

A RECORD OF THINGS WONDERFUL

An atheist reckons with God, kids, and the Unitarian Universalist church.

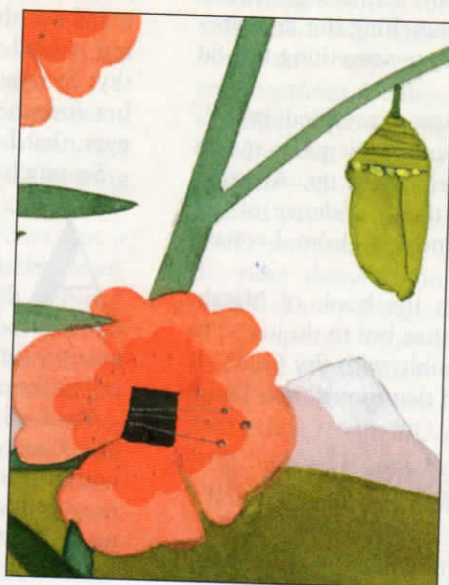
by Kris Willcox | illustrations by Jen Corace

WHEN MY mother was dying, in a Seattle hospital far from my home in suburban Boston, a palliative care team comprising a doctor, a social worker, and an interfaith chaplain arrived to help us understand the process of her dying and care for her in the final days. As they prepared to leave, I asked the chaplain if I could have “a prayerful moment” with him. The request surprised us both. I didn’t know precisely what I wanted. *Prayerful* is not a term I’d ever uttered. I knew that he was an Episcopal priest who, as a chaplain, served people of all faiths as well as those who did not identify with a religion. I also felt, instinctively, that he could interpret my request for a prayerful moment, even if I could not. He led me to a small room of chairs and tissues and did his best to understand.

“I see your mother listed Unitarian Universalist as her religion.”

“Yes,” I said. “It’s mine, too.”

He asked if I would like him to say something in keeping with our faith. I struggled for words,

