

Experience of *that* “Transcending Mystery and Wonder”

A sermon by Steven Epperson

November 16, 2008

UCV

Today, begins the first in a series of sermons through the course of this church year that explores what Unitarians call the “Sources” of our “living tradition.” I think that there are truly distinctive and unusual aspects about Unitarianism that I value deeply. One of those features constitutes a particular strength and challenge for us—and that is the remarkable breadth and diversity of the sources we call upon to authenticate, inform, ground, critique, and enliven our belief and practice: from individual mystical experience to the examples of exemplary prophetic women and men, from the wisdom of the world’s religions, to humanist orientation and outlook to the teaching of Earth-centred traditions. I know hardly anything like it; this diversity, this wealth of sources within one religion--sources that all of us can and are encouraged to turn to, draw from and experience in order to create and sustain the faith, deeds, worship, exploration, and institutions of our religious and ethical community. But in order to really launch out into an appreciative examination of our Sources, I need to step back and get certain things relatively clear. And here’s where I want to begin:

If we take the time to think about it and mull it over, how do we answer the question: *what is religion all about?* I’m talking about besides the messing up of our lives with implausible claims, onerous obligations, and guilt, and the filling of the annals of human history with irrationality, misuse of power, intolerance and violence of which religion has been all-too-justly accused. If we can set aside those considerations for the time being, let me ask the question again: *what is religion all about? What’s the point, function or use of it?* The world, its history and people are full of religions in bewildering varieties and expressions for good and woe; they’re not going to be exiting from the scene in the near or distant future, *believe me*, and here *we are* as a matter of fact, and not some place else. We have set aside precious time and resources, and we made room enough this day, and in our lives, for religion to take place. Why is that?

Through all its myriad, amazingly diverse expressions in sacred stories, ritual, arts, institutions, community, morality and ethics, it seems to me that we have created religions to provide an all-encompassing *interpretation of life, a vision of life*: what it is and ought to be, what hinders us from realizing that vision; and it strives to identify and make available the *enduring and sustaining goods that make life deeply meaningful and worth living*. In spite of deeply flawed histories, so flawed that we have just about given up on them altogether, we still turn to our many religions, perhaps most of them, including our own, we still strive through them to make three basic assertions—worthy of our attention—interpretations of a vision about life and its meaning, and how we can achieve it: a) that there is an essential *problem* that thwarts genuine human flourishing; b) that a religious vision of life contains an *ideal* that humanity ought to seek in order to overcome that basic roadblock to our deepest needs and aspirations; and c) that there are effective *means* available by which persons can be transformed from being afflicted to attaining our ideal, essential goals. Two examples:

Buddhists identify the acute suffering that arises from distorted self-desire and misplaced mental attachments as the chief *problem* afflicting humanity. The *ideal*, the way to transcend sorrow, is to renounce our thirst for the permanence of self and of things, and thus to attain nirvana, the bliss of enlightenment, which is the goal of existence. The *means* to realize enlightenment, the middle path available to any who would follow its way, includes meditation, right views, intentions, livelihood and community.

For Christians, the *problem* is estrangement or sin. In both action and intention, they claim humanity violates relations of mutuality, justice and love which separate and alienate us from God, other human beings and nature. The *ideal* is a transformation of the self, both within and beyond history, from alienation to an ideal experience of salvation or communion with the divine. The *means* to overcome estranging sin

and, thus, to realize the ideal, is faith in the saving grace of Christ, a condition of belief and attunement, it is said, that will lead to new manner of being, worshipping, and acting that will usher in a new era of justice and peace in this world, and union with the Divine.

Essential *problems*, *ideals*, and effective *means* to realize the ideal: this transformative model is common to many, many religions, including our own. (see Hall, Pilgrim and Cavanagh, *Religion: An Introduction*, 99-104. Hereafter: Hall, etc.)

Consider the Seven Principles printed on those bookmarks inserted in the back of the pews. (They are available to you every week to look at and muse over; and you're free to take them home.) They roughly identify the Unitarian world-view, our encompassing vision of things—they identify an essential *problem*; they claim an *ideal* state of things which, if achieved, will overcome that roadblock to profound human flourishing; and they suggest the *means* at hand for achieving our ideal.

