

A LANGUAGE OF TRANSCENDENCE

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ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH
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Readings:

Out of the Stars by Robert Weston.

Out of the stars in their flight, out of the dust of eternity, here we have come,
Stardust and sunlight mingling through time and through space.

Out of the stars, rising from rocks and the sea,
Kindled by sunlight on earth, arose life.

Time out of time, before time, in the vastness of space, earth spun to orbit the sun,
Earth with the thunder of mountains new born, the boiling of seas.

Earth warmed by sun, lit by sunlight:

This is our home;

Out of the stars have we come.

Mystery hidden in mystery, back through all time;

Mystery rising from rocks in the storm and the sea,

Out of the stars, rising from rocks and the sea,
Kindled by sunlight on earth arose life.

Ponder this thing in your heart; ponder with awe:

Out of the sea to the land, out of the shallows, came ferns.

Out of the sea to the land, up from darkness to light,

Rising to walk and to fly, out of the sea trembled life.

Ponder this thing in your heart, life up from sea:

Eyes to behold, throats to sing, mates to love.

Life from the sea, warmed by the sun, washed by rain,

Life from within, giving birth, rose to love.

This is the wonder of time; this is the marvel of space;

out of the stars swung the earth; life upon earth rose to love.

This is the marvel of life, rising to see and to know;

Out of your heart, cry wonder: sing that we live.

The Oversoul by Ralph Waldo Emerson

Let us learn the revelation of all nature and thought; that the Highest dwells within us, that the sources of nature are in our own minds.

As there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the heavens, so there is not bar or wall in the soul where we, the effect, cease, and God, the cause, begins.

I am constrained every moment to acknowledge a higher origin for events than the will I call mine.

There is deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is accessible to us.

Every moment when the individual feels invaded by it is memorable.

It comes to the lowly and simple; it comes to whosoever will put off what is foreign and proud; it comes as insight; it comes as serenity and grandeur.

The soul's health consists in the fullness of its reception.

For ever and ever the influx of this better and more universal self is new and unsearchable. Within us is the soul of the whole; the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One.

When it breaks through our intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through our will, it is virtue; when it flows through our affections, it is love.

Sermon:

I plan our Sunday services at least a couple of months ahead. That gives Kris time to decide what music will best support and enhance the service theme, and gives the choir time enough to practice. Ultimately, our hope is that all here gathered will have many ways – through words, music and silence – to engage your heart and mind, uncovering some new insight. Feeling inspired to personal or collective action. Finding comfort and strength for the journey.

So it was months ago that I thought it would be good to address our conundrum around religious language – particularly how we speak of the Holy. Finding our way to a language of transcendence that has integrity and authenticity. Kris asked Wiley to come and play his bagpipes – surely transcendent music that fills the rafters. We hoped that you would be transported, and I do hope you have been.

Yet when I sat down to write, I found myself still so discouraged by the state of the world. A war which no longer has any chance to be anything other than human tragedy. Leadership that is not only arrogant but corrupt and even seemingly inept at their corruption. Closer still to home, too many must put their children to bed hungry. Too many are addicted, desperate, dispossessed.

How could I stand here before you and speak of something as ethereal and abstract as a Language of Transcendence. The earth burns, people are suffering and starving. Shouldn't we be marching in the streets? Rolling up our sleeves to hand out food? Shouldn't I preach nothing but a call to merciful, compassionate and dedicated action? What good will speaking of a Language of Transcendence do anyone in the world today?

Actually, a great deal. It is a large part of what calls me to the ministry. I have simply been having a hard time connecting to it for myself. I wouldn't call it a crisis of faith – nothing so grandiose as that. I have said to you, for years now, that without a spiritual grounding, without a connection to the Holy – however you name it and wherever you find it – you will not be able to sustain merciful and compassionate and dedicated action in the world. And I have been struggling with my own sense of connection.

We need what Emerson called the Oversoul – the “deep power in which we exist.”

Emerson knew well that this power is revealed in nature and in thought, that “the Highest dwells within us, that the sources of nature are in our own minds.”

We get so hung up on God-language. I wish we wouldn't, I wish we could just put down our baggage and carry on with our journey using whatever words that feed us and move us. I worry that our resistance to the language of transcendence can be a barrier to our touching it.

“As there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the heavens, so there is not bar or wall in the soul where we, the effect, cease, and God, the cause, begins.” The highest dwells within us, among us and beyond us. Call it God, call it mystery, call it simple awe at knowing we are made of the stuff of the stars. I wish we might stop cringing at language and simply engage with the journey of the spirit.

But I suppose we will always struggle with language. Especially in a world where God-language is still so abused and used to perpetrate violence and division.

And it is part of *our* particular journey to find language that is authentic and helps us experience a Holy connection. Our first source is, after all, "direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit." We have the dear Transcendentalists for this source.

Yet how do we experience let alone name that transcending mystery and wonder?

Joanne Forsythe came to me recently to talk about something from her Mormon childhood. There were times on Sundays that she felt a palpable presence in the room. She noticed it and so did others, *something* was going on. People said it was the presence of the Holy Spirit, a sign that God was among them, a sign that the Mormon faith was the one true religion and all others were false. No matter the interpretation, she knows that *something* was going on.

What was that? she wanted to know, and (as the good Unitarian that she has long since become) has anyone ever studied it?

I told her I am not sure what it is, although I too have felt it, and far from a Mormon church. I have felt it alone at a meditation retreat. I have felt it in a deep encounter with the other, and I have felt it here in this sanctuary on a Sunday morning. It certainly doesn't happen all the time, but sometimes I feel that we are pitched together into a new place in the time-space continuum. The room grows quiet, time seems to slow, and I have a sense that the connections between us are almost tangible.

