



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Way Up There

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I suppose, for this sermon, I should invite all of you to remember back to the 1820s to 1840s. America was still young; the generation of the founders had mostly died- John Adams and Thomas Jefferson dying on the same day – July 4, 1826. Most of the land was still wilderness, though much of New England had been stripped of trees for farming. A squirrel could climb a tree in Philadelphia and not touch ground until she got to Des Moines, Iowa, where the Great Plains began. California was a part of Mexico until the late 1840s, becoming a state in 1850. Grizzly bears roamed the state. Most of the mountainous and desert west was only sparsely inhabited by Native Americans.

Railroads were just beginning to be a means of travel, the first new form of travel since early historic times and the domestication of horses. No phones, no radio or TV, no electricity. Agriculture was the primary industry and it was all done by manual labor. No refrigerators.

Few people went to school. There were books, to be sure, and the Bible was the book most people knew. Darwin was just a boy. Beethoven was creating his majestic music. Blake and Wordsworth, Keats, Byron and Shelley were writing English romantic poetry. An American literature was just beginning.

There were some Roman Catholics in the US – mostly in Maryland and Florida, very few Jews, hardly any Buddhists or Hindus or Moslems. Most Americans were protestant. Ministers mattered; they were among the best educated of any group in America – church was a primary means of public gathering. Sermons lasted 30 to 90 minutes and were mostly about the Bible.

Biblical criticism was new and there was an initial understanding that the Bible was not the literal word of God and was comprised of many different sources, put together over a long period of time. It was just understood that none of the New Testament gospel writers knew Jesus, and that the gospels were written a generation or two after his death.

This was the age just before the age of science - and like all ages on the edge, it was dynamic as people began to push limits and imagine more.

Though this was not the first time doubt about the Christian tradition appeared, it grew. In the 1820s William Ellery Channing wrote powerful sermons arguing that the doctrine of the trinity was not biblical and that Jesus was human, not a God, and that God was one. Reason, not revelation or church authority or tradition, began to make its way as the means of determining religious truth.

Out of this mix came a group known as transcendentalists. You know many of their names – Ralph Waldo Emerson, Channing, Theodore Parker, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Peabody, Henry David Thoreau. They were a major force in American culture.

What they thought was this – that behind, or beyond, or above, or thorough – the direction was not so important – was a reality that we all could grasp and connect with. This reality was spiritual – not material – and eternal, not contingent. What was most real was transcendent.

Emerson famously found this in nature, as did Thoreau, and to read Emerson is easily to be caught up in his enthusiasm for the spiritual. Emerson, and the others, thought that our fullest sense of freedom was to be found in our relationship to the transcendent - to what is beyond the material world.

And, indeed, central to every religious tradition is the sense that there is something beyond – that the world of things, objects, the material world, is not all there is, that beyond this – this wood, this flesh, this room, these bodies, is something, some essence, something – well something else.

Gods and goddesses, spirits, essences, Platonic Ideas, Kantian ideals – all these have been thought to be real – sometimes more real than the material world which is in a constant flux of decay and rebirth.

So, is this true? And if it is, what do we do about it?

Is the piece by Bach that Stephen played for the offertory just a collection of sounds like other sounds, or is it more? Is what lies beyond wonderful or awful – beautiful or evil? Is fear or delight the response? Are all these people in the whole journey of humankind who believe that there is something spiritual that is real – are they fools? Are they wrong? Am I an idiot to believe in God or an idiot not to?

Before I went to college, I had planned to become a glaciologist. After all, I grew up as public schools were emphasizing science as the most important are of learning – especially for boys. I intended to go to graduate school in physical chemistry and study glacial ice. On our 100-degree days here, I sometimes wish I had! I had imagined – maybe because I grew up in Minnesota and loved the winter the best – that spending time on glaciers would be about as wonderful as anything possible.

The first glacier I was on was in the mountains in Norway, during a train stop on the trip from Oslo to Bergen. A small glacier, to be sure, but still, it was ancient ice. It was cloudy; the sky just about my head, the only colors shades of black and white and grey, maybe a little brown from lichen here and there.

It was desolate and empty and forlorn, and as beautiful as any place I have ever been. I wanted to walk out into the distance and disappear into it, melt into the world, become one with it. I was in college by then, on a study abroad program. I had not taken any chemistry classes and instead had become a religion major by that point. I felt I had entered the room of the Gods – Valhalla I suppose - where spirits, at least the spirits of my ancestors, resided. I no longer believed in God; I had left Christianity some time earlier. But there I encountered a much more ancient God than the Christian god.

I sensed something more, something more than could be quantified, manipulated or even fully understood. I sensed a transcendent presence. I have had other experiences like that in my life – cross-country skiing up at DeBennville Pines, listening last spring to Pasadena Pro Musica sing Eric Whiteacre's 'When David Heard,' a concert at Royce Hall at UCLA by Tabla Beat Science, being in a room full of Mark Rothko paintings in Washington, DC, sitting in a chair next to Thich Nhat Hanh. There have been more – sometimes in this room as I step up into this pulpit, I feel as though I am in front of a burning bush that is not being consumed. I sense a presence.

I have no idea if you have these experiences or not; I know some of you do because you have told me. We call them religious experiences, mystical experiences. They have been a part of human history forever, and without them, we would probably not be here – I mean here sitting in this room together. The experience of transcendence is central to a religious community and tradition. It does not mean that every person feels this or believes this, but that it is essential to us as a whole.

