

## Home Worship for August 23, 2020

The following material is offered for those who want to create a common at home service this Sunday with your families, a few friends, or individually. We share these readings with permission from their authors. Each author reserves all rights to their respective work and requests that it not be copied or shared beyond this packet and our live Zoom worship service. Thank you.

We wish you all good health, and we look forward to the day when we can greet one another in person once again.

The Worship Committee

### **CENTERING THOUGHT: *Open to Awe* by Shari Woodbury ©**

Perhaps some here have outgrown mystery.  
Maybe you have doubts about Santa,  
Or have forgotten the magic of a newborn child.

One might easily lose touch with awe,  
In the struggle to do it all,  
Or simply to survive.

Hear, now, this invitation:  
To open yourself to surprise today  
And be ready to greet unexpected delights.

What star shall shine on you?  
What child remind you  
that all can be touched by glory?

What gifts can you give?  
How will you join the holy story?

### **CHALICE LIGHTING: *For the Web of Life* by Paul Sprecher ©**

At the beginning of our services we join Unitarian Universalists throughout the world to light our chalice, the symbol of our faith. It's flame reminds us that we are part of something much greater than ourselves. Today, we dedicate the chalice with these words:

We light this chalice for the web of life which sustains us,  
For the sacred circle of life in which we have our being,  
For the Earth, the Sky, Above and Below, and  
For our Mother Earth, and for the Mystery.

**MEDITATION: *All That We Do Not Know* (adapted) by Susan L. Suchocki. ©**

We recommend that you follow our worship practice of reading the meditation aloud, then follow it with silence for contemplation, meditation or prayer according to your own spiritual practice.

Day by day, month by month, year by year we are confronted with all that we do not know, that we do not understand, that we do not grasp.

Sometimes, we are humbled by this knowledge and say, “It is too wonderful for me to comprehend but I know this universe is grander and more beautiful than I ever could have imagined and I give thanks for the blessing of being here and seeing, hearing, experiencing, and sensing all that is so wonderful around and in me.”

Sometimes, we are saddened by this knowledge and say, “Merciful spirit, we need to have the burden of hurt and suffering removed from us. We long for the courage, the wisdom and fortitude to bear the pain of living.” And, “We wish for those who will carry our burdens for a short while. Please send us those who will comfort us with their healing words and thoughts.”

Sometimes, we are angered by this knowledge and say, “In the name of justice and compassion—if it is in our power—give us the strength and ability to right the wrongs, for no person in the world deserves this.”

Sometimes, we are made joyous by this knowledge and we say, “Spirit of life who blesses our world, we rejoice and cheer for our glorious life.”

Sometimes, we are made curious by this knowledge and say, “Holy and inexplicable is this life—I have no idea what happened or how it happened but somehow, somehow, something changed and I am free to explore new ways of being. Please always let us continue to search for the unknown in ourselves and others.”

**STEWARDSHIP OF OUR CHURCH:**

Heather Christensen reminds us that “every congregation depends on each of its members by your commitment of time, energy and resources” to help make the Unitarian Universalist vision of a world filled with peace and justice, love and joy a reality.

Even though we cannot meet together at our church building during this time, our expenses are ongoing. Please remember to continue to honor your pledges, and if you are able please donate as you would have to the offering plate and First Sunday Lunch basket as well.

**COMMUNITY—Joys and Sorrows. “Circle of Care” by Lisa Bovee-Kemper (adapted). ©**

“In religious community, we share our joys and our triumphs, our sorrows and our broken places. In this circle of care, we make space for the complexity of life, the

myriad experiences that bless and break our hearts. The truth of human experience dictates that on any given day, we each come to the table with hearts in different places.” It is especially so during this period of isolation from one another.

We set aside this time for the private concerns of our members and friends. Together in silence we send wishes of joy, comfort, and courage to those celebrating joyful events, or struggling with loneliness, loss or illness.

If you are able to please drop a stone for each of these in a bowl of water and let the ripples remind you that what affects one of us affects us all.

**SERMON/HOMILY: *Mysticism for the Rest of Us* by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval. ©  
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The following is an excerpt from the sermon given by Rev. Javier-Duval at the Unitarian Church of Montpelier on March 13, 2016.

Exploring mystery can certainly take us in many different directions. For me, grappling with mystery is at the heart of being religious and spiritual people. Religion deals with those experiences that are impossible or difficult to explain and those questions that seem to be without clear answers—Why are we here? What is the purpose of life? Why does suffering exist? Is there a “God”?

Answering these questions, however, isn’t as straightforward as solving the kinds of mysteries we usually encounter in our everyday lives. Hard and indisputable evidence can’t be pieced together to solve the mystery of the meaning of life.

In this way, religion is somewhat of a paradox - inviting us to ponder these enormous mysteries but in no way being able to offer conclusive answers. And, I believe that the purpose of religion isn’t to attempt to solve these ultimate mysteries and find definite answers but to help us live with the questions. As the song goes, “even to question, truly is an answer.”

Emil Homerin, Professor of Religion at the University of Rochester, puts it this way: “What if life is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be lived?” It is in this vein that I invite us this morning to explore the topic of mysticism.

