

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist
“Confessions of a Rational Mystic”
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Introduction

Today’s sermon arises out of an important part of our religious history that has been overlooked or forgotten by many, including myself. If you talk to many people about Unitarian Universalism they will emphasize the rational part of our history. Rationalism has been primary to our faith since the 18th century when the first Unitarians and Universalists applied the Enlightenment to this new religion. The Enlightenment religion of Joseph Priestley, Thomas Jefferson, William Ellery Channing, Hosea Ballou and others said that religious belief does not have to be based on faith alone. We can also use our intelligence, our reasoning powers, to come to a belief system.

It was during this period that we looked to science as a friend and not an enemy of religion. If you were a Unitarian in the 19th century you were likely to celebrate the scientific theories of Darwin and Priestley. As the 20th century arrived you looked favorably on the emerging humanism that also celebrated the growth of science in education. You would have probably supported Clarence Darrow as he argued for evolution taught in the public schools and against Biblical Creationism. The celebrated “Monkey Trial” became a rallying cry for many of our forebears as we staked our claim for rational, scientific religion early in the 20th century.

There would be an ongoing debate between the rationalists and the Christian theists in our denomination that would last over 50 years. The Christian theists would try to hold on to a belief in God. The Christians would look to Jesus as the great teacher and prophet. A minority of Unitarian Universalists would hold on to the supernatural. Most would see God in nature. Many like myself would substitute the word “nature” for God. Outsiders would call us pantheists.

I once had a friend, an Episcopal priest, who said we Unitarian Universalists worship the sacred rock. When he came to visit our church he saw a sculpture in the Memorial Garden shaped like a rock. It was called “Betsy’s Moon.” He said, “I told you. There is the sacred rock.”

Seriously, the compatibility of science and religion became central to our faith. Reason, alongside of freedom and tolerance, became our most basic affirmation. Something was missing, however. Where is the religious impulse? Is science enough?

Many of us would turn to Ralph Waldo Emerson for a different view. Emerson was a Unitarian minister in the 1830’s and 40s who was not happy with what he considered the over-emphasis on reason by many Unitarians. In 1838 he chose an ordination service at Harvard Divinity School to challenge some traditional Unitarian thinking. Today’s sermon is about this challenge.

Define Mysticism

It may be helpful to first define some terms. Words like mysticism and pietism are not common everyday words. You may not have been aware that they are part of the Unitarian Universalist tradition. The Encyclopedia of Religion defines mysticism as “the intuitive and emotive apprehension of spiritual reality.” It has been a part of all the major religions of the world, in China as Taoism, in India as Yoga, in Persia as Sufism, in Judaism as the Cabala and Prophetism, and also Christianity, both in Roman Catholicism, as St. Teresa and St. John the Divine and St. Francis, and in Protestantism, with the Quakers, the Moravians, and the Brethren.

The major point I would like to make in this sermon is that our Unitarian Universalist tradition also has a mystical strand that is often over-looked and forgotten. I have known about this history but like many of my colleagues, and because of my training and preference for rational enlightenment religion, I for some time ignored much of this mystical tradition.

The Encyclopedia of Religion also discusses comparative stages of mysticism: the awakening, purification, illumination and unification. You may have seen such an analysis by Joseph Campbell who talks of such spiritual journey in many religions. For purposes of this sermon I would like to differentiate between three types of mysticism:

Personal Mysticism

First, the most popular over the years is what is called “Personal Mysticism.” A good way to look at this type is to look at the goal of religion. For many religious people the goal is to achieve personal union with the Divine or God. In mystical Catholicism the goal of the individual is to give up your individuality, your personal gratification, for a union with God. Many people spend a lifetime trying to achieve this unity.

For Christians this unity can come through following the example of Jesus of Nazareth. We find this model in the life of St. Francis of Assisi who tried to be like the earthly Jesus. If this is achieved, the believer then will be sitting next to God in Heaven.

The true mystic in this tradition will deny personal gratification in this world, preferring instead the fruits of God’s love in another.

