

There Are No Stupid Clouds

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In an address delivered to the graduating class of Harvard Divinity School on July 15, 1838, Ralph Waldo Emerson offered the following critique of a preacher he once heard, “The capital secret of his profession, namely, to convert life into truth, he had not learned. Not one fact in all his experience, had he yet imported into his doctrine.”

I’ve always been fascinated by Emerson’s critique not only because I agree with his assertion that the preacher’s main job is “to convert life into truth”, but also because I know of no other way to do this than draw from my own experience. And many, including many of you, have noted how much you appreciate that I do this. Nonetheless, this approach is not without its hazards, for it often means I’m never completely off from work, even on vacation.

Case in point, this summer Kevin and I visited Alaska. And one morning as we sat, wrapped in blankets sailing back through Endicott Arm from the Dawes Glacier, a still drowsy young man, dressed in gym shorts, a sweat shirt, and flip flops, sporting major bedhead came out onto the deck to meet up with some people gathered just close enough to us that I could hear their conversation.

At one point someone in the gathering pointed toward an imposing mountain peak below which a diaphanous sliver of cloud rested and seemed to encircle it like a silk scarf. The young man shrugged and responded, “It’s just a stupid cloud.”

As soon as those words left his lips and reached my ears, I knew there was at least part of a sermon there. Upon returning to my stateroom later, I jotted down a few notes and for the remainder of the trip found myself frequently turning his words over in my mind. And as I did this I kept coming back to Socrates, or at least words attributed to him, “Wisdom begins in wonder.”

Now, clouds are, “an aerosol consisting of a visible mass of miniature liquid droplets, ice crystals, or other particles, suspended in the atmosphere of a planetary body or similar space.” (Wikipedia <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cloud>) And at the end of our story for all ages, when all the clouds gather and make rain, we’re reminded of the practical and vital role clouds play in sustaining life. We know what clouds are and what they do. What else is do we need to know, right? Look, up there! Meh. It’s just a stupid cloud.

The British journalist and humorist Miles Kington is credited with saying, “Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit; wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad.”

Kington’s humorous observation reminds us knowledge is not the same thing as wisdom. And indeed, when we mistake the one for the other, or prioritize knowledge at the expense of wisdom we essentially disenchant the world, adopting a mechanistic and materialistic approach to life where people, plants, animals, the planet itself, are exploitable resources to study, measure, categorize, and explain, for our benefit and entertainment.

When you’re up in an airplane, the pilot commonly rattles off some statistics, the altitude, anticipated flight time, and so forth. Because this is what the pilot shares we come to accept this data as what is most important about the flight.

Last year, while flying home from Fort Lauderdale, our plane was diverted to Syracuse, NY because of weather conditions on the ground in Connecticut. I can’t tell you what altitude we were flying at, nor how long the estimated flight time was, but I do remember the plane entering a mass of clouds so vast it was like flying through a magical land of forests and fields, mountains and valleys, dotted with castles and bridges, all in shades of white. It was breath-taking and I remember saying to myself, “Pay attention to this.”

Can you imagine the pilot of the plane simply pointing out the clouds outside the plane.? No information or statistics, just noting their presence?

Children have no problem doing this, it seems. Looking up at the sky they see cuddly, friendly animals and sometimes imposing, threatening monsters. Eric Carle, the author of *Little Cloud*, our story for all ages even tempts our imagination a little further telling us little cloud assumes the shapes of things it has seen flying over land and sea.

To wonder at the clouds, then, it not to try and figure out what they are or what they do. The point, if you will, is not to gain knowledge about clouds, but to connect to the poetry of the clouds. To contemplate and ask what they point to or reveal to us that our facts and figures about them miss?

Reading the poetry of a cloud, we find they speak with astonishing relevance of life on the ground, as well as the sky and sea, reminding us of the importance of play, of living or taking ourselves a little more lightly. The way they come and go, and can form and vanish with great speed, point to the transience of life, a reality shared by every living thing on this planet and in so doing teach us humility, offer hope, and warn us against

grasping too tightly to the joys and sorrows of this life, the very cause of suffering, according to the Buddha.

Wonder doesn't invite an answer, it seeks a confession. An honest acknowledgement of not-knowing, which is the price of admission into the mysteries of life.

"I cannot but see still in my mind's eye those little striped breams poised in Walden's glaucous water," wrote Henry David Thoreau in his journal, November 30, 1858, "... the miracle of its existence, my contemporary and neighbor, yet so different from me! I can only poise my thought there by its side and try to think like a bream from a moment. I can only think of precious jewels, of music, poetry, beauty, and the mystery of life. I only see the bream in its orbit, as I see a star, but I care not to measure its distance or weight. The bream, appreciated, floats in the pond as the centre of the system...another image of God."

