

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church—UU
“Signals of Transcendence”
The Rev. Dr. Morris W. Hudgins
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Introduction

Last week my sermon affirmed the path of mysticism as an inviting path for many Unitarian Universalists. I encouraged us to create a theology of mystery, discovering the unknown. I said the best scientists are mystics at heart. Today’s sermon is meant to expand my challenge of affirming mystery.

Some two hundred years ago a revolution took place in America. It was the revolution that brought God down from above the world to the world itself. This revolution was called by different names. We know it by “enlightenment” or “transcendentalism.” It is this revolution that I would like to talk about this morning.

One of the key figures in this revolution was William Ellery Channing. Channing, known as the Father of Unitarianism, reacting to the Industrial Revolution and to the new views espoused by deism, saw the universe as more than a machine. He wrote:

The voice of wisdom--that is, of moral and religious truth--speaks to us from the universe. What a blessing would it be to us, one and all, could we but really wake up to the glory of this Creation, in which we live! Most humans are actually asleep for their lifetime in this vast and magnificent world. Mighty changes are going on around them, fitted to entrance their souls in wonder and thankfulness; and yet they are moved no more than if they were shut up in a mill, seeing only the perpetual revolution of spindles, and hearing only the monotonous hum and clatter of machinery. (p. 940, Works)

What Channing saw was a magnificent universe that speaks to each of us who are willing to listen. It is this same universe that Carl Sagan, who died in 1996, brought to his lectures. Sagan was a Unitarian because he saw a unity in the universe, eternal truths in the stars. He was a natural descendent to the Transcendentalists of the 19th century. Many of us in this room received our education about the universe from Carl Sagan. Listen to the words of William Ellery Channing and think about Carl Sagan:

Instead of a few pale lamps giving only necessary rays, oceans of light daily overflow this planet whereon we dwell, with inexhaustible splendor and beauty. And the fire that sustains the life of earth's creatures is forever freshly kindled millions, and I guess we should say “billions” of miles away. (p. 941, Works)

The voice of Channing and Sagan were spiritual voices in the wilderness of industrialism and materialism in America. They saw the universe as something whole, that we were indeed connected to this universe and open to its majesty.

To transcend means to go beyond our perceived limits. For me it does not mean going outside the natural world. The Transcendentalist believes that we can know what the world has to teach us through our intuition. It is within our power to know more than we have known before.

The Transcendentalists were primarily Unitarians reacting to the over-emphasis on rationalism of the Unitarians before them. Tony Perrino is going to lead a class on the Transcendentalists in April using video presentations. The Transcendentalists would not use the word “irrational.” They would have talked about the powers of intuition, of knowing through perception, examination, inspection, and finally contemplation.

Some people talk about intuition as if it is a bad word. Intuition is the key to knowledge. The transcendentalist would say: “We can know something only through the use of our imagination. We must imagine something before we can see.” We must use all of our senses.

Sam Keen

Our connection to the universe is one form of what I refer to as signals of transcendence. Before I explain what I mean by this allow me to tell you a story. The story is told by Sam Keen in a book titled, “Beginnings Without End.” The story goes like this:

With age and ripeness he became an honored citizen of two worlds. He spent much time tending the homestead and sharing the life of the land with the People. But at heart he remained a Gypsy whose spirit was most at ease wandering through all the byways of time. He was at home in the Present, but frequently traveled back through the winding lands of the Past, and forward along the broad superhighways of the Future.

The years traced a map on His face. A universal history of adventures, a chronicle of archetypal human battles, was written in the language of crow's-feet and smile lines. Yet he remained strangely ageless. He combined mature competence with the soft wisdom of age and disarming frivolity of childhood. While the journey was not finished he was neither ashamed of the mistakes of the past nor anxious about what challenges were yet to come.

The road into the Future stretched farther than the eye could see but He knew the Journey would be interrupted. Somewhere ahead awaited the three Dark Presences--Death, Tragedy and Evil. At times they loomed so sinister that he cringed in fear and tried to hide in some static pocket of time; but Grief, Love and Hope came to the rescue and filled him with Compassion for all suffering. Courage to fight for change and Joy in Being. So each autumn day he walked forward among falling leaves into the territory of the Dark Presences. And he seemed to be bathed in and guided by the same invisible Light that make the New World a place of Marvel and Grace.

