

Remembering the Mystery and Wonder by Lindy Gifford

Sunday, September 14, 2014

Time for all Ages

We talk about the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism a lot in our Religious Education classes, but there's another list we don't talk about as much, and I think it's just as important: our six Unitarian Universalist sources. What does that mean? Our sources? Yes, they are where Unitarian Universalism came from. But a source is also something you can go back to, to deepen your understanding. Can anyone name any of our sources? The first on the list, and my favorite, is the one I want to talk about today. It's in your order of service, if you want to read it with me. "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."

How many of you feel you have experienced "that transcending mystery and wonder?" I would be surprised if there is actually anyone who has not, but sometimes we don't exactly remember these experiences or know what to call them. What about when you look up into a sky full of stars? Or lie in a field and watch the clouds? Or when you're body surfing and you catch that wave just right so you land way up on the sand like a beached whale? I want to tell you about an experience I had like that when I was quite little, maybe 5 or 6 years old.

Every summer, my family and I sailed the coast of Maine in our wooden sailboat. Our boat had a nice fat bowsprit (the mast-like thing that sticks out in front of the bow.) My two sisters and I thought it was just made for riding on like a horse and we did—as much as our parents would let us. It was always wonderful, but I remember one really special time.

That day, the surface of the water was very smooth and clear—there was almost no wind so there were no choppy waves. But there were big, rolling waves—my Dad called them swells—made by a storm way out at sea somewhere. We sat astride the bowsprit, hanging out in front of the bow of the boat, as it glided up one side of a smooth, clear, green hill of water, over the top and whooshed down the other side, over and over again. It felt as if I was flying or riding a sea serpent. It felt as if I was part of the boat and the boat was part of the water and everything was part of everything. It was as if "I"—the "me" I thought I was, did not exist anymore, except as part of the boat and the green/blue waves, and the whole universe.

Then I noticed an amazing thing. I looked at the shadow of my own head in the water and I saw that I had a halo! All around my shadow, there was a ring of golden wavy light. I thought to myself, "That's why I feel so magical. I am magical! I have a halo!" I looked at my sister's shadows and did not see any halos. I was the only one with a halo! As you can imagine, I thought I was pretty special.

Does anyone have any idea what made my halo? Yes, it was the sun behind me. A total solar eclipse of the head. So it turns out I was wrong when I thought I was the only one with a halo. It

must have seemed to my sisters that each of them was the only one with a halo. What I learned from that was that actually, everyone has a halo and everyone is special. Sometimes we forget that. We forget that we are all made of star stuff. We are each a unique child of the universe. I think that when we have experiences of that transcending mystery and wonder like the day I just described to you, at those moments we remember who we really are. So be on the lookout for the mystery, because it is all around us, and not just when we're on the bowsprit of a boat, but all the time. Let's try really noticing and being grateful for all the moments of wonder and mystery where ever we find them.

Reflection

Good morning. I'm Lindy Gifford and a long-time member of the Fellowship. Last year I started a two-year program to be ordained as an interfaith chaplain, at the Chaplaincy Institute of Maine. I am also a graduate of Rev. Erika Hewitt's sermon writing seminar. I want to tell you a story today, a bit of the story of my own spiritual journey. I have found that paying attention to my own life's path—where it has taken me and what that might mean—has strangely opened me to new possibilities. My journey is not yours—but I have also found that witnessing each other's journey can be very profound.

At times over the years, I have to admit that I have felt that Unitarian Universalism was so humanist in it's outlook, I wondered if it should be called a religion at all. But I also knew that at its core is a very different message. Take our first source, which talks about “that transcending mystery and wonder.” That doesn't sound very rational. Exactly what does it mean, I wondered? Is it the same thing as “ultimate reality” or “the ground of our being?” Is it the same thing as what the UU Spirit Play curriculum for children refers to as “the Mystery some people call God?” For me, at this point in my evolution, the answer is “Yes—all of the above.” In fact, that is pretty much my definition for the word God.

