



Soul Matters

The Gift of Mystery

Small Group
December 2023

Welcome to the Gift of Mystery

We live in a culture that loves to conquer mysteries. For us modern folks, the unexplainable is simply a lock to be picked, a code to be cracked, a puzzle to be figured out. But what if mystery isn't just something to solve? What if it's also something to be listened to?

This is the lesser recognized call of our faith. "Yes," it says, "Stay skeptical, continue to question and seek answers. But at the same time, leave space for life to speak!" One of the most elegant articulations of this comes from the poet Mary Oliver. In her beloved poem, [Wild Geese](#), she writes,

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
over and over announcing your place in the family of things.

Oliver's call to listen for life's mysterious announcements implies a letting go. Mystery is funny this way. You can't make it speak. Indeed, often the more you pursue the meaning of life's mysteries; the more distant it becomes. If we want mystery to speak, it seems we have to be willing to put down the pursuit and open ourselves to being caught off guard. UU humanist minister and poet, David Breeden, captures this beautifully when he writes,

I dug and dug
Deeper into the earth
Looking for blue heaven
Choking always
On piles of dust rising
Then once
At midnight
I slipped
And fell into the sky

Slipping, and then falling into the sky. Is there a better way to describe our dance with mystery? Isn't this what all the great mystics have been trying to tell us from the start? That sitting at the heart of mystery is not the unknown, but unity. We fall into the mysterious oneness of life and then it falls into us. Its voice whispers, "I am you and you are me." Simply put, mystery doesn't put up barriers; it dissolves them. Haven't all of us faced the wonder and mystery of a sunset, the stars, a baby's first cry or a lover's wet kiss and thought to ourselves, "My God, who I am does not end at the barrier of my skin!"

And it's not just words of connectedness, but comfort too. We find ourselves crushed by the weight of the world, so we take a walk in the woods, watch the waves kindly caress the shore, stare into the night sky or stumble on the smile of a stranger. And often, but not always, we hear the world gently sing, "It will be ok. In fact, it is all already ok!" UU minister, [Angela Herrera](#), puts it this way,

You bring yourself before the sacred, before the holy,
before what is ultimate and bigger than your lone life...
You stand at the edge of mystery...
Meanwhile, the armful of worries you brought to the edge of mystery
have fluttered to your feet.

So friends, this month, let's let mystery work its magic. Let's allow ourselves to fall in and be opened up. Let's slip into the sky and let it slip into us. Let's set the sleuthing down, for just a moment, and simply listen.

We can't wait to hear what the world whispers back.

Our Spiritual Exercises

It's one thing to analyze a theme; it's quite another to experience it. By pulling us out of the space of *thinking* and into the space of *doing*, these exercises invite us to figure out not just what we have to say about life, but also what life has to say *to us!*

Pick the exercise that speaks to you the most. Come to your group ready to share why you picked the exercise you did and what gift it gave you.

Option A

Return to Ordinary Moments of Luminosity

We've all experienced it: the mystery of an ordinary moment that suddenly lit up and reminded you of the marvel and preciousness of being alive. It moved you from a feeling of "the same old, same old" to a feeling of dancing with the sacred. Or maybe you heard a voice in your head saying, "This matters most!" and "Don't forget this!" It added meaning to our lives and *defined* meaning at the same time.

With this in mind, spend some time this month reclaiming a handful of those mysteriously luminous moments. Here's a video to help you on your way:

The Moment: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNVPalNZD_I

As you watch it, allow it to take you back to similar ordinary but radiant moments from your life.

After watching it, you can keep it simple and just list some of those impactful memories that came to mind. Or you can take this exercise to the next level by identifying one luminous moment for each decade or life-stage of your life. Some may even find themselves wanting to write prose or poetry about one of those moments.

However you engage it, the goal is to reflect on how that special moment or moments mysteriously *added* meaning to your life and *clarified* what was meaningful at the same time.

