

On July 5, 1687, Isaac Newton's "Principia" was published. Covering laws of motion, mechanics and gravitation, it is still considered one of the most important and foundational books in human history.

As children, we may have learned that Newton "discovered" gravity when he observed an apple falling from a tree while he was sitting peacefully on a park bench. Yet, of course, gravity existed long before Newton quantified it in his book. Other scientists throughout history prior to Newton knew of gravity yet they failed to quantify it as Newton did. Aristotle believed that objects either rose or fell depending upon the ratio of the four basic elements of which that body was composed – the four basic elements being earth, air, fire and water. Yet, even before Aristotle, before humanity, since the beginning of time, gravity existed. In the "Principia," Newton merely quantified it, telling humanity "here it is."

The beautiful aspect of Newton's law of gravity is that it pointed us toward unseen aspects of our universe. In the 19th century, astronomers calculated that the motion of the planet Uranus wasn't following the law as expected. Rather than supposing that the law was wrong, it was supposed that some other yet to be discovered object in the heavens was the cause for the discrepancy. Believing that Newton's law was correct, scientists calculated that an unknown object of a specific mass should be located at a specific place. On the very night that those calculations were made, astronomers looked in that specific place and discovered a new planet – Neptune.

The joy of discovery – discovering those things we have yet to see.

What innate, yet undiscovered, gifts...gifts we have yet to see...might be hidden within ourselves? We can think about this on multiple levels. What undiscovered potential might this congregation have? This year, we will be continuing to re-examine ourselves through our visioning process. We've jointly articulated the values we hold as a congregation. We've articulated a covenant with one another that comprises those values. We've articulated examples of what holding such values compels us to do. Our next steps involve us re-examining

our mission and articulating our vision. This process may help guide us on our way to the uncovering of our, and possibly your, hidden, yet to be discovered gifts.

In this morning's story, the Tower of Babel, taken from the book of Genesis in the Old Testament, I see a people cooperating, working together, wishing to be one community. They say, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth (Genesis 1: 4)." Yet God, seeing this says, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech. (Genesis 1: 6-7)."

God confounds them by causing them to speak in different tongues such that they can no longer communicate with one another. The people give up on their plans to build the tower as one community. They then spread into different communities throughout the earth.

Why did God do this? What good reason might God have to frustrate "his" people so? The standard argument is that the people had an ulterior motive – that in building such a tower to the heavens and wanting to make a name for themselves, they reveal their ego to be on the same level as God. Apparently, God wouldn't have any of that so he frustrated their efforts.

UUs hear many stories like this, and there are many of them in the Old Testament, and come away thinking God to be an angry, jealous and capricious God. We're not the only ones who think this.

Before Christianity became "orthodox" at the Council of Nicea in 325 CE, there were many different groups who were trying to square Jesus' message of "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind (Luke 10:25)" with the sometimes angry, jealous and capricious God of the Old Testament.

Some of these early Christian groups were called Gnostics. (This is an umbrella term used to describe several different groups that believed different things.) Some of these Gnostics,

hearing Jesus' message and reading these Old Testament stories, came to believe that the God of the Old Testament couldn't possibly be the same God that Jesus was talking about. Jesus couldn't be talking about this jealous, angry God who, earlier in the book of Genesis, is credited with creating this world rife with imperfection, violence and suffering. Gnostics came to believe that the god of the Old Testament was a god, but not "the" God. They believed that the god of the Old Testament was a flawed god who created something he shouldn't have. Jesus, to provide a course correction of sorts, had to come here to provide special knowledge of (i.e. Gnosis) and point humanity towards the direction from this Old Testament god to the true God of which humanity was unaware. The Gnostics, believing Jesus couldn't be wrong, gleaned from his teachings that there was a yet to be discovered God behind the god of the Old Testament...a yet to be discovered God, yet a God that had always existed.

Many of us might see the Tower of Babel story as simply another myth created to explain the diversity of people and language here on earth. Other cultures have similar myths about reaching the heavens by building towers. Other cultures have similar myths to explain the diversity among the earth's peoples.

In this story, God wasn't really looking to create diversity. God was jealous of the people, a bit afraid of them, and decided to cut them down to size. The resulting diversity was a side effect – an accident.

