

The Mystical Path to Unity; Sermon by Rev. Lori Staubit

Reading: Humanist Manifesto 1:

"The time has come for widespread recognition of the radical changes in religious beliefs throughout the modern world. The time is past for mere revision of traditional attitudes. Science and economic change have disrupted the old beliefs. Religions the world over are under the necessity of coming to terms with new conditions created by a vastly increased knowledge and experience. In every field of human activity, the vital movement is now in the direction of a candid and explicit humanism. In order that religious humanism may be better understood we, the undersigned, desire to make certain affirmations which we believe the facts of our contemporary life demonstrate.

There is great danger of a final, and we believe fatal, identification of the word religion with doctrines and methods which have lost their significance and which are powerless to solve the problem of human living in the Twentieth Century. Religions have always been means for realizing the highest values of life. ". "This fact explains the changefulness of religions through the centuries. But through all changes religion itself remains constant in its quest for abiding values, an inseparable feature of human life.

Today man's larger understanding of the universe, his scientific achievements, and deeper appreciation of brotherhood, have created a situation which requires a new statement of the means and purposes of religion. Such a vital, fearless, and frank religion capable of furnishing adequate social goals and personal satisfactions may appear to many people as a complete break with the past. While this age does owe a vast debt to the traditional religions, it is none the less obvious that any religion that can hope to be a synthesizing and dynamic force for today must be shaped for the needs of this age. To establish such a religion is a major necessity of the present. It is a responsibility which rests upon this generation" –written (1933.)

It is said that there are no straight lines in nature....and I believe it. We only need to look closely at our own personal histories to see that the designs and patterns we create with our living resemble growing orbits or spirals more than straight lines, as we moving out from the moment of our birth into the world. There are times when we might confess that our life doesn't seem to be going anywhere. How many know the frustration of feeling like you are caught up in a maze or only spinning circles?? Well you are not alone. We all struggle at times in our life to find a clear sense of direction. Having a sense of direction can make the difference between moving freely with purpose or being immobilized by meaninglessness, fear and despair.

Religions exist to address this very issue. However, many traditions profess a single, right way to solve this dilemma. Unfortunately, many paths to ultimacy and intimacy also lead to exclusivity. The effects of religious positioning and intolerance dominates our human history and continue to cause suffering and loss of life in the world today.

While I do believe that faith and values should inform our politics, any religion that seeks political and social dominance as religious goals, is a path of faith that ultimately leads to intolerance, blind obedience and even terrorism....

If we look backward on human history, perhaps we can take heart that change will come. If we look closely at any one particular religious history and chart its course over time, we see patterns emerge that resemble more the gate of swaggering sailors than a walk down the straight and narrow..... Believers can be walking in the light of reason or social justice in one age only to shift course and focus on emotion or the contemplative life in the next era; Perhaps we have historical "swaggers" because, as a species, we struggle to make strong and lasting connections between thoughts and emotions and are simply limited by our present state of the evolution. In response to the age of enlightenment and growing interest in the relationship between science and religion, Jonathan Edwards, an American Theologian and Congregational clergyman rocked the nation in the 1740's with his evangelical revivals and emotionally charged spirituality, giving rise to what is known as the "Great Awakening" However, it was Darwin's theory of Evolution published in 1859, entitled "On the Origin of Species" had a profound impact upon liberal theology and development of Humanism as an ethical/religious movement in this past century. Here at the beginning of the 21st century, the polarization between reason and emotion continues to divide "the faithful" within and among the world's religious traditions and right within our own Association of Congregations.

All this movement back and forth, to and fro....seldom results in the fulfillment sought by the believers in any faith, especially ours.-We are a people continue to be urged onward by a longing we struggle to name- in each age, we seek to find some solid ground on which to stand but remain under the illusion that a clear choice must be made between truth and love, reason and faith, mind and spirit.

Karen Armstrong, author of "A History Of God" describes this same "swaggering" in terms of our human need to feel intimacy with the ultimate only to run into the limits of personalizing the holy.

