

## Believing is Seeing

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For the first five years of my life I was raised by my maternal grandparents on their dairy farm in Ohio. In many ways it was an idyllic beginning. I had the run of the fields and ponds, chores to perform, and doting caretakers. All this plus having the farm animals as companions encouraged an active imagination. I remember nesting in the soft/scratchy hayloft in my grandfather's barn imagining how funny it would be if the cows laid eggs and the chickens plowed the fields and we milked the pigs twice a day. When I shared this what-if story with my hardworking, pragmatic grandmother she just shook her head and responded, "I'll believe it when I see it."

"Seeing is believing" is a useful axiom for protection against wild claims by the flim flam artists, be they the stories of a lonely four-year-old, the promises of some mortgage investment bankers, or most political campaign statements. But I think the opposite may also be true: believing may be a prerequisite to seeing. Belief in a thing does not always depend on visual perception. In fact, the ability to perceive a thing may hinge on belief – belief in the possibility that the thing can exist.

Take, for example, the condition of color blindness. My spouse usually can't differentiate between red and green. Science tells us this is a trait that is common in the male of the species. So when I forget and point saying, "oh, look at the cardinal", instead of seeing a red bird against a green tree he sees, uh, something else. He tells me it's all green until someone he trusts points out that red cardinal on a specific branch. Then, he says, it's like a switch being pulled – all of a sudden he can see the red bird. For a color-blind person the red bird is not even in the tree until that person believes two things: first, that there is a bird, and second, the bird is red.

I know there is a physiological explanation having to do with cones, rods, photoreceptors and other factors I know nothing about. But the science only supports the experience of believing that something is there, then having the reality of it confirmed. It's almost like accepting the idea of ... magic.

I think one reason for the popularity of the Harry Potter series is that it invites us into a world not too different from ours but one in which wonder and awe are part of the wizarding cultural consciousness. We rational Unitarian Universalists are not always comfortable with the notion of magic or miracles. But I've noticed that a lot of us older folks follow Harry Potter with the same intensity as do our younger counterparts. Could it be that the yearning to dream dreams and see visions is part of our common humanity? Do we long to be carried away by the inexplicable? To live – just for a moment -- in the magic of the metaphor? This yearning would certainly explain our creative impulse to story-telling through poetry and myths. This is the season, for instance, to tell the enduring story of the human yearning for light – for birth – for hope -- and it is told every year in the cultural context of the teller. We hear it in the story of the miraculous burning of candles for 8 days on only one day's supply of oil. We hear it in the story of the birth of a baby. We hear it in the celebration of the re-emergence of the sun from the longest night of the winter. We hear and we celebrate this story in various ways around the globe.

Believing before seeing doesn't mean putting your brain or cognitive abilities on hold. I'm not advocating the practice of blindly following a path others have set forth. Belief means being open to the possibility of the unseen. Because sometimes you have to believe in the possibility before you can truly see.

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The scientific community – especially the community of theoretical physicists -- know all about this idea. Now I'm going to venture into a territory I find fascinating but know almost nothing about. I have read that the mathematical calculations of astrophysicists have convinced them that most of the matter that makes up the physical universe is “missing”. That is, it must be something invisible and virtually undetectable. They call it “dark matter”. The fact that it has been unknown and unobserved hasn't slowed them up a bit. In fact, because they believe in the possibility—even the likelihood -- of this “dark matter”, they've developed elaborate experiments to try to detect it.

In 2009 I read that astrophysicists think they found something they called weakly interacting massive particles or WIMPS. Engineers have developed devices to produce colors and sounds as they are impacted by these WIMPS. By watching these devices in a deep mine in Minnesota, the scientists can see and hear the evidence of this dark matter. For instance, a certain type of particle strikes a device that registers, say, yellow, and sounds a note at a pitch of 440 cycles per second. Another type of particle strikes another device engineered to register red, and measures a pitch of 380 cycles per second. If you remember the movie, *Close Encounters of a Third Kind*, you can see how these devices might translate the particles into a sound and light show. Only this isn't a film. The “music of the spheres” is being played in a Minnesota mine, where the matter that composes the bulk of physical reality has been revealed. In a way, this revelation is literally a tear in the space-time continuum – a ‘thin place’ that the Celts described -- and the brilliant multi-colored light of a newly revealed truth is streaming through. And I love the notion that scientists and engineers have made music and art from deep space particles streaming into our blue boat home. I don't know what this discovery will inspire. In fact, I hear that there's dispute on exactly what it is they did or didn't find. But it doesn't matter. What matters is that scientists **believed** there was something there, then developed a methodology to find it. It's much like our Unitarian Universalist principle affirming a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. It's hard to search for truth and meaning unless you believe that there is such a thing as ‘truth’...there is such a thing as ‘meaning’.

More recently there has been a buzz about the Higgs boson – or the unfortunately named ‘God particle’. According to an article in the Science section of the December 13<sup>th</sup> *New York Times*, this is a subatomic particle whose existence is it thought is a key to explaining why there is mass in the universe. As in the Minnesota facility, teams of physicists are huddled around a mammoth piece of detecting equipment, in this case, the Large Hadron Collider at CERN – the European Center for Nuclear Research. The possibility of discovering the Higgs boson has sparked discussion among Unitarian Universalist ministers, led by Rev. Gary Kowalski, author of the book, “Science and the Search for God.” Rev. Kowalski asks, “Could theology ever pose testable hypotheses that could be supported or disproven by experimental observations? Or is that not the business of theologians?”

