

Mystery and Mysticism
by Rev. Diane Dowgiert, December 2, 2018

When the troubles of the world are too much with me and worry about the future weighs me down with the cold stone of fear, I have a practice that puts my life into perspective, lifts me from despair, and reawakens within me a sense of mystery, wonder, and awe. The practice is simple. I stand under the night sky and look up. The immensity of the cosmos, both in terms of its physical size and its long swath through time -- cosmic history written in the everlasting stars -- makes me feel small, even insignificant, shrinking my perceived troubles to the same scale. Questions crowd my mind. Where did it all come from? How did it all begin? How will it end? Or will it ever end? And what of my life, my small speck of existence, finite as it is, bound by the perimeters of birth and death, not having asked for either but still bound by their immutable laws of cycles and seasons, beginnings and endings? How shall I make meaning of the dual reality of being alive while knowing that I must one day die?

This practice of standing under the night sky and looking up into its unfathomable expanse makes me feel small and insignificant. It also makes me feel connected to and part of the universe – or is it universes? The Universe is one of my many names for god, not God with a capital G, but a small g, which signifies not a specific Deity, but a divine reality, a sacrality, a sacredness that pervades and is inseparable from life. It's as the philosopher and author of the book Seven Types of Atheism, Philip Gray writes, "A godless world is as mysterious as one suffused with divinity, and the difference between the two may be less than you think."

The path of the mystic is not so much to answer the questions as it is to live the mysteries, or as stated more poetically in Rilke's Letters to a Young Poet, "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."

We tend to think of Unitarian Universalism and Unitarian Universalists as rational. We value the use of reason in religious and spiritual matters. In his book Freethinking Mystics With Hands, UU minister Tom Owen-Towle notes that, "we have been satirized as a demystified religion suffering from an 'ecstasy deficit.'" While there is some truth to this, there is a strain of mysticism that has long run through our tradition.

The Transcendentalist Movement of the early 19th century included people such as Frederick Henry Hedge, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Walt Whitman, Samuel Longfellow, Henry David Thoreau and a long list of others. Their most noted and most often quoted spokesperson was Ralph Waldo Emerson, who left the Unitarian ministry to become an essayist and public speaker. Though he left the Unitarian ministry, he never left the church. There is a falsehood out in the public realm that says he either was excommunicated from his faith or that he abdicated his faith. Neither is true. He was a regular attender of Sunday services at the Unitarian church in Concord, Massachusetts, which is where his body is buried. He was a staunch critic of what he called the “corpse-cold Unitarianism” of his day. When he was invited to deliver the commencement address at Harvard Divinity School, he used it as an opportunity to offer up his critique, saying to the newly minted group of ministers, “Yourself a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost, cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint people at first hand with Deity!”

For Emerson, reason isn’t solely a function of the mind, but also a function of the senses, the intuition, and the heart. “The heart knoweth,” as he said. He implored those just going out into the world of ministry to engage the whole person in the pursuit of religious truths. He promoted self-reliance, not in the rugged individualist I-can-take-care-of-myself-thank-you kind of way but in the trusting one’s own experience kind of way.

We hear echoes of the Transcendentalist Movement in the Unitarian Universalism of today. Our faith centers on seven principles that are drawn from six sources. The first source is: “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 that create and uphold life.”

When I stand under the night sky and look up, I am drawing on our first UU source, a spiritual practice that reawakens my sense of mystery and wonder, lifts me from despair, and puts my life into perspective. When I am unable to be out under the night sky, I have another practice that renews my spirit. I open the pages of Robin Wall Kimmerer’s beautiful book, Braiding Sweetgrass. Kimmerer is a botanist and an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. The full title of her book is Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants.

While standing under the night sky connects me to the wide universe, Kimmerer’s writing connects me with the natural world of the earth. The earth, or Gaia, is another one of my many names for god, again, god with a small “g”.

Kimmerer's mysticism is informed by western academic science and by the teachings of her indigenous ancestors. One definition of mysticism is the apprehension of knowledge inaccessible to the intellect. To learn from the plants and animals as her ancestors did requires use of the senses. She tells of asking permission of a maple tree to be tapped. The answer comes in the scent of the bark, the sound of sap moving through the veins of the tree, the feel of how the tree either resists or yields to the insertion of the tap. That she can explain the chemistry and biology involved in the formation of the tree's gift of maple syrup doesn't change her relationship with the tree. Nor does it make the gift any less miraculous – not in the supernatural way but in the amazing, astounding, and awe-inspiring way. What Kimmerer teaches is that mind, body, emotion, and spirit are all valid ways of apprehending knowledge, and all are needed if we are to heal our relationship with the earth. She says that “science is the process of revealing the world through rational inquiry, bringing the questioner into unparalleled intimacy with the mysteries of the more-than-human world.”

Kimmerer's native approach is one of reciprocity and gratitude, one that sees human life not as separate from nature, but as an inseparable part of nature, with gifts to receive and gifts to give. She says, “Knowing that you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate. But when you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street into a sacred bond.”

The season of winter holidays and holy days is upon us. The natural forces of the universe have brought us to the place in our yearly orbit around the sun to where the balance between light and dark has shifted, to the time of the year when the blanket of night's darkness has lengthened over us. Traditions of the season call us together to tell the ancient stories of mystery and miracle. The darkness of night skies can draw our gaze upward and outward to the mysteries of this great cosmos, this universe of which we are a part. The season's darkness can also draw us inward to hearth and home, our earthly home, our family home, and the home that is our body.

The spiritual path of the mystic invites us to consider our own experiences as sources of wisdom and truth. In other words, we need not look to some higher authority to validate what we know in our bones to be true.

That being said, the spiritual path of the mystic is a path of humility, bowing before the immensity of life's great questions, being willing to live in the great “I

Don't Know" – living the questions while showing up for life with a fullness of being to embrace mystery as a condition of human existence. I recently heard Neil deGrasse Tyson say that he wonders if humans are intelligent enough to understand all the inner workings of the universe. In that case, living with mystery may be our only choice.

When the troubles of the world are too much with us, may this season's cloak of darkness invite us into the mystery and miracle of our human existence, lifting our eyes to horizons beyond our earthly dwelling place, to the wide universe of which we are a part, feeling our connection to a transcendent spirit moving us to open ourselves to forces of renewal and the transcendent hope that life is a good gift and that we are worthy recipients of this gift.

May we return what we have been given in equal measure so that life might flourish, now and always.