She writes:

"Judaism, Christianity and to a lesser extent Islam have all developed the idea of a personal God." (paraphrase: "This idea of personal relationship with the "holy" led to concepts of human worth, dignity and rights so highly valued by religious humanism. However, there are draw backs to identifying with a deity who loves, judges, punishes, sees, hears, creates and destroys as humans do." "Even Buddhist and Hindus had to develop an avenue for intimacy seen in the form of the Avatars of a supreme reality")

"Yet a personal God can be a grave liability. He can be a mere idol carved in our image, a projection of our limited needs, fears and desires. We can assume that he loves what we love and hates"

"The very fact that, as a person, God has a gender is also very limiting." "A personal God can be very dangerous." "Instead of inspiring the compassion that should characterize all advanced religion, "he" encourages us to judge, condemn and marginalize."

"The world religion's all seem to have recognized this danger and have sought to transcend the personal conception of supreme reality."

"All three of the monotheistic religions developed a mystical tradition, which transcends both the personal god and the concept of an ultimate reality. Mystical religion is more immediate and tends to be more help in times of trouble than a predominately cerebral faith."

The tradition of the Mystics may be key to the evolution of our own faith tradition. The Mystics assist us in making deep connections with primordial beginnings while at the same time help cultivate a constant sense of presence or belonging in the here and now. The fruits of mystical experience are evidenced in the descriptions of mystical poets and thinkers in every world religion.

"Mysticism, in its pure form, is the science of the ultimate, the science of union with the absolute. The mystic is the person who attends to this union, not the person who talks about it. Not to know about, but to Be, is the mark of the real initiate."

(Evelyn Underhill: *The Mystic Heart* p.20). From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia:

"The purpose of mysticism is to reach a state of return or re-integration. The purpose of mystical practices is to achieve union or oneness in experience, to embrace a larger identity and re-identify with the all that is." "Mystic traditions often form a sub-current within larger religious traditions such as [Kabala](#) within [Judaism](#), [Sufism](#) within [Islam](#), [Vedanta](#) within [Hinduism](#), [Christian mysticism](#) within [Christianity](#). Native ,Aboriginal, and Earth Centered Spiritualities seek this same balance as the unseen world interfaces with the practical life of the people through sacred ceremonies and rituals.

Much has been said in Unitarian Universalist Ministers meetings and Congregations about our own historical "swagger" as we struggle to merge rational religious humanism with spirituality.

Perhaps we should turn to the Mystics of our past before forging ahead;

"Following the Enlightenment, a new generation of Unitarians and Universalists decided that the revolutions had not gone far enough, and had stayed too much in the rational mode." "Corpse-cold" Emerson called the previous generation of rational religion." "The spiritual hunger of the age that also gave rise to a new evangelical Christianity gave rise, in the educated centers in New England and around Boston, to an intuitive, experiential, passionate, more-than-just-rational perspective. "

"Added to all this, the scriptures of non-Western cultures were discovered in the West, translated, and published so that they were more widely available. The Harvard-educated Emerson and others began to read Hindu and Buddhist scriptures, and examine their own religious assumptions against these scriptures. In their perspective, a loving God would not have led so much of humanity astray; there must be truth in these (other religion's) Scriptures too."

"And so Transcendentalism was born. In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds...A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine (Soul) which also inspires all men."

"Yes, men, but women too."

"Most of the Transcendentalists became involved as well in social reform movements, especially anti-slavery and women's rights. The Transcendentalists, despite some remaining Euro-chauvinism in their thinking, believe all people had access to divine inspiration and sought and loved freedom and knowledge and truth." by Jone Johnson Lewis ©1995-2002 [Jone Johnson Lewis](#).

These home grown Mystics "The Transcendentalist" were influenced by (Islamic) Sufi and (Hindu) Vedic writings.

