

Mystery & Wonder
Greenville UU Fellowship
September 8, 2019
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Story for All Ages: *Waterbugs & Dragonflies*, by Doris Stickney

Readings: *I Stood Upon A Mountain*, by Aileen Fisher (adapted for 5 voices)
from *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, by Ursula Goodenough

Sermon: The living tradition we share draws from many sources. Today we will be exploring the first of the six sources of Unitarian Universalism: *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 which create and uphold life.*

It's a big sentence, so let me begin by breaking it down a bit.

"Direct experience" means that no guru, priest, scholar, or teacher is here to tell us what things mean. This follows from the Protestant shift away from priests being the necessary intermediary between humans and God, and takes it a step further, since Unitarian Universalists today inhabit a wide swath of belief or non-belief about supernatural deities. Experience, especially religious experience, is personal, and it is ours to understand and interpret.

"Transcending mystery and wonder" is a phrase that contains vast and ineffable possibilities. It is as if I cannot even stretch my arms far enough to reach around it and contain its meaning. Mystery – the unknown, impossible to understand. Wonder – the act of observing and being awed and amazed, being curious and openhearted. And transcending, transcendence, transcendent – beyond the capacity of human reason.

"Affirmed in all cultures" tells us that mystery, wonder and transcendence do not belong to and are not defined by any one culture, religion, or worldview.

When we are "moved to a renewal of the spirit," we are inspired, recharged, our cup filled, our hope renewed – we find ourselves with spiritual and other resources that give us energy and help us to continue the work of being human.

"Openness to the forces which create and uphold life" is a way of orienting ourselves to be curious, to wonder and ask questions, to bring our awareness to that which is outside of us.

The practice of cultivating awe and wonder, being attuned to the sacred, is what makes survival possible. It is the experience of transcendence that gives us the tools to solve the most unsolvable of problems. Instead of focusing on fear, we are invited to reach into the abundance

around us – the beauty of our relationships, the stunning power of the natural world, the ways that we save each other each and every day.

In a Unitarian Universalist community, what is considered sacred varies from person to person. Some of us equate words like sacred, holy, and transcendent with a belief in the supernatural which they eschew. Some of us interpret the same words more broadly. Some of us do believe in the supernatural. By the way, when I say supernatural, I'm referring to something that is beyond the visible or observable universe, the laws of nature, or scientific understanding. As a result, the the rational and the supernatural get set up as two opposing ideas – or at best, two ends of a continuum. But it's not helpful. Binary constructs seem simpler, of course, and perhaps they are, on the face of it.

In his blog, "Yet Another Unitarian Universalist," Dan Harper says "Throughout our history, and into the present day, the rationalists dominate our theological conversations — and I include both the theistic rationalists and the atheist rationalists. Our faith tradition clings to its belief in a rationalism inherited from the Enlightenment; we believe in carefully reasoned arguments; we have a tendency to focus on the brain and mind and ignore the heart and the rest of the body; we are most likely to use logical thought, and we are inclined to ignore other ways of knowing and interpreting the world." (<https://www.danielharper.org/yauu/2014/04/mystics-and-transcendentalists/>)

Let me be clear, there's not a darn thing wrong with carefully reasoned arguments and logical thought. They serve us well, and are an essential part of our religious history. At the same time, rationalism and Enlightenment thought are not the only part of our religious history. There is a mystical tradition in that history as well – and there is religious pluralism in our present and future. The rational and the intuitive are not in opposition to one another, they are simply different approaches. They may have a tension between them, and they may seem mutually exclusive, but they can both be true or have merit. So, too, are religion and science not in opposition to one another. Reason and intuition are not two ends of a binary, they are simply two of many tools we can use to exegete or interpret our lives.

John Keats is well known for coining the phrase "negative capability" which is when a person "is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." He called it the distinction of a Man of Achievement (capital M, capital A), or the Thinking Man (capital T, capital M) – which I interpret more inclusively as any person who seeks to be reflective – any person who seeks to understand the world around them more deeply.

