

Sunday, August 19, 2018 *Mystical Varieties of UU Experience (excerpts)*

Chalice Lighting

Today's text is by the Theosophist leader Annie Besant.

O Hidden Life

vibrant in every atom

O Hidden Light

shining in every creature

O Hidden Love

embracing all in Oneness

May all who feel themselves as one with Thee

Know they are therefore one with every other.

Time for All Ages

Answering Nature's Call

Jim Gasperini

I'd like to invite the young and young at heart to join me on the steps. In today's service we're talking about surprising things that make us think "oh, wow," and perhaps change how we think about the world. Of course since you are kids, this sort of thing probably happens every other Tuesday, but I'm going to tell a story that happened to me.

The adults looking at the title of my story are probably thinking, "is he really going to talk about *that?*" The answer is yes, tastefully. "Answering Nature's call" is a polite way to refer to something we do every day, but don't talk about much.

I grew up back East, where you don't have to go to the snow, because the snow comes to you. I lived next to the woods, so I had plenty of opportunity to answer Nature's call by writing on the snow. This is one thing that boys can do a lot easier than girls. Get the idea?

Sometimes I would just make zigzags back and forth. I have a theory that this is how a famous painter named Jackson Pollack discovered his technique for painting with drips, after having a few of his favorite diuretics, stumbling out of his studio on a snowy night to answer Nature's call. Other times I would write the names of girls I had on my mind, but most of the time I wrote my name: J I M.

The main part of this story didn't happen in the winter, but in the summer, in the Adirondack mountains of New York. On my way back from a hike one day, I stopped to answer Nature's call on a big green stretch of moss. Out of habit I wrote my name: J I M period. The ability to do punctuation makes you a master in this particular artform.

I would never have remembered this incident except that the next day, when I happened to take the same trail, there on the green bank I saw my name: J I M period, written in butterflies. There were hundreds of them, slowly opening and closing their wings, so intent on what they were doing that I could put my hand right next to them and they would just flutter a few inches a way and squirm back into the line.

It's strange but true that butterflies, which we think are so beautiful, like to eat stuff that we think totally yucky. See the picture up there of butterflies on the giant lizard? They are drinking fluids dribbling from his eyes and nose.

Seeing my name written in butterflies was so beautiful! I felt blessed. I had answered Nature's call, and Nature had answered back! I watched them for over an hour.

The next day I deliberately chose the same trail, to see if the butterflies were still there. They were, but I'm afraid to say that overnight some enemy of butterflies – squirrels maybe, birds or bats – had attacked. All that was left was their wings, antennae, and twisted bits of other pieces. You could still read, though, laid out in dead butterfly parts, the name of the creature who had lured these poor insects to their doom: J I M period - now written in carnage. *Now* what was Nature telling me? I felt terribly guilty.

I've wondered about this story ever since. That a simple act like a mammal answering Nature's call in the woods could cause both astounding beauty and dismaying destruction continues to amaze me.

As it happens, the flapping of a butterfly's wings is the classic example of chaos theory, a way scientists study the interdependent web of all existence. The idea is that a butterfly's gentle flapping could set off a chain reaction of forces that results in a storm on the other side of the world. So perhaps my accidentally getting all those butterflies killed kept a typhoon from hitting India. Or maybe it caused a typhoon that otherwise wouldn't have happened. The web of all existence is complicated, so we'll never know.

But my story is over, and it's time for us to sing you off to your classes.

Sources of Our Faith

Markate Daly

Our Unitarian Universalist faith draws from many sources, branching out from our Judeo-Christian heritage to include wisdom and insights from many other religious traditions, humanism, literature, philosophy, and even science. But the first source of our liberal faith is our own personal experience of life and what it has taught us. In this church we share these experiences with each other in a small group ministry setting called Chalice Circles. This year's Circles will be forming next month in the Atrium.

This morning, it is my honor to share one of my own experiences as it relates to today's topic: profound and inexplicable experiences that lead to a deeper understanding of the natural world and our human position in it.