This is, I believe, the primary purpose of worship – to evoke a sense of the sacred, to encourage an awareness of the transcendent. We do many, many important things here – we work for justice, we stand up for certain principles in the world and in our community; we educate our children in the values and traditions we believe can help them grow as human beings. But if we did not worship – that is, gather here at some time and invite the presence of the holy into our individual and communal lives, we would just be another educational or social service organization.

The former president of the UUA, Bill Sinkford, urged us to recover the language of reverence, knowing that this is no easy task, and that it requires, first and foremost, that we open ourselves – as individuals and as communities – to experience the transcendent. Our new president, my good friend Peter Morales has urged for years that we need to practice a more radical hospitality, and he is quite right, but we need to ask Peter, and ourselves, for what reason, for what purpose?

Emerson was ordained as a Unitarian minister in 1829 and served a congregation briefly, leaving the ministry in 1832. He remained a Unitarian, a member of the church in Concord, MA. He criticized Unitarianism as being 'corpse-cold' and the minister of the Concord church, Barzillai Frost, as preaching as though he had never lived – he thought sermons should be thought passed through the fires of experience and should open the hearer's soul to the divine.

In Judaism, we have entered the High Holy Days and yesterday marked the end of Ramadan in Islam. For both traditions, it is the time of year to take stock and to focus on one's spiritual life. Muslims fast from sun-up to sundown. Jews catalogue the events of this past year to make amends. Both traditions take time to listen more closely for the voice of the divine. Abraham Heschel – I read from his wonderful little book *The Sabbath* – asserts that 'The goal of higher spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information, but to face sacred moments.' The goal of our faith is to prepare for, to wait for, moments of transcendence.

We cannot control these, and that is the hook, isn't it? In a faith like ours, which acts as if salvation and meaning come from hyper-activity, we often place barriers between the transcendent and our selves. Thoreau said that we need wilderness partly because we need places where our limits are transgressed – where we are not in control. We need, he said, in other words, to surrender.

This is the wisdom of all religious traditions and we UUs should pay attention; the task of the religious life is not to amass information, as Heschel said, but to prepare and wait for sacred moments.

I want to recommend to you an article in a recent *New Yorker* by the literary critic, James Woods. In it, he takes on the problem of God, and especially the kinds of fundamentalisms present in the world today. The fundamentalism of traditional religion that view God as the avenging tyrant condemning non-believers, or the God who favors one president over another or one sport's team over another, or who guarantees prosperity or cures disease – the kind of God who refuses to help my golf game or let me win the lottery. But also the fundamentalism of what has been called the new atheism – Daniel Dennet and Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins with their narrow and ignorant understanding of religious history and tradition. In terms of their critiques of religion, they are all sloppy and lazy and really not worth our while.

Woods argues that the God of the fundamentalists – the theists and atheists – and the Gods of the theologians – Aquinas, Maimonides, Tillich and their wholly abstract Gods – won't do. It is impossible to believe in a God, as the philosopher John Rawls claimed, who could benefit an individual but would not save a million Jews from Hitler. God, Rawls, claims, has to adhere to at least a basic sense of justice. But the God of the theologians and philosophers is not much help either – Tillich's Ground of being, Aquinas's First Cause, Aristotle's Unmoved Mover – these leave a human person cold, even as they may be interesting thoughts.

So where does this leave us – somewhere in the middle I am afraid, with experiences of transcendence and the attempt to express that. Maybe it leaves us with Bach or Rothko or the stillness of a Thomas Merton, the passion of Martin Luther King Jr.

One of my favorite stories is 'The Pure in Heart' by Peggy Payne, and it is about a Presbyterian minister in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. He serves an upper middle class church, filled proper, and well-educated Presbyterians. The minister – his name is Swain - has his PhD from Yale – 'a man of rational and ethical orientation' in the author's words.

Working in the garden one day, he hears the voice of God saying 'Know that there is truth. Know this.' He knows it is God's voice – I imagine we would all know that – if God were to speak it would be unmistakable. He freezes and sweats and does know what to do. He tells his wife what has occurred – she is silent, then tells him it is OK, that she does not think he is crazy.

He does not know what to do. He has a sermon to write and wonders if he should tell his congregation what happened. No, he decides, that would not be wise. He reflects that he had always hoped to hear God's voice but now it brings him no joy, just anxiety. In the end he tells his church in a sermon that he has heard the voice of God.

The service ends, Payne writes, without incident. A few people say something in the line – things like ‘The Lord moves in mysterious ways; one person tells him to trust, but most file by with handshakes, heartiness and veiled eyes.

The call comes a little later in the week from the governing Board. They have voted to recommend that he seek professional help. Soon a petition is circulated and there is a vote, and so Swain resigns.

A great story. Not because I have heard God’s voice - because I haven’t – at least not very recently - but as an example of how reticent we all are about sharing these experiences of transcendence. Have you shared with others? Somehow they are private, even worrisome as if something were amiss. I want to urge anyone to share their stories with me – send an email, a letter, if it is a brief experience a text message or twitter, or make an appointment.

Because, you see I have felt the presence of the holy, of the sacred, of the transcendent. The presence has been at times brooding; it has been indifferent; it has been frightening, and wonderful – not always the same, but a presence real and not imagine. I believe in them and do not believe in them. I am caught between my head and my heart. Hawthorne wrote in his journal after a visit with Melville, saying that Melville could neither believe nor disbelieve and therefore was one the most religious of them all.

That is all. Wait and listen. Sit now and then. Open your soul to the presence of all that is holy. And if it comes, be grateful and if it does not, do not worry.

Life is a gift my friends, more wondrous and mysterious than we might imagine. While we have each other, while we have Bach or Melville or the mountains or deserts or oceans, while we have our children and our friends, while we have those who love us and we love, all things shall be well and all manner of things shall; be well.