This distinction – the ability to rest in the midst of uncertainty, mystery and doubt without trying to explain things – is quite challenging. I agree with Keats, though. It has been said that the human capacity to reason is the thing that sets us apart from other mammals – but I tend to agree more with those who suggest that our capacity for empathy sets us apart. And an ability to empathize, perhaps, relies on one's ability to sit in that space of unknowing, of inaction. Of deep listening. And deep feeling.

This first source invites us into the practice of negative capability, invites us to sit with mystery, to wonder, and to listen with our hearts, to listen *through* the tension. It is possible that not all questions have answers. The waterbugs wanted so much to know what happened at the top of the stalk – but, of course, they couldn't know until it happened to them. It's not easy to live with no answer to such a big question. But we do live with no answer to big questions. Every day.

The Transcendentalists are the mystical root of the Unitarian Universalist tree. There are mystics in most religious traditions: Christian mystics like Hildegard of Bingen, Teresa of Avila, and Thomas Merton; the Kabbalah in Judaism; or Sufi Muslims, among many others. All of them describe visions and religious ecstasies, and seek a close relationship with their understanding of God.

The Transcendentalists believed that the divine permeated all of nature and humanity. Seeking more intense religious experiences, they believed in personal freedom and the inherent goodness of both humanity and nature. They were involved in most of the attempts to create utopian communities in the 19th century and held progressive views on things like feminism, social reforms, and stewardship of natural resources.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was perhaps the most well-known of the transcendentalists, and the following is one of his most famous quotes, "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 eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God." This text is found in the essay, "Nature," which describes how immersing oneself in nature is the closest thing to experiencing oneness with the divine.

Some people interpret this as suggesting that Nature is the same as God. I don't read it that way, I find it to be a comparison of outcomes. Nature is as mysterious as the divine, and as uncontainable. Both can stop us short with transcendent beauty. Both can inspire us to take action. Both can renew our spirits.

Annie Dillard is often called a modern mystic. Whenever I read her work, I think she would have fit right in with Emerson and Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller and the other transcendentalists. Here is a passage from her book, *An American Childhood*, "What does it feel like to be alive? Living, you stand under a waterfall. You leave the sleeping shore deliberately; you shed your dusty clothes, pick your barefoot way over the high, slippery rocks, hold your breath, choose your footing, and step into the waterfall. The hard water pelts your skull, bangs in bits on your shoulders and arms.

The strong water dashes down beside you and you feel it along your calves and thighs rising roughly backup, up to the roiling surface, full of bubbles that slide up your skin or break on you at full speed. Can you breathe here? Here where the force is the greatest and only the strength of your neck holds the river out of your face.

Yes, you can breathe even here. You could learn to live like this. And you can, if you concentrate, even look out at the peaceful far bank where you try to raise your arms. What a racket in your ears, what a scattershot pummeling!

It is time pounding at you, time. Knowing you are alive is watching on every side your generation's short time falling away as fast as rivers drop through air, and feeling it hit."

Again, we see how awareness of something greater than and outside the self calls the mystic to wonder, to interpret, to explore. We all have the ability to interpret and explore our own experience, to allow ourselves to wonder and be curious. Ursula Goodenough suggests that seeking a point isn't the point – that mystery is worth experience. She is a cell biologist and a religious naturalist – so, perhaps the opposite of a mystic, if we were accepting the binary premise of opposites. She compares cosmic and quantum mystery to the divine. This, too, suggests that the outcome is the point, that it doesn't matter what inspires us, whether it is divine or natural or something else entirely. It matters most that we *are* inspired.

I am inspired by watching astronauts explore space and scientists make new discoveries. I am inspired by theologians and mystics who seek to describe and inhabit the sacred. Even so, I am convinced that we simply aren't meant to know everything. In science or nature or humanity or math or God or community or quantum mechanics, there is always more to discover. Mystery generates wonder and wonder generates awe and awe generates inspiration and inspiration generates hope. And hope is what sustains us in the most difficult of times.

May it be so.