

[Part 1 - Stephan Lange]

**Mysticism of the Ordinary Kind**

Was there anyone here today whose mind was not at least for a moment out in the solar system? Those wonderful images come to us from Jim Eastman who presented that originally in March as part of a service on the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism. His topic then was the seventh principle, the “*Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*” And he certainly covered it well. But I think it also is a “*Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.*” If that sounds familiar, that’s because it’s one of the living traditions of Unitarian Universalism. It’s often given the name of Mysticism and it will be the focus of today’s sermon, which will be shared between Lucy Bunch and I.

The first part will have me sharing some personal thoughts and experiences with you and then Lucy will give a more historical perspective on Mysticism in Unitarian Universalism.

Before finding Unitarian Universalism I was at best unreligious. Therefore when I discovered that I liked going to UU services I assumed that was because it embraced Humanism as one of its foundations. I was, after all a dedicated rationalist; believed passionately in the Enlightenment project – that time when what we today call science came into independent existence and was no longer just a kind of speculative philosophical

inquiry called Natural Philosophy, but had strict standards of fact and proof. That was also the time when Philosophy turned materialistic and made a split with from Religion. I love the hard sciences, especially mathematics with fervor. Interestingly enough until this split even Mathematics, the most rational of all sciences by some standards, had it's mystical elements. Ancient Greek mathematicians were so impressed by Geometry that they found mystical revelation in it and formed mystical cults. A famous example, the Pythagoreans, of Pythagorean Theorem fame essentially believed that God was a mathematician and that only if you understood the number and measure of the world could you understand God. Interestingly enough modern science is coming back around to that, for example, when Stephen Hawking says that the goal of science is to understand the "Mind of God" as he so famously ended his best selling book " A Brief History of Time" with.

Surely it was this UU humanist tradition that spoke to me most – me this person who had found traditional religions to be too superstitious and illogical to be worth my time and effort. The Humanist tradition certainly did speak to me but I began to have doubts that this was really what brought me back again on so many Sundays. It wasn't as if we were actually discussing that much that I considered humanism. I remember that odd mention of Deism but there was little that I heard about Descartes Moral Philosophy its impact upon the modern idea of self and responsibility. In all honesty, I think if I had heard such sermons, then I might not have enjoyed coming back so often.

Don't get me wrong, I like those topics, but I'd just as soon read a book or borrow a lecture series on those topics. As interesting as that all is, a Sunday service is not really

*that* kind of communal learning experience – we have universities and colleges in the area.

Perhaps that's it, this communal experience and the pleasure of each other's company. I can certainly say that I find the company of my fellow UUs pleasant but there is more than that going on here. There's a certain sharing of moral values, a certain common liberality, inclusiveness, and, and ... and ... and... then I stumble as I can only think of the word – something religious. This unreligious guy who prides himself on being rational can't come up with any other word than “religious”? I doubt that I can define religious adequately but it's not philosophy, or science, or politics, but something else – for me it's a communal acknowledgement, celebration and sharing of the web of life and our experiencing of it.

I tried to find out where I might fit in with this and found myself looking at the list of sources and the words “Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder” really resonated. I've had moments of awe and wonder at certain transcending mystery. But there were ordinary, rational experiences. Not “mystical” in the sense that I had always understood Mysticism to be. There are definitions of Mysticism that say that Mysticism is “*The Direct Experience of the Divine*” – which to me forces the conclusion that an atheist can't be a mystic. Well, then I personally have a problem here. Other definitions say things like “*Mysticism is that which can not be spoken.*” If that were true then why do they try so hard to talk about it and write books about it? I couldn't make much sense of descriptions involving visions and voices and other supernatural events. I don't know if these are real or not but I've never experienced any such thing – at least none that weren't explained by a fever or other delirium.

But I have had “*Direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder*” but as ordinary events. They don’t happen every day so they are uncommon but they are ordinary – and from what I hear from others these too have them. Let me give you an example of one personal experience that some of you might relate to.

