

**The Wisdom of Insecurity**  
**By Rev. Steve Wilson**  
**Pacific Unitarian Universalist Church**  
**Feb. 4, 2018**

I just want you to know that I'm in over my head today by essentially tasking myself with passing on the message of someone who, I believe is essentially trying to explain enlightenment. And ...well we all know how wordless and complex that is and confession: I don't think I am really *that* enlightened.

So in light of my failure to completely grasp Alan Watts' perspective, I am going to more simply explain what he says about our relationship to faith and the sacred, and our relationship to our broader world and essentially how we suffer on many levels from a case of mistaken identity.

It is appropriate to begin with Alan Watts' outlook of not so much the world we live in in a traditional sense but the way we look at the world. Watts mostly worked and wrote from the fifties to the early seventies, and the book I just read from and mostly draw from was written in 1952. His era began with the height of post-war American stability in the 50's, and came into and through the height of the instability of the sixties. Watts was aware that people during his time had never been more comfortable, and amidst that new material comfort, his generation was the first to live with the fear that they would be blown to smithereens by nuclear weapons.

Such paradoxes always defied his thinking. And I think California's lore too. Although he wrote more than a generation back, I suspect that the intellectual spiritual outlook he lays out, and assumptions he notes about his times will feel very, very comfortable to our own. Well, comfortable may not be the right word, but I suspect it will at least feel familiar.

Alan Watts suggests a fact even more obvious to all of us here today: that ours is a time of great new awareness of science and technology. That all sounds good until you realize that Watts suggests the price we have had to pay for these new wonders has been our loss of faith in the chief myths that have guided us and still shape us. In short, for Watts, the price of our explosion in knowledge and technology was a more neutered and demystified world, a place where our logic and reason get titillated at the same time our souls go a-wanting.

Ours is a world, and remember he is only writing in the fifties and sixties, when science not so much proposed the death of God, as much as it quietly deemed God irrelevant. For Watts, the world today is re-envisioned more accurately and is even more exciting than before, but in a way that fails to comfort. He says we have in a way liberated ourselves from the old dogmas and habits enough to shirk them, feel liberated for a moment, but then right after this freedom comes anxiety. How Californian, right? In a

way Watts describes the West as having cultivated a narrative and a script we no longer believe it can fulfill, and yet we are stuck with its legacy.

For Watts, traditional religion has a challenge. We now all know how the religions that are asked to form us formed. We know the culturally specific, the patriarchal, the historically and politically specific ways they were created. And, now much more than in Watts' time, with average Americans watching looped repeating stories on the historical Jesus on the History Channel, with the work of scholars and scientists deconstructing the Bible, permeating now in mainstream consciousness. This is even truer. In this unveiling, we find the old myths to be dead to us. This is so true, Watts notes, that outside of the most rigid fundamentalists, ours is a time when even those who advocate for the old dogmas do so on their social merit. They advocate for them, for the now practical effects these beliefs have, rather than the accuracy or truth of them. People now more believe in the fruit of what believing creates, rather than in the God of the story, or the beliefs of traditional faith itself. Watts suggests myths can vary across time in their messages, and still be valuable, but all myths require at least one thing for them to be helpful. We must believe they are true.

Watts wants us to know that "belief" can be another paradox. For as much as belief testifies to things, it can oddly, paradoxically, be a symbol of a lack of faith. For most, Watts says, "being a believer too often means that we close off the information that does not suit or fit the world-view." He wants us to know that quite literally, we can only believe in what we think we know, but that real faith embraces that which is known to be unknown. Thus, beliefs, and even more so, creeds, are by definition of what faith really is: a misguided effort to trap the sacred.

We UU's love to hear that. For Watts, the effort to capture the sacred is an act comparable in Watt's mind to the fumbling required to tie up a gallon of water in a paper sheet. Said another way, Watts gives us words for a lot of what we suspect: that religion often mistakes symbolism for the amazing things religions try to testify too. As many before have suggested, let's not forget to remember that the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon. Watts believes, that religions and philosophers have worn out their ingenuity creating ornate beliefs and creeds that essentially try but fail to distract us in their attempts to wrap the magic of life, which has an inherently fluid experiential quality to it, into the package of static symbols. Few are wise enough to get to the truth that religions try to capture and box faith, but they can't.

