

Behind the Curtain
A sermon delivered by Rev. Rebecca F. Benner
At the Accotink Unitarian Universalist Church
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READING from *The Prestige* by Christopher Priest

There almost invariably comes a moment during the [work of a magician] when the illusionist will seem to pause. He will step forward to the footlights, and in the full glare of their light will face the audience directly. He will say, or if his act is silent he will seem to say, 'Look at my hands. There is nothing concealed within them.' He will then hold up his hands for the audience to see, raising his palms to expose them, splaying his fingers so as to prove nothing is gripped secretly between them. With his hands held thus he will rotate them, so that his hands are, indeed, as empty as it is possible to be. To take the matter beyond any remaining suspicion, the magician will probably then tweak lightly at the cuffs of his jacket, pulling them back an inch or two to expose his wrists, showing that nothing is there concealed either. He then performs his trick, and during it, moments after this incontrovertible evidence of empty-handedness, he produces something from his hands: a fan, a live dove or a rabbit, a bunch of paper flowers, sometimes even a burning wick. It is a paradox, an impossibility! The audience marvels at the mystery, and applause rings out.

How could any of this be?

The magician and the audience have entered into what I term the Pact of Acquiescent Sorcery. They do not articulate it as such, and indeed the audience is barely aware that such a Pact might exist, but that is what it is.

The performer is of course not a sorcerer at all, but an actor who plays the part of a sorcerer and who wishes the audience to believe, if only temporarily, that he is in contact with darker powers. The audience, meantime, knows that what they are seeing is not true sorcery, but they suppress the knowledge and acquiesce to the selfsame wish as the performer's. The greater the performer's skill at maintaining the illusion, the better at this deceptive sorcery he is judged to be...

As every stage magician well knows there will be some who are baffled by this, some who will profess to a dislike of being duped, some who will claim to know the secret, and some, the happy majority, who will simply take the illusion for granted and enjoy the magic for the sake of entertainment. (p. 32-34)

Some years ago, a magician was reported as saying: 'Magicians protect their secrets not because the secrets are large and important, but because they are so small and trivial. The wonderful effects created on stage are often the result of a secret so absurd that the magician would be embarrassed to admit that that was how it was done.'

There, in a nutshell, is the paradox of the stage magician.

The fact that a trick is 'spoiled' if its secret is revealed is widely understood, not only by magicians but by the audiences they entertain. Most people enjoy a sense of the mystery created by the performance, and do not want to ruin it, no matter how curious they feel about what they seem to have witnessed. (p. 49)

SERMON

Last week, my friend Nancy and I went to see the movie *The Prestige*, a fascinating film about magicians at the turn of the 20th Century, based on the book I read from earlier this morning. A month before we had seen *The Illusionist*, a quite different movie, but also one about magicians around the same period of time. Before this most recent movie, we saw a number of previews for upcoming horror movies. All of these movies they were advertising fit into the style of horror movie that has become prevalent in recent years. You know the kind—the ones that leave absolutely nothing to the imagination. Movies whose only goal seems to be to create awful images of the worst and most brutal kinds of violence. Obviously these films appeals to a large group of people, and I certainly don't mean to condemn horror movies in general. As many of you know, I am a huge Stephen King fan and that includes some of the movies along with the books. But there is something about these new movies I find hard to take.

The juxtaposition of these previews and the movie about the world of magic more than a hundred years ago got us talking. About magic and mystery. About what's scary, what's romantic, and what we allow to remain unknown, unseen.

It seems that there is precious little in entertainment these days that remains a mystery to us. Horror films and date movies show us every detail. What once was only hinted at, suggested, is now shown in full detail. Magic tricks that used to amaze adults don't much any more. We have all seen too much, or read how the tricks are done, or watched one of the "magic secrets revealed" television shows. We all know better. We are cynical and suspicious and don't want to be played for the fool. We can't resist a look behind the curtain to discover that the wizard is just an ordinary man.

The world itself is much less mysterious to humanity than it used to be. Science and technology have explained things that for our ancestors were evidence of God, or wonders far too vast to comprehend. The shortening of the days that happens at this time of year used to be a time of superstition and fear, as people wondered if the sun would ever return. The workings of the human body were little understood. Illness came and went, death arrived or didn't, and people had little control or influence over health and life.

These days, though there is still much more that we don't know than there is that we do, sometimes we can buy into the illusion that all is knowable, and that most is known. We can see inside the human body and far out into space. We can go to the moon and explore some of the deepest parts of the earth. We cannot cheat death, but we have learned much about health and illness and are able to greatly influence the course of our lives. Human curiosity and exploration have taken us far, and offer promises of still more knowledge. We have gained a tremendous amount from this growing knowledge, and I am certainly not advocating we give it up and go back to the days when the rising and the setting of the sun, the destructive storms of wind and water felt like the work of unpredictable gods.

But we have lost something in our growing knowledge. In the two magic movies out this fall, one of the my favorite things was the look on the faces in the audiences as they are amazed by the illusions of the magicians. I think of how rarely I see that look on the face of anyone over the age of five or so. How often do we allow ourselves to be amazed? To relish in the mystery without trying to look behind the curtain?