The place was a maternity ward about thirteen years ago where I was suddenly presented with this bundle of life. She was in my arms before her mother even had a chance to hold her. Many things were happening at once and I was told to hold this little being, that would be called Sophie, while her mother was being tended to. I had a few minutes alone with her, before the nurse and the mother would put other demands upon her and me. In those few seconds I realized that the world, no the universe had changed. This wasn’t a material event. This was something beyond that, something that we often call spiritual but which I just called mental, or intellectual. It’s wasn’t just that a new being was in the world, in the universe - these were all true –and this is an everyday occurrence, but there was more to it than that. This new being, would know and interact with beings that I didn’t know; beings that didn’t even exist yet. This baby, this bundle, this being that I held for fleeting seconds alone in my hands, was a part of a nexus of a whole web of beings that didn’t exist yet, or those I might not even ever get to know. Suddenly the whole complex web of life came crashing in upon me. An actualization of the interdependent web of life, the seventh UU principle, before I’d ever heard of UUism. Had I however not had a mind that tried to make sense of this; of this material bundle with its immaterial web of relationships to be, this complex of emotions and ideas along with it’s material being, then I would not have had the same awe and wonder. It wasn’t

just this material thing – this beautiful baby girl - , it was this something nameless, this potentiality that I couldn't describe or name, that made this moment magical.

Let's go back to Jim Eastman's words with his evocative descriptions of webs between atoms and solar systems. We can't be awed and admire the wonder of it all without first knowing about planets and atoms. I can admire a sunset and be even more overwhelmed if I realize that not all planets have sunsets, for example the moon has no sunsets. Who hasn't looked up at the stars some clear night and wonder at how far away they are and be amazed at the tinyness of the earth and it's inhabitants? But you can't be overwhelmed with its size unless you do know that they are truly vast distances away. In ancient times the stars were all considered to be close by the earth, all the same distance away fixed to a sphere. That might bring it's own awe but I find knowing about the immensity of the universe awe inspiring. But it's a rational, ordinary event. Not a divine event. But it's more than that, because the more you know, the more rational, truth and meaning seeking you are, the more material you will have with which to *directly experience the transcending mystery and wonder , affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life*. Learn to wonder, the more you learn, the more you'll enjoy the wondering. But don't forget to share your wonder with us, because that's why we're here.

This idea of a rational mysticism that I'd found to appeal to me and help me fit into UU something that has had currents in our tradition before, and at this point I'd like to ask Lucy Bunch to give you a more historical perspective on the topic.

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[Part 2 - Lucy Bunch]

Turns out the Stephan and I have a lot in common. I too was unreligious until my thirties. I was raised Baptist, but it was a terrible fit for me as a child and I stopped going to church in my teens. The church did not like my questions. Take it or leave it. I left it. During my twenties I thought that religion was irrelevant to my life. But when I moved to Sacramento in my early thirties, I wanted to find a community of people who shared my values – even though I wasn't quite sure what those values were. I had attended a UU church twice as a child with a neighborhood friend and remembered it as a positive experience. So I sought out the Sacramento church (at that time there was only one). I considered myself a rational, intellect driven person. Why did I come to church? What was I looking for?

I have learned a lot about Unitarian universalism since that first visit, have grown in my personal theology. The thing that keeps me here, and indeed has sent me to seminary, is my appreciation for how UUism allows me to use both my head and my heart. His faith grows my understanding in more than just intellectual terms – as Stephan says I didn't come here for a lecture, I could have gotten that in lots of other places. But I didn't come here for spirituality if it meant that I had to check my reason at the door. Many of us

are here to day because we couldn't accept things in other religions that didn't make sense to us. But we are here, because we believe that we gain something from being here that we won't find in a lecture.