One way to look at this type of mysticism is a denial of materialism. The mystic will often give all his personal belongings so he or she can be an example for others to follow the monastic life, a life of unity with the divine.

Often the personal mystic talks about visions or dreams in which a voice within tells him or her to follow a certain path. We don’t see much of this type of mysticism in Unitarianism Universalism. There is one strand of Universalism, however, that comes close to this type of mysticism. It comes out of Pennsylvania. The Universalist Reformer, George De Benneville, in his diaries talks about visions, and other mystical experiences, in which God gives him a message.

The De Benneville path to mysticism is similar to many Christian mystics—an attempt to find union with the divine through the example of Jesus of Nazareth and through the reading of Holy Scripture. I am going to go out on a limb here and conclude that this type of mysticism will probably not work for most modern-day Unitarian Universalists.

Practical Mysticism

Let’s move on to a second type of mysticism. It is referred to as Practical Mysticism. If the personal mystic’s goal is to give him or herself over to God, the practical mystic accomplishes this goal by the way they live, such as through love or service to humanity.

In the history of Unitarian Universalism we have many practical mystics. Some, like Dorothea Dix, a Unitarian or Clara Barton, the Universalist, did not call themselves mystics, partly because our tradition did not encourage it. In almost any other tradition Dix or Barton would have been called saints. Both gave themselves in sacrificial service for the betterment of others, Dix, primarily in the field of Mental Health, and Clara Barton in the field of medicine, especially in her heroic efforts during the Civil War and in founding the Red Cross.

There is another theological word I would like to introduce at this juncture. It is the word pietism. Pietism and mysticism are often intertwined in religion. Pietism is best defined as heart-felt or practical religion as opposed to intellectual or formal religion. The classical example is the Methodists as differentiated from the Anglicans, especially in England but also in America. Wesley and the Methodists were comfortable with small group discussions centered on living the devotional life, Bible study, and prayer. Prayers could be impromptu. Preachers would gather worshippers anywhere anytime. The Anglicans, on the other hand, were more formal, and were not comfortable with such prayers, and especially were not known for revivals, and worship out of the cloistered walls of the cathedrals.

One of the interesting ironies of Unitarian Universalist history is that the first Universalists were evangelists of types. This is that part of our history that we have ignored. Our Universalist founders, like John Murray, De Benneville, and Elhanan Winchester, came out of the Methodist and Baptist religion where pietism was popular.

On the other hand, the Unitarians, the Brahmins of Boston, were not comfortable with the evangelistic spirit. I would argue that Unitarianism was founded as a denomination against such evangelism. The first generation of Unitarians in New England was in part a reaction to the Second Great Awakening, that evangelistic movement of the 18th century that spread throughout America.

One of the reasons why Unitarianism and Universalism took so long to come together was this basic difference—one, Unitarianism, urban, more formal and rational and the other, Universalism, rural, more informal, pietistic, devotional, and evangelistic.

What is missing in both religions is a theological framework which encourages an affirmation of mystery. You need a belief in miracles. In classical mysticism you would say your work is God's work. He or she intervenes in the natural order and accomplished a miracle.

Natural Mysticism

This is where the third type of mysticism comes to play. This is referred to as the Natural Mystic. This is the person who sees in nature a religious significance and meaning. Examples of natural mysticism are St. Francis of Assisi in the Catholic tradition, and Ralph Waldo Emerson in the Unitarian tradition, and John Muir, the 20th century mystic and naturalist.

This is the person who loses himself, but not in some metaphysical reality but in nature itself. This path of the mystic, I would predict, has much potential with Unitarian Universalists today. It combines the worldly aspect of the Practical Mystic and adds a transcendence to the world of nature.