This story which I interpret as the journey of the author, or someone he loves, tells the story of an individual's struggle through the pain and agony of life to the joy of peace in the end. I see this story as the archetypal Unitarian Universalist story. It looks into the abyss, into the Dark Presence of life, in search of meaning and purpose. It is the story of an existentialist who probably lost meaning. It is the story of adventure in a period of lostness, and the goal of finding ones way. It is the story of mistakes along the way, and a future that at one time looked bleak.

This story is also my story. My religious journey began in high school and college. I was not raised in a religious family. I joined a church in high school and then decided to go into the ministry. In college I challenge the literal religion taught in Sunday School. As a philosophy and religion major I was attracted to the existentialists and later the humanists.

Some of my family members thought I had gone the path straight to hell when I began to question the existence of God. This was when I was a Methodist. In my adult years, I would struggle with divorce, a culture fighting` racism, and war. I would then face death in my own family—my sister, brother, father, and best friend in college would die before their time.

This journey of life is the struggle with death, tragedy and evil. As Keen writes: “At times they loomed so sinister that he cringed in fear and tried to hide in some static pocket of time.” How many of us have faced these same realities?

Signals of Transcendence

It is through these experiences that we are opened to the possibility of transcendence. Keen uses the examples of grief, love and hope that filled the voice of the Dark Presences. I want to add several more this morning:

The first is the one I have mentioned already: The feeling of being connected to something larger than oneself. Some would call this a mountain-top experience. I would also call the feeling of being connected to another person or group or church as another signal of transcendence. Whatever the experience, it is a time when the self becomes absorbed into something larger. We feel that we are a small dot in the vast universe that Sagan talked about. We are a part of the Oversoul that Emerson wrote about in his essays. He writes:

Within us is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One.

This experience is different for each of us, but the feeling may be similar. I have felt this type of transcendence when I saw the handiwork of a group of monks who worked years to construct a simple bell tower. I have experienced that feeling in the Canterbury Cathedral, not in the enormous nave, but in the small chapel at the very end honoring the saints and martyrs. I lit a candle for Martin Luther King, Jr., one of the martyrs mentioned. When I saw his picture I wept.

Another example of a signal of transcendence may be a wedding ceremony when a mother or father witnesses their young daughter or son walk down the aisle. Emotion wells up and the eyes become teary. The experiences of a lifetime enter into our minds-eye and we become something larger than our physical body. We become transcendent. Yes, our transcendence takes many forms. Emerson writes:

When it breaks through our intelligence, it is genius; when it breathes through our will, it is virtue; when it flows through our affection, it is love.

These experiences of transcendence can also come through times of grief, or pain or loss. They take us out of our lostness and bring us peace and joy. They can come when the loss of love has challenged us to the core and we wondered if we would ever find love and hope again.

As Keen says it is often that compassion brings us out of our misery, comes to the rescue, alleviates suffering. No matter how lost our faith we need to believe that suffering can be alleviated, whether that is our suffering or the suffering of another. If we lose that hope than we lose a reason for living.

Kate Braestrup

Some of you were able to hear the best-selling author Kate Braestrup this week. Kate is a Unitarian Universalist minister who serves as a Chaplain for the Maine Warden Service. Kate ministers mostly to those who have lost loved ones in a tragic death. She also ministers to the officers who do the work of search and rescue. Her first book was titled, "Here When You Need Me." Her second which came out this year is: "Marriage And Other Acts of Charity." They are both wonderful.

I see the work of the divine in Kate's ministry. She describes her theology in her recent book. She sees love as the Latin *caritas*. It is

...of a wholehearted, impartial, and selfless variety that in its human incarnation is said to hint at the nature of God's love. *Caritas* isn't something only the poor, the sick, or prisoners need, and neither is it necessarily what the rich and healthy are exclusively able to provide. Love takes many forms, from the ludicrously painful profundity of an adolescent crush to the intense, protective passion of a new parent for an infant. There is the lump that rises, unexpectedly, in the throat of an otherwise reliable jaded American on seeing the Statue of Liberty, and there is the presence of a hospice volunteer at the bedside of the dying man. There are sturdy kindnesses and noble heroics, and there are ordinary commitments made and held to, day after day. Marriage is one of these, but there are many others.