With this loss of faith comes a drive, a greediness even to live with the time one has, and similarly, the fear that one is missing something. In response, we greedily rush around to get all the panorama of sights and sounds one can squeeze in our short lives. I'm certainly guilty of this. Being left without our myths to guide us, Watts suggests we have been tempted into a vicious cycle where we work to fuel the resources to have more and more moments before we die. For this reason, Western Civilization finds itself in a perpetual cycle of frustration. We have come to be a people insatiably hungry for the next experience, and worse, in preparation to then have the next moment. And this was just the 50's. He ought to see us now.

Wow! I feel a little naked knowing how I tabulate my adventures around the world, or even in the last six months around LA. Watts notes human beings seem to be happy when they can look forward to a future that seems pleasant. Watts says it is all fine and good to look forward or reminisce. Our memories and our capacity to forecast out into the future are rare human qualities some of our greatest intellectual capacities. However, if we get so used to living in the past and/or planning for the future we run the risk of getting inoculated from the real magic of living, which requires a certain awareness or presence.

Watts warns that if we live too much of our lives planning the future, we run the risk of being unable to even enjoy the future that we have prepared for when it arrives. Damn Alan, when are you going to get to the entertaining part of your philosophizing. We all have seen this at work in the dramatic person who works hard to build security in order to have good future experiences while the bulk of their life pass too busy, too stuck in the odd anxiety relieving act of prepping or worse worrying to enjoy it. But to Watts, life is never about arriving in the right place. As Watts suggests, dancers don't pick a spot on the floor and race to get there, composers are not judged by how quickly they get from the first to the last note. The point is the journey.

See for Watts we make a real mistake in our effort to make permanent those experiences and joys which are only valuable because they are changing. For Watts, there is wisdom in coming to know that music is a delight precisely because of its flow and rhythm. If you have forgotten this, stop music on any note, and holding that note for any length of time and it will suddenly sound horrible. Watts wants to remind us that whether it is spent remembering or it is spent dreaming there is really always only this moment. However, if one lives out each of our consecutive moments focused too much in the past or the future, the person could, in all honesty, ask how much they live in the real world.

So, let's pause to take Watts first challenge. Are you pushing through life, preparing to be happy when all of what really brings us happiness is available to us in every moment? Watts sees not only happiness and well-being as fluid and inexpressible, so too are "things" for lack of a better word in life too fluid to be packaged by our labels. Watts says that although we can and must name things, our power to label is never as accurate or as benign as we might think. Words, memories, expectations are a layer. Unconsciously Watts believes we place this cognitive film over our experience designed to explain things, but that does not take place without numbing and dulling the vividness of the life in the process. This leads us to confuse the symbol with the reality.

See the picture of the word "*Awareness*" on our bulletin? *It is a pretty word isn't it?* Look at it, you might think to yourself, that's an interesting font, but whatever you feel, you have to admit that the word is a far cry from the feeling of awareness. What Watts wants to tell us, is that our symbols sneak into take the pace of our experience. Watts uses the example of trees to make his point. In reality, trees are not as singular, fixed, or as isolated as we conceive of them. They are, of course, most easily defined physically from the tip of their upper branches to their lowest, thinnest roots, but really is this not so obvious. Trees are so interconnected to the broader environment that to define a tree by

its physical entity (the most obvious way to identify something) really is more an illusion than we think. Because trees can't exist without dirt and sun, and the process of connecting sunlight to energy, incorporating that process into its treeness means it is not really a stretch to say trees really are as much a verb as they are a physical thing. For Watts, the labels we pick up from language are dangerous because what happens when we think inside these conventions is that it facilitates us living and thinking in pre-packaged ways. Duller ways. More concretely, less dynamically.

Watts observes that the science of ecology has come to confront the truth of our simple task of labeling things in the isolated ways we have become accustomed to. As we study living things, including of course ourselves, with eyes of the interconnectedness we have come to learn exists over the last century, we find that examining an isolated creature (including ourselves) and its behavior accurately, you must also describe the behavior of its environment. Watts observes that in the West the average conception of who we are is something of an ego or consciousness wrapped in a bag of skin and bones. Watts believes that we in Western Civilization we are inclined to believe that the real I, or real me is in charge. Pick the way you describe it as you wish, we like to think of ourselves as a skin-encapsulated ego.