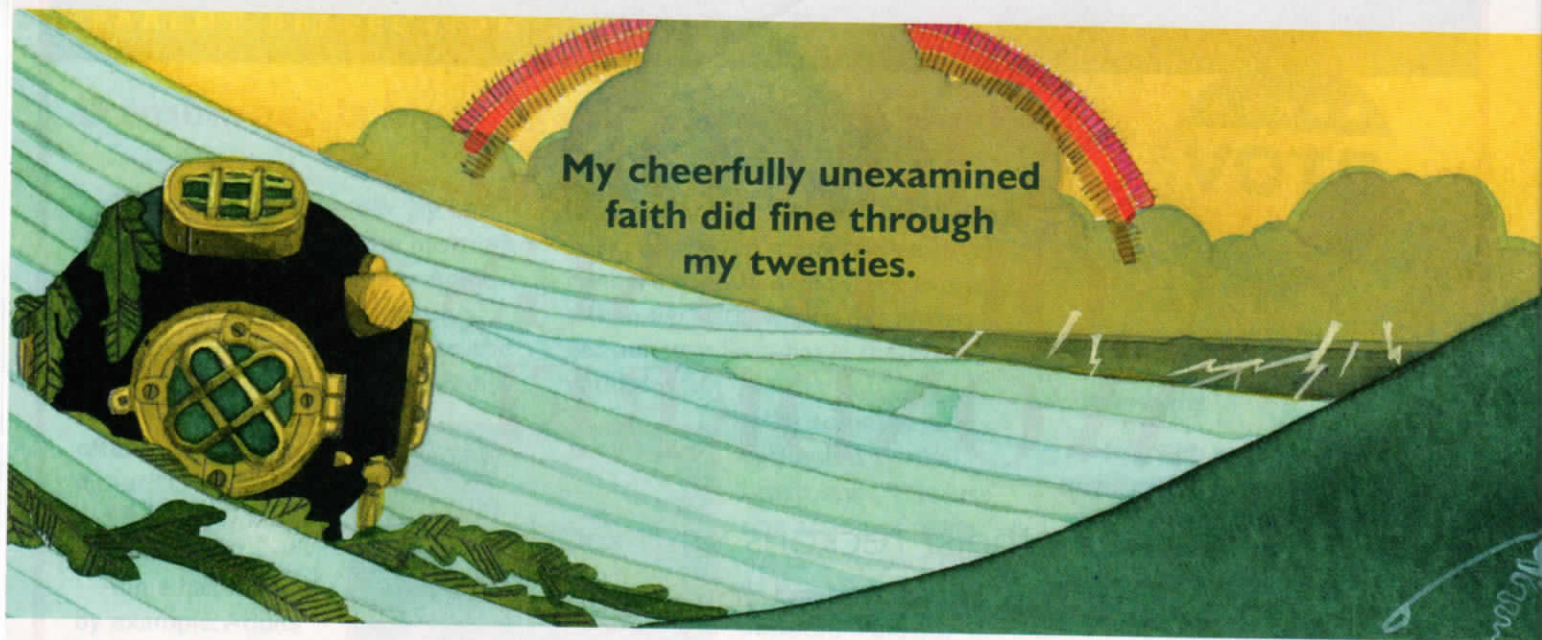


finally coming out with, “Could you just . . . say whatever Episcopalians say in situations like this?” He put his hand on mine and prayed that God would bring comfort and peace to my mother and our family. I sniffled my thanks and went back to Mom’s room.

A devout Christian might say that God was reaching out to me. A confirmed atheist might suggest I was too sad to think clearly. Here’s what I think: I needed comfort, from the most

direct source of that person’s heart, which was Episcopal tradition and belief. Further, I knew that to receive comfort in the language of his faith would not cancel or threaten mine; my beliefs were safe within me.

IN 2004, WHEN I WAS 28 AND WORKING for the UUA, I had the privilege of giving the sermon at a weekly staff chapel service. In a wood-paneled room overlooking the Massachusetts State House, I spoke of growing up UU in Utah, where religious liberals “huddled together for warmth.” Then, with delight, I told



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of my newfound Christianity, which was not only tolerated but welcomed at my Cambridge parish. How nice, I declared, after munching the dry cereal of humanism for years to taste something full-fat and churchier.

I was proud of that sermon (excerpted in *UU World's* July/August 2004 issue), so it pains me to admit that those claims haven't held up. A dozen years later, I'm surprised at the confidence of my own proclamations. Apparently, as John Leonard said, "I was older then."

I shared then words from the book of Micah: "What does God require of thee but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" It wasn't merely the word God that moved me, I said, it was "the word 'require.'"

God does not appeal to my reason, does not suggest that I be just, merciful, and humble. God *requires*. Period. . . . I can love those words and the idea of a God with requirements because I've never been told to submit to a God with mean or impossible requirements.

I acknowledged that this wasn't so for many UUs, including members of my congregation and family who have been told to submit to mean or impossible requirements, but for me the God of Micah and his requirements worked fine. My argument—if I understand myself correctly—was that lack of any bad history with God justified the adoption of Christian beliefs. I added this zinger of a quote from the Indigo Girls: "The sweetest part is acting after making a decision."

My cheerfully unexamined faith did fine through my twenties, with no major stress tests. But later,

after I had children, and my 5-year-old asked, "Mommy, is God real?" I knew she wasn't asking me about the Spirit of Life and Love. She was asking if God is an actual, sandal-wearing guy in the sky, the way her paternal grandparents and some of her friends insisted. I knew also, looking into her eyes, that I was an atheist and always had been.

So much for the sweetness of action.

AT THIS WRITING, OUR FAMILY IS NOT part of a congregation, but when asked about my religion—or facing that ultimate litmus test of faith, the hospital admission form—I still answer "Unitarian Universalist" without hesitation. It belongs to me, and I to it.

Gradually, my husband Scott and I drifted from our Cambridge parish where we met. We live within minutes of a dozen UU congregations, yet now I find the very thing that excited me about many New England UU churches, an openness to Christianity, gives me pause. It feels like a latter-day UU heresy to admit this, but I'm concerned my children will pick up *theism* along with the Seven Principles. Scott, a self-described "escapee" from a deeply conservative Christian tradition, can't stand this idea. When I cajoled everyone recently into attending Christmas Eve services at a nearby congregation, he wanted assurance that there wouldn't be too many mentions of Jesus.