After God confounds the people with a variety of languages, rather than find a way to communicate, work together, build and rebuild, the community scatters. How much love binds such a community together? If you woke up tomorrow morning and came to find that those you love the most spoke a different language than you, would you merely shrug your shoulders and say, "Oh well" and move on?

Some people here at UUMAN might feel that we are speaking different languages... here amongst ourselves; and that, perhaps, we have angry, jealous, capricious gods making selfish decisions from on high frustrating our efforts. It can be disheartening to feel this. And rather than find a way to communicate, work together and rebuild, maybe we'll just scatter. Maybe there's an unwillingness to rebuild; an unwillingness indicative that the love we share for one

another might not be as deep as we thought it was. That could be our myth. That could be the story we tell ourselves about ourselves.

Or, we could tell ourselves a different story.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who died at the hands of the Nazis, said, “Only that fellowship which faces such Disillusionment, with all its unhappy and ugly aspects, begins to be what it should be in God's sight, begins to grasp in faith the promise that is given to it. The sooner this shock of disillusionment comes to an individual and to a community the better for both (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, UUA Commission on Appraisal: Belonging, p10).”

The shock of disillusionment is difficult, especially when, in that disillusionment, we discover some less than pleasing aspects of our very selves; especially when we were living under the illusion that we were already in the promised land, the land of milk and honey.

We had a beautiful ribbon cutting ceremony last week to celebrate the reconstruction of the downstairs of Fellowship Hall. It's truly beautiful down there...but will it always be that way? No, that would be living an illusion. Our children and Premo children will be down there. There will be fingerprints on the wall and doorways, shoes tracking in mud and dirt, spilled juice and splattered paints...and glitter! It is inevitable.

After the ceremony, I told someone that if this basement ever floods again, I'm simply going to get in my car, drive away and not come back. I'll be “off to see the wizard!” Because I've been down there standing in three inches of water. I've mopped it all up; swept it into this little drain we have in the corner of the building. I've worked on the ground regrading behind the patio in an effort to keep water from the building.

Ok. I say that I'll be off to see the wizard but in my heart I know that that wouldn't ever be the case. There's no place like home. 😊 And I have faith that behind and beyond the disillusionment is the promise that has been given to this congregation, that the hidden unseen gifts of this congregation and its people, you and me, have yet to be fully discovered

I've seen evidence of these gifts already.

Last Saturday we held a training session for the teachers who've rallied around our MCY program. There were many new people present; as well as many people who hadn't taught in years. And although I am personally grateful for their willingness to step into this role and for the positive vibe they brought to the training, I wonder if they realize that *they* might be the ones who will be most affected by their act of service. I wonder if, as new teachers, they realize that they might be the ones who'll discover something new about themselves. I know that I didn't know this when I first volunteered to teach at my home congregation over 20 years ago. I learned a lot about myself in my many years as an OWL instructor youth group advisor. This experience essentially pushed me over the edge and led me to pursue the path toward UU ministry.

A couple of weeks ago at NFCC, perhaps ten of us were unloading a truck full of school supplies and backpacks that would end up being given to Fulton County schoolchildren who lack the means to acquire their own.

During our work together, Carla Kapeskas told me about something that had transpired at her home. She had some friends of hers over to her house and she began to describe the interfaith El Refugio service project that we had just completed here at UUMAN earlier in the week. As she began to talk, her ninth grade daughter Vika interrupted her and began explaining the service project to Carla's friends...that in the UUMAN sanctuary we had over 100 people of all ages, colors, ethnicities and religions (Muslims, Jews, Christians and UUs) working together, side by side, to assemble backpacks for families who must take a long trip to the Stewart Detention Center simply to visit their detained loved ones. Vika further explained to the guests that we do this work not only as a service project, not only to get to know others in our community who are different from us, practice a different faith than us, but also because this work is what we do as Unitarian Universalists who follow seven principles.

I imagine that was one interruption Carla welcomed! A parent hearing something like that from their child (and relating this to a third party adult no less!) is what it's all about. Just a couple of years ago, I'd never hear a peep from Vika....Now there's a young woman who's finding her voice...and it's a Unitarian Universalist voice!

Yes, these are just some of the examples of the hidden, unseen gifts of those here at UUMAN; gifts that are just now dawning on the horizon. And in this congregation, I am willing to "trust to those elements I have yet to see....[and with that I] look for the true shape of our own self (David Whyte, "Working Together")...and of this congregation.