We don't think that we beat our hearts, Or, that we are the hair that grows, or stomach that digests, we think that we have a heart that somehow beats itself. In short, we have the idea that we are in charge of the voluntary actions, not the involuntary actions like digestion or heartbeats. All of these examples provide us evidence that we are not a body, but that we have one.

I would like everyone to point your finger to where on or in your body you most think you are. Watts says that we in the West mostly identify ourselves as living some vague place between our ears and behind our eyes. We almost conceive of ourselves as an ego or a soul trapped or hanging in our bodies, likely somewhere behind our eyes like a chauffeur. In our identification with our brains, we have a bias, a tendency to identify and pigeon hole wisdom to the realm of conscious thinking. And when we do this we ignore and put down the wisdom we hold, like how our heart beats, how our glands work etc. Placing intellectual wisdom over instinctive wisdom sets up a false hierarchy between our brain and body. This has been by some called the European dissociation.

There is real wisdom. Our real genius is really in the way the human heart beats, the way we heal, the way homing pigeons navigate-- which have nothing to do with the high end cognitive functions we most associate with. As someone who just went through a colonoscopy, I invite you to take a moment to identify with our bodily functions and give some tribute and gratitude. TMI? Maybe. Watts wants us to expand our identity past our consciousness and out into our body, (get physical with this, like a break dancer) and out into the interplay of what we eloquently have phrased "the interdependent web of all creation." Watts attests that in the East, someone asked to point where they are would be more likely to point to their chest, not in our skull. Mostly from Watts analysis, from someone who grew up Western, but then absorbed an Eastern orientation he has come to see that as Westerners, we are trained by the broader myths and narrative to see ourselves

as a soul and or mind, an ego that is somehow imprisoned in our body that looks out onto a world that is alien.

If we were not somehow apart from the world, he asks, then why would we think that we come into this world, when in reality, we more accurately come out of it?

Let's spend some time there. If we came into this world, we would have to come from somewhere else. But as far as we can tell there is no somewhere else. Watts wants us to come to claim ourselves as a direct product of the world. Watts asks us to consider the question, this parable of sorts. If the world were a tree, what is your first instinct, to see yourself as a bird who lives on and among the branches, or see yourself as one of its leaves. Take a minute first to evaluate your instinct, and then to evaluate the reality. Repeating question: "If the world were a tree, what is your first instinct, to see yourself as a bird who lives on and among the world's branches, or that you are a leaf on the tree?"

Being that we believe we are created, and thus a bit alien, we are inclined to think of ourselves as living on the earth rather than a being of the earth. Am I wrong? We obviously are not bound to the ground like a tree is, we, like birds, are more animated. But in an interconnected sense we are more a part of the earth than living on it, right? We tend to see the world as a creation (as the Bible tells us) something that, like us, was made, brought to life in an act of creation from either clay and a little breath and spit, or from ribs. But, as we now know that is not how it happened. It is perhaps more accurate that things are not put together, as much as they have come from within. When we tell ourselves that we stand as a special part of creation, created by God, we quite naturally come to the idea that we stand apart from a chaotic mechanical world, that is vast, old and cold; and an animal world driven by simple primitive drives. Watts posits that we come to see ourselves as apart from life, in a way. It sets up a sense that what is outside me is not me. But our experience tells us that we extend out into the environment. We see that part of the environmental crisis is rooted in the idea that out here is not us. We have exaggerated the us; we kick back at a world that we feel kicks us around and has control over us.

But Watts wants to tell us, reassure us really, that you can't get an intelligent thing like us out of a dumb universe. Watts wants to assure us that our intelligence is not so much an "other", a foreign element to the world, as it is an expression of a creative universe. And our world has peopled and grown consciousness just like an apple tree grows apples. One of my favorite simple contemporary quotes by Carl Sagan harkens to this idea. "We are a way for the cosmos to know itself." And, as it says in the book of Matthew (Chapter 7:16): you cannot gather grapes from bushes, nor figs from thistles. In Watts words, you, we, me are something that the whole world is doing. Just like a wave on the ocean is an expression of the ocean, are a part of creation. Watts says, if you want to put the world down you can see the stupidity of the world. i.e. rocks. You can see the base predictable quality of human behavior as an evolved version of that base mechanical way if you like, but it is equally, perhaps even more accurately, another option to see the wisdom of the rocks and lift it up. Perhaps this is message at the heart of Jesus' statement that the trees and rocks will cry out.