But what about the “direct experience” part? Can we actually experience God? I now believe we can, because “God” or ultimate reality, is all around us, all the time. As Emerson said, “Everything is made of one hidden stuff.” We were born from it and we are bathed in it even now. We all once knew this but have largely forgotten and often work hard to deny what our heart is trying to remember. I certainly have. Only a few years ago, I would not have made any of these statements with a straight face, but I am here today to testify to my personal conversion from a Unitarian skeptic to a Universalist mystic.

I was raised Unitarian Universalist in the 1960s. I did not learn to pray or really to think or talk about God at all. In Sunday school I enjoyed the lessons about other people's gods and they may have had something to do with my becoming an archeologist, but church was not where I connected with the mystery. For me, that happened in nature. Sailing, on long hikes, keeping a nature journal with my Dad, and lots of free-range exploring and playing outside: these were the times I felt most myself and most connected to life.

By high school I had stopped attending church—in buildings. For many years, nature was my only church, and I found great solace there. But often life seemed overwhelming. I felt and saw

the brokenness of the world very deeply, but felt paralyzed. I was lucky to find a similarly disillusioned husband, who also enjoyed being outdoors a lot. We put off having children for a long time, feeling that they would cramp our canoeing and bike-riding style, but it also seemed like madness to bring more children into such a messed up world. Thankfully we eventually came to our senses and had two wonderful daughters. I can't imagine what would have become of me if I had not had my children. They were probably the best course correction I could possibly have been given.

The births of both our daughters were profoundly moving experiences. Suddenly there was a new person who had not been there moments before. Exactly where did she come from? On one level I knew only too well—on another, it was a mystery. I will never forget their soulful eyes regarding us moments after their births. Steve and I coined a phrase for those newborn eyes: we call them whale eyes. They seemed to peer out from the depths, from another realm or dimension. And perhaps they did. Perhaps part of them was still wherever it was they came from, that place I had somehow forgotten and longed to remember.

Having my daughters, watching them grow, and witnessing their unjaded delight in life helped me to begin to do just that—to remember. I still felt worn down and sad for them growing up in a relentlessly materialistic world. But they reminded me of something. Exactly what, I could not say, but I could half feel it, around the next corner, just outside my peripheral vision, a dream? a memory? Like a lost paradise...

But of course having children was not always about close encounters with Mystery. We were working parents raising two small kids, while attempting to renovate an old neglected house with very few skills or resources. Our long hikes, bike rides, and canoes were no more. Meanwhile the world situation appeared to be only worsening with each passing day. This was the time of the first Gulf War, 911, the war in Iraq, an Inconvenient Truth... Add to that a move from Belfast, Maine, where we had lived for twelve years, to a new community—Damariscotta—and I found myself in a kind of numb, helpless despair.

Thankfully, once again help was beamed in from the Mystery. This time it came in the form of Sophie, my dog and guardian angel. We had promised the kids a dog and a larger yard to make amends for moving them away from their friends, and we delivered on both. What I had not banked on was that Sophie would change my life more than she did the kid's. I had been working at home as a freelance graphic designer for several years, but I had never allowed myself to do anything but work when the kids were off at school. Suddenly a midday walk in the woods was mandated and Sophie was punctilious and insistent with her reminders.

Together we began to explore the uncharted woods and marshes behind our new home. Walks with my silent spirit guide dog became the center of my spiritual life. And winter, a time when I usual became even more depressed, was the best. That was when we would go on snowshoes deep into the frozen marshes, into a strange, stark landscape much like a desert, and inaccessible at any other time of year. Walking, contemplating, and photographing the same few square miles of Creation, season in and season out, was a truly healing spiritual practice. Gradually I became

more connected to the reality that underlies and imbues everything, but that was so hard to remember when I was up to my eyeballs in housework, deadlines, and children's homework.

Around the same time, I started attending Unitarian Universalist church again (this Fellowship). I found it comforting and familiar and like home, but at first I didn't find there what I found in the woods. One day our then minister, Kitsy Winthrop, offered a sermon based on the book *Epiphanies*, by Ann Jauregui, a practicing therapist with a PhD. As I read it I felt a sudden shock of recognition. The stories in the book seemed hauntingly familiar—stories of people's nearly forgotten childhood experiences of a transcendent joy and an abiding sense of connection—to something. Something huge. It was through reading the book that I retrieved the lost memory of the bowsprit ride I spoke of in the time for all ages.