Look at the first and seventh principle: *behind* them lurks the problem: in #1, the worth and dignity of persons is neither universally recognized nor achieved; and in #7, there is a fatal lack of mindfulness with regard to the interdependence of all existence. As a result, human dignity and the extensive well-being of what we call "the web" are imperiled. Put both or either of them in harm's way, and we lose something essential.

Now step out from behind these two principles, and what do we see? The explicit assertion of our ideals, that about which we dream—the inherent worth and dignity of every person (#1), and, in #7 human beings finally wised-up, and in possession of sufficient information, humility and grit to respect the interdependence of all things.

Achieving those ideals...it would almost be heaven. But how? What are the means to bring about such a transformation? Principles 2-6. Those are the practices, the disciplines, the vehicles we pick up and put to use in order to overcome that which most fundamentally besets us and the world. They are the material we use to build. Put them to work, and piece by piece we raise walls and roof over our heads, and thus make a home capacious enough, compassionate and just enough, spiritual, truthful and honest enough, insightful, welcoming, healthful, democratic enough, peaceful enough, caring enough....*not perfect*; not the kingdom of saints or of heaven. But good enough for abiding and thriving in a not-too-pompous way.

How on earth do we know this house can stand? That the plans are well drawn? That the materials are any good? That the foundations are sure? What about when it's in need of repairs? What do we use? And how do we know that those taking up residence inside are worth the risk to claim as kin and community?

That's what the Sources are all about. "The living Tradition which we share draws from many sources." We know what an urban landscape looks like when one set of plans or materials are used in construction: flat, stuccoed facades?: we get leaky condos. Towering curtains of steel and glass?: inhuman scale and forbidding, lifeless city canyons; block after block of Vancouver specials or monster houses?: monotony, with little relief, and no history, no story to tell about what went before in our cities' neighbourhoods.

Scan down the list of the "sources of our living tradition": it's like an outline of Unitarian history and experience. The sources tell the story of a questing, vital, heterogeneous religious community; of women and men who, over time drew and who continue to draw upon a dazzling range of materials in order to build a religious and ethical community full of life and possibility: sources to deepen our spiritual selves; sources that locate us both within the household of our own tradition and within a worldwide community of religions; sources to keep us honest, to critique our faith and institutions; sources that enjoin us to connect with and celebrate the sacred circle of life and the rhythms of nature. They are there, all of them at hand, awaiting us to build, explore, affirm, critique, and connect. We need only to put them to good use and thus make vividly

fresh and relevant our encompassing vision of life: its problems, its ideals, and the means to achieve our vision.

And that first source is "direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life."

Direct encounter with the abiding mystery and wonder of existence and life, through its myriad expressions throughout history and across cultures, is central to religious experience and expression. Sacred stories, belief systems, rituals, moral codes, painters, poets, and musicians—behind, beyond and within all these types of symbolic expression the human family has groped to convey an intimation of a "presence," "mystery," "wonder," the "holy" abiding in and beyond all things. Arjuna's charioteer reveals himself as the Lord Krishna, and in amazement Arjuna exults: "I see all gods within your body...all sages and holy serpents. Universal Form, I see you without limit." As a boy, Black Elk was out on the prairie hunting and just as he was about to shoot a kingbird, it spoke to him: "Listen! A voice is calling you!" And looking up, thundering down from the clouds, two men streaked toward him like arrows singing and drumming: "Behold, a sacred voice is calling you; All over the sky a sacred voice is calling....Take courage younger brother, on earth a nation you shall make live...with power...the cleansing wing." (see Hall, etc., 29, 30; Haught, *What Is Religion*, 161-2. Hereafter: Haught.)

Far removed from the prairie and the battlefield of Kurushetra, Alfred North Whitehead, writing in *Science in the Modern World* put it this way: "Religion is a vision of something which stands behind, beyond and within the passing flux of immediate things—something real, yet waiting to be realized." William Blake must have known something of this when writes: "To see a world in a grain of sand/And heaven in a wild flower,/Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,/And eternity in an hour."