"Well, it is *Christmas Eve*," I said. Was he expecting a lecture on the rule of law?

We went. Jesus was mentioned, the kids took part in nativity-building, Scott didn't break out in hives, and we haven't been back. I can't easily explain why, but I've been worrying about it faithfully, chasing



my tail so hard I've now caught it and bitten down firmly. Scott calls this state of frenzied inaction "Fret Level Orange." To be fair, he is just as unsure. He'd like us to have the social and ethical supports of a church community but only wants the kind of UU experience I can't stomach: the detox program, whose primary function is to bar the door and heal the wounds of bad religious experiences. Growing up a so-called "non-Mormon" gave me an appreciation for the refuge offered by UU churches, but it also made me weary of church experiences that were, at heart, a refusal of religion. The Church of No.

If there was a moment in childhood that inspired my brief stint as a Christian, twenty years later, it was probably the Sunday school lesson when our teacher explained that some people believe in the God of the Bible, while some are Jewish or Hindu, and some other people are Buddhist, and so on. I felt cheated. The Mormon kids around me had the eternal glory of the Heavenly Father, and I got "and some other people are Buddhist." Curricula have surely evolved in thirty years, but that early experience of being bored left a deep impression. I don't want our kids to have a church experience that leaves their senses dulled, and Scott would sooner take them on the highway without seatbelts than give them unshielded exposure to even the most liberal Christianity. So here we are, two people who met in a UU congregation, were married by UU ministers, live near Boston in the highest density of UU churches anywhere, identify as UUs, and yet cannot get ourselves to church, nor conclude that it's all right to stay away.

This would be an incomplete story if I didn't own up to another source of resistance: fatigue. Church

eats time. In earlier years I gave the time gladly, but family life exhausts me for many interactions I once welcomed. Why venture out when the chaos in my home rivals any post-service coffee hour? Yet in congregations I believe everyone should pitch in, especially if you bring kids. I can't just gobble up the Beloved Community others brought to the potluck—Mom raised me better than that. I'll show up and pay my pledge, help put the folding chairs away, serve on the Canvassing Committee—and the next thing I know, I'll be teaching Sunday school. (I may exaggerate, but only slightly.)

Two specific forms of guilt keep me from simply enjoying my Sundays at home. First, I am letting down the movement. For all their imperfections, I owe a debt to the UU communities that raised me, from Sunday school to youth groups and YRUU conferences to the New England parish where I became a full-fledged member and met my life partner. To gain so much and leave feels like ingratitude, and a gamble. I would feel bereft without the option of a UU congregation to come home to, yet when Sunday rolls around we aren't going. Not this week, not next. Maybe not ever. I'm the grown child who never makes it home for holidays but expects her childhood bedroom to stay just as she left it.

The second spur is my kids, who could benefit from the experience and care of a church. At ages 8 and 6, their selves are forming right in front of us, fragile as new shells. Last year my daughter, then 7, looked up at me while brushing her teeth and said, "Sometimes it's so weird to think that . . . I exist . . . you know?" My heart skipped a beat: Baby's first moment of existential wonder!

"Yes," I said, "I *do* know!" A year later, she's more



guarded. Walking home from school, she asked me about the location of the Arctic Circle, and I suggested, with perhaps too much enthusiasm, that we consult a map together.

"Never mind," she said. "This is turning into one of those 'Let's Learn Something' conversations." Her curiosity remains, but my access is narrowing. Here, again, we might benefit from a community where she and her younger brother could agree with adults who share many of their parents' beliefs, without suffering the indignity of openly agreeing with us (an essential function of church youth groups for me).

It gets more fraught. When I told my daughter I was writing about being a mom who doesn't believe in God, she calmly replied, "I believe in God and that everything in the Bible is true." If she was hoping for an incendiary reaction, I supplied it.

