

SOURCE #1: EXPERIENCING THE MYSTERY

Rev. Kit Ketcham, Sept. 23, 2007

I'd like to invite you to turn in your hymnal to one of the first pages and let's take a look at what we find there. The Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism are what we usually consider the most important aspect of UUism. The Seven Principles outline how we covenant to be with one another and with the earth and many a sermon series has revolved around the meaning and importance of these Principles.

We consider the Sources of Unitarian Universalism much less frequently. In fact, I googled "Sources of UUism" and found fewer than 10 references to sermons based on the Six Sources -----across the UUA over the past several years. And yet they form the backbone of our history, they tie us to other religious traditions and to a long line of religious heroes and thinkers.

I believe that, out of a lack of understanding of our roots, we UUs often struggle with our religious identity and purpose. We are more inclined to say what we don't believe than what we do believe, and I think this has to do with a lack of knowledge about our Sources, the wellsprings from which we flow, as a religious faith.

I did notice in the list of references that Google produced that many religious education courses about the Sources are taught to both children and youth and occasionally to adults. And much as I approve of infusing our children and youth with a strong sense of Unitarian Universalist identity and connection, I am struck by how important it is for us adults to have that same understanding of who we are as a faith tradition and where we come from.

So last spring the Worship Committee and I decided that we would experiment with theming this year together, using the Six Sources as our dominant theme for services. This means that every month I will preach on one of the Sources and will also offer a Conversation evening during the following week, to give us a chance to share our own experience with that Source and to find the ways it enhances our own religious thinking.

Five of the Six Sources of Unitarian Universalism were drafted and voted into usage in the 1980's at about the same time as our Seven Principles. The Sixth Source, which refers to earth-centered religions, was adopted at the General Assembly in Spokane Washington in 1995. Perhaps some of you were there and voted this Source in. I was and I did vote yes, not realizing what a momentous occasion it was to recognize the importance of indigenous religion in the developing theology of Unitarian Universalism.

Do you still have your hymnal open? Let's read together that first Source, including the introductory statement: The Living Tradition we share draws from many sources: 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 that create and uphold life.

Direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, moving us to a renewal of spirit and opening us to the forces of life. Wow! There's a lot packed into that statement.

Let's unpack it a little bit. I invite you to close your eyes, let your mind drift for a moment, and then let it settle on some experience you may have had, a time when perhaps you received some insight, some wisdom, some sense of connection with the universe, some sense of great love. Just stay in that place for a moment, reliving it in your heart and mind.

Think about the moment. You may have had physical sensations, of goosebumps or a sense of weightlessness or removed-ness or perhaps of deep joining. You may have found it pleasant or frightening. You may not have had words to describe it or you may have gasped or sighed in response. Let yourself recall any sensations you may have had.

Think about the context. What had been happening in your life up to that point? Was it a joyful time in your life? A time of grief? Of illness?

Of boredom? Of new love? Can you put a finger on anything that might have influenced the opening of a door for you spiritually?

When you're ready to do so, feel free to open your eyes and we'll go on.

A few years ago, I told you of an experience from my life that has profoundly affected me ever since. In a moment I'd like to retell that story and use it as an illustration of how we often receive a direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder. Because you doubtless have had similar moments, perhaps unrecognized at the time, and these experiences are much the reason why UUism is a unique religious faith.

We do not require that those who join us have religious experiences that are tied to doctrines or to a deity or to a particular prophet. We know that each person's life offers meaning and insight into the human spirit and its relationship with other living beings and with the mystery of the universe. And we feel that this experience is so important that we acknowledge it as a Source of our faith.

We are not "woowoo" about this, though some of us delve more deeply into spiritual matters than others. But we rely on our own experiences in life to guide us spiritually. This is different from most other religions.

Here's the story: It was June, 1994. I'd been driving Interstate 80 since dawn, from Farewell Bend on the Snake River in eastern Oregon where I'd camped in my van the night before. I was returning to Colorado after burying my mother, crossing the hot dry deserts of southern Idaho and over the border into Utah, pondering the lessons of her life and death and crying as I drove, my tears drying almost as soon as they appeared, in the hot blast coming through the open window. And now I was beyond tiredness, in that late afternoon state of mind where rational thought and fantasy merge, and reality has a fuzzy edge._

_I'd been seeing a lot of hawks poised on telephone poles or circling overhead, their broad wings barely flickering to stay afloat. My mother had loved birds, and hawks and eagles were interesting to both of us. Each bird felt like a message, but in my emotional state, I couldn't quite figure it out. _

Every redtail or northern harrier caused me a fresh pang, and by the time I reached the outskirts of Salt Lake City, I had exhausted my tear ducts and my brain.