Now I never shout out to you all that the Holy Spirit has arrived among us. Even if, perhaps, it has. And I would never suggest that it is a sign that Unitarian Universalism is the One True Faith. Yet I do experience something. Whatever *IT* is, I agree with Emerson that, "Every moment when the individual feels invaded by it is memorable." Such moments are for me magical, even more so because they are so rare. Don't get me wrong. I think the spirit moves here most Sundays. Something utterly delightful happens when you all gather and worship together. But sometimes something more happens, too. Call it a felt presence, a kind of spiritual communion. As if we are all experiencing a fuller, deeper consciousness. As if we are somehow on the same rhythm or beat. Sometimes it happens in the music – that's partly why I don't usually like applause after someone plays or sings. If the music pitches us into that deeper place, applause breaks the moment. It can also happen in the moments of deep silence and just sometimes it even happens during the sermon. The barriers between you and me fall away and I feel a power sense of we.

Something happens that puts us in touch with the transcendent, with all that is Holy.

Emerson has such beautiful language for it: the soul of the whole, wise silence, universal beauty, the eternal One, the Highest, God, a better and more universal self, deep power, the Oversoul, to which every part and particle is equally related.

Others have called it "mystery hidden in mystery." I often call it a Holy Movement because it never seems to stay still. Whatever *IT* is, it has sounded through the ages – soul answering to soul. It kindles on the pages of every scripture throughout human history. It is ultimately unnamable, although we have many names for it.

And, if Emerson is right:

The soul's health consists in the fullness of its reception.

The point of this is not that we should all be having these grand, transcendent, mystical experiences. My own have been quite rare, and I suspect many of you have not had any experience you would name that way. The point ultimately is that we feel connected to something, to each other, even in small ways. That human connection is holy in itself.

So what are we to do when we don't feel the connection? When the ills of the world are too much with us? When we feel called to do something, but it all feels too big and too far away.

That is where I have been more often than not in these past weeks, and then something captured my imagination this week and gave me renewed hope.

A friend of mine who works at the Oregon Food Bank sent me a flyer about Hunger Awareness Week and something called the Food Stamp Challenge. During the week of April 22-28, the folks at the Food Bank are challenging everyone to live on a Food Stamp budget. That is \$21 per person in your household.

This is precisely what more than 425,000 Oregonians, and 30 million people across the country, must do every week. This congregation has long been concerned with hunger issues. You support the HOPE Food Pantry with your money and the work of your hands. You contribute to the Oregon City Congregations Emergency Relief Fund, which provides food vouchers, among other things for people in need. And several times a year, you cook and serve at the Feed the Hungry soup kitchen. It is a powerful commitment you make.

I am planning to take the Food Stamp Challenge and I invite you to join me. It's not about feeding the hungry per se, it is about experiencing a little of to be poor and not have enough to eat. When we have enough, those who do not are other. Our work at HOPE and Feed the Hungry brings them closer. I hope this challenge will bring them closer still.

I've begun planning my "menu" for the week. How will I live on \$21? I certainly won't be shopping at New Seasons. The more I think about it, the layers and levels of how this might affect how I live my life grow more complex.

Just contemplating this endeavor has broken through my malaise. It gives me something concrete, tangible to do. It's not of immediate help to people. But raised consciousness is a wonderful thing. Imagine what lessons your children might learn having to forgo favorite foods and just being able to open the fridge and graze whenever they feel like it.

Now I know that not everyone will be able to take the full challenge, for any number of reasons, but I do ask you in the days ahead, at least to notice your food purchases and choices and how much you spend. And if you can, take on this challenge with me.

What does this have to do with a Language of Transcendence?

It will bring me closer to folks who are poor and marginalized, makes my compassion more concrete with an understanding less theoretical and more real. Helps me see and feel a deeper connection to all people, then that will carry me into a "better and more universal self" which is one of Emerson's names for the Oversoul.

For that is ultimately what religion is about. We divide ourselves, every way we know how. All religions of the world try to draw us back together. And there is something about a connection to the spirit which encourages on the journey toward each other.

Today is Palm Sunday, the day on the Christian calendar that celebrates Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. We tend to be fond of the political, social radical Jesus. The very human Jesus who angrily turned over the moneychangers tables in the Temple. The Jesus who calls us to identify with the poor and marginalized.

Yet we cannot separate the social radical from the man who was so filled with the spirit. Whose sense of authority came from his sense of connection with the God. He spoke with fire and conviction that led his followers to believe him, ultimately to naming a religious movement after him.

That spirit calls us to remember that we are all connected. Out of the stars we come. We are all made of the same stuff as the stars. Out of the vastness of space, out of the rocks and sea, life rose in the warmth of the sun. And so did we.

There are so many ways to touch the Transcendent. Many grow more comfortable with specifically religious language, the Holy movement of the spirit within and among and beyond us. Yet we also touch it in the simple awe and reverence at the complexity and wonder of life itself.

This is the wonder of time; this is the marvel of space;
out of the stars swung the earth; life upon earth rose to love.
*This is the marvel of life, rising to see and to know;
Out of your heart, cry wonder: sing that we live.*

Or as Emerson wrote, when we touch this vast Oversoul,
When it breaks through our intellect, it is genius;
when it breathes through our will, it is virtue;
when it flows through our affections, it is love.

This Transcendence, this wise silence, this mystery hidden in mystery, the eternal One, calls us to connection with one another. It calls us to love. Whether you see it in the wonder of being alive, whether you feel it in this congregation, whether you feel it in your connection to the universe and all of humanity, this Holy Movement rises to love, calls us to love more fully and deeply.

So, do whatever you need to uncover, nurture and grow your connections. Let the spirit move you and move through you. Name it if you like or don't. Stand in reverence, stand in awe or being alive and rise to love.
Rise to love.
Rise to love.
Amen.
May it be so.