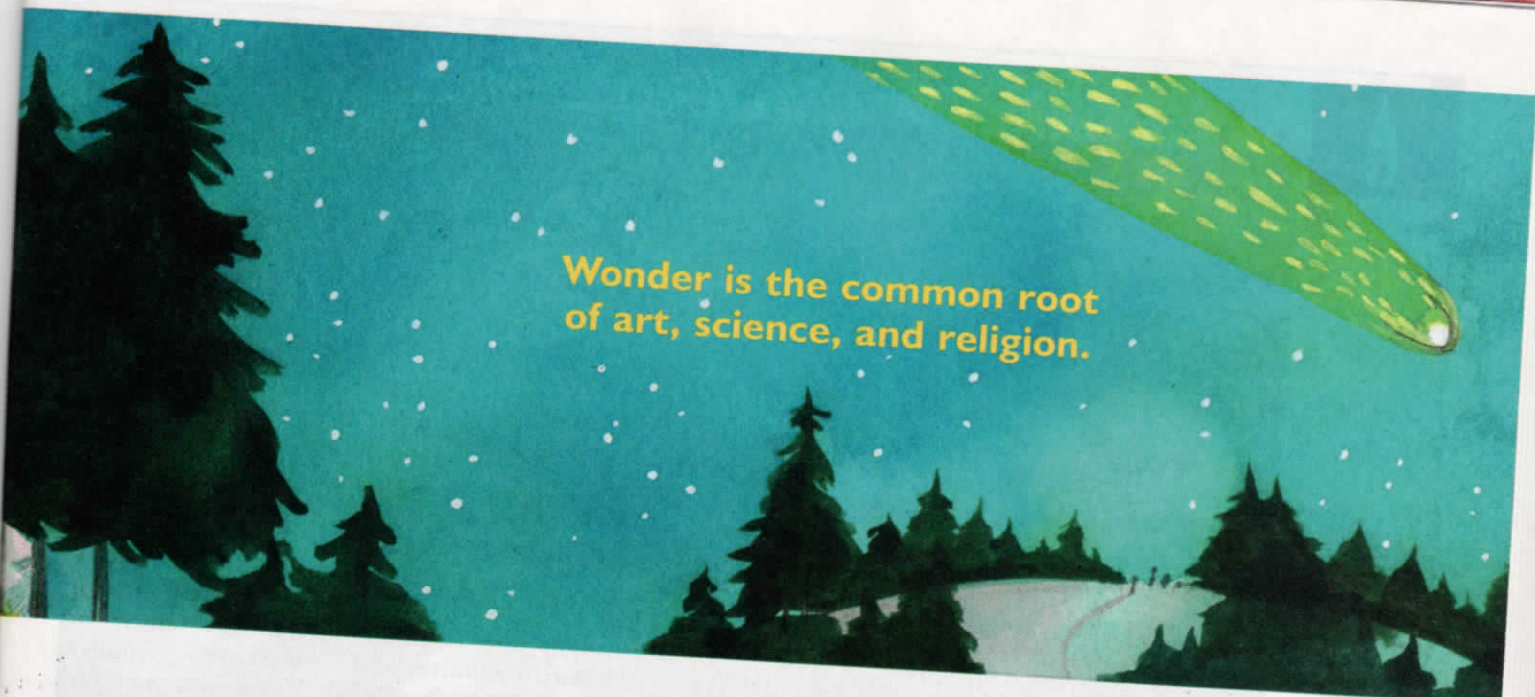
"You don't even know what the Bible says!" I railed. "How can you know that you believe in God?" She stuck by her statement although she has since declared, "People who believe in God are crazy," to which Scott nodded approval and I ranted about religious tolerance. Some might say that religious education classes are in order, for all of us.

Is my daughter a Christian, an atheist, or just a pill? None, yet. These debates are the UU version of confirmation class, the same kind of spiritual chin-up I was doing when I announced, at age 9, that I planned to join the Mormon church. My mom, a board member at our church, said quietly, "I will be sad if that happens." Her calm may have come from the fact that we belonged to a congregation, and she suspected I'd find more to keep me there as I got older. She was right.