In his latest book, *The Cure At Walden Pond*, Thomas Moore, advises. "Find nature's potent metaphors but never give up contemplating nature's actual wonders." Noting that for Thoreau, "The main point about fish is their poetry, how they point beyond themselves to the ultimate mysteries and beauties."

Yet we persist to this day in our belief that explaining the world will be our salvation. Instead, it may prove the beginning of our end. As Thoreau observed in the words of our call to worship this morning,

"One boy thinks of fishes and goes a-fishing from the same motive as his brother searches the poets for rare lines. It is the poetry of fishes which is their chief use. The beauty of the fish, that is what is best worth the while to measure." He continues, "Its place in our systems is of comparatively little importance. Generally the boy loses some of his perception and his interest in the fish; he degenerates into a fisherman or an ichthyologist."

Whether we're talking clouds, fish, trees, mountains or something else, lose the metaphor and you risk losing the wonder. Lose the wonder and you're effectively shutting the door to wisdom and potentially to love.

For wonder, that humbling, sometimes unsettling realization that reality is larger, deeper, or more mysterious than we can fully comprehend, draws us beyond ourselves and our assumptions, sending us in pursuit of truth.

And as Eric Carle's *Little Cloud* and Henry David Thoreau's musings on fish remind us, truth emerges not from analysis, but attentiveness. We attend to life's mystery when we look beyond the literal and bring to ordinary experience, the attention, imagination, and sensitivity we would bring to something like a poem.

Thus a bream is not simply an aquatic, anamniotic, gill-bearing vertebrate animal, but a manifestation of the divine that inspires contemplation on the interconnectedness of life. And there, gliding across the sky, there are no stupid clouds. Rather, a regular gathering of shape-shifting mentors who have a thing or two to teach us about life on the ground.

When we let go of our anxious propensity to merely analyze the world and everyone and thing in it and being to attend to it, we become more receptive to their particularity and value. Fish will remain an important source of food and clouds a vital driver of earth's water cycle and the study of both will continue to help us to understand more about how the world works, but with attentiveness we're awakened to something more. Something worth beholding, contemplating, and connecting to that points beyond their biology, structure, and assumed "place in our systems." Attentiveness fosters affection, reverence, gratitude, and ultimately love.

The comment of one drowsy young man on a trip to Alaska, who dismissed a cloud as "stupid", points not so much to his failure to see anything more than "an aerosol consisting of a visible mass of miniature liquid droplets, ice crystals, or other particles, suspended in the atmosphere", as it does to religion's error in turning from metaphor in favor of the literal or, in the words of the late Robert Eller-Isaacs, "so many acts both evident and subtle that have fueled the illusion of separateness."

The creeds, edicts, and doctrines that feature prominently in many religions and the way in which they're practiced or enforced immediately come to mind. Still, while Unitarian Universalism is a creedless religion, and we're not given to formulating doctrine or issuing edicts we are not exempt religion's tendency to lose the metaphor, so to speak. Indeed, for as long as I've been a UU, I've observed easy acceptance of metaphor and symbolism in almost every religious source we claim and site, save for Christianity, to which a literal reading is often applied. And while we speak passionately of our interconnectedness, especially with nature, and the inherent worth and dignity of all people, we can easily find ways to divide the world and its inhabitants into us and them.

I offer these few observations not as critique nor to call out hypocrisy, but to remind us we are human. Our religion, like all religion, is a human institution. And at the end of the day we are influenced by the secular world as much, if not more, than we influence it.

I chose today's responsive reading, A Litany of Atonement, in part as a nod to our Jewish friends and members with Jewish family or background observing Yom Kippur, but more, I chose it because it reminds us we can start anew.

“We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.”

Eller-Isaacs names many transgressions for which any person might seek and offer forgiveness: remaining silent when speaking up was called for, letting anger and fear dictate our thoughts and actions, for greed, selfishness, willful ignorance, creating division, rejecting/downplaying spiritual guidance, and so forth. And any of these might also be seen, in whole or part, as losing the metaphor, that is, turning away in one way or another, from a poetic reading of life in favor of an entirely or mostly literal one.

But Eller-Isaacs also offers a way back, “begin again in love.” Which is essentially a call to attentiveness, the same invitation extended in the words attributed to Socrates, the same invitation contained within Thoreau’s journal, the same invitation disguised as a children’s story in Eric Carle’s, *Little Cloud*.

And so whenever and however we find ourselves inclined to say, “Meh. It’s just a stupid cloud.” let us pause, forgive ourselves and each other. And begin again in love.

May it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be