The direct experience of mystery and wonder is qualitatively different from other experiences, and no normal language can adequately express it. Albert Einstein writes of his "rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law," which for him "reveals an intelligence of such superiority that compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection." But that doesn't mean he didn't stop thinking, reflecting and trying to express his rapturous amazement anyway. For he continues: "The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious....Whoever does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his eyes are dimmed." (Whitehead, quoted in Hall, etc. 29; and Einstein, quoted in Haught, 164)

This is precisely what was driving a new generation of Unitarians in the 1830s to near despair. For them, that generation in the 1830s-50s, and today we call them Transcendentalists, their religion, their Unitarianism, had become "corpse-cold." Their elders mined Sacred Scripture obsessively for rational proofs of the existence of god; and were tone-deaf to its spirit-filled poetry and myth. In schools and universities, their teachers drilled them in the rote memorization of the classics, yet never once asked them what they thought or felt about the issues and passions teeming in the books and words before them. And their ministers? Emerson, in a speech to graduating divinity students in 1838, told them a story about going to worship service where after we nearly vowed "to...go to church no more."

A snow storm was falling around us. The snow storm was real, the preacher merely spectral, and the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, and then out the window behind him into the beautiful meteor of the snow. He had lived in vain. He had not one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love...If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it....In how many churches, by how many [ministers], tell me, [are we] made sensible that [we] are an infinite Soul; that the earth and heavens are passing in [our] minds; and that [we are] drinking forever the soul of God?" (from *The Complete Essays...of Emerson*, Modern Library, 1950, 76, 77. Hereafter: Emerson.)

This was the particular project of the Unitarian Transcendentalists: to awaken themselves and those around them to the immediate mystery and wonder of the earth and heavens continuously poring through and enlivening our minds and souls. This experience was not something far off or fit only to be felt and experienced second hand in ancient books by epic heroes or god intoxicated prophets. It could happen anywhere, anytime, to anyone in the most unexpected ways and places. "Crossing a bare commons," Emerson wrote, "in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky...I...enjoyed a perfect exhilaration...glad to the brink of fear.....Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the air and uplifted into infinite space...I became a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all, the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and parcel of God." (Emerson, 6)

It is a curious way of telling, but the language of direct experience always is. It is *ineffable*; how do you convey the wonder in beholding the birth of a child, or the grief, the mystery, perhaps even the joy, as we approach the portals of death. How to convey the awe and reverence in beholding nature's overwhelming immensity, inscrutability and beauty? Or that of an astonishing work of art? And yet there's something about them that seemingly compels us to try. Though *transient* and passing, the memory of these experiences lingers and can fill life with abiding significance, meaning and trust. They convey no mere vague feeling, but an exceptionally sharp *insight* into reality; insight so powerful that they can lead to a whole new understanding of oneself and the world.

This is really difficult for me to talk about; it is for any of us, because it is so intimate, so private, so not ironic, or witty, or rational, polished, and tame. One of my chief worries about becoming a Unitarian, and about serving in its professional ministry, was this: would the wellsprings of mystery run dry for me; would I ever experience deep and meaningful mystical, religious feelings ever again. I'm serious. For I believe they have occurred at moments in my life. Turning my life inside out; crucial in helping me make decisions that would influence who I was, what I would become, what I thought and believed about the world, nature, of everything. Times when I felt that it was not just me, but something much greater that spoke and moved beyond, within, and through me.

Once upon a time, I would have called it "God." Now I have become more than content to say "that transcending Mystery and Wonder," and locate it within myself, those I love, and the only world I know. It is enough, in Einstein's words, to fill me with "rapturous amazement."

Wrestling to come up with these words and those on other Sunday mornings; worshipping and serving with you; celebrating the birth of an infant and blessing it into this world and into a loving family so full of pride, anxiety and hope; grieving with you over the decline and death of a loved one, and yet marveling together with joy at that person's life—

"Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder" is not dead; it is alive, at hand, and comes as a gift renewing our spirit; and as an open door bidding that which "creates and upholds life" to approach and abide.

* * * * *

For classic descriptions/studies of "the holy," and of direct, mystical experiences, see Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, and William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.... For two fascinating recent excursions into mysticism, spirituality, and the sciences, see John Horgan, *Rational Mysticism*..., and Owen Flanagan, *The Really Hard Problem: Meaning in a Material World*; for a progressive Christian theology, see Gordon D. Kaufman, *In the Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*).