_I wanted to be back in Colorado as soon as I could. I prefer U.S. Highway 40, through the mountains, but I had no idea how to find it in the maze of interstates, beltways, and smaller roads that interlace the Salt Lake

valley. __

I drove south into SLC, peering through my foggy contact lenses at unintelligible signs, looking for landmarks. Nothing. I realized I was in the far left lane of a 6-lane interstate and, in my weariness, nearly sideswiped another car as I tried to pull the huge van over so I could read my map. __

__At last came a break in traffic, and I eased over to the shoulder, cringing for fear I had missed seeing some hapless little car in my mirror, and half-expecting to feel a sickening crunch. But I made it, stopped the van, and, once again, the tears came. I was safe, I hadn't hit anyone, but I was exhausted and bereft. __

__Suddenly, in my rearview mirror, I saw the ominous blink--blue and red, blue and red. "Oh no," I thought, and hastily mopped my eyes as I fumbled for my car registration. __

There appeared at the driverside window a short stocky cop, his hat pushed back on his head, his face serious and concerned. I braced myself for the worst, assuming he'd seen my near-accident, but in a voice of infinite kindness, he just asked, "Lady, are you lost?" __

That man could not have known just how lost I was. I couldn't find myself on any map--neither the map of Utah nor the map of my life. I didn't know where I was after my mother's death; I only knew I needed to go home.

I don't know what I said to him, besides asking how to find route 40, but he neither remarked on my tears nor ticketed me, and within a few minutes I was on my way again. ___

As I topped the last long hill up out of Salt Lake City, my eye fell upon the broad winged silhouette of another redtailed hawk, soaring just above the horizon. ___

And all the confused, jumbled thinking that I'd been doing all day-- the memories of my mother, my grief at losing her, my anger at all the years I'd felt motherless because of my own rejection of her religious beliefs and because of her illness, the link to birds and mountains and all of nature, the incandescent flame of her unconditional love for me---all these coalesced into one single thought: I AM NOT ALONE. I AM NOT ALONE. I AM IN THE ARMS OF THE UNIVERSE, I AM IN THE ARMS OF GOD.

That knowledge has reverberated for me down the thirteen years since it happened. Before that time I had not experienced much spiritually. It was before I began my seminary training, though I had felt a call to ministry. But I had, over the years, insulated myself from profound emotional responses. I had not let myself feel much; I was always busy trying to help junior high kids deal with their emotions, or staying afloat after my divorce, or driving gloomy thoughts away with a deliberate discipline of cheerfulness.

But when my mother died, it hit me like few other losses had hit me. I had learned by then that “stiff upper lip” was not really the best response to loss, that I had many other feelings. And I wanted to let myself experience them.

This experience of transcending mystery and wonder, to use the language of our First Source, was a gateway for me and since then I have come to recognize spiritual experiences more often and more clearly.

One of the things I’m most queried about, as a minister, is spirituality and spiritual experience. How is it different from religion? Is it important? What is it, anyhow?

I have normally defined religion as a public expression of my relationship with the universe, or God, if you find that word meaningful. It happens in community, it is strengthened by my relationships with others, and it gives me an external outlet for my efforts to make the world a better place.

Spirituality for me is a private expression of my relationship with the universe, or God. It is my internal awareness of the beauty of each of life's moments. It is available to me always, if I am mindful. Most of my spiritual experiences I don't share; most of them I savor privately and ponder privately.

I was with a young couple this summer, preparing for their wedding, and the young man observed that he and his fiancée were different in how they approached spirituality. He wondered about spiritual experience and how to increase it in his life.

I looked at him and his fiancée sitting on my couch in the morning sunshine, he with his arm around her, my cat Loosy on her lap, and I had a revelation, which I tried to put into words.

“Here we are, the three of us, talking about how to make the ceremony of your marriage meaningful and beautiful, not just for yourselves but also for your friends and family. That in itself is a spiritual act.

“You are sitting in the sunshine, basking in its warmth, savoring the relationship between you and her. That is itself a spiritual moment.

“She is next to you, enjoying your arm around her, petting an animal on her lap as it purrs and expresses its enjoyment of her care. That too is a spiritual experience.

“Every moment of our lives has the potential to be a spiritual experience, whether it’s a joyous or sorrowful or so-called ordinary moment. It is our mindfulness, our awareness, that gives it meaning and importance. We can call spiritual experience into our lives just by noticing it.”

Remember last spring when many of us here attended the Chaminade concert, offered by a small trio of musicians whose members are all connected through this community. It was a wonderful experience for many of us, I suspect, to see their intensity, their virtuosity, and to feel the waves of music which broke over us as they played.

It could have been just a performance, an excellent one, but for me it was more, because I know these musicians, as do you. I know their lives, their hopes, their sorrows. And I saw how the music filled them and us, how their gift of the music was sacred, holy. The music and the musicians filled us with joy that night and it was indeed a spiritual experience.

Unitarian Universalism has at its heart the myriad spiritual experiences of all of us who gather together around the flaming chalice. Our individual and collective spiritual lives are the bedrock, the origin, the foundation of our religious faith. From our direct experience of mystery and wonder, we shape our deepest understandings and convictions.

We need not use a doctrine or a deity or a prophet to build our spiritual lives around. We are free to trust our own experience and understandings of the universe on which to build our faith. And that is what I find so compelling about UUism, that we are trustworthy as spiritual beings, that our humanity can show us the way to a fuller, deeper way of life.

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

BENEDICTION:

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that many moments of our lives have the potential to be spiritual experiences. May we savor those moments and bring them with us into our lives together here in this beloved community. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.