One response caught my eye. Rev. Dr. Dorothy Emerson wrote: “Because I happen to know one of the lead physicists on the Hadron Collider project and was visiting him and his wife (Both UUs and classmates of mine at Pomona College) in the Geneva area as the project was nearing completion, I had the opportunity to go underground and see the project first hand. If I had not seen it with my own eyes, I would have never believed that anything so complex could be built and made to work.” Emerson goes on to observe, “This project has been my friend's life work along with other scientists from around the world. I guess that's the sort of massive cooperative effort it takes to discover God: the work of all those brilliant people and a huge amount of funding. A true act of faith on the part of so many people, against the odds and many,

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many predictions that it would never work.” She continued, “A real plus of this experience is that I was introduced to the UU ex-pat community in the area most of whom had connections to the project. One scientist is married to a UU minister. I’m sure there’s a theological aspect to this adventure and I hope one or more of these folks writes about it from their UU perspective.” Unquote. Personally, I hope so, too.

The shepherds in the some field in some month a few thousand years ago weren’t theologians or astrophysicists or wizards. But the story that is told is that they were open to considering the possibility that the astronomical event of an unusually bright star might be more than it appeared: That there may be something extraordinary taking place. I don’t know if this is ‘true’. I’m as suspicious as the next UU of ‘singing ‘angels’, although I do enjoy the metaphor and am willing to entertain almost anything that has an idea about how to achieve peace on earth. Perhaps the stories recorded in the Christian gospels were an account of a mass delusion. But I love it that somehow those shepherds got the idea to ‘fear not’. We would probably all be better off if we heard voices telling us to “be not afraid”.

We humans have enormous power of imagination...to believe it before we see it. Cynics would name this as the ability to delude ourselves. And there’s no doubt that our readiness to believe makes us vulnerable to all sorts of predatory claims. That is why it’s so important to subject the claim to individual logic and reason, then test out the evidence in a trusted community of truth-seeking people. This process – this method -- is at the heart of our chosen faith. We are, we must be, to be Unitarian Universalists, scientifically minded. That does not mean that we must be scientists, but we must be aware of the tentativeness of knowledge. We must be aware that ultimate truth is not found by finite minds -- that the truths we do discover are vulnerable to alteration and sometimes even rejection when the evidence does not support our beliefs. While we may feel foolish if and when we are proven wrong, we at least will not be indefinitely vulnerable to the flimflam artists.

But we must risk being vulnerable if we are to believe before seeing because believing before seeing enables us to vision – to transcend the obvious and be open to being transformed by possibilities. One of my favorite visionaries is the Hebrew prophet Nehemiah, who responded to the sorry condition of Jerusalem after the Babylonian conquest by envisioning the renewal of the temple. He believed this restoration was possible before ever seeing any indication of its feasibility. In fact, it was a foolish notion because Nehemiah himself was an exile serving as a cupbearer to the foreign king Artaxerxes. Nehemiah’s concern over the condition of Jerusalem and the residents Jews consumed him. He brooded and planned and finally cast the vision – stated his belief -- to the king, who had the resources to make it happen. But he also believed that that which he called God was the ultimate resource for this project. The upshot of this story is that, in the face of scorn, ridicule and even threats from powerful onlookers Nehemiah not only restored the walls and gates of the city, he laid the foundation for the renewal of the Jewish people.

Two and a half millenia later I had a similar experience. A visionary minister invited me to expand my impulse to donate an organ to a small Caribbean island church, asking me instead to renovate the crumbling church structure for no apparent reason other than it was a church and it was in distress. I was captivated by the sacredness of the place, but in hindsight it was a fool’s errand. Nonetheless, guided by the vision of transforming the community I, too, brooded and planned and cast the vision to people who could help make it happen. Like Nehemiah’s temple, against all reason the Salt Cay Methodist Church restoration was completed and the transformed building was re-dedicated.

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I'd like to report that, like Nehemiah's Jerusalem, the community is thriving. I wish I could tell you that the church is a central part of a renaissance to transform that dusty little backwater a vibrant spiritual retreat destination. The fact is that Hurricane Ike tore through the island in September 2008, taking off the new roof and reducing the building to its former ruined glory. As I stood howling in the rain-soaked steaming rubble it occurred to me that transformation is a tricky thing, not subject to projected outcomes. From the scientific point of view this effort would be viewed as a failed experiment. But the theological point of view doesn't evaluate in terms of success or failure. It evaluates whether or not an effort is transformative. And my experience – as was Nehemiah's -- was certainly transformative of individual lives.

To identify as a Unitarian Universalist means that we are aware of the tentativeness of knowledge and the unpredictability of transformation. All of us -- astrophysicists, shepherds, mathematicians, wizards, story-telling children -- must test their belief against the evidence. And everyone who believes before they see learns to live with ambiguity, and uncertainty, and the profound understanding that they may never see the full truth. In fact, they may even make fools of themselves. That's the journey. Today of all days I encourage all of us to listen for the voice that calls us to the unseen: That voice that calls us to fearless acts of foolishness that will transform us, making us and our world whole. My hope is that we can believe that there is a red bird in the green, green tree. That we will test that belief in the fire of reason fueled by the covenant of community. And that, as we practice the art of believing, we will all see what is real, what is true, and what is enduring. May it be so. Amen.