

First Unitarian Church

December 10, 2023

I have enjoyed the hell out of researching this sermon. *Religious experience*. I was inspired by our theological theme this month: mystery. And by the fact that among six sources of UU faith our denomination names, one of which is “the direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder.”

I wondered: how did “direct experience” end up there? And what is meant by “transcending mystery and wonder?” Having been a UU all my life, I realize I have long thought that “transcending mystery and wonder” was a euphemism for God, which we call by so many names, mostly *not* God, such as the love that holds all, spirit of life, etc. Those other names being closer to what UU’s typically think of the divine. If they think of the divine at all.

And as someone with a bachelors and master's degrees in religious studies, when I hear the phrase “direct experience” I think of classic consciousness-altering religious experiences, the kind that Christian, Jewish, and Muslim mystics and many Catholics saints describe; and Buddhists when they describe nirvana; the kind yoga was created to facilitate in Hinduism; the kind researchers at Harvard were interested in in the 1960’s when they studied psychedelics, before those kinds of studies were made illegal, and also today now that it’s once again legal. In October, Harvard announced it is launching a new multidisciplinary psychedelic research program.ⁱ

But we don’t often speak of mysticism in Unitarian Universalism, even though UUs, too, have mystical experiences. We spoke of mysticism even less back in the 1980’s, when our statement of principles and sources was adopted.

“Transcending mystery” sounds vaguely god-like, but it also sounds like something else: it sounds like Transcendentalism, a major movement in the 1800’s. Maybe it has to do with that. Transcendentalism is the theology associated with figures like Margaret Fuller, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau. It began as a kind rebellion within Unitarianism— in fact the transcendentalist movement was started by young people challenging the ideas the older folks held dear.

Those older folks were so incensed by it they kicked Emerson out as a Unitarian minister. Which is funny, right? Because it was the 1800’s and that stuff all seems *really* old to us now. Old, and kind of normal, because transcendentalism went on to have a big influence in and beyond our faith. Transcendentalists believed that there is a unity of all creation and that we can experience the divine in nature. It is one of the reasons this sanctuary has a wall of windows facing a wildlife habitat. Transcendentalists also believed that humans are inherently good, just plagued by errors of thinking, bad habits, and harmful traditions. Maybe transcending mystery and wonder had to do with transcendentalism and nature.

So, I started digging around for the history of our sources. I looked on my bookshelf- but none of my many (many!) UU history books had any explanation. I looked at the UUA website- nothing. I checked the Harvard Divinity School UU archives online- I couldn't find a thing, though I assume it's in there somewhere. I reached out to several older colleagues, ministers who might personally remember the process or who entered ministry soon after the statement of our principles and sources were adopted – no one could recall. I consulted the whole planet, meaning I Googled the question. Still nothing.

I did come across a reference in one of the history books to something called the Commission on Theology and the Frontiers of Learning. So, I decided to investigate that. Maybe they knew? It was formed by our denomination in 1962. The commission's task was to name the core beliefs of the denomination, contrast those with new knowledge in the various fields of learning at that time, and help the denomination imagine how to creatively adapt its religious philosophy and beliefs for that new era.

Can we take a moment to appreciate that? Back in 1962, UUs took stock. They wanted to check their beliefs against science and other new learning. And then figure out how to adapt them accordingly. That's pretty cool. And that is why UU is called a "living tradition." It's why the name of our hymnals – the gray ones—is "Singing the Living Tradition."

1962 was sixty-one years ago. Do you know First Unitarian was already here back then? Some of you do. At least two of you were already members here that year. We had just moved onto this corner lot. We had only a couple of buildings. And when you see photos of them, it looks like we were sitting in the middle of the desert. No development. Just this little church, that was part of a denomination that was comparing notes with science and changing its theology accordingly.

That 1962 commission published a report called "The Free Church in a Changing World." The commission wrote: "Our growing knowledge of the profoundly mysterious cosmos is found increasingly valuable in guiding life and thought."ⁱⁱ They contrast this with the fundamentalist religious belief that science will only give humans a false sense of pride.ⁱⁱⁱ And they wrote, "The beckoning mystery of the universe has already become for many, and may become for more, the most effective source of awe and reverence..." That feeling of awe and reverence. You know? Like if you go up to Sandia Peak, and look down, 360 degrees. Or when you finally look up at the stars at night, like really taking them in, and you can't believe you haven't been doing that more often.

We hadn't even walked on the moon yet when the commission wrote this. We hadn't seen the photo called "earthrise." Our planet, so beautiful and blue, sailing in deep dark space. What is this? What are we part of? What are we?

We are part of something that inspires, and we are made in such a way as to have, religious experiences. Maybe those are the direct experiences of transcending mystery and wonder.

Or maybe, it's all of the above.

There is a book, written over a century ago, that says just that. It's called *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. It was written in 1902 by the psychologist William James. James defined religion in very personal or individual terms. He defined it as the feelings, acts and experiences of individual people as they relate to whatever they may consider divine. God. The Ultimate. Etc. The relationship between you and That. You and Them.

And he talked about the religious experiences he calls mystical. Mystical comes from the ancient Greek root word *μυστικός*: relating to sacred mysteries. Mystery, *μυστήριον*, shares the same root. *μυστικός*, *μυστήριον*, mystery, secret. A mystical experience is one that reveals sacred truth, imparts a knowing beyond the intellect, or involves an experience of oneness with the divine.

