

Varieties of Religious Experience

Sermon by

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One problem I have talking about the varieties of religious experience, as Schultz said in our reading, is trying to use the word “religious” or any language for the extra-ordinary in a way that we all know what we mean. I suppose it is hard in any community, but for Unitarian Universalists it is a particular challenge. Long ago we gave up a common understanding of what it is to be religious. We even sometimes disagree about whether we are a religion. I hope the answer to that is “Yes”. I want us to claim being a religious people. We are so much more than a social action group or a social club, although we are both of those. There is a yearning here for something more and deeper.

We’ve got to be careful that we draw the circle big enough that most of us fit inside and not so big that it has no meaning or strength to inspire.

When I say, “we believe,” as in “we Unitarian Universalists believe,” the most you can hope for is that I am going to talk about my understanding of who we are and what we hold ourselves out to be. Get three UU’s in a room talking about religion or spirituality . . .or anything else . . .and it will be impossible to get agreement. None of us use those really big terms like “religious experience ” or “spirituality” the same way.

So I probably need to say more about who I am.

I myself am an analytical woo-woo.

I appreciate scientific method and I like to think I gather information carefully. And I’m interested in a wide variety of non-rational experiences. I don’t believe, as I said recently, in a sky-god or any god that is wholly other.

Still, I feel something when words like “holy” or “sacred” are used.

I'm not at all sure about an afterlife. Reincarnation is possible. Most people in the world believe in reincarnation actually, but I think I won't come back as a new person -- maybe grass and dirt and a few bits of mineral that become part of something else. I believe that the energy that is me and the elements of me will come back to life in other lives.

But what do I know? And haven't we all had experiences that leave us with some lingering something that doesn't fit with the day to day world we ordinarily inhabit? Some experience that leaves us puzzled because it doesn't fit with what we believe already? Many of us have had odd things happen to us when someone we are very close to dies. Those experiences make me wonder if I am sure of anything.

I'm finding I can't say a word here without wanting to explain what I mean by it. "Mystery" for example. I don't mean paranormal. I expect that today's mysteries have explanations if we live long enough to learn what those explanations are but there will always be plenty of room for awe and wonder and, of course, searching.

I said that I would like for us to be comfortable calling ourselves religious. I think that language has power in it and I want UU's to claim our place at the table.

Here are a few thoughts from some famous thinkers that I think we all might agree with, *more or less*, about what it is to be religious:

John Dewey: "A religious activity is any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal, in spite of risk because the ideal has an enduring value."

How about this from Milton Yinger: "Religion is a system of practices by which a group of people struggle with the ultimate problems of human life."

Paul Tillich said: "Being religious means asking passionately the questions of meaning and being willing to receive answers."

These fit for most of us here I think. Religion is understanding our interconnections with the rest of creation.

But, back to me:

I am cautiously open to reports from those who say they have had experiences of other realities. I loved the Castaneda books and reading about people of power and peyote. I have friends from seminary who go to South America to participate in shamanic rituals with ayahuasca. I'm curious about psychotropic drugs. Many teachers I admire did antheagins while they were legal and those experiences led them to create lives of religious exploration.

I think it is fascinating that drug trips and the experiences of meditators have so much in common. I'll admit that I want to make that mean something and not have everything reduce down to the mechanical way our brains work. That's my bias.

That's another distinction, by the way. Do we think with our brains or our minds -- or are those the same thing? Some use the word "mind" to mean the larger field from which we experience and interact with the world including body wisdom . . . and more.

During a class in religious traditions at seminary, we experimented with Shamanic journeying. We lay on the floor in a darkened room while a drummer played a regular beat something like a deep voiced ticking clock. We had been told to identify a personal portal, which could be something like a hole in a tree trunk or a cave. I decided to use something real: the storm drain opening near my house on Mabel street in Berkeley. As we lay listening to the rhythm, we were instructed to enter our portal and see what happened.

As I approached the opening of the drain and started crawling in, I was suddenly whisked away into the darkness and felt myself drawn out and down at great speed. Then I popped out of the darkness with the sensation of flying, soaring really, in a bright tropical, sunny valley with banana trees and palms ringed by distant blue mountains. Just north and still in the valley there was a huge stupa surrounded by people. I wanted to hover and watch but was suddenly caught again as if by a great wind. This time, after moving through utter darkness, I emerged standing at the edge of a small clearing in a forest at twilight. Before me was a tiny cabin with a front porch and only a screen door, though I couldn't see in.

Suddenly a dog came around the cabin to play and dance with me. The animal was ecstatic. I was ecstatic.

Way too soon, the drummer who had continued to set an even tempo, paused and then struck several loud beats -- our signal to return. Before I could gather myself, the drum beat faster and faster and I was sucked back out, past all that I had seen, through the darkness, past the stupa and was just emerging from the storm drain when the drumming stopped.

I felt wrenched away. I had not been ready to leave. When I got back out, I was terribly, terribly sad that I could not have stayed longer. Not merely wistful -- truthfully, I was sobbing. And now, years later, if I told you the particulars of playing with that dog and having to leave, I'm afraid I would begin to cry again. It was that vivid.

