

“In Praise of Mystery (Water Communion)”

Delivered to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Roanoke on Sunday,
September 13, 2026 by the Rev. Jen Raffensperger

“Arching under the night sky inky
with black expansiveness, we point
to the planets we know, we

pin quick wishes on stars. From earth,
we read the sky as if it is an unerring book
of the universe, expert and evident.”

When Ada Limón wrote the [poem](#) that became today’s reading, she was
serving as the Poet Laureate of the United States. On the Library of
Congress website where this poem appears, it also publishes this
contextual note:

“As part of her laureateship, Ada Limón wrote an original poem, “In Praise
of Mystery: A Poem for Europa,” dedicated to NASA’s Europa Clipper
mission.

On June 1, 2023, Limón debuted “In Praise of Mystery” to kick off the
NASA “Message in a Bottle” campaign, which invites people around the
world to sign their names to the poem.

The poem will be engraved on the Clipper, along with participants' names
that will be etched onto microchips mounted on the spacecraft. Together,
the poem and participant’s names will travel 1.8 billion miles on Europa
Clipper’s voyage to the Jupiter system.”

NASA’s Europa Clipper mission successfully launched on October 14, 2024
and is due to arrive sometime in April, 2030, a date that still sounds like
science fiction to me, even as it is less than four years away. Europa, one
of the moons of Jupiter, is an icy world, with liquid oceans beneath the ice

where the conditions for life may exist. This flyby mission will investigate the conditions on this distant world more closely than humans ever have.

Of course in cosmological terms, Europa is a very close neighbor indeed. And in cosmological terms, four years is but a blink, travel in the tiniest hop. As huge as humanity's quest for knowledge is, in some ways, it is close to home. It is a reminder that there are worlds all around us to explore, worlds that we cannot fully comprehend.

"Still, there are mysteries below our sky:
the whale song, the songbird singing
its call in the bough of a wind-shaken tree.

We are creatures of constant awe,
curious at beauty, at leaf and blossom,
at grief and pleasure, sun and shadow."

It is this constant awe that connects us. It is this constant awe that drives humanity to explore the universe just as it is this constant awe that drives us to explore our own world, our own souls. The souls of our neighbors on this planet, human and otherwise, remain mysterious things. The interiority of others, unknown to us until we are invited, perhaps cautiously, perhaps with jumping-in-with-both-feet enthusiasm, into deeper relationship.

There is a tension within this poem, that the poet plays with - as Poet Laureate, her job is to honor the mission, flinging the footprint of humanity out ever farther into our solar system, carrying the names and dreams of so many of us etched onto tiny chips.

Still: there are mysteries below our own sky! This reminder - that there is still so much here to wonder at, so much awe to find - also points us to the question of how we are caring for the world as it is, this world, right now, here at home.

Ever since humanity pinned its sights on space, on the exploration of worlds beyond our own, we have lived with these questions. How much of our attention and resources should be focused outward? What are the ethical and moral implications of space travel when people here on earth do not have safe places to live, do not have enough food to eat, cannot access vital medical care?

There is something to be said for all that we learn from space travel. We learn about the universe in which we live, we learn about ourselves. Without that dream, we would not have that image of the “pale blue dot” - our own home, seen from space, as Carl Sagan reminds us represents all that we have ever known, loved, been, dreamed. Here, on this small watery planet, full of mysteries.

“From earth,
we read the sky as if it is an unerring book
of the universe, expert and evident.”

It’s true. Humans have always looked to the stars to tell the truth about ourselves through our stories; we have used their positions to steer our ships; we have dreamed about all that we do not know out there.

We look outward and we dream. We look inward, too, and dream. We look to those closest to us, not just our celestial neighbors but to one another, the people we see day in and day out, and we wonder - what are their dreams? If we each contain a world of ideas and experiences within our own consciousness, how do we connect - how do we bridge ourselves from the world we inhabit right now to the one we dream about? Do we look to space? Do we look around the earth? Do we look to each other?

“And it is not darkness that unites us,
not the cold distance of space, but
the offering of water, each drop of rain,

each rivulet, each pulse, each vein.

O second moon, we, too, are made
of water, of vast and beckoning seas.

We, too, are made of wonders, of great
and ordinary loves, of small invisible worlds,
of a need to call out through the dark.” (6:10)

O dear neighbors, dear mysteries, we too are made of water. Our planet
pulses with life in water, and water pulses within us.

Sometime in seminary, I heard something that has stuck with me ever since
- though I’m sad to say I don’t remember who told me, or whether the
thought was theirs or something they’d read or heard themselves. Still, the
wisdom is what stuck with me: “We spend too much time looking to the sky
and the mountaintop for God, we look up in the remote places where it’s
hard for humans to get to for that which is larger than ourselves, which
connects us. And we’re doing it all wrong. The thing that connects us isn’t
up there where the air is thin. It’s down, down, below our feet. The water
that nourishes us from the roots up, that sustains all life.”

If you want the truth, dig down.

If you want to dream, look around.

If you want to unite with others, look to the water, listen for the rain, hear
the pounding of your own heart and see the tears of joy and sorrow in the
eyes of your neighbor.

The world as it is right now is full of injustice and hatred. It is just as full of
joy and connection. The same water runs through and sustains each of us.
Yes, look outward. Yes, look inward. But most importantly, look to each
other. Do not lose the beautiful mystery of humanity in the tales of hate and
betrayal. Ground yourselves in the water that shapes and sustains us, that
connects us. We, too, are made of great wonders. Let that ground you. Let
that lift you. Let that river carry you.

So may it be.