In 1858 Ralph Waldo Emerson translated the work of Hafiz (12th c. poet) and called Hafiz a poet for poets and wrote in his journals that "Hafiz fears nothing. He sees too far; he sees throughout, such is the man I wish to be."

-(from Preface, pg.1; The Gift, translations by Daniel Ladinsky)

Earlier in our service we heard the lines....

"Beloved Presence....You are the breathing of the world"

Emerson: ESSAY IV *Spiritual Laws*

"When the act of reflection takes place in the mind, when we look at ourselves in the light of thought, we discover that our life is embosomed in beauty."

The Mystics and the Transcendentalist are heretical and jolt us out of our preconceived notions of being religious"

In these next poems –Hafiz wrote

"What do sad people have in common?
It seems they have all built a shrine to the past
And often go there and do a strange wail and Worship.
What is the beginning of Happiness?
It is to stop being so religious like that"
"We are not in pursuit of formalities or fake religious laws,
For through the stairway of existence, we have come to God's door.
We are people who need to love because love is the soul's life,
Love is simply creation's greatest joy.
Through the stairway of existence, Hafiz, Have you now come,
Have we all now come to The Beloved's Door?"

Even for the skeptics among us....

There are those who have experienced fleeting but wondrous moments when insight and awareness is peaked ; when love floods the senses and a profound sense of belonging becomes a reality-if only for a moment. Such events inspire us to break through false choices and invite us to consider a much larger reality - one we struggle to articulate in every age.

Author Annie Dillard describing her personal experience and brief moment of awe and wonder "when suddenly all the lights went on." On a walk in her book "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek."

Russian Author Alexander Solzhenitsyn,

Speaks about this inner connection to the universal in these words:

"Sometimes I feel quite distinctly that what is inside me is not all of me." -cited by Rev. Mike McGhee in a sermon on Mysticism

Anna Akhmatova –who suffered under Stalin and whose work was banned from Soviet Russia, shared this same sense of mystical union in one of her poems

"A land not mine, still forever memorable, the water of it ocean still and fresh.
Sand on the bottom whiter than chalk, and the air drunk, like wine,
late sun lays bare the rosy limbs of the pine trees.
Sunset in the ethereal waves: I cannot tell if the day is ending, or the world,
or if the secret of secrets is inside me again.

-from "Women in Praise of The Sacred"; edited by Jan Hirshfield
Personal Reflection by the minister: undocumented

Closing remarks:

"The mystical experience has certain characteristics common to all faiths. (However) it is a subjective experience that involved an inner journey. It is not a perception of objective fact but a journey of the imagination."

-adapted from Armstrong pg. 219.

The essence of truths gleaned by the mystics throughout time and history are universal even though the images and words that describe their experiences are particular to their time, culture and religion. There is a quality of deep respect for the unique nature of each being. There is an understanding of profound connection between to the whole of life and the sure wisdom that there is a single unifying mystery of which we are intimately and ultimately a part. However, the path of the transcendentalists (and the ancient mystics) was highly individualistic and leaves much still to be said for living in community in the world today.

Walt Whitman urges us to move beyond worn religious ideas when he said " We consider bibles and religions divine- I do not say they are not divine, I say they have grown out of you, and may grow out of you still." At this moment in our religious history....we are in need of a way that is wide enough and deep enough to engage us all in the quest for beauty, truth and meaning. We need religious thought and action that does not lead to narrow minded pathways but opens all people to wider vistas of understanding. At no other time has it been so necessary to transcend differences to create unity. Let us join with others to link arms and steady our gate. May we draw insights from all paths of knowledge and love to add strength to the journey of faith before us.

Closing Reading: "A Great Need"- Hafiz

Out of a great need, we are all holding hands and climbing.
Not loving is a letting go. Listen (folks) The terrain around here is far too dangerous for that."

References:

A History of God by Karen Armstrong; 1993.

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Website references:

www.transcendentalists.com/emerson_essays.htm

What is Transcendentalism?

by Jone Johnson Lewis

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Sermon; Rev. Michael McGhee, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Arlington.