

“The Sense of Wonder”

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On Thursday, I attended the local chapter meeting of the UU Ministers Association. After the obligatory time of coffee and chatting, we gathered for worship. Our preacher, the Rev. Jo Murphy of the UU Mass Action, began her sermon by asking us to call out what inspires awe in us. “Babies,” “sunsets,” “hot fudge sundaes,” “human generosity,” and “sexy hockey players” were some of the answers shared. How would you answer? What generates a sense of awe in you? What kindles your sense of wonder?

As happened with my colleagues, I suspect our own lists could quickly grow. We can discover a sense of wonder in the smallest ladybug gently crawling on our fingertip as well as in the widest vistas from a mountain top or alongside the ocean. The quiet breath of a sleeping infant can elicit a sense of wonder as can the thunderclap of a summer storm or the trembling bass of an organ in the stone of a cathedral. Small and massive, quiet and deafening, experiences of wonder pepper our lives.

On my own wonder list, I think of a time in my 20’s when a small group of friends and I slept outside under the stars in a remote mountain village. Far from any light pollution with a new moon dark in the sky, I was astonished by the layers of densely sparkling lights of various patterns and intensity. In that same village after an evening chapel service, my jaw dropped as I stepped outside to be met with a massive supermoon still orange from the sunset. Years later, the village awed me anew as a marvel of engineering began to safely remove the chemicals that lingered from the remnants of a nearby copper mine. Most recently, when the one road to the village was washed out from storms this winter, the generous outpouring of support from a national community of people who love this village awed me again. Through these experiences of this village, the wonder of nature was and remains inseparably entwined with the experience of human community.

Wonder and love were also entwined for Rachel Carson, the famed biologist and author, argues Boston University scholar Lida Maxwell, in her new book, [*Rachel Carson and the Power of Queer Love*](#). However, before exploring Maxwell’s argument, let’s first revisit some of Carson’s biography as a founding voice in the environmental movement.

Born in 1907, Carson grew up traversing the forests of her Pennsylvania home with a love for nature learned from her mother. After graduating college in 1929, she studied biology at Wood’s Hole and Johns Hopkins. As a woman scientist in the 1930’s and 1940’s, she was a rarity as she worked for the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Also an award-winning author, her first book, *Under the Sea-Wind*, told the stories of the life-cycle of three sea creatures—from *their* perspective. This personification underscored for audiences the stakes of

survival each creature faced. Human and sea life share a journey of encounters with life and death.

In a book tracing the roots of the environmental movement, author Douglas Brinkley describes a young Carson like this:

“To her, all of God’s creatures had a will to live and were worthy of compassion. Though not outwardly philosophical, she did believe that every person had to respectfully repay an eternal debt to nature. At a young age, she understood ecology as a basic notion: *We live in the house of life, and all the rooms connect.*” (*Silent Spring Revolution*, 44)

To convey this same notion in our Unitarian Universalist language, we might point to our 7th principle: “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part”. However, in Carson’s era, such notions of interdependence were widely unknown. Instead, a sense of pride in human capacity to control nature permeated the ethos of the day.

This sense of mastery over nature was evident in the widespread use of DDT and other chemical as pesticides in the 1940’s, 50’s, and 60’s. In her 1962 book *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson forcefully and scientifically decried the dangers of DDT not just to insects, but to the interdependent web of life—including human life. In a [2014 sermon](#) on Carson, my colleague the Rev. John Gibbons recounts his memory of 1962, writing:

But when I was eight or nine, I remember the mosquito control trucks that each spring rumbled slowly through the streets of my suburban neighborhood outside Chicago. From a tank in back, the trucks emitted an immense cloud of pure DDT. My friends and I thought this spectacle was pretty cool, so we liked to ride our bikes directly behind the trucks, trying not to run into one another, blinded by the fog and enshrouded by DDT. Our parents, of course, made no objection.

Perhaps some of you have similar memories of DDT being sprayed in your neighborhoods?

Carson first encountered critical scientific studies of DDT while working with government biologists in Maryland. First pitching an anti-DDT story to *Readers Digest* in 1945, she proposed writing about the impact of DDT on beneficial and essential insects as well as the waterfowl and other creatures who depended upon the insects killed or contaminated by DDT. (*Silent Spring Revolution*, 52) While this article was not published, the 1951 publication of Carson’s book *The Sea Around Us* exploded her literary reputation. Winning the National Book Award as well as the attention of the Kennedy family and other luminaries, this success enabled Carson to leave her government work and become a full-time writer. At the same time, she took custody of her 5-year-old orphaned grand-nephew Roger and built a house on Southport Island in southern Maine.