Later I did some of my training in a mental hospital partly because I wanted to hear about the worlds my psychotic patients visited. Unfortunately, the patients in my hospital were on all kinds of medications and I rarely got to ask such questions.

D. Patrick Miller wrote about his childhood, which was a lot like mine. In fact, it may be that my early years, which were filled with church services and anchored by observances and rituals, may have molded me into a person who is fascinated by mysterious experiences. I wonder if all of those years of going to church, and arguing with the teachings, taking them seriously enough to be upset by them . . . I wonder if all of that set me up to be a minister and a minister in a critical thinking tradition like ours? I want to know things and I want more of those out-of-time moments I have had both in church and alone in darkness. By the way, I was told in seminary that I was an apophatic mystic because in meditation, I am drawn more toward darkness than light, more to the cave than the mountaintop.

As Bill Shultz said in our opening reading, UU's have been relatively comfortable saying "we are seekers after truth." That phrase points outward without a guarantee of a promised land or another world. We are probably generally more intellectual than experiential. But, many of us want something more than intellectual exploration. We want *religious experiences*. I don't know if it is simply the way my brain works; it may be just that, but I 'm terribly curious about things in general including woo-woo things and I crave experience. I read and study and listen but experience itself gives me the kind of learning that I seem to need to construct my personal narrative, my story of what is true.

We all have to weave our perceptions and experiences into some kind of coherent story. If we are successful at this, even though it is a process that is never finished, we can integrate new experiences without getting lost, and we can risk facing things yet unknown. It is important to have a place where we can tell our stories. We need places of belonging where we can do the work of making sense of life and the ineffable.

I suppose I'm telling you my woo woo stuff today so that more of you feel it's OK to explore such things.

I probably decided to go to seminary because of the woo-woo thing that has always been of interest to me and Coleman Barks. His translations of Rumi's poems were new to me that year as I wandered trying to figure out what work I wanted to do with the rest of my life. Rumi's poems evoke in me a longing for the ineffable, the indescribable, the indefinable, which I think I have always felt was something like the ocean that holds me. The "ocean" is a common metaphor in Sufism and Rumi's writing.

Here is a quote from Barks about the environment of his childhood:

"I grew up in an ecstatic family. Anybody at any time could burst into song for any reason. My mother would just dance around the house, singing. I recall those two minutes at the end of the day when a golden light would fall across the floor, especially in April. I would lie down in it and hug myself. One time when I was doing that, I told my mother, "Mama, I've got that full feeling again." She said, "I know you do, honey. I know you do."

Imagine growing up with a family like that.

By the time of my ordination here, I was swimming in the words of Rilke, "To praise is the whole thing." "To praise" . . . that phrase shoots me back into the ocean. The oceanic experience. It is the larger view, a glimpse of the transcendent, a feeling of being part of the great story of everything rather than being isolated in my own small self with all of my own small self problems. "To praise is the whole thing. *To praise is the whole thing.* Those who can praise come toward us like ore from the silences of rock."

“If the only prayer you ever say is “thank you,” it is enough.” Meister Eichert

Praising. Savoring. Allowing time and space for noticing and silence long enough and deep enough that we can hear our own hearts. That’s the sort of religious experience I have known, and you have known. It is the kind that grabs us and let’s us notice the glory of everything.

Religious experience is something like going inward and inward until we get shot out into the great cosmic story and know ourselves as part of it and find ourselves not isolated bits of matter but part of the unfolding of the universe’s own story. Feeling this “belonging” is a religious experience.

I hope I’m describing these feelings and connections well enough that you can see religion as a tradition, like our movement, and as a category of experience and that we can float past particular word choices and see how often we are pointing at the same moon.

Listen to what Frederick Buechner said:

“Everybody prays whether [you think] of it as praying or not. The odd silence you fall into when something very beautiful is happening or something very good or very bad. The ah-h-h-h! that sometimes floats up out of you as out of a Fourth of July crowd when the sky-rocket bursts over the water. The stammer of pain at somebody else’s pain. The stammer of joy at somebody else's joy. Whatever words or sounds you use for sighing with over your own life. These are all prayers in their way. These are all spoken not just to yourself but to something even more familiar than yourself and even more strange than the world.” “....even more familiar than yourself and even more strange than the world.”

Since I seem to be busy exposing myself this morning, I should tell you that I have also used Runes as a meditation tool and dreams and Tarot as ways to get to and understand the parts of me that I have trouble getting hold of.

Let me end with a paragraph from Tarot of the Spirit by Pamela Eakins:

“The challenge is to search our minds and learn to transcend ordinary states of consciousness in order to perceive deeper levels of truth. We are searching for Ourselves, for Buddha, for Christ-consciousness . .the secret to open the Eye.

When the Eye is open, we will integrate contradiction. We will accept shadow. We will transcend anger. And, we will know our neighbors as our Selves. Propelled by the intentional contemplation of opposites, we arrive at a unified field of time and ultimately overcome the limitations of dualistic thinking.”

Now, if all of this sounds too intense or demanding or just plain goofy, throw up your hands and laugh. Through laughter, just as through meditation or any other practice, you will find what you seek.

It is my nature to work at learning and work at being happy but I see that working hard is not the only way. All you really need to do is pay attention, love life, and savor with your whole heart every earthly delight.

Blessed be.