

THE MYSTICS AMONG US

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ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH
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READINGS

We offer two readings this morning.
The first from the Rev. Susan Manker-Seale
(Text not available)

And this from the Rev. Robert Weston

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

*Out of the stars have we come,
up from time,
Out of the stars have we come.*

Time out of time before time in
the vastness of space earth
spun to orbit the sun,
Earth with the thunder of
mountains newborn, 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
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.*

SERMON

Last year our Coming of Age Youth handed out a survey to the congregation about our beliefs. As they were working to articulate their own beliefs, they wanted to know what you all believe. One survey item asked people to check off all religious perspectives that applied: Things like atheist, agnostic, theist, mystic, Buddhist, Christian, humanist. Now the vast majority of you picked more than one of these and often three or four. The most surprising result to the Youth was the number of you who indicated that you are mystics – not a majority but easily 30 or 40 percent.

This did not surprise me quite so much. I myself checked off theist, humanist and Buddhist I know. I can't remember whether I included Christian or mystic, but depending on the day, I might well have. I have been aware for a few years of a growing trend among us to lean into and acknowledge a mystical bent. This ultimately is not so surprising considering our long historical tradition of mysticism – especially in our Unitarian heritage.

Rev. Tom Owen-Towle reconciles what feels on the surface to be a contradiction – how can someone be a humanist or atheist and be a mystic, too – by naming us Freethinking Mystics. As free thinkers, he says, we “ardently believe in the worth, not the infallibility, of human

reason.... We use our reason to the fullest to explore but not capture life's inescapable mysteries. [As] Unitarian Universalists, [we] are suspicious of that which is felt but unprovable, insistently real but not intellectually grasped. It is often difficult for us to confess that we dwell in a universe utterly beyond our creation, our control, and even our comprehension."

Yet Owen-Towle sees also a strong "mystical bent [that] would posit unequivocally: 'There is so much we do not know that remains mysterious. We are sustained by processes and powers that we can neither fathom nor do without. The universe is wondrously, terrifyingly inexplicable. And we like it that way.'"

The first definition of mysticism in the American Heritage Dictionary is, "Immediate consciousness of the transcendent or ultimate reality or God." The second definition is, "A belief in the existence of realities beyond perceptual or intellectual apprehension that are central to being and directly accessible by subjective experience."

Interesting that these definitions do not require a deity. Some might name ultimate reality God, but others most assuredly would not and neither would be wrong.

How many of you have had such an experience, one that carried you beyond or outside the usual range of human perception, in touch with an ultimate reality? Mick told you about hearing the sound of the universe.

I will never forget the summer night when I was 16 and I went out in the yard of my suburban Detroit home at three in the morning. Such a teen-age thing to do. I walked in bare feet on the thick grass. It began to rain, and I danced among the drops of water, feeling silly and free – states hard to maintain in the daylight for a self-conscious teen. Suddenly (and often there is a suddenness to such experiences) suddenly I knew quite clearly that I was an integral part of the earth upon which the rain fell. My feet felt rooted in the grass; my arms reached to the sky. I felt unutterably tiny and yet completely connected to all of creation, as large as the universe. My tiny self contained a consciousness that encompassed the wideness of the sky and beyond.

Mystical experiences may well be subjective and beyond what we consider rational, but they are not inherently unreasonable.

Many have had experiences of being intimately connected, being one with Being. And what of the times when almost unbelievably synchronous events converge, when so many things click into place in our lives in both concrete and metaphorical ways. We can and do try to explain them away as coincidence, but that explanation doesn't fully satisfy.

Unitarian minister Jacob Trapp puts it this way: "I like to think of mysticism as the art of meeting reality, the art of richer and deeper awareness. It is an experience that comes unbidden... it is not the intellectual conviction that Being is itself my being, but rather an ineffable experience of that Oneness, flooding in to overwhelm our illusion of aloneness, separateness. There are moments when life seems vivid and resplendent, when a more than mortal splendor breaks in, when there is a touch of grandeur and of glory in just being alive."

A more than mortal splendor.

Yet how do we talk about such experiences without sounded a little to woo-woo for comfort? In a faith that prides itself on bringing reason to bear in our religious lives, what place do such seemingly unreasonable experiences have among us?

And I am aware that there are some, perhaps many of you out there who've had no experience of anything of the kind. Perhaps you are sitting there thinking I am crazy or feeling inadequate. You don't need to be a mystic to be a Unitarian Universalist, but you can be. And I would like to suggest that mystical experiences need not just be a grand sense of transcendental oneness. That a sense of connection is possible in smaller and less than grand movements.

Being touching the grandeur and glory of just being alive need not be at odds with humanism. For make no mistake, we are a supremely humanist faith, which for me has little to do with atheism or a rejection of god. Indeed, while I do consider myself a theist, I am a deeply convicted humanist as well. My greatest concern still lies with how we live our human lives here on this earth. I am delighted, flummoxed, moved and engaged by the many ways we come to express ourselves. I remain in awe of the notion that we are made of the same stuff as the stars. That from the Big Bang through to the formation of the earth and down to the eventual evolution of life on earth, that somehow there have come to be creatures such as ourselves. Creatures self-aware and conscious, who can in turn lift our gaze upward and outward to exploring the stars. Who can have such remarkable self-defeating if not self-destructive tendencies, and yet who can still love so powerfully that we can change our lives and change the world. I find all life holy and sacred, and I want always to name that holiness and invite people to live with fuller awareness of it – including the richer and deeper awareness that Trapp calls mystical.