It was the late eighties and I was on my kneeling chair at my desk. These were very popular at the time, great for the back but hard on the knees. I had recently completed my dissertation in moral philosophy. In it I had argued that the interpersonal bond humans form with each other, even on a momentary basis, contains within it a natural ethics that has the force of a moral imperative. But I hadn't any idea what that bond might be. This is what I was puzzling about that afternoon on my kneeling chair.

While I was struggling with the age-old problem of the nature of a person, I was hit with an image of a human being making connections not only to other people, including those distant and past, but all the other elements of physical and social existence. In the center, holding it all together, was a force field that had no content of its own, much in line with Buddhist teachings of the no--self. To say that I was hit with this image is not a metaphor. I found myself on the floor. I crawled over to the couch to catch my breath and puzzle over what had just happened. There seemed to be no combination of muscle contractions that I could have used to pitch myself to the floor,

The conception of the world as a network of entities connected with lines forming and fading is very much in line with the seventh principle of Unitarian Universalism, "the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part". But I was an empirically focused philosopher with a background in the science. I could never tell anyone about this, even though I used this insight in every thing I wrote and I continue to elaborate it. In the last five years, though, there has been an explosion of research in many sciences supporting this vision. Now I am scrambling just to catch up!

Silent Meditation/ Prayer

Jim Gasperini

I invite you now to sit comfortably, close your eyes if you'd like, and share a time for inspiration. Let's share about 16 inspirations, and exhalations, in silence.

On average we have 16 inspirations, each minute of our lives. That adds up to a thousand inspirations an hour, 23 thousand a day, 8 and a half million a year. Over 9 million if we get a lot of exercise.

As humans though we ask more of life than our daily breath, and our daily bread. We crave inspiration in a larger sense.

Let us remember now, and be grateful for, our moments of unexpected inspiration. Those times when something happened that changed our understanding of ourselves or of the world, glowing forever in our memories as if a flashbulb had gone off in darkness. Also those times when we worked hard to prepare, so that when the right idea, the right situation or the right person came along, we would be ready. Whether or not the inspiration led to a vision come true, still we were ready.

Let us remember also those times when we keenly felt a lack of inspiration. When we felt dispirited, like a sailboat becalmed, rocking uselessly on a windless sea. Some of us may feel that way right now. It can be hard to remember how to catch the wind again, or even to remember that we ever had those glorious moments when our sails filled with wind. Let us remember our dispirited times, or live them for a while, then let them go, and move on, looking forward to the next puff of inspiration.

Some of us felt inspired this morning to share a joy or sorrow with our church community:
[items from the Memory Book]

In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson:

We stand on the edge of all that is great, yet are restrained in inactivity and unacquaintance with our powers, like workers of the hive every one of which is capable of transformation into the Queen Bee. We are always on the brink of an ocean into

which we do not yet swim... But suddenly in any place, in the street, in the room, will the heaven open, and the regions of wisdom be uncovered, as if to show how thin the veil...

May our inspirations of the body be very numerous, and our inspirations of the spirit be numerous enough to lead us forward in wisdom and joy. Amen.

Reading

Jim Gasperini

An excerpt from *Living with a Wild God - A Nonbeliever's Search for the Truth about Everything* by Barbara Ehrenreich

May, 1959

The town of Lone Pine California offered no complexities to explore, and at the time very little even in the way of side streets, so I just headed east to where the sky was lightest. The street I was walking on held a few grudging concessions to commercialism – an auto-parts store, for example – but nothing was open and there were no humans or moving cars to be seen...

In the next few minutes, on that empty street, I found whatever I had been looking for. Here we leave the jurisdiction of language, where nothing is left but the vague gurgles of surrender expressed in words such as "ineffable" and "transcendent." For most of the intervening years, my general thought has been: if there are no words for it, then don't say anything about it. Otherwise you risk slopping into "spirituality", which is, in addition to being a crime against reason, of no more interest to other people than your dreams.