Along the seacoast of Maine, Carson reveled in experiencing nature with young Roger. In a magazine article, ["Help Your Child to Wonder"](#), Carson recounts these experiences, noting how she "just expressed [her] own pleasure in what we see, calling his attention to this or that." Carson's goal was simply to help a child to wonder and cultivate a reverence for life. Such wonder as more than just a way to pass the time, she believed wonder connects us with something deeper. She writes:

Those who dwell, as scientists or laymen, among the beauties and mysteries of the earth are never alone or weary of life. ... Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is symbolic as well as actual beauty in the migration of the birds, the ebb and flow of the tides, the folded bud ready for spring. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night, spring after the winter.

Carson found endless renewal in her shared experiences of nature with Roger as well as those she shared with her neighbor and dear friend, Dorothy Freeman.

Now to return to Maxwell's book, *Rachel Carson and the Power of Queer Love*. I will say at the outset that neither Maxwell, nor I wish to simply categorize Carson as "gay" or "lesbian." Rather, Maxwell draws upon the notion of *queer* in the sense of resisting scripts of expected behavior. In this sense, to *queer* something is to refuse to fall in line with what most folks might consider "normal" or normative. In the case of Rachel Carson, not only did she pursue a career as a scientist, she also never married—becoming a mother only later in life through adoption. In other words, she did not simply fall in line with expectations for most white women of her class and era by marrying and becoming a housewife and mother. And then, in meeting her Southport neighbor Dorothy Freeman, she found a profound love, which they expressed in hundreds of letters when apart as well as in joyful companionship in the summers they shared in Maine.

By tracing how Carson and Freeman express their sense of wonder for the love they have found in one another, Maxwell argues that this same wonder infuses Carson's subsequent writing. Love and wonder for each other were inseparably entwined with their shared experiences of sea and forest, birdsong and starry nights.

Two years after meeting Freeman, Carson writes the magazine article on children and wonder in which she writes about looking at the stars with a friend—a friend I imagine to be Freeman. Struck by the utter magnificence of the sight which is accessible on so very many nights to the human inhabitants of the shoreline, she muses that so few pause to notice, to pay attention, to *wonder* in awe.

When did you last experience *wonder*? When did you last pause to consider, as Carson suggests, “*What if I had never seen this before? What if I knew I would never see it again?*” Such experiences of wonder not only spur interest to learn more about the world in which we dwell but they also have merit simply as *pleasure*. As Carson writes, they are “*an antidote to the boredom and disenchantment of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from sources of our strength.*” (*Sense of Wonder*, 43) In other words, wonder disrupts the sleepy sameness of our boredom as well as the expectations of social scripts for how we *should* behave and experience the world.

For Carson to bravely write *Silent Spring*, a book that challenged the use of chemical pesticides like DDT by major corporations and even government entities, she would have needed a deeply powerful source of energy to fight the status quo. Maxwell argues that Carson’s experience of queer love helped to fuel her work as a champion for viewing the human and non-human worlds as entwined. Resisting the normative script that human life was separate from nature and that humans could “master” nature, Carson instead advocated for a love and wonder of the whole living world.

As she completed *Silent Spring*, Carson wrote to conservationist friend:

The beauty of the living world I was trying to save has always been uppermost in my mind—that, and anger at the senseless, brutish things that were being done. . . . Now I can believe I have helped a little. (Quoted in *Silent Spring Revolution*, 224)

Love for the beauty of the living world—a world inhabited with people she loved and creatures she personified—motivated her courageous action. For Carson, the world was not divided into human and non-human. All the rooms were connected in an interdependent web of Life of which we are a part.

As Carson finished *Silent Spring*, she battled cancer. Among those who supported her was the [Rev. Duncan Howlett](#), Unitarian minister at All Souls in Washington D.C., a church near to her home in Silver Spring, Maryland. (As you may know, before becoming minister in DC in 1958, Rev. Howlett was minister here for twelve years.) While Carson was not a member of All Souls, her relationship with Howlett, who officiated a memorial service for friends at All Souls, and her way of understanding the world certainly aligned her with our faith. Or, perhaps more accurately, her way of teaching about an interdependent world shaped our Unitarian Universalist faith to this day.

Carson’s 1962 book *Silent Spring* is often credited with launching the environmental movement. At the center of her work was a profound love for life—an inseparable web of human and non-human life. As we celebrate the arrival of spring this weekend sixty-four years the book’s publication, may we pause in a moment of gratitude for the courage, dedication, and love of Rachel Carson. Perhaps we might best honor her memory by taking

time today to disrupt our expected paths of action and pay attention to the wonder of this world. You may not know the name of every (or any!) bird, insect, tree, or shrub you pass by, but like a child, you can still “drink in the beauty, and think and wonder at the meaning of what you see.” Indeed, it may just be a sight that you have never before seen, and perhaps may never see again.

May it be so. Ashé. Amen.