American Unitarianism was founded on the idea of using reason to understand religion. In the early nineteenth century when the Unitarian denomination was emerging out of Congregationalists - Religion was accepted, not challenged, as revelation, miracles, the word of God. That is where Unitarians come in – as U started to break away from the Calvinist doctrine – what was distinct was the call to use reason to understand for yourself, don't rely on the biblical revelation itself, or a church authority telling you what to believe.

That was Channing's message when he gave his famous sermon on Unitarian Christianity – the word of God is only true if you could reason it to be true. Rev Martha gave a sermon on Channing last year. As she said- “Channing argued that scripture required interpretation through the application of reason. Each responsible person must study the text for himself and reach his own conclusions rather than blindly follow the teaching of the majority.” This was a critical turning point for Unitarians and defined us as distinct from other Christian denominations – many of

which said that we were not longer Christian because we did not accept the word of god based on revelation and the authority of the bible.

This was a great start for our denomination. Don't just accept what you are told, but use your reason to determine what is true. Many of us are here to day because we couldn't accept things in other religions that didn't make sense to us.

Before we go any farther lets think about some of the terms that we are using and make sure we are all on the same page. Lets start with the word Rational – when we say someone or something is rational we mean they make sense – we can understand them.

What do we mean by reason – inference and deduction from our perceptions and extend our knowledge. It how we figure things out, observing, collection information, including our own experience.

I know these concepts seem obvious to you, but it is important to remember that in an earlier period of our history, before the Enlightenment, people just accepted the way things were, they didn't feel like they had any authority to decide for themselves. People who used reason to derive conclusions were burned at the stake – Galileo – remember him?

So Unitarians brought reason into Christian Religion, a dramatic, heretical idea.

But does reason make a religion? There is a reason why Unitarians are called Gods frozen people. All head and a bit of heart? Where are the emotions, the spiritual experience that can't be accessed through reason. Where is the intuition. Shouldn't these be a part of religion?

Enter Ralph Waldo Emerson. He came on the scene about 20 years after Channing's famous sermon in 1819. He challenged the limits of rationalism in religion. he challenged the nature of God and human's relationship to God.

Emerson brought intuition to religion, to the sense of knowing God. But he didn't see God as an other, or as Martha said earlier in a sermon on Emerson – “as an anthropomorphic being with personality and a role in history.”

Influenced by Eastern thought, his concept of God was one of oneness, that God , humans, and Nature were all one great whole. As Stephan and I read in our opening words “ Within us is to the soul of the whole, the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related, the Eternal one.”

When Stephan and I first discussed this service and his interest in rationalism and mysticism – I knew we were talking and Emerson and Transcendentalism. And I knew that Stephan's and my experience of wanting both, being both, was part of the uniqueness of UU and a gift of Emerson.

As I see it the gifts Emerson gave us were two fold – divinity was within us and within all Nature – his term for the natural world. And we must be in tune with Nature, he said “let us learn the revelation of all nature and thought that the Highest dwells within us, that the sources of nature are in our own minds.” But his second gift is that this God, this divinity that is a part of us, is not found strictly through reason, not strictly through feelings, but by all these things as channeled through our intuition. As Martha described “Emerson defined Transcendentalism as the direct experience of the Holy; faith in a God knowable through intuition, whose existence was to be sensed rather than proven only by physical or historical evidence, logic or reason.”

I don't want to term God to get in the way here. I especially don't want any or you thinking that you are shut out of these ideas because you don't believe in God, or aren't comfortable with the term. Emerson spoke of God

because that was his time and context, but his words were extremely radical. The God that he defined as within us, within Nature was blasphemy in his time. By established religions of the time— including Unitarians – Transcendentalists were considered heretical and flaky – and some of them were flakes. Brilliant flakes.

Stephan felt a bit alienated by the idea of mysticism because it was defined as direct experience of the divine. I don't want semantics to get in the way of valuing the “direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder” of our first source. Lets use Emerson's terms:

There is a deep power in which we exist and whose beauty is accessible to us.

