

Feb. 3, 2008

Sermon

“Engaging Our Sources: UUs as Mystics”

“The living tradition we share draws from many sources.” Now, the six sources that are enumerated, along with our seven principles, as shaping our religious understanding, are not – cannot – be complete. Nor will each one speak to each one of us. In a faith such as ours, in which each of us draws on our personal experience, our own upbringing and influences, our unique observations of the world and our own attempts to make sense of what we see and feel – in such a faith, to even try to identify the sources on which we collectively draw may seem hopeless, or at least presumptuous.

But by audaciously listing those six sources, we acknowledge that our beliefs are not created in a vacuum; that we are all creatures of our context and that our religion, radical as it is in many ways, did not spring fully formed out of some theologian’s head. It developed out of many traditions, grew, changed, evolved... and continues to do this. Ours is a faith firmly rooted in history. It’s a faith with an underlying structure, scaffolding on which it has created its own beautiful and radically inclusive shape.

Of course, each of these sources deserves a year’s worth or more of sermons just by itself, but you might get a little sick of a whole year of my talking about this one subject. So I’ve decided to at least scrape the surface of at least one aspect of each of our sources in a series of sermons. It’s the least we can do to save ourselves from the arrogance of believing that Unitarian Universalism is only about the “wings that set us free.” We are also about the “roots that hold us close,” that give us nourishment and endurance and strength.

The first of these six sources that shape our religious understanding recognizes that the individual – not an institution, not a charismatic leader, not an authoritative text or holy scripture, but the individual life – my experience and yours -- is the ultimate source of what we know, or think we know.

The first source is identified as “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.” I’ll say that again, because it’s a mouthful: “The 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.” Let’s take a closer look at this statement by starting from the end and working backwards.

First off, this statement affirms that there are “forces that create and uphold life” and that it is possible and desirable to be open to them. Spirit of Life, Nature, the Sacred, Ultimate Reality, God or Goddess... these are all names for those forces that create and uphold life. We understand that these include, but are not limited to, the scientific phenomena of procreation and nourishment and the wonders of physical bodies and instinct that make all life possible. These life-giving forces certainly include the biology and ecology of the material world.

But the forces that create life also include the mystery of love, the existence of the joy that makes us want to live, the urge to make beautiful things, the capacity for wonder and learning, and gratitude for that which makes life worth living – excitement, curiosity, connection – all that enhances and enriches human life. In other words, the forces that create and uphold life are all that we experience as sacred – necessary, but also wondrous. We are made in such a way that we may be open to this Sacredness, so that we may not always take it for granted but that we may, at least from time to time, be filled with thanksgiving and longing for greater understanding, greater communion with these forces. Whether we understand these forces to be God or not, they are capable of arousing in us feelings of reverence and wonder. And we need the experience of reverence and wonder.

Because, as this statement affirms, our spirits are in need of renewal. Our spirits as well as our bodies crave nourishment, crave both freedom and safety, independence and love, challenge and rest. Now, some of you may be wondering about the implicit assumption here that we have spirits, let alone spirits that seek renewal. For the sake of entering into the wisdom of this statement of our first source, I ask you to try, at least for now, to accept that “spirit” is emotion, but much more than emotion. Try to accept that spirit is that “inner light,” or if you will, the “still small voice within” or even the spark of divinity, the sacred in one another that we recognize and love. Try to accept that spirit need not be understood as immortal soul, but simply as soulfulness: that which seeks meaning and longs for union with something larger than itself; something that craves goodness and beauty and truth and growth. Surely, the spirit, the part of us that holds these longings, must be continually renewed if we are not to become mere automatons slogging through our days in a joyless and soul-numbing repetition of the chores that we must perform in order to survive.

There is mystery out there... and there is inherent in us, this statement of our first source claims, a need or desire for that mystery and for the sense of wonder that it evokes – a human need that transcends cultural differences. It is this sense of the mysterious, of questions that cannot be reduced to rational or scientific answers, that renews the spirit.

We don't know why there is beauty. We don't know why the universe exists or how light can be both particle and wave. How is it possible to write a symphony or a sonnet? Where does that miracle of creativity come from, and why? We don't know, can never know, the inner life of another human being. Why are we so made that we willingly inflict cruelty as well as incomprehensible acts of kindness?

It is this wonder we experience that keeps us going. As Annie Dillard reminds us, “beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them... We don't know what's going on here... Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery...”