But there is one image, handed down over the centuries, that seems to apply, and that is the image of fire, as in the "burning bush." At some point in my pre-dawn walk – not at the top of a hill or the exact moment of sunrise, but in its own good time – the world flamed into life. How else to describe it? There were no visions, no prophetic voices or visits by totemic animals, just this blazing everywhere. Something poured into me and I poured out into it. This was not the passive beatific merger with "the all", as promised by the eastern mystics. It was a furious encounter with a living substance that was coming at me through all things at once, and one reason for the terrible wordlessness of the experience is that you cannot observe fire really closely without becoming part of it. Whether you start as a twig or a gorgeous tapestry, you will be recruited into the flame and made indistinguishable from the rest of the blaze...

I could not speak of it because I lacked the words, and I could not recapture the experience any more than a burned-out filament could be used to light a fresh bulb. Something had happened, but it seemed to have happened *to* me rather than *for* me or for my edification...

When people run up against something inexplicable, transcendent, and, most of all, ineffable, they often call it "God", as if that were some sort of explanation...

Why would I want to apply the ancient, well-worn notion of "God" to that force or power or energy I'd encountered in Lone Pine, which bore not the slightest resemblance to anything in the religious iconography I had grown up around?

Sermon

Mystical Varieties of UU Experience

Jim Gasperini

Many of you know Barbara Ehrenreich for her work as labor activist, feminist, and award-winning journalist. In *Living with a Wild God*, very much a departure for her, she details how, as a self-describe "fourth-generation atheist," she endeavored all her life to come to terms with extraordinary experiences she had as a young woman.

The term "mystic" can mean many things. By some definitions, mystical experience must be earned: it can only come from strict and rigorous religious practice, devotion to a mystical way of life. On the other extreme, the term can describe anything strange and compelling enough to make you think, "oh, wow." I'd put my little butterfly story on that end of the spectrum.

Though my sermon title might suggest a broad survey, I intend to go narrow and deep, focusing on experiences like Ehrenreich's. Her story fits within a definition the pioneering psychologist William James made in lectures titled *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James identified four "marks," as he called them, "which, when an experience has them, may justify us in calling it mystical."

First is *ineffability*: He explains:

No adequate report of its contents can be given in words. [...] its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others. [...] Mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect. No one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it consists.

When someone who has not had a mystical experience hears others tell about them, they may react with skepticism. James compares such reactions to someone lacking a musical ear trying to

appreciate a symphony, or someone who has never been in love listening to someone who *is* in love talk on about it.

The second essential mark is *noetic quality*. I had to look that one up. Nominally, “noetic” just means “relating to mental activity or the intellect.” James used it to describe something *like* an emotion, but which has an intellectual aspect as well. He says:

Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time.

The other two marks, which James found often, but not always, associated with mystical experiences, are:

Transiency—“Mystical states cannot be sustained for long,” and

Passivity—“the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power.”

He recounted many stories, beginning with people for whom mystic experience arrived unexpectedly. A Unitarian minister walking to an English country pub suddenly felt “immersed in the infinite ocean of God.” Taking a hansom cab back to his hotel from a poetry reading, a Canadian psychologist found himself “wrapped in a flame-colored cloud.” In attempting to describe this experience, he used fire imagery very similar to Ehrenreich’s.

James then surveyed stories of those who have cultivated mystic consciousness methodically: Hindu yogis, Buddhist practitioners of *dyhana*, Muslim Sufis and Christians following the discipline of orison.

Enough abstraction - time for a personal story. Thirty years ago in Kathmandu, the father of a close Nepali friend invited my girlfriend Rebecca and me to join him on his daily early morning visit to the temple complex Pashupatinath.