The Rev. Braestrup lives out her theology as she faces tragic death. She sees her work as the hinge between an old and new life for the family. Kate experienced this herself when her husband, a policeman, was killed in a car chase. She says that it is the person who tells the family members of the death who becomes a loving presence for them. You don't need to tell them how to feel, but to be with them in their agony, as they fall to the floor or lean against her body for strength. She concludes: "The point of being human is to get better (and better) at *caritas*, at *agape*, at love." Human love is a signal of transcendence.

Kate is a refreshing speaker partly because of her sense of humor. She writes:

... if anyone needs proof that God has a sense of humor, here it is: I am a middle-aged mother of four who primarily works with young, very fit men. My preferred habitat is a warm well-stocked library, yet I work in the outdoors, with outdoorsmen. But the crowning irony, the one that makes family members and old friends smile in know disbelief, is that I, a famously loquacious person, have a job that mostly requires me to just show up, shut my mouth, and be.

Transcendence in the middle of tragic life.

Yes, there are many signals of transcendence. The traditional Christian may see order in the universe. Somehow in the midst of chaos there arises some order, which seems miraculous at times. Some may even call this order, “God.” Peter Berger, who gave me the idea for this sermon, writes:

Throughout most of human history humans have believed that the created order of society, in one way or another corresponds to an underlying order of the universe, a divine order that supports and justifies all human attempts at ordering.

Emerson described his beliefs as a correspondence theory--that the order of the universe somehow corresponds to the life of the individual, that there is a relationship between this world and the divine world. Emerson came to the radical conclusion that there are miracles but that these miracles are part of everyday and do not deny the laws of nature.

A scientist can affirm this epistemology, this way of knowing, and can see the miracles of nature in the laboratory science. It is this conclusion that led Einstein to see the mystery of life. You do not have to be Einstein to see signals of transcendence. Another signal can be in the face of a child at play. Alfred Schutz writes:

When one is playing, one is on a different time, no longer measured by the standard units of the larger society, but rather by the peculiar ones of the game in question. In the “serious” world it may be 11 a.m. on such and such a day, month and year. But in the universe in which one is playing it may be the third round, the fourth act, the allegro movement, or the second kiss. In playing, one steps out of one time into another.

Yes, to play to be in the moment of joy and ecstasy with another is a signal of transcendence. In play we escape the pain, the sorrow, the conflict of everyday life, and play becomes the center of our life. But the most obvious and poignant example of transcendence is when a person who is sick becomes well, a person who is lost can be found, a person who is in pain can find the joy of life once again.

I have experienced many such times in my life--when I entered the hospital room and saw someone who I thought would not be healthy again, sitting next to someone who feels the same, but neither of us say it. Then a week later we sit and talk to that person.

I have held hands with someone flat on their back who wanted to die. I leave them and go home wondering when it is going to happen. Days later I return and the person is sitting up, raving about the beautiful green leaves reflected on her mirror window.

Another example is when two individuals are separated by their individual egos, and hate is the only word that describes the relationship. When that hate is transformed into love, that is another signal of transcendence. Yes, there are many: awe, wonder and mystery, beauty, love, healing, compassion--people doing good things, living their values, reaching out to heal open wounds with compassion. These are all signals of transcendence—going beyond where we have gone before, reaching new heights.

Closing Words

As we begin to plan for summer, I encourage you to take this opportunity to separate yourself from the hurry-scurry of everyday life, join others for special occasions, find ways to connect with the mysteries of life, experience the transcendent in our midst, remember a loved one who has been lost, join with others to learn more about this earth and about yourself, join the choir, sing the voice of praise for living, play with a child, and reach out to help others. Plan a magical trip. Go to the Summer Institute. All of these are ways for us to become a part of something larger than ourselves. We become a part of the transcendent. May we all find ways this year to become a part of that which we call holy, right and good. Thank you.