This sort of mystery is transcendent, our first source tells us. It transcends our poor intellectual comprehension. It cannot be reduced to scientific equations. And it can be known only through direct experience. We can read about it; we can catch a glimmer of it as we listen to someone talk about it. But we can know it only by experiencing it. The

direct experience of Holiness is the essence of mysticism. Mysticism is not a religious tradition we automatically associate with Unitarian Universalism. In the old joke, when we come upon two signs, “This way to Heaven” and “This way to a discussion of Heaven,” UUs are supposedly more likely to choose the latter. We are reputed to prefer our mystical experiences second-hand. This is the stereotype that, like most stereotypes, is based on some observation, but a partial and poorly-understood observation.

The truth is, we have a noble tradition of mysticism within our history – most notably in the Transcendentalist movement, that faith in the supremacy of personal experience, filtered through the subjective and the intuitive -- the divinity within us answering to the divinity beyond. And, these days, there is a hunger in our congregations for religious experience. Not just religious discussion, but a felt encounter with the Holy.

Because God or the Sacred must be experienced to be known, even in part, even as a faint tracing on the surface of mystery. The state of consciousness that we name transcendence is, by its very nature, incapable of being reduced to words or formula. It must be lived.

In Dillard’s words, the least we can do is try to be there... try to see. In the statement of our first source, we must be open to the transcendent. But why bother? What’s in it for us? And even if we are convinced that this is a worthy aim, how are we to go about it? How can we coax mystery out of the mundane?

The second part of this question may be the easier to try to answer. We know that transcendent experiences are possible and that we are more likely to have them if we open up our eyes and all our senses, discarding all the categories, expectations and requirements of our little understanding and simply open ourselves to the unexpected, whatever that may be. This, by the way, is also one way to understand prayer, as essentially an invitation to mystery, to the Holy. As a willingness to encounter, connect with and be moved and changed by that which is beyond our daily and limited way of seeing ourselves and the world. Those who pray in this way, without asking for intercession, for favors or assistance of any kind, those who simply wait in an attitude of willingness may experience the transcendent. So may those who practice meditation, or long distance running or who lose themselves in creative work. These are all ways to invite the Holy, to invite insight or revelation.

Intensely focused attention – whether it be while listening closely to a piece of music, observing nature, making love or attending to another person with real empathy – this kind of attention, regardless of its object, invites an altered state of consciousness, an experience of transcendence. We leave behind the categories we normally employ to make the world small enough to manage and let the experience fill our awareness, unmediated by the intellect.

These methods all involve a kind of self-forgetting. Getting out of our own way, transcending the normal self-consciousness that accompanies us through our waking hours, is a prerequisite to this kind of experience. We need to empty our consciousness

of this kind of preoccupation with self in order to make room for something bigger to enter it. Union with the transcendent, a pervading sense of oneness with the universe or with the Ultimate, is a typical component of these experiences.

This transcendence of the self as we normally experience the self can be frightening. In madness or under the influence of hallucinogens, its strangeness can be terrifying. But the sense of oneness or connection with this “something larger” that we may call the Holy or Nature or the Other is more typically described as deeply and even life-alteringly assuring, healing and comforting. For the theist, there is a sense of being safely held in divine hands. For the non-theist, it is a sense that Nature itself, or human love or artistic expression is sufficiently “divine” -- the expression of Absolute Spirit or Ultimate Reality.

In either case, the sense of cosmic relatedness brings about a feeling of confidence and peace. That conviction of relatedness, of being part of a larger and dependable order, departs, and leaves behind insight that, more likely than not, cannot be remembered or expressed. But it also leaves us changed, illuminated, enlightened. In Dillard’s words, “The whole show has been on fire from the word go. I come down to the water to cool my eyes. But everywhere I look I see fire; that which isn't flint is tinder, and the whole world sparks and flames.” This is the presence of power, of beauty, to which we surrender in utter calm and utter confidence of its rightness.

Thus is the spirit refreshed by an encounter with Mystery and wonder. Again, listen to Annie Dillard: “We don't know what's going on here... Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery... We must somehow take a wider view, look at the whole landscape, really see it, and describe what's going on here. Then we can at least wail the right question into the swaddling band of darkness, or, if it comes to that, choir the proper praise.”

Questions and praise, mystery and wonder... This is the intensely personal religious experience that is open to us all. We don't need to believe in the supernatural or a Supreme Being. We don't need to dance like a whirling dervish or handle snakes. All we need to do is be there, open our eyes, our ears, open our fearful and beaten spirits to the healing knowledge that we are not all there is, that we are not alone. That we are indeed – irrefutably and with or without our permission -- part of this mysterious and life-giving universe. That we belong, through no effort of our own and no matter what our faults or wrongs, to this Mystery, to this greatness, to this inexpressible and wondrous totality of Being.

Let us wail the right question into the swaddling band of darkness, and, when it comes to that, choir the proper praise.

Amen.