

Transcending Mystery and Wonder
Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska
UU Church of Minnetonka
October 5, 2008

SIX SOURCES RESPONSIVE READING

The living tradition which we share draws from many sources:

- 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;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;
- Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

First Movement: *In the Beginning*
(Transcending Mystery and Wonder)

From the *Sources Cantata*

Lyrics: Rev. Kendyl Gibbons; Music: Rev. Jason Shelton

In the beginning: silence. In the beginning: wonder.
In the beginning: beauty. In the beginning: death, death, death, death!

Kingdom of marvels, terror and splendor;
Province of dust and breath;
Woven in time of promise and hunger,
Heaven on holy earth.

Curious creature, knowing and choosing,
Risen of mortal clay,
Heartbroken pilgrim, finding and losing
Light of the common day.

REFRAIN

Ah, source of all, again renew
Life more abundant, life more true
Summon these moments, sudden and few
Joyful and tender; spirit of wonder

Dew on the lily, gem on the lotus
Star in the summer sky
Thundering mountain, altar of fire
Tear in the loving eye

Holy the myst'ry, holy the journey,
Holy the hour of pray'r
Blessed and merciful, blessed and generous
Sacred as simple air.

REFRAIN

On the horizon: justice.
On the horizon: kinship.
On the horizon: wisdom.
On the horizon: peace.

Summoning duty, touch of compassion
Keeper of song and flame
Struggle and silence, praise and thanksgiving,
Truth beyond every name

In the beginning, on the horizon...Life!

Transcending Mystery and Wonder **Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska**

When I was ten years old, our family took a road trip out to Colorado. One place we visited was Mesa Verde National Park in the far southwest part of the state. Mesa Verde is where old ruins exist of the Anasazi, also known as “cliff dwellers” because they built their houses and villages under overhangs high up on the sides of cliffs and mesas. The Anasazi lived in these cliff dwellings for hundreds of years, and then suddenly, about 500 years ago, they disappeared. We don't know why they left, or where they went, and we don't know their language.

When our family first arrived, we got there in the middle of the day and the crowds were so huge and the lines so long that we did not get to see an Anasazi ruin, called “Cliff Palace” until near twilight. That turned out to be a good thing because the crowds had thinned out and the site felt more pristine and primal. It was the first time in my life that I had ever come into such close contact with something so old – certainly something so old made by humans.

I did not feel cold chills or the presence of ghosts, but as I walked around that ruin in the twilight, I just felt a sense of eerie wonder. Here I was, walking around a dead village, high on the side of a mesa, where children my age used to run around playing games while mothers smashed corn on stone slabs, and fathers carried meat on their backs up long ladders from below.

That night, as our family sat in front of our tent around a fire at a campsite a few miles away, I snuggled with my parents and gazed into the vast black sky. It occurred to me that our campsite would have been like a back yard to those Anasazi people, and they could easily have sat where I sat, hunted rabbits where our car was parked, or gazed up at the same stars I saw. It was one of the first times I remember feeling both incredibly small, yet intimately connected to everything around me: connected physically to the dry earth underneath my body, relationally to my parents and all my ancestors in time before me, and spiritually through the ether between my atoms to all the spaces between all the stars.

In our Unitarian Universalist religion, most people are familiar with the seven principles, but we tend not to be as well versed in the six sources of our faith. So this year I plan to offer a sermon series, addressing a different source about once each month. Today I address the first source: “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.” Though I did not have these words for it at the time, this first source articulates exactly the experience I had as a ten-year-old at Mesa Verde National Park.

When the Unitarians and Universalists merged in 1961 to become one association, they hammered out a statement of principles in such a contentious process that it almost tore apart our union before we even had a chance to merge. By the late 1970’s, however, the work and influence of Civil Rights and Women’s Rights called for a revision of sexist language, and by 1979 the work of revision began. After a four year process of continent-wide discussion and feedback, and after two years of review (as required by Unitarian Universalist Association bylaws), the new statement of Principles and Purposes, including the Six Sources, was passed at the 1985 General Assembly with only one dissenting vote!

Our Principles, Sources and Purposes include fairly heady writing. Part of that has to do, I suppose, with the fact that it needed to speak to the wide range of theologies and beliefs. We encompass theists and atheists, humanists and pagans, Christians, Jews and Buddhists. This offers quite a challenge to ministers as we attempt to create meaningful worship. It also offers a challenge to our members, who must respect, live in, communicate between, and build up a larger community that houses all these beliefs under one roof.

Even the Reverend Kendyl Gibbons and the Reverend Jason Shelton, the two creators of the *Sources* Cantata (the first movement of which we saw earlier) are on nearly opposite ends of the theological spectrum. Jason describes himself as more of a mystic theist, while Kendyl Gibbons is quite a solid humanist. Yet, together, they created an amazing seven-part cantata celebrating our Unitarian Universalist diversity and plurality, honoring each tradition from which we draw.

We Unitarian Universalists can be a difficult lot. We are so theologically diverse that it can be frustrating to understand why we even gather together in the first place. So what do we do? With this piece of disunity as a cornerstone of our faith, how then shall we live in faithful, beloved community?

Inherent in the structure of our religion is a tension between the authority of individual conscience and the needs and vision of the gathered community. We see this tension living between our first principle, which states that we affirm “the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” and our seventh principle, which states that we have “respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.”

One way to move through this struggle between which theology is more “correct” or more mature, is to have a reference point outside the cycle of struggle. With an outside reference

point, we allow ourselves to live in the tension between opposites. Our six sources, articulated as a foundational component of our diverse beliefs, offers us a reference point to which we may refer and remind one another about why we gather in the first place – not merely as an assembly of individuals, but as a beloved spiritual community.