For mystical experiences are a real part of the human experience. They may be uncomfortable, especially when they remind us rather forcefully that "we dwell in a universe utterly beyond our creation, our control, and even our comprehension." Yet I think we should still explore and glory in the mystical side of religious experience. Let such moments, when they arrive, deepen our experience of our lives. Let them inspire us to explore, "if not capture, life's inescapable mysteries," and be in the world more deeply and fully

Yet we can appear so reasoned and rational in our faith, that many feel uncomfortable owning to being mystics among us. This is supremely ironic given our long tradition of mysticism, especially among Unitarians.

Our Puritan forebears, as a colleague of mine has put it, “thought that every tree and twig and snake and frog was a messenger of the unseen—parts connecting us to a greater whole.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Unitarian minister of that self-same Puritan stock, saw a universe “wondrously, terrifyingly inexplicable. And [he] like[d] it that way.” What he named the Oversoul, we would name the web of life. In his essay *Nature*, he describes an experience of becoming a “transparent eyeball.” In the midst of nature, he could lose his sense of separateness, aware only of his connection to all. “I am nothing; I see all,” he wrote.

Emerson’s protégée and friend Henry David Thoreau, one of a group of thinkers, writers and poets who gathered round Emerson now known as the Transcendentalist, wrote of nature in far less exalted terms. His relationship to nature was more intimate than transcendent.

I disappointed someone mightily recently when I told her that when Thoreau was living at Walden Pond he took the two-mile walk to Concord nearly every day. He was often fed by Emerson’s wife Lidian (with whom he may well have been in love) and he often brought his laundry to his mother.

Yet Thoreau deemed it important to come to know one place very well. And he came to know every plant in every season on that path from Walden to Concord. He was a naturalist finding connection in knowing the world intimately, in knowing every tree and twig, every snake and frog.

Did he have “moments when life seem[ed] vivid and resplendent, when a more than mortal splendor [broke] in, when there [was] a touch of grandeur and of glory in just being alive?” I suspect so. Certainly, he knew the art of meeting reality, of a richer and deeper awareness of the natural world.

Our mystical bent need not only be expressed in transcendent language like Emerson’s or in the language of the Sufi mystics who become as one drunk on the love of God.

We can also simply find our sense of wonder, awe and ultimate oneness in the amazing connections and intricacies and manifestations of life on earth as revealed to us ever more fully by personal awareness and by science.

Our faith has never had a difficulty reconciling our religious inclinations with science. Indeed, science inspires in us a profound sense of wonder and awe. As Susan Manker-Seale says: “Most religions... don’t spend nearly enough time integrating the daily discoveries of science and sociology with their religious precepts.”

The Transcendentalists’ attraction to nature brought our religious attention to nature. Some experienced it as mystics and some as scientists. And some as both. I can just imagine the kind of mystical experience Unitarian Charles Darwin felt when the theory of evolution fell into place in his mind. Darwin’s skill at what Trapp calls “the art of meeting reality, the art of richer and deeper awareness” was profound. Did he feel the touch of a more than mortal splendor when the pieces of his theory all fell into place?

I can well imagine so. For I can get chills at simply contemplating the marvel of evolution. When I consider as Robert Weston wrote: Out of the stars in their flight, we have come.

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.*

William Schultz, past president of the UUA, writes, “Whom should I adore: the Creator or Creation? Most western religions have answered back, ‘Adore the Creator!’ and supplied an image (Zeus, Jehovah, Christ) to be adored. But our answer is far different. Whom should we adore? The Creation, surely, for whatever there be of the Creator will be made manifest in Her handiwork.”

Being a mystic means being open to the mystery and wonder in creation, in human life, in the connections of all that exists. What greater meeting of reality than to realize that we are made of stardust. How astonishing that stardust could come together in this form and create me – a conscious, sentient, self-aware being with opposable thumbs and an ironic sense of humor.

I need no more.

So leave here today knowing that you stand in a long and proud mystical tradition.

Feel the call of that tradition to be open wonder and awe.

Be open to the possibility of an immediate, intimate sense of connection with all the earth, with all beings and with Being itself.

Talk about it.

Follow the wisdom of such experiences even if it can seem a little crazy.

For it is from that connection we will all move with greater compassion for each other and for the planet.

Mick spoke also of the mystical experience he felt at the power of this community to do good in the world.

Indeed that is the power of being freethinking mystics.

As Owen-Towle professes:

“Ever-informed minds and transformed souls must reform the worlds wherein we dwell. Hence we are beckoned to meditate and march, pray and protest, commune with nature and clean up our streets, raise hell and experience heaven.”

Indeed, may it ever be so!