity, he imagined himself on a beam of light. Einstein was able to conceptualize the relationships between abstract objects and movements and solve complex problems through his intuitive gifts. In 1905, while working as a technical agent at a Swiss patent office, Einstein formed his "General Theory of Relativity," which eventually overturned the physical laws that had informed science since the seventeenth century. Einstein determined that concepts like speed or length can only be measured relative to other physical objects. There is no such thing as absolute space or time. Our experiences of them will be different depending on our perception. He ignored the ideas of physicists who were struggling under the old theories. And in June, 1905, he published his famous equation, $E=Mc^2$ in the Swiss "Annals of Physics."

Almost no one understood his theory or paid it much attention. In fact, it was still controversial in 1922. When Einstein won the Nobel Prize for physics, they specified that it was for his work on photons. Only in the 1930s did the technology catch up enough to verify his predictions. He was ahead of his time. In some ways, he was ahead of himself.

Einstein's discovery indicated the presence of Black Holes in the universe - gravitational vacuums in space that attract and swallow all within its pull. The calculations proving them, based on Einstein's gravitational laws, were made as early as the 20s. But Einstein chose to ignore this concept, and later to oppose it. Black holes were too bizarre and outrageous to fit his concept of the Universe, so he attempted to disprove their existence. He made all the correct calculations, but he interpreted them all wrong. He simply could not overcome his mental block. Despite his brilliance and the magnitude of his innovations, Einstein resisted the implications of his own theory. He rejected his own legacy.

But Einstein was not the only genius with a blind spot. Joseph Priestly, the Unitarian minister, discovered oxygen, nitrous oxide, and photosynthesis, among other things. He invented seltzer water and rubber erasers. But he held to the misguided theory that a substance called phlogiston combusted to become oxygen, which throughout his life he called "dephlogisticated air." Dr. Benjamin Rush, a Universalist, was a member of Congress. He signed the Declaration of Independence, administered military hospitals, founded the United States Sanitary Commission (now the US Department of Health), and was a strong critic of slavery and the use of alcohol and tobacco - all while maintaining an active medical practice. During the Philadelphia Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793, he worked tirelessly. And yet, Rush was a staunch proponent of "blood-letting" - bleeding patients of pints of blood to remove fevers and "ill humors." While this practice served as a sort of anesthetic, it undoubtedly did more harm than good to patients already weakened by disease. Rush had a simplistic view of disease, and yet he pioneered diagnostic medicine. "While ... his ...students always thought of Rush as 'most wonderfully entangled in the delicate web of his honest sophistry, that the great Rush, after having reduced all disease on earth into a unit, should have described every distinct disease most accurately and minutely in his lectures on practice, is one of the most inscrutable mysteries in the absurdities of learning.'" [from *Destroying Angel: Benjamin Rush, Yellow Fever, and the Birth of Modern Medicine*, by Bob Arnebeck, @ www.geocities.com/bobarnebeck/fever1793.htm].

There are at least two lessons to be learned here. One is that being an expert - or even a genius - does not guarantee that you are right. Everyone has their blind spots, convictions or feelings that close their eyes to differing perspectives. For some people, it is due to family culture, for others it could be based on religion, or personal experience. Right now, there are huge numbers of people who oppose legal gay marriage. Many of these same people work in soup kitchens and hospices, care for their neighbors, and work for racial justice. Some are themselves gay. They may be good, caring, intelligent people, but they simply cannot redefine their concept of marriage or conceive that they are like us in any way. They are not all motivated by hatred. Some are simply stuck in time.

From psychology to physics, we are constantly reminded of how similar we all really are. And yet we continue to resist it, tooth and nail. It is not really equality that we seek, after all. We want to be superior. We want to be smarter, hipper, and more virtuous than other people. We want our choices, our attributes validated and praised. Let's face facts. We are no more generous or understanding than any other people.

There is an old story from the Eastern tradition that says that when the gods created the universe, they found a place for everything but the truth. This created a problem, because the gods didn't want this wisdom discovered right away. One of the gods suggested the top of the highest mountain; another the farthest star, a third spoke up for the dark side of the moon, and another for the bottom of the sea. Finally, they decided to place the truth inside the human heart. In that way, we would search for it all over the universe, while we held it within us all the time. The secret lies in our hearts.

And that brings us to our second lesson. And that is that no matter how flawed we are, and how wrong we can be, we each have the capacity for great insight and healing. We can make mistakes, or fail school. We can feel unworthy. But we carry truth within our hearts. We can each contribute something good to the world.

When Chet Raymo's father dragged him out of bed on that clear, starry night, he never found the comet. He didn't know where to look, or what he was supposed to see. So they just stood there, looking up. Many people would have found him a fool or a failure. But young Chet was awed by the majesty of the stars. He and his father spent many nights thereafter studying the heavens, learning the constellations and planets. It became the basis for his life's work in science. He says, "I carry from that night my first memory of the stars, nameless, uncountable, flung like a cold net across the pines, beautiful and nameless." [Chet Raymo, *The Soul of the Night*, p. 13]

George Bernard Shaw once said, "A life spent in making mistakes is not only more honourable but more useful than a life spent doing nothing." So many discoveries have happened by chance. It may take 20 years, or 50, before their real value is found. And in the meantime, we keep searching and growing. For, as Buckminster Fuller (another great Unitarian) reasoned, "...every time you make an experiment you learn more: quite literally; you cannot learn less." You can make wrong deductions or overlook information, but you cannot learn less. So take a chance. Be wrong! But keep trying.

Albert Einstein was the father of atomic science. But he was also an ardent pacifist, who studied philosophy and balanced science with morality. Einstein was passionate about the ethical treatment of individuals who are different, perhaps because as a child he was so different from other children. He spent his life promoting peace and humanitarian goals, with articles on education, religion, peace, and technology. He wrote, "We scientists, whose tragic destination has been to help in making the methods of annihilation more gruesome and more effective, must consider it our solemn and transcendent duty to do all in our power in preventing these weapons from being used for the brutal purpose for which they were invented. What task could possibly be more important to us? What social aim could be closer to our hearts? Human beings, vegetables, or cosmic dust; we all dance to a mysterious tune, intoned in the distance by an invisible piper."

You can be very wrong, but do plenty that is right. That is both the mystery and the miracle of our human existence. Our virtues limit us as much as our prejudices and fears. With all our hopes and ideals, we will always be flawed. And yet, we are capable of great acts of beauty and courage. We can be kind, even to those we oppose.

All we can do is to keep our minds open to new people, new ideas, and to new experiences. And remember that the truth lies within every fragile and imperfect heart. Like mine. Like yours.

Benediction by 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." Make your choice.