

This I believe

Since I joined CVUU, I have noticed that one of the sources of our faith is almost never spoken of or chosen for sermons and discussion. Perhaps because it is the one that seems hardest to approach.. It is the first source and I believe it is the most important one - the absolute ground and source of our spiritual experience.

Each of you probably has the little folded card which lists on the left, the principles we Unitarians covenant to promote, and on the right, the sources of our faith. The first source listed there 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 which create and uphold life.”

This source refers to what in other religions would be called, God. I admire the deliberate avoidance of that overused word in this very careful statement. It doesn't tell us we have to believe in “God”, it encourages us to seek out “direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder” In other words, it asks us to perform an experiment, and then take note of the results.

This is the perfect wording for a skeptic for someone who wants to be liberated from religious traditions which have claimed to know what God is, and then freely killed masses of people who didn't believe in that particular definition., or else prayed for them as inferior beings.

But are skeptics off the hook? Does this tell us we don't have to deal with this issue? No it does not. On the contrary, if we want to participate in our faith, it urges us to seek “direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder.” In other words, don't take anyone's word for what is there, but in true Unitarian spirit, explore this for yourself. In fact, according to our faith, this is the very first thing to do, the first and most important source of all the rest.

I love the words, “transcending mystery and wonder”, and I celebrate them. “Transcending”, for example, tells me that whatever I may find in this search, it will be greater than I am, greater than anything I know, beyond me and my culture, outside the box, beyond the frontiers of knowledge. “Transcend: to rise above or beyond the limits or powers of.”

So now we find out why “direct experience” is the only way to go with this source – It is simply that whatever we experience will be ultimately beyond our capacity to explain or understand. But not beyond our capacity to experience it.

I find this tremendously exciting, Here, at last, we humans and our human culture are in our proper context – that is, completely immersed in something much greater than we are. It's the perfect place for a learner, for an explorer, the perfect place in which to learn

humility, to be inspired, the perfect place from which to begin to create, because it shows us how much there is to learn, how much we do not know, how much remains to be said, sung, danced, contemplated.

I believe one reason we don't often choose to refer to this first source is that it's intimidating, and puts us in a place where we are not comfortable. We are comfortable with things we can weigh, measure, count, touch, explain, judge, and control. We like the five senses and all they show us. We like to be in charge. We like proof. And if we can't prove something, we in our culture often deny whatever resists that proof.

We are proud of our intellect, of humanism, the enlightenment, the creation of our democracy, the discoveries of modern and contemporary science. And we are right to delight in these things, and to be inspired by them. But we make a huge error when we choose to be limited by them, saying they are all there is. And we make a worse error when we choose to believe that our rational intelligence is the summit of creation. We are learners, we are explorers, we are fallible.

So where is the "transcendent mystery and wonder"? In the past, we believed it is in a place outside of us called Heaven. I believe as many alive now believe, that it is both within us and around us, that this mystery lives in all that is. Whatever the kingdom is, it is here with us, right now.

There is blazing superintelligence everywhere in the universe, and we are part of it. There is a world constantly being created all around us and within us. Through it and with it, we create – our lives, our relationships, our institutions, our plans. There is a current of love in us, always available if we choose to open to it.

How can we have "direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder"?

Here are some ways that work for me.

I believe that probably the greatest one is to have and state a clear intention to experience it. This means a focus on the search, and an openness to what comes. I will talk more about this.

For me, being close to infants and small children brings us close to this mystery – to witness the joy, the growing intelligence and wisdom of these little beings is to feel mystery and wonder.

Time spent in nature – rivers, streams, mountains, forests, puts us in touch with this source.

Meditation can teach us to be attentive to the signals we receive, both outwardly and within ourselves. Also other

meditative disciplines like yoga, t'ai Chi, Chi Gong and, yes, prayer which is a way of setting intent and contacting the spiritual energy circulating in the world.

In my life, making music with a group of people has helped me do this – music can open us to this part of ourselves.

These are all avenues connected to our hearts, to intuition, to a kind of perception no less valid than problem solving with our intellect alone.

My own life has brought me smack up against mystery. The time, for example, when I was living in a family in southern France. One day after the noon meal, I went upstairs to my room, feeling dizzy and sick. After awhile, I realized I couldn't get up off the bed. Soon, I was burning with fever, feeling as if I might die. The family had gone out and I was alone for hours. I thought, there is only one person who can help me, and that is Mom – but she is thousands of miles away, across the ocean. But I concentrated on her, calling out to her, inwardly, asking her to help me. Hours later, the family returned and found me hallucinating, with a temperature of 105. A doctor was called. It took me two weeks of bed rest before I could get up and around. I never wrote home about what had happened, not wanting to alarm anyone. Weeks later, Mom met me at the dock when we returned from Europe. Her first words to me were, "What happened to you on August 17th? I got up and prayed for you for hours."

This was the moment when my center began to shift. I realized that there is something amazing, an invisible connection, a knowing, that links us with beings and events far away from ourselves in time and space. It seems to be activated by intent or focus, - another word would be prayer - at least part of the time.. Do I think this connection is part of what other people would call, God? Maybe. It certainly is part of the mystery and wonder of being alive. It reminds me that we are more than just skin-encapsulated egos walking around in three dimensional bodies. Does this mean I think such things are supernatural? No. I believe everything operates according to natural law – it's just that we haven't discovered some of these laws yet.

How could my Mom know I was ill and needed help?

How could I, one day, standing in the produce section at Albertson's, suddenly see in my mind's eye the image of a dear friend in Canada, falling down, passing out seriously ill? Yet, months later, I learned this had happened.

Why did my dear grandmother Mary, long dead, suddenly appear in my kitchen one summer afternoon not old and tired as I had known her, but youthful, beautiful, radiating a brilliant light and love. I had been going through a very hard time, but I had not thought of her in a long time. I do know that seeing her there changed my beliefs about life and death.

What did my experiences teach me? The most important thing is, I think, that we are capable of much more than we believe we are – that there really is something

beyond the visible, three dimensional world and we are connected to it, and we can interact with it.

Albert Einstein said, “ The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.

In the last year or two, I have noticed more heart energy and enthusiasm than ever before at CVUU. I am happy to feel this coming about. I hope we can continue on this path, that we balance reason with intuition, analysis with awe , and intellect with heart - that we consciously integrate the first source of our faith into our lives and our celebrations.

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