

## Preparation for Mystery

*Mystery* is a word that covers a lot of ground, from who-done-it TV shows to socks disappearing in the wash to the inscrutable quirks of cyberspace. When we dig down, though, we find that mystery at bottom is not about the unexplained, but rather the inexplicable.

What makes something inexplicable? Our minds automatically organize our perceptions and generate explanations for what occurs. This drive to explain motivates not only our science but also our systems of religious belief. Thus for many, God is the answer to questions about the origin of our world and about meaning in our lives. Religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam worship a deity who creates the world, presides over history, guarantees divine justice, and offers redemption from human suffering. But such understandings rest upon assumptions that cannot themselves be explained.

For some of us, neither science nor conventional religion can explain the fundamental questions of human existence. We may ask ourselves, *does my life have a purpose? If so, how am I to know what it is?* What is this consciousness we inhabit from first breath to last? Ultimately, how can we be a separate self yet at the same time part of an interconnected web of being? We may find ourselves uncomfortably aware of a disparity between our inner reality and our public identity. How can we bring those two sides of who we are together into authentic wholeness? Along the way, we can't help but notice that everything is impermanent. How are we to live with the knowledge of our own death?

We may go on to wonder how we came to be here in the first place. Philosophers tell us that this is the most mysterious question of all: *that there is something rather than nothing*. But our own aware presence can seem almost as mysterious. As zen counterculture wit Alan Watts said, "You are the universe experiencing itself."

No matter what answers we come up with, the questions never stop. Some spiritual traditions are more welcoming to mystery, viewing the sacred as the Great Spirit or Mother of All. The Unitarian Transcendentalists saw the "One Universal Mind" in all of creation. The Tao suggests that creation's source is mysterious: "It was from the Nameless that Heaven and Earth sprang." In Buddhism, this ultimate reality is called *pregnant emptiness*. A zen parable advises us not to mistake the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself – a reminder to undertake meditative and other practices as mere means to the indescribable end known as awakening.

Mystics point us towards the need to step out of our usual ways of knowing into pure presence and primal wonder at the mystery of What Is. In such a moment, we give up trying to explain, stand in the light of eternity, and just behold with childlike openness what is there before us in its own inexplicable right – a mountain stream sparkling the air as it tumbles over rocks; the crack of bat against ball in a baseball game under the summer night sky; a painting that quietly stirs the air around it; a beetle purposefully crawling up a twig; a loved one's familiar face; a song faintly blowing in the wind.

Clearly, there are different ways to understand what we do not understand. That in itself is something to ponder.

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It is possible to go through life doing no more than responding to every situation with the knowledge we have, as best we can – bringing our concepts and purposes to bear on everything we encounter. This is a grave mistake ... there is something else present in everything you see, hear, touch, taste, or smell. It is the unspeakable – the silence inside the sound, the darkness inside the light, the stillness inside the motion. It is the mystery. It holds us always.

*Meredith Garmon, adapted from Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat*

Whatever inspiration is, it's born from a continuous *I don't know*. *Wislawe Szymborska*

Science questions the common assumptions which seem to be true to everyone, to the layman as well as to the average scholar. Then the genius comes and asks for the basis of these accepted assumptions ... When [the first philosophers] became conscious of the astonishing fact, underlying all facts, that there is something and not nothing, an unsurpassable depth of thought was reached. *Paul Tillich*

Most Native languages use words to describe God that are synonymous with the English word "mystery." Among the Algonquin-speaking peoples, God is *Gitche Manitou*, which means "all-encompassing mystery." *Eddie Ensley, Visions*

The real world is beyond our thoughts and ideas; we see it through the net of our desires divided into pleasure and pain, right and wrong, inner and outer. To see the universe as it is, you must step beyond the net. It is not hard to do so, *for the net is full of holes*. *Sri Nisargadatta*

More than once I have mentioned to you how my life and work have been guided by the effort to overcome the old pressures that rob us of mystery, the mystery essential to our capacity to love from fullness. Humanity has been terrified and beset by dread; but is there anything noble and gracious that has not, from time to time, worn the mask of dread? *Rainer Maria Rilke (in a letter)*

Worship is the mystery within us reaching out to the mystery beyond. It is an inarticulate silence yearning to speak; it is the window of the moment open to the sky of the eternal. *Jacob Trapp*

Every faith has a different form of comfort to offer ... and each is useful. Sometimes it helps to dwell on the immensity of the universe. Sometimes it helps to feel the presence of ongoing family and community. Sometimes it helps to light a candle and say a prayer. Sometimes it helps to sit and breathe. *Adam Gopnik*

## Questions to Ponder

1. In the preparation materials, which quote most speaks to you?
2. Do you recall experiences of wonder and mystery as a child? As an adult? Has that experience changed in nature over the span of your life?
3. What role does mystery play in your spiritual life?
4. What role, if any, does mystery play in our shared, collective life?
5. When you contemplate the mystery at the core of existence, how does that affect you?
6. In your current life, what mysteries are most present to you?

## Words of the Day

Before coming to the gathering, think of a few words, phrases, or metaphors that describe ways you consider mystery in your life. The prompt for the Words of the Day activity will be to complete this sentence: "One of the mysteries of life that I ponder is ..."