Watts calls the living in the moment our “primary consciousness.” Our primary consciousness experiences reality, not ideas about it. Our primary consciousness experiences only the moment. Perhaps this is what Jesus is getting at when he says you must enter the kingdom of heaven as a child. This form of consciousness for Watts is a step closer to the very deep, deep, self, that which is you: the whole of being. Can you feel the broadening, the flattening of you? What Watts wants us to know, to identify with is that the universal energies and wisdom of the universe are the real you. Life in its totality is the real you. So, Watt’s would say that when you use the word “I,” practice seeing yourself as a finite expression of the universe. That is a revelation. So, part of Watts agenda is to pass on the awareness that you and I are really are expressions of what the whole thing is doing. You and I, all of us, are mostly really the works, the universal self that has simply taken the shape of you, for a while. So, it is true for Watts that the I that we all feel attached to will go away. And that is sad and real, but when you think of yourself, really identify you, as an extended, flattened broader part of the eternal wisdom, as a temporary expression of the whole universe, you will naturally live less anxiously and be less inclined to cram as much in as you can, and rail and wail against the world.

Watts wants us to know that nature and experience are so inevitably fluid, that fighting against its nature may really be an unconscious separation from life. We must give in. For Watts, peace, or in the Christian sense, salvation, comes when we realize that we are not apart from, but an outgrowth and expression of the universe. Watts wants us to get to the place where we can look up at the sky and say “that is me.” I suspect that this truth is what gives the mystics of the world this great love and peace, and I suspect that it is something like this wisdom that gives the Martin Luther Kings of the world their certainty that we are all in this together. We all know or hear that the best things in life are free, but truthfully, it would be more accurate to say that you do have to pay for the best things in life, only give them your attention. Perhaps our attention is the real currency we might focus on.

Our abstract thinking facilitates us being resistant and removed from all that which is organic, but to Watts when we get more biological and we conceive of ourselves as a moment of consciousness that will sink back into the consciousness of the universe, then we can begin to see the good and the natural part of death. It is no different, no less natural than wanting to go to sleep after a hard day’s work and to not want to sleep on a bright morning after a night’s rest. But our dualism forces us to resist death and other things physical as the enemy. He said that “when experience stops oscillating and writhing, it can again become sensitive to the wisdom of the body, to the hidden depths of its own substance.” For Watts, another paradox worth noting, is that the feeling of insecurity and the desire to avoid it are one and the same. Seeking security in an insecure world Watts’ argues, is not only never achievable, it produces a tightness that is not very life-giving. Watts gathered people around him on his houseboat in Sausalito saying that when one has tasted the mystery of life, and the wonder of awareness, beliefs and creeds are not necessary.

It says in the Bible, “Perfect love casteth out all fear.” Mostly Watt’s begs us to know that you can’t fake your way into the leap of real faith, by claiming belief any more than you can believe you see the sky, because you have painted the window a pretty blue. But

Watts' deconstruction is hardly over. Watts says, we gain relief and enlightenment not by fighting the most profound characteristics of life, but by giving into it.

Ask yourself...Is it not true that we most taste peace, and freedom from anxiety when we lose our sense of self to a task, to a great musical piece, to the fluidity of life entering in and taking us out of ourselves. The best things have a present-ness to them, and at the same time an eternal. Look for it. Don't, as many cancer survivors, describe; it is only when they have accepted the limitations and conditions of this world that we most feel life's blessings and even our liberation. For Watts you have to accept and bear the unavoidable. When life is good, death is proportionately evil. The more we love, the more we grieve. The more security you strive for, the more you are going to want. There is no way to have the subtlety of thought that we have, the ability to remember and project out into the future without being aware of our perishability. Said even more simply, with the subtle and intense pleasures that consciousness brings us comes with comparable pains. Let God, let God so to speak. Watts speaks of the deep spiritual truths as having something of a reversed or a backwards paradox type of truth. He calls it the law of reversed effort. When you fight to try to stay on the surface of the water, you eventually tire and sink; but when you do next to nothing you float. And like it, really the best way to keep control of your breath is to not try to hold it. We all know that those who work hard to justify themselves do not convince others that they know much.

Likewise, and most poignantly Watts quotes Jesus, "That whosoever would save his soul must lose it." Essentially, we get more life when we worry less about losing it, describing, labeling, and trying to contain it.

So may it be. Amen.

#