It is ironic that the reason Ralph Waldo Emerson came in conflict with the Unitarians of his day is because of his belief that the miracles of the New Testament, especially in the life of Jesus, were not miracles in the traditional sense. The Emersonian address that angered the traditional Unitarians was the Harvard Divinity Address given at the ordination of Jared Sparks at Harvard Divinity School in 1938. I would like to quote from this address. First, I quote from the beginning of this classical sermon. It is my favorite reading in all of our history, and why I am comfortable with the label, natural mystic. I hope some of you have had a similar feeling or will this year:

In this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life. The grass grows, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of glowers. The air is full of birds, and sweet with the breath of the pine, the balm-of-Gilead, and the new hay. Night brings no gloom to the heart with its welcome shade. Through the transparent darkness the stars pour their almost spiritual rays. Man under them seems a young child, and his huge globe a toy. The cool night bathes the world as with a river, and prepares his eyes again for the crimson dawn. The mystery of nature was never displayed more happily. . . . One is constrained to respect the perfection of this world in which our senses converse. How wide; how rich; what invitation from every property it gives to every faculty. . . . In its fruitful soils; in its navigable sea; in its mountains of metal and stone; in its forests of all woods; in its animals; in its chemical ingredients; in the powers and path of light, heat, attraction and life, it is well worth the pith and heart of great men (and women) to subdue and enjoy it. . . .

Yes, this passage affirms in words of praise an celebration of nature and life. This opening probably didn't upset the formal Unitarians of his day as much as this next paragraph in which Emerson downgrades the role of Jesus of Nazareth. You must understand that Jesus though not God, was still a lynch-pen, a basic principle, for the first generation of Unitarians. Emerson and his followers began to change this fact. Listen to what he says:

Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty, he lived in it, and had his being there. Alone in all history he estimated the greatness of humanity.

Here is where Emerson gets into real trouble. He begins to equate Jesus of Nazareth with all humankind, you and me included. He writes:

One man was true to what is in you and me. He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his World. He said in this jubilee of sublime emotion, "I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me speaks. Would you see God, see me; or see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think."

The natural mystic does not reject reason, but adds another dimension. For the transcendentalist it is called intuition. Today we would call it feeling, matters of the heart. It is the language of the poet, not the

scientist. This is the path of the mystic. Some would argue, me included, that the greatest of scientists are also mystics. They look not at what is known, but what is unknown. Discovery is their calling card. They risk going into the unknown. They criticize what the scientists before them have written. The method of the mystic is not far from the method of scientific discovery.

Listen to Emerson as he combines his love of nature, the natural order of things, with his concept of miracle. This is another of my favorite readings in our history. You must understand something as I read this passage. The first generation of Unitarians was being criticized for stretching the Christian gospel. The orthodox wondered how far they would go. You give them an inch and they will take a mile. Well, Emerson was ready to take five miles. He wrote:

Christianity became a Mythos, as the poetic teaching of Greece and of Egypt, before. (Jesus) spoke of miracles; for he felt that man's life was a miracle, and all that man doth, and he knew that this daily miracle shines as the character ascends. But the word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain. . . .

The problem with Emerson is the same problem the classical Christian mystics have. He becomes anti-institutional and too personal. Let's be honest. If you accept where Emerson is going you can worship outside of the church. It becomes a personal matter and does not see the importance of the community. This is the problem orthodox Christianity had with natural mystics like St. Francis. During his life he was not made a saint. He was persecuted. Sainthood comes much later.

The same is true for Emerson. He was chastised for this sermon during his life. Now we make him our Unitarian saint, metaphorically, if not literally. What Emerson did was take Christianity off its high pedestal. This is what angered his forebears. Listen to his words:

. . . Historic Christianity has fallen into the error that corrupts all attempts to communicate religion. As it appears to us, and as it has appeared for ages, it is not the doctrine of the soul, but an exaggeration of the personal, the positive, the ritual. It has dwelt, it dwells, with noxious exaggeration about the person of Jesus. The soul knows no persons. It invites everyone to expand to the full circle of the universe, and will have no preference but those of spontaneous love. . . .

What Emerson wanted is now happening in our movement and it makes some of us uncomfortable. He wanted a religion with heart and not just mind. Here is what he also wrote:

The time is coming when all men (and women) will see that the gift of God to the soul is not a vaunting, overpowering, excluding sanctity, but a sweet, natural goodness, a goodness like thine and mine, and that so invites thine and mine to be and to grow. . .

