

April 11, 2010
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Mysticism.3

The mysteries of Mysticism

In this age of materialism and fundamentalism, we long for answers and directions in this chaotic world. The mystics warn that to neglect what is precious about our inner life will affect how we integrate the fragmented world around us, so we may engage the world in ways that keep opening our hearts.

"earth laughs in flowers." Ralph Waldo Emerson,

Call to Worship

The mystics teach us to pause in order to become aware. Therefore I call you to Worship those things that have worth for you. Take time. Be mindful of the surroundings we call sacred in this, our Sanctuary. Notice the beauty, the symbols, the people that are here together, the outside, and the inside. For this is why we have come to this place -- To be thankful and give praise for our life.

Let us be silent together as our hearts and minds are awakened by all we are aware of.

1 minute of silence.

Ring gong....

Einstein said, "The most beautiful and the most profound emotion we can experience is the sensation of the mystical; it is the sower of all true science. Those of us who can no longer stand rapt in awe and wonder are as good as dead.

To know what is impenetrable to us actually exists and manifests itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty that our dull faculties can comprehend, the knowledge, this feeling, is at the heart of all true religiousness."

Sermon: The mysteries of mysticism. When we experience something totally unexpected and out of our power and control, we are connecting with our mystical self. We are seeking a way to gain knowledge of mysterious energy by accessing what is inside. "Wow, I never noticed that before!!" To be a mystic, it is not necessary to be one particular religion. Mystical experience is found in all religions and all time. Think of the movie, "The Gods Must Be Crazy." The people on the ground had a new experience that surprised and amazed them. They attributed this unexpected "coke bottle from the sky" experience as part of the mystery of God. Of course, we are

too smart and scientific to think this was God's doing. We know this was not the work of god, but of accident and gravity.

The thought that we can know God from experience, or the Unknowable One, through our experience, began with Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and Bonaventure. (1221-1274)¹ These Italians claimed that perceptions of the divine came not from hierarchical church authorities and dogma, but from personal experience. All people have mystical experiences where their consciousness is changed. We become aware of something that was unknown or unnoticed before. Mysticism therefore is a universal experience.

I was surprised the other day when my husband repeated several times throughout the day. "It is amazing how many colors nature can produce!!" He is an amateur photographer and loves to take pictures. His cameras and photo printer and photo papers are his most prized possessions. He studies the options presented by his newest camera; prides himself on getting the sun just right on the subject. It is a serious hobby. Last Monday he took a field trip out to the tulip fields in La Conner. As he was leaving, I suggested he might just bring home some tulips. He brought two bunches and I put them in arrangements around the house. I knew he had been studying fields of tulips and individual close-ups of tulips with his camera. So I really noticed when he put aside that heady, "I can get a great picture" side of himself, and just noticed, as the tulips gradually opened inside the house. He noticed the subtle markings of the petals and variety in color. Later, he noticed the sheen on the petals, and described it as satiny when the light shone through the window. He didn't want to touch the petals, as if to disturb the marvel of creation. He simply stopped, noticed, and shared his joy at what the tulip held in its creation.

If I asked my husband, "are you a mystic?" my guess is that he would say "No." My take on it is that this was a mystical experience he was telling me about. He shared what he observed, something beautiful and marvelous that was totally out of his power and control. He forsake the materialism of the lens and the shutter speed to spend time in wonder. Is this not the same experience the Emperor in our story had? In the midst of all the finery of the castle and gardens that had been created just for him and his regal staff, the experience that brought him to tears was the singing of the Nightingale. He was amazed that such an ordinary looking bird could produce such an extraordinary song.² Is that not our experience? The ordinary has the ability to give us joy when we stop and notice. In the story, every note of the bird's song went straight to the Emperor's heart. His feelings were awakened. The mystics teach us to stop, attend to our

¹ Soelle, Dorothee. The Silent Cry. Mysticism and Resistance: Fortress Press, 2001, a translation.

² The Nightingale, Hans Christian Andersen

feelings. Even if we have no words to describe what we have felt, we can love what has been revealed to us. The beauty of the bird's song, and the colorful variety in the tulip petal are all part of the beauty of creation.