The reading I shared with you earlier makes clear that illusion, that magic takes a mutual agreement between the magician who performs the trick and the audience who promises to believe, even if only for just a moment, in the possibility of magic. Without either side of this agreement, this pact, there would be no magic. And so what happens when a culture, when humanity as a whole stops believing, stops being willing to be amazed?

Our religious faith, and particularly the Unitarian branch of our heritage, was deeply influenced by the Enlightenment. By scientific method and discovery, by formal biblical criticism, by the growing use of human reason and rationality as the path to wisdom. Our religious forbears broke away from their more conservative counterpoints in part over the question of how much of the world and religious faith could be understood through human thought. As you well know, this is an argument that continues.

In any case, for those early Unitarians and soon the Universalists, this focus on human reason and the application of the scientific method to religion led to the gradual stripping away of ideas and beliefs that had long been central to Christianity—the virgin birth, the miracles of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, the divinity of Jesus, and eventually the guarantee of an afterlife. This reason-focused strain of our religious tradition has been and remains vital to who we are. It is fundamental to our identity that we insist that our religious beliefs and practices makes sense when looked at through the filter of our reason, our experience, our knowledge, our basic human understanding. I have always deeply valued this part of who we are and this way of approaching religion. In fact, I can't imagine doing it in any other way.

At the same time, it is among my deepest hopes that in our emphasis on reason and rationality we do not lose sight of wonder. That we do not forget how to be amazed. I would like to believe that we do not *always* have to look behind the curtain. That we can remain willing to enter into that agreement every now and then and allow for the possibility of magic. Of miracle. Of mystery.

I believe that most human beings have a deep and abiding need for something that goes beyond our human understanding. That as much as we strive to know more, to discover more we also need to have moments, experiences, ideas, and hopes that transcend what we know.

People have expressed surprise that, even as human beings make tremendous progress in science and medicine, in technological discovery and in historical awareness, there has been a rise in the power and presence of religion, particularly conservative, fundamentalist, and/or mystical religions. A generation ago, religious scholars predicted the gradual but unstoppable decline of religion. They claimed that the world would grow ever more secular until religion carried little or no force in people's lives and in society.

Recently these same scholars have admitted they were wrong. In fact, they acknowledge, the opposite has happened. It seems counterintuitive, especially from our perspective in a religious tradition that attempts to marry faith and science, reason and wonder. But I believe that what is happening in our world is partly a result of just how deeply runs our need for wonder, for awe, for mystery. The more we understand, the more the mysteries of the world are no longer mysteries, the more desperately we need things that go beyond our understanding. Many, many people have responded to this need by turning to very traditional religious beliefs that simply cannot be proven or disproven by science. Seeing everything, knowing everything is, for most people, not all it's cracked up to be.

Though it seems a trivial example, I come back to the discussion about movies that I had with my friend Nancy. In some ways, the scariest movies are those in which we never quite see the monster, where the horror is hidden, imagined, as much our own as the filmmaker's. The same is true for love stories. When the romantic and sexual scenes are shown in nearly full detail, some of the power is lost. The most romantic and sexiest moments are those almost kisses, those suggestions of what might come, those times when we are allowed, encouraged to co-create what we don't quite see.

I believe the same is true when it comes to religion, to meaning, only more so. If everything is revealed, if all the work is done for us, it does not belong to us. We need imagination, dreams, and things that cannot be explained.

And, of course, there is plenty of genuine mystery out there to be had. Think of all we know about conception, genetics, human development. And then think of what a wonder and mystery each one of us is. Whatever we learn about all the elements that go into who we are, we will never fully understand the way it all comes together to make us ourselves. We are more than the sum of our parts, and what makes us that way may never be known.

Or think about the experience of falling in love. Sure, we know a lot about the biological drive for the continuation of the species, the benefits for human society that come through compassion and caring. We can account for many of the reasons why we are attracted to one person but not another. But thank goodness, none of that can fully explain the power of falling in love. Whatever the known biological and psychological reasons for love, the experience is like magic, and we wouldn't want it any other way.

These are genuine mysteries, not just the work of a pretend sorcerer who uses sleight of hand to keep hidden the mechanism that makes the trick work. Maybe someday human beings will know enough about how we work, about how the world works so that even these mysteries, these magical part of life which seem so incomprehensible to us now become explainable through the chemical workings of our brain and the particular combination of our genes and our environment, Maybe someday human knowledge and understanding will reach so far, so deeply that there will no longer be cause for wonder, for amazement, for awe. Maybe someday there won't be any mysteries left.

All I can say is how grateful I am that this time has not yet come. I need that sense of amazement that comes when I see great beauty, the wonder that comes with the experience of love, the awe I feel when the world surpasses my quite limited understanding.

I love hearing the stories of scientists studying the most basic building blocks of life and the universe and who find at the center mystery, the inexplicable. Some of the deepest statements of faith in and appreciation for mystery and wonder have come from those who know the most about what lies behind the curtain.

Just as we celebrate reason and knowledge, so may we honor all that we do not know. Whether we call this mystery God, spirit, or simply the as-yet-unknown, let us give thanks for its presence in our lives. Let us give thanks for all those experiences which go beyond what we know, what we understand, what we can explain. For those truths which are deeper than what we can prove. Let us give thanks for magic, in all its forms.

May it be so. Amen.