Option B

Let Music Work Its Magic On You

There are few things that can wake us up to the mysterious marvel of life than music. So we put together this playlist of instrumental pieces that explore and help us tap into mystery:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3eGd0FBpglD8RXGyN7ML1F?si=2395e659efad4d62>

Here's your assignment: **Engage life with this playlist playing in your ears!**

More specifically:

- Find an outside space you appreciate and feel comfortable in. For instance, your favorite hiking trail, your back porch looking out over your flower garden or looking up at the night sky, or a coffee shop by the corner window that allows you to watch the hustle and bustle of the world.
- Play and listen to the entire playlist.
- While you listen, take note of what comes up for you.

The goal is to allow the space you are in to come alive, and in doing so, open a space within you. Music transports us, so let it transport you. Music illuminates the miracle of being alive, so see how it illuminates the world around you. Come to your group ready to share how music altered your seeing, and what you saw.

Option C

Draw Your Dreams

There are few things as mysterious as our dreams. Many consider them doorways into our unconscious, revealing our anxieties before we are even aware we have them. Creative types also find their dreams can help them get unstuck in a way their conscious mind couldn't. Some even say their dreams gave them [entire visions](#) for what to create. For instance, John Lennon said he received [an entire song](#) from one of his dreams!

So, this month, play with this mystery a bit by [drawing](#), [painting](#) or [collaging](#) one or two of your dreams!

We encourage you to do some dream journaling before you sit down to create. Here are a few links about dream journaling to help you out:

- <https://thecreativeindependent.com/guides/how-to-start-and-keep-a-dream-journal/>
- <https://medium.com/dream-codes/how-to-journal-your-dreams-the-right-way-to-unlock-their-meaning-f278f6f87f85>
- https://www.huffpost.com/entry/beginners-guide-to-lucid-dreaming_b_9516482
- <https://www.cafeausoul.com/oracles/dream-dictionary>

Additionally, here's a great podcast featuring experts debating what purpose our dreams serve: <https://open.spotify.com/episode/53P9qg7F3KxLKT8bnY9Ri4?si=MvyQIVCpRfuM58ycYgZFmg>.

Option D

Meditate on Mystery

Many of us have a regular meditation practice, a time we set aside to more intentionally center and open ourselves. So why not make mystery the focus of one or two of your meditations this month?!

Here are four pieces that would make rich focal points to meditate on:

- Life Is Absolutely Miraculous: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scDF8elfoNs>
- Inside It All, by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer: <https://www.mindfulnessassociation.net/words-of-wonder/inside-it-all-by-rosemerry-wahtola-trommer/>
- Primary Wonder, by Denise Levertov: <https://www.poetry-chaikhana.com/Poets/L/LevertovDeni/PrimaryWonde/index.html>
- The Miracle of Being: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1ly2KfOVjA&t=96s>

Option E

Which Mystery Quote Calls to You?

Sometimes we read a quote and it perfectly captures what's going on for us right now. Or allows us to view our current circumstances in a new light. With this in mind, spend some time this month reading through the quotes *in the Companion Pieces section* below to ***find the one that best illuminates your journey with mystery.***

Your Question

This list of questions is an aid for deep reflection. They are meant not so much to be answered as to take you somewhere. Read through the list 2-3 times until one question sticks out for you and captures your attention, or as some faith traditions say, until one of the questions “shimmers.”

Then reflect on that question by asking yourself:

- *What is going on in my life right now that makes this question so pronounced for me?*
- *How might my inner voice be trying to speak to me through it?*
- *How might Life or your inner voice be trying to offer me a word of comfort or challenge through this question?*

Writing out your thoughts often enables you to go deeper. It also sometimes helps to read the list of questions to a friend or loved one and ask them which question they think is the question you need to wrestle with.