The concept of this experience was described by the Italians, Aquinas and Bonaventure. About the same time, there was a German theologian, philosopher and mystic by the name of Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) who had drawn similar conclusions about the nature of religious experience. He believed we need to replace an orthodox spirituality, which depends on obedience to authority, with a mystical spirituality based only on creation itself. In patriarchal perception, a miracle is described as an incident which defies the laws of nature, caused by something external to nature. On the other hand, Mystical amazement, sees the original miracle as **being** itself, in creation –in a rose blooming. This way of seeing nature as creation was the seed that led to the religious philosophy called panentheism.³ I must share with you one of my favorites of Meister Eckhart's writings:

"Apprehend God in all things, for God is in all things.
Every single creature is full of God and is a book about God.

Every creature is a word of God.

If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature – even a caterpillar – I would never have to prepare a sermon. So full of God is every creature."⁴

I agree with Eckhart, caterpillars are amazing creatures. Do you remember the first time you let one of those fuzzy creatures crawl around on your hand? The way they move joint by joint, leg by leg, all hidden by that colorful fuzz?

Others have reminded us of miracles in nature. The Zen practitioner, Thich Nhat Hahn puts it this way:

"People usually consider walking on water or in thin air as a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth. Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don't even recognize: a blue sky, white clouds, green leaves, the black, curious eyes of a child –our own two eyes. All is a miracle."⁵

And how do we access these miracles? We need to stop with enough time to be aware of our experiences. Then we can be amazed.

Ah, The mysteries of Mysticism

There is another side to mysticism. In this age of materialism and fundamentalism, we long for answers about our chaotic world. ⁶(From *Freethinking Mystics with Hands*, exploring the heart of Unitarian Universalism, by Tom Owen-Towle 1998)

³ Soelle, Dorothee. *The Silent Cry*. Mysticism and Resistance: Fortress Press, 2001, a translation

⁴ Northwest Earth Institute, course book on "Exploring Deep Ecology", 2001

⁵ Hahn, Thich Nhat, *the Miracle of Mindfulness*. Beacon Press, 1976

⁶ Owen-Towle, Tom, *Freethinking Mystics with Hands*, exploring the heart of Unitarian Universalism, UU publication, 1998

I wondered if there were any UUs who could provide answers for us? It is often difficult for us, as sophisticated, knowledgeable folks, to confess that we dwell in a universe utterly beyond our creation, our control, and even our comprehension. There is a preeminent Unitarian Universalist mystic by the name of Jacob Trapp, who wrote a book *Return to the Springs*. He puts it this way: "I like to think of mysticism as the art of meeting reality..." we are mystics, spiritually attuned to the marvels of the universe and yet awake to the omens of the divine. Unitarianism represents the unity of God. Creation is a *uni*-verse, not a multi-verse. We did not create the ecosystem; our obligation is to live according to its inherent guidelines, honoring its unity as biological fact and source of religious aspiration.

What about the humanists? Within Unitarian Universalism, there is a group who composed the Humanist Manifesto. These humanists still held boundless appreciation of divine mystery. In effect, most signers were naturalistic mystics positing that: "We humans are co-partners with a great nature which has produced us." As humans, where do we fit our minds and hearts into Trapp's commitment to "religious aspiration."? To what do we aspire, as people of faith?

Ralph Waldo Emerson answers with this desire: "Let me keep the doors of my mind open for the possible knock of some vagrant truth. Let me swing wide the shuttered windows of my heart that perchance some winged messenger of love light upon my sill." (from Clinton Lee Scott, *Promise of Spring*.)

Emerson's words contain a poetic beauty that to me is also part of creation. I feel gratitude for those who do have the words to describe their experience with mystery.

Are we all mystics? Are none of us mystics? Is the person sitting next to you a mystic? Personally, I prefer to shy away from labeling myself as humanist, or mystic, or theist. Half the time, I don't really know what these words mean. The other half of the time, I am revising my thoughts about my own experience, and about the language needed to say what my experience has been. I feel helpless many times to put into words what I find joy in, what holds mystery for me. I seek oneness with the rest of life through listening, seeing, smelling, and feeling. My hope is to know that I am not alone but that I live in the midst of other lives, helping me to make my way in this world.