As non-Hindus we could not enter the temple itself, so Vishnu took us to a roof overlooking the temple steps along the Bagmati, a sacred tributary of the Ganges. As monkeys scampered on the roof tiles around us, many of the most intense moments of the human drama played out before our eyes. On the steps to the right, an emaciated man bathed in the frigid river. On the left blazed someone’s colorful funeral pyre, surrounded by mourners sprinkling themselves with river water. Pashupatinath is at once a house of prayer and ritual, community center, hermitage, hospice, funeral home, outdoor crematorium, and burial place, in the form of the river.

This becomes more than a tourist story only after we left the temple area. Just past the vendor stalls selling incense, fabrics, and colored powders, on an ordinary street corner under eaves hung with strands of drying peppers, I stopped for a moment.

Suddenly I dropped out of my conventional awareness. I *knew* that my body, the dusty street, and all the familiar world, constitutes a thin crust over a deep current that flows, *like* air or water but *not* air nor water, through me, and all things, always.

This spiritual flowing did not seem conscious, nor in any way concerned with human affairs. It was not a he, nor a she, nor even something I could imagine addressing as “you” or “thee.” Appeals to it for help would be like asking a physical river to leap up from its banks and wash away my concerns. Yet despite this divine... indifference, the awareness that this spiritual wind blows through everything always gave me inexpressible joy. This flowing... something, might be called love, in the sense that it connects all living things, and perhaps all things living or not.

I knew my awareness of my self to be a minor eddy, spinning for a while in the margins of the eternal flow. Whatever it is that, for a while, causes my little ripple to imagine a distinct “me” came from the flow, is still part of the flow, and someday will simply lose its temporary distinctiveness and sweep back into the current.

I’ve learned since of many terms and metaphors that resonate with this experience: Prana. Chi. Ruach. The river Jordan. The Saraswati, a spiritual third river that Hindus believe joins the Ganges where it merges with the Yamuna. Dreamtime. The divine afflatus. The breath of God. The Over-Soul.

I have no idea how long I stood there, lost in my extraordinary rapture. Rebecca and Vishnu, walking on ahead, eventually noticed my absence. She came back to find me, and touched my arm. Instantly I was back on a dusty street in Kathmandu, once again living and sensing in the usual way, in the familiar crust.

Transiency – check. Ineffability, noetic quality, check, check. As for passivity – it was not so much that some higher power grasped and controlled my will but that while in my amazed trance, such a thing as individual human will seemed beside the point, something I had left up there in the ephemeral material world.

Back home in Manhattan, after a year-long search for some way to make sense of my experience, I found a spiritual home at the UU Church of All Souls. It wasn’t that the spiritual practices there focused on mystical experience, any more than ours do here at UUCB. In my year of searching I had tried a couple practices that did deliberately attempt to induce a mystical state of mind,

including a Sufi group with which I spent long periods doing whirling ecstatic dancing. My mystical experience had come quite unexpectedly. I decided that I have insufficient patience to attempt to reach that state again deliberately. Though my experience happened near a Hindu temple, I am far too distant culturally to ever become a genuine *sadhu*, and feel no desire to join the Hari Krishnas.

What resonated at All Souls, and with the UU idea in general, is an environment open to many sources of inspiration, where services have a rhythm reminiscent of my Episcopalian upbringing but which do not require that I subscribe to a creed that I had turned away from as an adolescent. Places where I can not only explore religious ideas with like-minded folks, but – as it turns out-- talk about my experience from the pulpit. And no-one has walked out yet.

For Unitarians at the turn of the 19th century, the term “mystic” was derogatory, associated with fanaticism and cults. The Unitarian movement favored the human intellect. One idea that distinguished them from conventional Christianity was that the order in which a benevolent deity had arranged the universe could be discerned through dedicated personal study. Divine “revelation,” which they looked for mostly in the Bible, was God’s way of confirming the findings of a rational process.

Unitarians generally mistrusted the emotional sort of “revelations” that took place at evangelical revival meetings, another major religious development of the time. Since revelation was divine assurance to diligent students of their spiritual progress, how could messy emotional camp meeting conversions without study or effort be genuine spiritual transformation?