A note about self-care: *Often these questions take us to a vulnerable space. It is OKAY to ignore the questions that may be triggering – or lean in if that feels safe.*

1. As you’ve grown older, has life seemed to have more or less mystery in it?
2. What was the first mystery to capture your imagination? How does that still shape you today?
3. What has been your most successful means of encountering or staying open to mystery?
4. What’s the most unprovable thing you’ve placed your faith in?
5. Have you ever heard silence speak?
6. Has mysterious “meaningful coincidence” (synchronicity) ever pointed you in the direction you needed to go, right when you were not sure of your way?
7. Mystics describe their mysterious experiences using phrases like, “my soul turned into a tree,” “I slipped and fell into the sky” and “I became a transparent eyeball.” Do any of these descriptions resonate with you? Have you had a mysterious or mystical experience that would help explain these phrases to others?
8. Do you spend more time treating life like a problem to be solved, a game to be won, a struggle to be survived or a mystery to be lived?
9. What’s one thing you could do this month to more deeply encounter mystery?
10. If there was one mystery you could have answered/solved before you die, what would it be?
11. Rev. Angela Herrera says that when we “stand at the edge of mystery, at the edge of the deep,” the armful of ordinary worries we carry, “flutters to our feet.” Has mystery ever done this for you?
12. What has allowed you and your life partner to still view each other as the wonderful and intoxicating mysteries you were when you first met?
13. **What’s your question?** Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to find it.

Companion Pieces

Recommended Resources for Personal Exploration & Reflection

The following resources are not required reading. We will not analyze these pieces in our group. Instead they are here to companion you on your journey this month, get you thinking and open you up to new ways of imagining the gift of mystery.

Word Roots & Definitions

The roots of mystery point to the idea of a secret, hidden truth that renders us speechless. It comes from the Greek root *muo* - literally translated as "shut the mouth" or "to be rendered silent or dumbfounded" and is also the root for our English word "mute.

Wise Words

Life is not a problem to be solved, but an experience to be had.

[Alan Watts](#)

Let mystery have its place in you... leave a little fallow corner in your heart ready for any seed the winds

may bring, and reserve a nook of shadow for the passing bird; keep a place in your heart for the unexpected guests, an altar for an unknown God.
Henri-Frederic Ariel

Knowledge is a priceless gift. But the illusion of knowledge can be more dangerous than ignorance. Thinking that you know your lover or your enemy can be more treacherous than acknowledging you'll never know them. Every morning in Japan, as the sun is flooding into our little apartment, I take great pains not to consult the weather forecast, because if I do, my mind will be overclouded, distracted, even when the day is bright... In the end, perhaps, being human is much more important than being fully in the know.

[Pico Iyer](#)

I witness a beauty in the form or coloring of the clouds which addresses itself to my imagination... You tell me it is a mass of vapor which absorbs all other rays and reflects the red, but that is nothing, for this red vision excites me, stirs my blood, makes my thoughts flow... If there is not something mystical in your explanation, something unexplainable to the understanding, some elements of mystery, it is quite insufficient.

[Henry David Thoreau](#)

I have a friend who speaks of knowledge as an island in a sea of mystery. Let this then, be the ground of my faith: All that we know, now and forever, all scientific knowledge that we have of this world, or ever will have, is as an island in the sea. Still the mystery surrounds us.

[Chet Raymo](#)

Let me keep my distance, always, from those who think they have the answers. Let me keep company always with those who say "Look!" and laugh in astonishment, and bow their heads.

[Mary Oliver](#)

The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.

Oscar Wilde

Beneath the masks, beneath the names... is a thrumming, ecstatic atomic swirl, unseen and omnipresent, inescapable and holy... How is it I sometimes see only woman, man, cottonwood, spider, self, other...

[Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer](#)

I like to think of mysticism as the art of meeting reality, the art of richer and deeper awareness... It is not the intellectual conviction that Being itself is my being, but rather an ineffable experience of that Oneness, flooding in to overwhelm our illusion of aloneness, separateness.

[Jacob Trapp](#)

Every one of us is a mystic, because we have this experience of belonging, once in a while, out of the blue... But what we call the great mystics, they let this experience determine and shape every moment of their lives. They never forgot it. And we humans, the rest of us, tend to forget it.

[David Steindl-Rast](#)

Sometimes, when a bird cries out,
Or the wind sweeps through a tree,
Or a dog howls in a far-off farm,
I hold still and listen a long time.
My soul turns and goes back to the place
Where, a thousand forgotten years ago,
The bird and the blowing wind
Were like me, were my brothers and sisters.
My soul turns into a tree...

[Herman Hesse](#)

I believe God is everything ... My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it came to me: that feeling of being part of everything not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed.

[Alice Walker](#)

In the woods . . . standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.

