

## “A Sense of Wonder”

I want to thank Dean Corrigan, a member of our congregation who last week sent me a tribute he'd written for his favorite teacher, Mary Finnegan. He'd been in her classroom many years before in the little town of Gorham, New Hampshire, where she'd taught English. She was the kind of teacher, he said, who understood there are standardized tests but no standardized children. It was a heartwarming letter of thanks to an educator who had obviously touched many lives. But what struck me most was a biographical note at the very beginning which said that Mrs. Finnegan happened to be the oldest person to receive a Ph.D. in Humanities from the Department of Philosophy at Florida State University, which had awarded her a doctorate at the age of eighty three. After a standing ovation as she received her degree, she said, "I just like to read and study." Here was a woman who long after her formal teaching career was over, never stopped learning. And at an age when most of us are pleased just to remember where we left the car keys, she was cracking the books and writing dissertations. And it occurred to me that this was no coincidence, that curiosity is contagious. Her inquisitiveness is precisely what made Mrs. Finnegan such an outstanding influence on younger minds. Because the most interesting people are interested people, who never stop asking thinking and asking questions.

Some brains are like that, exploring issues others don't even know are issues.

That's true, for example, of Bill McKibben, the author of a dozen books who now teaches at Middlebury College, and whose volume *The End of Nature*, published twenty years back, in 1989, was the first popular work to call attention to the reality global warming. McKibben is in the forefront of the environmental movement, speaking with equal authority on recombinant DNA and cap-and-trade. So it's rather surprising to learn that as a young man, Bill McKibben never thought about nature or the outdoors much at all.

As he explains, "I went from college straight to *The New Yorker*, where I was the steadiest writer for the Talk of the Town section, about as urban a job as it's possible to imagine." But then he took on an oddball assignment for the magazine. He decided to find out where every pipe and wire in his Manhattan apartment came from and went. So instead of just turning on the faucet and expecting running hot and cold, he followed the plumbing up to the reservoirs in the Catskills, and traveled to Hudson Bay to see the enormous hydro projects producing power for Con Ed, and rode with the garbage scows out into the New York harbor. Somewhere along the way, he says, he had an "aha" moment of realization that the physical world actually mattered. "That this came as an insight says much about how I—and perhaps most good suburban Americans---had grown up," he confesses. He'd lived inside a rather artificial shell. But he was drawn out and into a much wider world, an unexpectedly fascinating and complex world, by the simple act of flipping a light switch and not taking the electricity for granted, but instead inquiring, where does the power come from?

Many of us live in apartments like that, maybe most of us, even if we live in Burlington rather than the Big Apple, even if we happen to know where our water comes from and where the wires all go. For example, all of us inhabit a body for our entire lives, a flesh-and-blood domicile we depend on for each breath and every step,

but I think it's safe to say that most of you here this morning don't know which side your spleen is on (could I get a show of hands?), and I'd be hard pressed to explain how my digestion works or the reason for the colors I can see inside my head when I close my eyes at night. Again, we dwell daily in a financial house (or maybe a house of cards?)--a marketplace where we buy and sell, get and spend without a second thought--but I suspect few of us could account for how wealth actually gets created, or how so many trillions could vanish into smoke almost overnight when the economy evaporated last fall. What do you think we'd learn if, like Bill McKibben following his pipes and conduits in Manhattan, we tried to actually follow the money?

Sometimes, admittedly, we'd rather not know. Those strawberries in the Hannaford might not look so tempting, after all, if we knew exactly how far they'd traveled, or who picked them, or what was sprayed on the vines. And a whole industry exists to keep consumers thinking happy thoughts instead of looking too carefully into safety standards or working conditions for the people who actually make our shoes and shirts and cell phones. But sometimes the questions ask themselves.

That was true, for instance, of the woman many consider to be the founder of the modern environmental movement, Rachel Carson. It would have been easier for her not to write *Silent Spring*. Her mother had just died; her eyes were failing. She was undergoing radiation to treat a growing cancer. Trying to unravel the intricate biochemistry of DDT and explain its dangers to a non-technical audience was undoubtedly going to be the toughest assignment of her life. She also knew that she would have powerful enemies ready to pounce on any error in her work as evidence that she was unqualified and hysterical, a woman and therefore not to be taken seriously. And she doubted if the average reader was really eager for the information she was presenting. The chemical companies were accustomed to feeding the public "little tranquilizing pills of half-truths," in her words, to maximize profits and keep the customer satisfied.