Just yesterday, in the current group of people taking the UU 101 class, we had a wonderful discussion and exploration of what “direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder” might be. While disavowing the old white guy in the sky God with a long beard sitting on a throne, several people also expressed a desire for ritual, and the importance of being able to use and discuss the word “God.” Several class members shared that the moment they left their previous faith was the moment when they had a revelation about how God was not “out there,” or controlled by priests or fundamentalist ideologies. Rather, they became aware that God is “in” things: in the music of John Coltrane, in the art of painters and dancers, in the democratic way Unitarian Universalists conduct congregational meetings, and in the love we share in our everyday lives.

“Transcending mystery and wonder” can mean so many things, especially in such a theologically diverse religion as ours. We are held together not by a creed, but more by common values. For me, a large part of it has to do with the regular spiritual practice of looking beyond our own needs and our own wants.

I am not arguing for blind allegiance to a religious hierarchy. I am not arguing for the institutional church to squash individual expression or individual needs. But I see church as a place that offers challenge, as a place that offers the possibility of wholeness, as a place that offers transformation. And this work of being transformed as we transform the world only occurs when we are in community. When we join a church we merge with an entity, a community that is larger than we are, and the community often has systemic needs that may be quite different from our individual needs. I am reminded of a passage I use in each UU 101 class I lead. It is a passage from the 2001 report called “Belonging: the Meaning of Membership,” from the Unitarian Universalist Commission on Appraisal. The commission writes that, “One of the continuing challenges for liberalism is its inability to inspire and engender institutional commitments, transcendent of the concerns and interest of a given time or place...But you have to be trusting to be disillusioned, and surprising as it may seem, such disillusionment plays a crucial role in developing loyalties and commitments.”

An individual in a church community, or an atom in the universe, both involve one particularity in relationship with the larger whole. So as I explore the notion of “transcendent mystery and wonder,” it feels important to me to talk about the relationship we each may have with the larger community.

My vision for “church” is that it creates and allows space for change and transformation. The institution of the liberal church charges us to be true to our individual personhood while at the same time challenges us to enter into a relationship with the larger entity of the community, and the higher power of the world and the universe. At its best, church can provide space for authenticity. Church can provide space for personal growth. Through engagement and relationship with others, Church offers space to make mistakes, learn from those mistakes, offer forgiveness, and then enter into a deeper relationship based on the vulnerability we share with each other.

As I worked on this sermon, it occurred to me that the phrase, “direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder,” was awfully similar to the phrase I’ve heard in more fundamentalist circles, where people are urged to discover a “personal relationship with Jesus.”

If we religious liberals live and move freely through the world of metaphor, then “transcending mystery and wonder” may be personified as “Jesus,” and a “personal relationship” may be reworded to say “direct experience.”

So these days when I hear fundamentalists talk about their faith, I’m not so annoyed anymore. I understand the impulse behind their faith. Though I use different words, and though I hope my faith is more generous and loving, the impulse behind my faith is just as valid and just as deep as I seek to discover a connection between myself and all that is.

It seems that much of our awareness of “transcendent mystery and wonder” is in direct proportion to our sense of humility. Many of us say we feel the most spiritual, or the most connected, when we are outdoors in nature. When we are in nature, we have a hard time arguing that we are in control. In nature, it is clear that weather and animals, trees and hills will have their way with us, and the best we can do is prepare our best with appropriate clothes, shelter, food and exercise.

But in the city, when we interact with people and attend church, we seem to live with the notion that we are in control: we turn on the air conditioning when it is hot, and the heat when it is cold. We hop in our cars to go where we want when we want. If other countries do not do what we want, we will invade them and force them to change. If protestors and community organizers call out for compassion and humane treatment, we will call them names and arrest them. Our western culture is filled with the notion that other people are here to serve us, and that if we just talk reasonably enough or pay enough or get angry enough or threaten menacingly enough, then we will get our way.

But when we believe we are in control and ignore or close ourselves to the possibility of transcendence, especially when we are in community with other people, we close ourselves to the possibility of transformation. When we close ourselves to the possibility of transformation, we close off the life of spirituality. And as I see it, a spiritual and congruent life is the life that the institution of the church is supposed to support and provide.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophet Micah makes his assessment of humanity: “Your rich men are wealthy through extortion and violence; your citizens are so used to lying that their tongues can’t tell the truth!” Micah preaches that God does not want us to make offerings of a thousand rams or ten thousand rivers of olive oil. God would not be satisfied or pleased with the sacrifice of an oldest child. Micah says simply that all God asks is for us humans “to be fair and just and merciful, and to walk humbly with your God.”

To walk humbly with the vastness and varieties of the universe requires a revelation – and an acceptance – that we humans are not the most powerful beings on earth, and that we are not the pinnacle of existence. Walking with a sense of humility means that “God” does not have to be an old guy in the sky for us to understand that forces exist in the universe that are greater than we are. God does not have to be a physical entity or even a spiritual force for us to realize, even with all our scientific knowledge, that we do not know everything.

To walk humbly in the presence of the universe, in the presence of our ancestors in a southwestern Colorado desert at night, or in the presence of the gathered community of a Unitarian Universalist Church on a Sunday morning, is a spiritual practice. Walking humbly in our relationship with other church members through the vastness and varieties of the universe opens us to the possibility of transformation. Walking humbly creates an openness, as our first source articulates, “to the forces which create and uphold life.”