Ann Jauregui says in her book: “Shyly, we venture out with our songs and stories into a world still in the thrall of a reluctant science. Yet even now, science is encountering astonishing non sequiturs of its own, surprises that beg us to reinstate all of our stories and include them in our explorations. Above all, these are sacred tales, profoundly healing as they remind us of—and restore us to—our innate all-right-ness.”

Jauregui describes her own moment of sudden revelation and remembering when she heard a discussion on quantum physics on NPR. She says, “The physicists on the radio were speaking with amazement and some chagrin as they talked about the subatomic ‘building blocks’ of the material universe, which seem to amount to almost dreamy flickerings of energy that come and go in some kind of vast subatomic space or medium that is virtually “empty” and yet distinctly alive.... They were ... contemplating a mysterious realm beyond or within—it's hard to say just where it is—the world we observe with our five senses... contemplating this realm with expressions of astonishment, humility, and awe.”

I had seen the movie “What the Bleep Do We Know?” and I recommend it, I found the quantum physics pretty hard to wrap my brain around. Now I've really given up trying to understand it all. For me, just knowing that science now appears to confirm that something beyond what we can apprehend with our senses does exist... that was enough. That much understanding pried the lock off the door that my reasoning mind had been working so hard to keep shut. It helped me to reclaim some of my childhood sense of wonder. I didn't have to deny it or ignore it any more. It even began to break down my UU distaste for the word God.

Sometimes it felt as if I had to dig pretty deep into Unitarian Universalism to find what resonated for me. I did a lot of that digging in small covenant and adult Religious Education groups at Fellowship. That is where I discovered some of the many more currents in the stream of Unitarian Universalism, besides straight-up humanism. Many UU theologians past and present had a lot to say about wonder and mystery—and God. Again I felt that thrill of recognition when I discovered the late Rev. Forrest Church and the trajectory of his spiritual evolution. (Even his name seemed an apt description of my own spirituality.)

As a young minister, Church wore his ‘rational aridity’ proudly, believing only what he comprehended. Eventually though, he awakened to what he called the ‘God-shaped hole’ in his

life, and in Unitarian Universalism. He said that when rationalism negates or displaces mystery, 'our imagination and sense of wonder are just as likely to die as are the gods we pride ourselves for having killed.' Church eventually came to what he called a 21st Century Universalism. He said, "Spun out of star-stuff, illuminated by God, we participate in the miracle we ponder." Amen, brother!

But I was still thirsty for more. And then there was that part of the first source about how wonder and mystery is "affirmed in all cultures." So last fall, I started studying at Chime, the Chaplaincy Institute of Maine. Chime is an interfaith wisdom school and is not affiliated with any one denomination. There I am learning to become more comfortable with words and practices that would seem quite out of place in a UU service. Words like mystical, which I now use to describe some of my experiences. I could even imagine calling myself a mystic! And learned that there are mystical traditions in every religion, and that the language used to describe the experiences is amazingly similar across traditions. "The wonder and mystery affirmed by all cultures." The most important thing I am learning is that I cannot understand everything with intellect. My rational mind can talk me OUT of believing in my own direct experiences of ultimate reality, but it can't experience it. That happens with some other part of me. This revelation, this conversion is ongoing. I don't know where it will lead me, but it appears to be picking up speed.

So... there's one last section of the first source that I haven't talked about—and I saved the best for last. It says that the direct experience of the wonder and mystery "moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life." The more I pay attention to life and the miracle it truly is, the more I understand that paradise was not in fact lost—just forgotten. It is not around the next corner, but all around us, all the time, right here, right now. Not just in mystical peak experiences, and not just in nature. Not just in a newborn's eyes, but in everyone's eyes, could we but see it. Letting this understanding sink deep into my soul is not only my best defense against despair and the resulting paralysis, it is also the only way I can find my true self and my best part to play in life. As I come to feel deeply that I am connected to something bigger than myself, and something essentially good—no miraculous—I find I might just be able to aid and abet that something, work with it instead of against it. Like catching a wave just right. And that's when I remember that feeling of riding up one rolling green hill of water and down the other side, just in time to catch the next one.

And so may it be.