But someone had to write the book, and she knew how. Yet temperamentally, she was more poet than provocateur, more mystic than muckraker. As she said, the gift she would impart to every child is an indestructible sense of wonder--glad appreciation the everyday miracles of singing birds and silver rain--for "it is not half so important to know as to feel," in her words.

Wonder is inseparable from religion, which has been described as the "oceanic feeling." Apart from dogma or creeds or institutions or belief systems, religion is an experience of the eternal, the boundless, the infinite, the unsearchable. And the ocean itself was where Rachel discovered that oceanic feeling, describing her sensations in books like *The Sea Around Us*. She wrote lyrically of exploring the beach at night, finding a small ghost crab in the beam of her torch, "lying in a pit he had dug just above the surf, as though watching the sea and waiting. The blackness of the night possessed water, air and beach. It was the darkness of an older world," before the dawn of human witness. "I had seen hundreds of ghost crabs in other settings, but suddenly I was filled with the odd sensation that for the first time I knew the creature in its own world--that I understood, as never before, the essence of its being. In that moment time was suspended; the world to which I belonged did not exist and I might

have been an onlooker from outer space. The little crab alone with the sea became a symbol that stood for life itself—for the delicate, destructible, yet incredibly vital force that somehow holds its place amid the harsh realities of the inorganic world.”

For Rachel, even a lowly crustacean could be a *Thou*, a divine subject rather merely an object of study, a being to whom she might feel emotionally bonded and spiritually akin. She was one of the first nature writers to spin her yarns from the animal’s point of view, as in her first title *Under the Sea Wind*, where she followed the fate a little sandpiper she named Blackfoot on his annual migration from the Canadian Arctic to Patagonia 12,000 miles away. To do so, she had to enter imaginatively into the bird’s reality, asking “how does a breaking wave (a) sound and (b) look to sanderlings?” For her, the ocean was never a desolate or lonely place, but one filled with soaring thoughts and enlivening companions.

Yet like the bird guided surely on its long flight, Carson had a homing sense for truth and her science was dead on. Her appetite for mystery never diminished her hunger for the facts. She demolished what she considered maritime myths like the lost continent of Atlantis and the Sargasso Sea that trapped wayward sailors in tangling weeds. For her, the ocean held plenty of real marvels without resort to fiction. Fascinating, for instance, that nearly sixty years ago, Carson observed that “now in our own lifetime we are witnessing a startling alteration of climate ... The frigid top of the world is very clearly warming up.” Without being able to pinpoint the precise cause, she reported on icefields like Alaska’s Muir Glacier receding over ten kilometers in the space of a dozen years. But she reasoned it must have something to do with changing currents and warming water, calling the ocean’s the earth’s great thermostat. Hers was an intellect as restless and roving as the sea itself.

Science and faith—or least a certain kind of faith—fit together in her way of looking at things, for both ask insistent questions about our universe. For religion, the riddles have no final solutions. Whether there’s a God, the whole question of evil, what happens when we die, why there’s something instead of nothing are perplexities that haunt the mind, and even without any definite resolution make us think more seriously on the meaning of our lives. Science may tell us about the physics of the atmosphere or the dynamics of wave action, but can never tell us what makes the sunset beautiful or why the pounding surf stirs the soul. Yet religion needs science precisely to challenge our assumptions, to disrupt received opinion and the day’s conventional wisdom, driving knowledge to the limits of understanding so that we can all the more appreciate the vast extent of the unknown.

Our particular faith is better at questioning our answers than answering our questions. So it was appropriate for Rachel Carson to request that her final farewell take place at the All Souls Unitarian Church in New York, where the minister, Duncan Howlett, had companioned her through her final illness. She wanted a simple ceremony, without fanfare, attended by her closest friends. Sadly, her estranged brother Robert seized control, and the official funeral was held at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., with U.S. Senators for pallbearers and eulogies from an Episcopal bishop she’d never

met. The following day, the more genuine, intimate parting took place in the Unitarian chapel, where the minister read from Rachel's own reflections, watching the flight of butterflies as they set out on a migration from which none would ever return. "For the monarch," Carson mused, "that cycle is measured in a known span of months."

For ourselves the measure is something else, the span of which we cannot know. But the thought is the same: when the intangible cycle has run its course it is a natural and not unhappy thing that a life comes to its end.

Not unhappy, if the mind has been alert, not unhappy, if the work has been real, not unhappy, if the heart has loved, not unhappy if we have lived with a sense of unquenchable curiosity, for then we might approach our last moments with a sense of gratitude for what's been and wonder for whatever follows.