William James describes religious experiences, mystical experiences broadly, from seemingly small moments to the dramatic, consciousness-altering kind. This makes a lot of sense to me. Whenever I hear a person say they have never had a personal religious experience before, I think they probably mean the dramatic, consciousness altering kind. And sometimes, I talk to people who've had the dramatic consciousness altering kind, but they aren't sure how to think or talk about it. Often, they are so afraid they'll sound crazy, they never talk about it at all.

But religious experiences are part of the human experience. They are as natural as love, friendship, belonging, and other intangible aspects of life. Those parts of our being that we often describe here as the *depth* aspect of life. What sets religious experiences apart is that instead of relating us to other humans or our communities, they relate us to the divine. The Universe. Ultimate reality. This thing we're sailing in. And that, in some sense, sails in us. Is us.

Mystical experiences, big or small, have four qualities that we can know them by. They are passive, noetic, transient, and ineffable.

They are passive in the sense that when one happens, it just happens. It requires no effort when you experience it. You can't make it happen. You can make yourself available for it, through meditation or prayer or some other practice. But you can't *force* a mystical experience to happen. In fact, it may happen when you least expect one.

Noetic means they impart some kind of knowledge that is beyond the intellect or rational thought. It's something you just suddenly apprehend. You just get it. Noetic. Then the experience passes—that's the transient part. They aren't a permanent state of mind. And afterward, this thing you came to know in it is almost impossible to put into words. That's what *ineffable* means. It can't be put into words. You'll try and try, you might come close, but there's something in it that language cannot adequately convey. Words fall short. It's a felt, experiential knowing.

Passive, noetic, transient, and ineffable.

Subtle mystical experiences can arrive as a sudden deeper grasp or understanding of something. It could be some concept that you've heard many times, but suddenly you hear it in a new and profound way. Or it's something you hear in a piece of music or poetry or a story, that becomes, in James's words "...irrational doorways...through which the mystery of fact, the wildness and the pang of life, [steals] into our hearts and thrill[s] them."

James even describes déjà-vu as another variety of mystical experience. He quotes the poet Alfred Tennyson. Actually, we all quote Alfred Tennyson. He's the 19th century poet who wrote lines like "tis better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all." He's one of the most quoted writers in the English language. Of déjà vu, Tennyson wrote:

"Moreover, something is or seems,
That touches me with mystic gleams,
Like glimpses of forgotten dreams—
"Of something felt, like something here;
Of something done, I know not where;
Such as no language may declare."

You've got the passivity, the noetic quality, the ineffability, and the transience. Déjà vu leaves us with a sense of something metaphysical, like there's something more to this world than our conscious minds know.

We can have mystical experiences of the kind that UUA Commission described in 1962, when they spoke of "the beckoning mystery of the universe" as "the most effective source of awe and reverence." Awe and reverence are very religious experiences. When we experience them, as with other religious experiences, we feel something outside of the self, we are drawn into something larger. With religious experiences, our "paltry personal concerns," as James puts it, fade away, at least temporarily. It is "an awe mixed with delicious restfulness" he says.

And then there are the more dramatic classical mystical experiences, in which a person has a profound experience of unity with the All or God. Nirvana, or enlightenment, has that quality. Jewish, Christian, Hindu, and Muslim mystics all describe it, too. And a similar experience has been reported by many people who have terminal illnesses and who participate in psychedelic research studies. That kind of experience is sometimes called a cosmic consciousness. William James quotes a nineteenth century psychiatrist who describes the spiritual impact of that sense of oneness: "With these come what may be called a sense of immortality, a consciousness of eternal life, not a conviction that [a person] shall have this, but the consciousness that [they have] it already."

They report a profound experience of oneness with the universe that eases their fear of death and brings them a deep, lasting peace.

That's another quality of a mystical experience. Unlike a dream, the experience stays with the person after it passes. After a dream we wake up and know it was a dream. We don't keep

feeling certain that what we dreamt really happened. Well. Unless we have a dream that is itself one of these experiences, and we wake up with some new understanding.

Not long after my dad died suddenly last year in a car accident, he appeared in one of my dreams and gave me a hug that was so real, when I woke up, I *knew* I had talked to him and hugged him. A few weeks ago, we met for lunch in a dream, and he told me about his experience since dying. Again, I awoke *knowing* I had spent time with him.

Many of you have shared your own accounts of dreams like that with me. And you've told me about other kinds of mystical experiences, too, though perhaps you didn't use those words. Times when you were struck by awe, or a sudden peace, when you felt truly held and one with that Love that Holds All, or when you gained some new understanding that you struggled to articulate even though its impact on you was clearly profound.

There are so many accounts of mystical experiences, large and small, from people in every era, together they comprise a state of consciousness that is a common, yet profound part of being human.

What is this? What are we part of? What are we? We sense more, I think, than we can put into words... though that has never stopped a preacher from trying.

ⁱ <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2023/10/26/study-of-psychedelics-society-culture/>

ⁱⁱ Tapp, Robert B. et al. "Theology and the Frontiers of Learning." *The Free Church in a Changing World: interim report by the commissions to the churches and fellowships of the Unitarian Universalist Association*. Unitarian Universalist Association. 1962. (pp 16). <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uiug.30112051910757&seq=20>