Many younger Unitarians however found something lacking in their calm, considered, rationalist religion. (Hmm. I can’t help breaking in here to wonder - where have I heard such a sentiment before? *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*) Anyway the young Unitarians of the day, encouraged to be free-thinking individuals on a personal quest to determine divine meaning, and inspired by English and German Romantic literature, sought more intensity in spiritual experience. Called the Transcendentalists (a name originally coined by critics, which they adopted much as the Quakers and Shakers adopted theirs), among their conscious goals was reclaiming mysticism, which they saw as a universal type of religious experience.

Emerson, a founder of the Transcendentalist Club, recounted an experience crossing Boston Common at twilight:

Standing on the bare ground, my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,--all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball. I *am* nothing. I *see* all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.

The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental. To be brothers, to be acquaintances, --master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty.

Was that a mystic experience, by the criteria of William James? Though it certainly sounds like it to me, scholars differ. Emerson used the term “ecstatic” to describe sixteen such experiences, drawing on the original sense of that term in Greek: *ek – stasis*, to stand outside of oneself. He did not consider them exotic or esoteric, however, but normal.

Though Transcendentalist ideas were a logical extension of steps the Unitarian movement had already taken, the church leaders of the time found them shocking. Over time the Unitarians leaders came to accept the Transcendentalists, but of course did not always agree with them. The influential minister Henry Ware Jr. wrote a sympathetic case for mysticism, from the mainstream Unitarian perspective of the time. He defined mysticism as “the striving of the soul after God, the longing of the finite for communion with the Infinite.” This was a dualistic, devotional concept: there is a creator God out there, separate from us, with whom we long for communion, to which we should demonstrate devotion.

Emerson’s mysticism was not dualistic nor devotional but *monistic*– the idea that God and the universe are one. My sense in Kathmandu of a universal flow through all things always everywhere, indifferent to human concerns, was a monistic vision of the divine.

Emerson also used water imagery, in describing his concept “The Over-Soul:”

When I watch that flowing river, which, out of regions I see not, pours for a season its streams into me, I see that I am a pensioner; not a cause, but a surprised spectator of this ethereal water...

We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one.

William James found two “philosophic directions,” as he termed them, in all the mystical experiences he surveyed. Monism was one. From the writers of the Upanishads to the Sufis to St. Teresa of Ávila to the spontaneous experiences of the anonymous ordinary people he interviewed - all shared the sense that the divine is impersonal, not personal; immanent in the universe, not separate from it.

The other philosophic direction he identified he called “optimism.” Even when mystic experience becomes so intense as to verge on bodily pain, as it did for Saint Teresa, it imparts a sense of joy. For Teresa this joy “penetrates to the marrow of the bones, whilst earthly pleasures affect only the surface of the senses.”

One of the anonymous people with mystic experience whose stories William James told may have been James himself. Near the end of his chapter on mysticism he wrote:

We pass into mystical states from out of ordinary consciousness as from a less into a more, as from a smallness into a vastness, and at the same time as from an unrest to a rest. We feel them as reconciling, unifying states. They appeal to the yes-function more than to the no-function in us. In them the unlimited absorbs the limits, and peacefully closes the account.

To which I say, Amen, and thank you.

Closing Hymn

#1068 *Rising Green* by Carolyn McDade

My blood doth rise in the roots of yon oak,
her sap doth run in my veins.
Boundless my soul like the open sky
where the stars forever have lain.
Where the stars, where the stars, where the stars forever have lain.

My hands hold the weavings of time without end,
my sight as deep as the sea.
Beating, my heart sounds the measures of old,
that of love's eternity.
That of love, that of love, that of love's eternity.

I feel the tides as they answer the moon,
rushing on a far distant sand.
Winging my song is the wind of my breast
and my love blows over the land.
And my love, and my love, and my love blows over the land.

My foot carries days of the old into new,
our dreaming shows us the way.

Wondrous our faith settles deep in the earth,
rising green to bring a new day.
Rising green, rising green, rising green to bring a new day.