[Ralph Waldo Emerson](#)

Those who dwell among the beauties and mysteries of the earth are never alone or weary of life.

Rachel Carson

You bring yourself before the sacred,
before the holy,
before what is ultimate and bigger than your lone life...

You stand at the edge of mystery,
at the edge of the deep...

Meanwhile, the armful of worries you brought to the edge of mystery
have fluttered to your feet...

[Rev. Angela Herrera](#)

In a true encounter with another human being, we come face to face with the mystery of life. In some way, every other person, no matter how well we know them, will remain as mysterious to us as a country across the ocean we only read about in books... In every interaction, whether it is with a stranger or our longtime partner, we can be surprised by what we have not yet seen or even imagined.

[David Rynick](#)

To be able to marvel at the face of our neighbor with the same awe we have for the mountain top, the sunlight refracting. This manner of vision is what will keep us from destroying each other.

[Cole Arthur Riley](#)

The great mystery is not that we should have been thrown down here at random between the profusion of matter and that of the stars; it is that from our very prisons we should draw, from our own selves, images powerful enough to deny our nothingness.

Andre Malraux

The final mystery is oneself.

Oscar Wilde

I said, "I had this feeling maybe I had been called."
"And you may have been right." he said, "But not to what you thought. Not to what you think. You have been given questions to which you cannot be given answers. You will have to live them out—perhaps a little at a time."

"And how long is that going to take?"

"I don't know. As long as you live, perhaps."

[Wendell Berry](#)

Music

Two different playlists for each of our monthly themes: one in Spotify and another in YouTube. They are organized as a journey of sorts, so consider listening from beginning to end and using the playlists as musical meditations.

Click [here](#) for the Spotify playlist on [mystery](#).
Click [here](#) for all [Spotify playlists](#).
Click [here](#) for the YouTube playlist on [mystery](#).
Click [here](#) for all the [YouTube playlists](#).

New this month! Our *instrumental* playlist on mystery. On Spotify [HERE](#). On YouTube [HERE](#).

Videos & Podcasts

On the Miraculous Mystery of Who We Are
<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/7GwjpOkXFyU>

Reawakening to the Miracle & Mystery of Life
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scDF8elfoNs>

The Mystery and Miracle of Everyday Moments
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNVPaINZD_I

Mystery in the Smaller Parts of Our World

- [Neurons connecting](#)
- [Eyeball seeing](#)
- [Hearts beating](#)
- [Water creatures “bioluminescing”](#)
- [Pond creatures dancing](#)

Art Made in the Gap of Mystery and Not-Knowing

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdxfbpZIRcE>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DTUVfGDEAqE>

On The Fact that How AI Works is a Mystery

- https://open.spotify.com/episode/7onym0eP8yEkUATJyYz58G?si=RavQ1OS3SqWBN_6jEHINVQ
- https://open.spotify.com/episode/3npjXNctUSGRUjVR4EYb4Y?si=qT-HZWkyTHY_WzfZ10LNAG

Articles

Majestic Trees

This [Finnish photographer](#) helps us see the “ordinary” [trees](#) around us as [the ethereal creatures](#) they really are!

Intellectual humility: Why it’s so hard to see our own ignorance, and what to do about it.

<https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2019/1/4/17989224/intellectual-humility-explained-psychology-replication>

Books

[When God is Gone Everything is Holy](#)

[Awakening Wonder in an Anxious Age](#)

Movies

[The Velvet Queen](#)

[Silence](#)

[Boyhood](#)

[Arrival](#)

[Psychedelia](#)

More Monthly Inspiration from Soul Matters!

Our Facebook Inspiration Page:

<https://www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle/>

Our Instagram Page:

Find us as “soul_matters_circle”

Music Playlists:

Click [here](#) for links to the [Spotify playlists](#) for each month.

Click [here](#) to check out the [YouTube playlists](#).

Packet Introduction Credit Note: Unless explicitly noted otherwise, the introductions of these packets are written by our Team Lead, Rev. Scott Tayler. Rev. Scott gives permission for his pieces to be used in any way that is helpful, including in newsletters, worship and in online service/recordings.



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