Labels may be helpful for some. Do you have a label for what part of the faith world you fit into? I have heard different folks here label themselves: atheist, agnostic, humanist, mystic, and none of the above! That might feel right for you, and not for me. And we can still walk together, seeking truth with our own labels, and respecting other's journey within our beloved community. We are not solitary figures, we are communitarians. Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal, partnered path, where independent wills dwell in the service of creating and sustaining an

interdependent web of existence, not only with other humans but with the sacred circle of animals, plants and deities that inhabit our universe. **This is our religious aspiration.** It becomes the fate of freethinkers to stake our lives on incomplete but satisfactory data. We never enjoy total truth, only a sufficient supply of it, so we must live by successive approximations of the good, the loving and the beautiful.⁷

You can stick with one label, or many labels, as Thoreau did. Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) says of himself, "The fact is, I am a mystic, a transcendentalist and a natural philosopher to boot." Withdrawing from the world of professional work and false needs, he found his own needs met in a non-dominating, mystical relation to the woods and animals, to light and water. In the face of a lake's calm, he speaks of the transforming power that comes from living in nature and from leaving an existence that is purpose-ridden and machine-like. He speaks of an unconscious obedience to the supremely just laws wherein human beings become like a calm lake of pure crystal and what is deeply within us reveals itself readily. But Thoreau's pantheistic romanticism is no mere flight from making a living; it is the finding of self.⁸ Isn't this our most sacred religious aspiration? The finding of self.

Can the mysteries contained in mysticism give us answers to what we face in this chaotic world? What if we don't find quiet woods? Or a calm lake? We're just sitting in our own chaotic space at home, wondering how to make sense of our world and find our best self? What if we don't find joy in walking on the earth? -- because we aren't walking at all; we are in our car and some big truck is cutting us off on the roadway as we are trying to get to work. And is that big truck gonna bash into the car, just because it can? There is a lot of chaos in the world. So what does the mystic say to that?

Most mystics have had to suffer. Does suffering lead one to find a new way? I wondered what direction some have taken, out of the chaos and frustration of ordinary life?

Thomas Merton (1915-1968) was a mystic and a man who fought in the resistance against the Vietnam War. He said that "if you want to know me, don't ask where I live, what I like to eat, how I part my hair; rather ask me what I live for, in every detail, and ask me what in my view prevents me from living fully for the thing I really want to live for." Resistance to what is not right in our culture and community can be part of the mystic's journey to wholeness. Contemplation, paying attention to your true self may reveal to you the answer, "what do I live for?" and next "what prevents me from living fully?" These mysteries confront us continually. Thomas Merton asked important questions. His answer involved resistance to the social reality that confronted him in the twentieth century. He joined others in

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Soelle, Dorothee. The Silent Cry. *Mysticism and Resistance*: Fortress Press, 2001, a translation

resisting a war he could not live beside. His answer was both a mystical internal being and an external political being. Many others through the ages have lived their mysticism in repudiation of the values that ruled their worlds.

War and its resistance sometimes can bring new solutions to the fragmentation that war creates in our lives. Back in the 12th century, a remarkable thing happened as a consequence of war. Men were killed; women had their lives turned upside down. Consequently, they joined together to create a new life. It was focused on women's lives, called the Beguine movement. It is one of the rarest examples of a mystically inspired new form of life created by women for women --one million strong. It flourished for nearly two centuries. In an ocean of patriarchal, hierarchically directed injustice, the Beguines created islands of freedom for women!! The revolution that occurred was spiritual. The movement spread rapidly in Holland, the Rhine region, France, and Switzerland. (1100-1250?) These communities preached, taught, gave counsel and pastoral care to other women. There were no community rules and no perpetual or long-term vows as the monasteries required. Many of the greatest women mystics lived in these communities. They were poor, persecuted, and free.⁹ They resisted the choices presented to them. They made the choice to perpetuate creation through their loving actions. They had faith and trust in the unending Universe. It is this kind of love that mystics live on!!

The community they created gave them a freedom they had not had before. The mystics warn that to neglect what is precious about our inner life will affect how we integrate the fragmented world around us. We may, then, engage the world in ways that keep opening our hearts. The Beguines were able to pay attention to their inner life at the same time they were attending to their outer life.

Mysteries of Mysticism It's about awareness, and faith, and gratitude. We are part of the ongoing creation. In this sense, we are all guardians of joy and responsible for making life's beauty visible and audible. Joy is the ground on which mysticism and aesthetics make connection.

Sometimes, when our own words are inadequate to lift us, we can turn to music, song writers and poets: Wordsworth gives us this poem: "Daffodils"

⁹ Ibid.