LIKE A GOOD UU OF INQUIRING SPIRIT, I have read dozens of books and articles about faith and parenting and, like my mother before me, have highlighted, underlined, and scribbled the occasional rebuttal in those texts. They offer plenty of sound reasons for going to church. *Children need to practice values like caring and respect in the context of a larger community.* Sounds good; I'm with you. *Children are naturally spiritual.* A squishy term, "spiritual," but I know what you're getting at. And there are many authors assuring me that I do no harm to my children by remaining unchurched, as long as I am open, honest, and curious and help them remain so as well. Easier said than done, but yes, I'll sign on for that.

What comes through in all of these texts, whether they advocate church-going or not, is the need for community in children's lives. Scott and I make a nice enclave for our own needs, but we are not a village. When poets Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon returned to Hall's childhood Congregational church in rural New Hampshire, it was to be part of "a community radiating the willingness or even the desire to be careful and loving." This is more than neighbors, I think; more than friends, which we have; or a good school in a friendly town. None of these are places made for intentional conversations about love, justice, or wonder. Churches are.

After a lot of reading, I found what I thought could be the foundation of an approach that worked for me. Jesse Prinz, a scholar of philosophy and ethics, suggests that wonder is the common root of art, science, and religion, and perhaps the defining human experience—the nudging emotion that leads us to want to understand our world (sci-



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ence) and venerate it (art, religion). When I found Prinz, I put down the other books and articles. Here was the experience that linked my atheism and Christian longing—the sense of awe (“I exist . . . you know?”) and the desire it produces to feel more of that emotion—to cultivate wonder. It’s what is often missing, but might be restored to dull lessons in World Religions, my map of the Arctic, or Scott’s love of math. Before the question of religion, which will ultimately be a personal choice we cannot dictate, is wonder and, I’d add, the feelings of respect and responsibility that go with it.

Prinz turns to Socrates, Adam Smith, and René Descartes to anchor his points, and to an eclectic catalogue, *The World of Wonders: A Record of Things Wonderful in Nature, Science and Art*, published in 1883. In exuberant nineteenth-century fashion, this book covers everything from glaciers to steam engines, sunspots to “the wonder of the telegraph.” Sections like “Educated Fleas” reveal a charming gullibility but also a sense that nothing, not even a flea, should be overlooked because the world is a treasure-trove of wonders, worthy of our attention. I want to help my kids feel that prodding sense of wonder, with maybe a tad more skepticism as bal- last. I want them to feel that heart-surge that I experienced when I was 20, on a moonlight ski outing in the Wasatch Mountains with friends from the UU church. At a quiet bend in the trail I looked up to see a meteor blaze across the sky. Pure wonder.

I did not acquire this reliance on wonder by myself. I learned it in Unitarian Universalist communities, and it is part of a UU heritage I hope to give my children. Possibly—probably—we will

decide that this can only happen if we show up at church, setting our casserole down at the table of Beloved Community. (But we can’t teach Sunday school, so *don’t ask*.) If my children want to know what took us so long, I’ll tell them it took time to decide that we, too, wanted to be there. Church served as a cruciferous vegetable for the spirit, by adults who don’t like the taste of it, will soon be rejected.

My daughter recites, “Hours turn into days, turn into months, turn into years, turn into decades, turn into centuries, turn into eons . . . Mom, what comes after eons?”

“I don’t know,” I say. She holds my gaze for a moment, trying to sound the depths: How much *do* I know, and of that, how much am I withholding?

Here is my story as it stands today:

Sometimes religion becomes a reason and a way to hurt others, to control, and exclude. When a person, like your dad, has that experience, the hurt goes very deep. *Therefore, be careful*. Other people see the world through religions like Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism, and it is their way of loving the world and doing good. Religion need not diminish them, or you. *Therefore, relax*. As an atheist—if that is what you are—you are not denied a beautiful vision of this world. You do not have to be *anti* anything, you are not “Non.” The world, in all its wonder, is revealed to you as much as to anyone. *Therefore, rejoice.* ❖



Kris Willcox, a regular contributor to UU World, lives in Arlington, Massachusetts, and may soon be avoiding committee meetings at a congregation near you.