Another criticism of Emerson is that he elevates the stature of man. I would agree with this criticism. Emerson calls us the "wonder-worker." What the 20th century taught us is that we are also the destroyer. Yes, we can the soul of goodness in us, but we can also have the soul of evil.

Some years ago I was invited to give a lecture to a group some of you may be familiar with—Spiritual Frontiers Fellowship. They are what I would call part of the New Age movement. I titled my address: Emerson and the New Age. The majority of my address was a praise of Emerson. But I ended with a criticism of his individualism. I called for a religion that combines both personal growth and a social conscience. This was my attraction to Unitarian Universalism. It is individualistic but also communal. I reminded the Spiritual Frontiers people that Emerson and the Transcendentalists also emphasized a social conscience, and this is what is needed today in the New Age movement. I reminded them that Emerson said we need a new prophet, a new Jesus, in our time. I asked, "Who is that prophet? Who is reminding us of the God within? Who is calling us to bring order out of chaos, combining the practical mystic with the natural mystic, the personal with the communal?"

Conclusion

I conclude this morning with a story. One year ago next month I had an accident at my home in Tennessee. I won't go into the details but it involved my lawnmower. It resulted in my second operation that year and of my life. Last weekend I returned to my home and my accident was on my mind. I recently told a golfing friend of my accident. He responded: "God has a purpose for everything." I responded: "I wish I could believe that." To be honest, I can't believe in a God that would cause such things to happen, i.e. accidents, serious illness, defeats in life, a year-and-a-half search for a minister but no candidate.

On Monday I did some work in the yard and decided to play a round of golf. I got my golf cart and went over to the par three behind my house. I saw a golfer walk toward the tee, so I placed a ball on the ground and hit away. The pin was in a difficult spot on the green. I couldn't see the hole. My ball went toward the mound in front of the green.

I asked the man if I could join his group. He said they had a foursome. So I said I would go ahead of them if they didn't mind. I walked up to the green and looked for my ball. I looked in front of the green in the pot bunker, a common result on that hole. It wasn't there. I looked on the side of the green. It wasn't there. I looked behind the green. It wasn't there. I walked toward the hole. There it was: a hole-in-one. I yelled and began to jump up and down. I went back to the tee and asked for a witness—a requirement to claim a hole in one. One man said: "I saw you hit the ball." The next man said: "I saw you take it out of the hole. It's a hole in one." They congratulated me and I promised beer in the clubhouse." I thanked them for their help. Marti and I would drink Champagne later. A plaque will be made detailing the hole in one. One more item checked off my bucket list.

As I look back on this day, the Ides of March, and the events of last year, I see justice in the making. Maybe there was an angel helping me on Monday, or was it St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, and the place of my relatives on my mother's side of the family, the Fitzgeralds.

One can say that my hole-in-one was complete luck. I could argue that I earned it. I have been hitting the ball well. On the other hand, I am comfortable with the conclusion that St. Patrick was with me this week. He was my angel. He helped complete the ark of justice from last year. Yes, this is my answer. I am sticking with it.

My prayer today is for all of us to look in the world around us, and within that world find some beauty and joy. Let us honor the path of the mystic: appreciation of the world of magic in the everyday world around us. Let us affirm the role of conscience and love, the practical mystic, but most of all let us find God in the world around us. Let us find mystery in the everyday world, and call it miracle. May we do all of this responsibly, with respect for the world and in human beings. May we find joy in living and in our accomplishments, overcoming challenges, accepting defeat, moving forward together with hope and promise. Amen.

Benediction

I look for the hour when that supreme Beauty which ravished the souls of those eastern men, and chiefly of those Hebrews, and through their lips spoke oracles to all time, shall speak in the West also. . . .I look for the new Teacher that shall follow so far those shining laws that he shall see them come full circle; shall see their rounding complete grace; shall see the world to be the mirror of the soul; shall see the identity of the law of gravitation with purity of heart; and shall show that the Ought, that Duty, is one thing with Science, with Beauty, and with Joy. (Ralph Waldo Emerson)