Every moment when the individual feels invaded by it is memorable.

It comes to the lowly and simple; it comes to whosoever will put off what is foreign and proud;

it comes as insight; it comes a serenity and grandeur.

The souls health consists in the fullness of its reception.”

Maybe we come together on Sunday for our soul's health. Stephan recognizes that something goes on in church when we come together –

that there is more than just the pleasure of each others' company that creates our religious community. We don't have a creed, we don't pray communally. But we know that there is something that binds us, something that is greater than each of us and our individual experiences. For Emerson that something is the over soul:

*The only prophet of that which must be, is that great nature in which we rest, as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere; that Unity, that **Over-soul**, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other; that common heart.*

Hey Jim – Emerson almost got us to the solar system! We are a part of all “as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere.”

We are a part of all. We are all a part of the web. For Emerson we all share the same soul.

*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. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the*

*animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are shining parts, is the soul.*

Stephan you are a terrific Unitarian universalist. Like Channing, you believe in reason and reject religions that ask you to leave your questions at the door. Like Emerson you know that there is something more than just reason, and that our soul needs this something more. You embody what I love most about this faith, the journey of understanding, the community of seekers who walk the path together. I love how Jim speaks on the Interdependent web, and Stephan is inspired by his talk to think about rationalism mysticism and I am drawn to bring out the connections to transcendentalism. We all grow from these connections.

I also think that Stephan's quest represents our current state of UU faith. Martha talked about this in her conclusion in the Emerson sermon talking about the shift from rationalism to more integrated way of approaching spirituality . she said "ours will never again be a faith dependent merely on rationality. There is a vibrant strain of our faith that relies on intuition, on the felt experience, on mysticism, and this strain is not going anywhere soon.

It co-exists, more or less peacefully, with our older tradition of empiricism and faith in reason and science.

I think that these two strains exist simultaneously in many individuals. I know they coexist in me and Stephan, and probably in many of you. I want it all, I want to engage my mind and my spirit. I want to honor my intuition. I want to be grounded in the authority of my own experience, but open to the mystery and the wonder, willing to be moved by things I don't understand, and not believe that figuring things out with my intellect will give me all the answers. This is a common strain for many UU's.

I think this represents a maturing of our denomination. We have evolved as a faith that can never draw on just one aspect of our being – we are not dependent on rationality, nor do we engage in an ungrounded mysticism. The addition of our seventh principle added immeasurable to the spirituality of our denomination. Many of us were nurtured by the spirituality of the “interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” Of which we are a part. I am willing to engage with the interdependent web and know that my soul is part of the greater soul of all life. We come here because we know that together our connection, our web, our soul, has more meaning

and depth than any one of us alone. Perhaps UU have come round to Emerson's way of thinking after all he said:

Within us is the soul of the whole, the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related. When it breaks through our intellect it is genius; when it breathes through our will it is virtue; when it flows through our affections it is love.

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[Reading]

**Interdependent Web of Life – Jim Eastman**

( Excerpt from UUCS Service of March 29, 2009 )

- A mother and child, bound by the experience of birth, continue with nurturing, this day, and decades into the future.
- A house cat plays a game of “Catch Me If You Can” with his human keeper, a joyful, active, physical exchange for both.
- A tree planted to stabilize a levee bank provides cool shade and clean air to admirers of the river's panorama.
- A satellite jettisoned to Saturn beams back information, suggesting where our own planet has been, or where it's going.

Glimpses of the big picture, these are; a picture that constantly changes, like a mixing bowl that's as big as a house, as big as the planet, as big as the universe. As we blend, as the 14 billion year old big bang unravels, we and our molecules bump and grind into each other, creating new combinations and new relationships that redirect our futures.

The unfathomable quantity of people, animals, plants, and all the other stuff of our planet, let alone of the universe, make full comprehension of it all impossible for these little human minds of ours.