What exactly is mysticism? A strict dictionary definition of a mystic is “a person who seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to obtain unity with or absorption into the Deity or the absolute, or who believes in the spiritual apprehension of truths that are beyond the intellect.”

This definition fits pretty well with the concept of mysticism I was most familiar with having been raised Catholic. Mystics as I understood them were those saintly people who heard the voice of God and who would turn their lives over to whatever God was calling them to do.

For example, my namesake, Saint Joan of Arc, was quite the mystic. Living in the 15th century in France, Joan had a series of visions during her life beginning when she was a young girl instructing her to take action to save France from the English. At the age of 17, she was mysteriously guided by the voices of saints to embark on an 11 day journey to see Charles, the heir to the throne, to convince him to take action against the English and to allow her to fight with the French troops. She fought for a few years and then was captured and put on trial for being a heretic and then was eventually burned at the stake.

Historic mystics, especially in the Christian tradition, often related these types of accounts. Being moved to piety and to life changing action by visions from God or supernatural beings.

Now, on the one hand, part of me kind of idolized these mystics. Their ability to be that in sync with the divine appealed to a certain kind of religiosity in me. But, another part of my being, perhaps the more intellectual side, couldn't quite accept this kind of mysticism. It honestly sounded a bit far-fetched. Yet, that desire to feel a sense of deep spirituality and reverence and awe has remained with me.

So, when I was first discovering Unitarian Universalism, it was important to me, though I couldn't have articulated this at the time, that there was space within this faith tradition for me to acknowledge and feel the mystical. To have a safe space to be spiritual even as I shed the religious trappings that no longer fit.

One of the first publications I read about Unitarian Universalism was this slim book by Tom Owen-Towle. It's called, "Freethinking Mystics with Hands: Exploring the Heart of Unitarian Universalism."

Given what I knew already to be a faith based largely in reason and to be committed to action in the world, it was a revelation to me that mysticism could play a part. In our history, we, indeed have a rich mystical tradition - not a mysticism based upon belief in a supernatural god or a deity way up in the heavens who talks to us but rather in an internal experience of the sacred. The Transcendentalists, one set of our Unitarian forebears, best expressed this kind of mystical experience. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau were all transcendentalist mystics who emphasized Intuition as the best way to know the world. Their brand of mysticism emphasized the felt knowledge of a deeper truth of being one with the universe and this knowledge for them was often felt in nature.

In *Return to the Springs*, UU minister Jacob Trapp describes mysticism in a similar fashion:

I like to think of mysticism as the art of meeting reality, the art of richer and deeper awareness. It is an experience that comes unbidden...it is not the intellectual conviction that Being itself is my being, but rather an ineffable experience of that Oneness, flooding in to overwhelm our illusion of aloneness, separateness. There are moments when life seems vivid and

resplendent, when a more than mortal splendor breaks in, when there is a touch of grandeur and of glory in just being alive.

For me, mysticism is a way of being spiritual that puts us in touch with that which is beyond this material reality - to the reality of our deeper connections to one another, to all life, and perhaps, to some greater spirit and force. These spiritual experiences put us in touch with the greater mystery all around us.

Now, all of this can start to sound a bit other-worldly and unattainable. It can be pretty easy to idealize or romanticize mystics. Mystics, I have told myself, are just more in tune. They exist on some higher plane of enlightenment. And, obtaining that height of spiritual awareness would surely require me to leave all this - the tedium of daily life - all behind. It is easy to think that union with the divine, the sacred, the Ultimate, is only possible for monks or nuns or the saintly.

But what I want to emphasize about mysticism as a form of spirituality is that it is rooted in our direct experience. It is not mediated by any religious body or authority.

Direct experience of mystery and wonder is one of the primary sources of religious truth that we Unitarian Universalists identify. As a denomination, we affirm that the living tradition we share draws from many sources, including: "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 that create and uphold life."

Mystical moments, although we cannot will them to happen, are available to us all. The mystical moments I have experienced have not involved visions or voices of the divine. These instead have been moments of feeling profound spiritual wholeness, of having a felt sense of some greater truth of our union, our goodness, our connection and interdependence.

(Here, Rev. Joan describes an experience she had in Nicaragua prior to joining the Montpelier Church.)

One afternoon, I was working alongside the 14-year-old daughter of one of the women who owned a part of the farming collective I was living and working on. We quietly went about our work clearing away brush with machetes. We bent low thwacking away at the tangle of weeds that came up to our knees. And, all of a sudden, there was a rush of wind that seemed to shake the trees from their tall leafy tops all the way down to the base of their trunks. I stopped what I was doing and looked straight up into the trees. In this moment of awe I felt as if the wind had a message. A message of reassurance, a reminder that I am part of something greater than myself.

Some of my most profoundly spiritual moments have been moments like this when I have felt something that I simply cannot explain. Moments in nature, in a crowd of people, or simply sitting with a friend when some felt sense of connection and oneness overcomes me.

The poet William Wordsworth describes these profound moments well in this excerpt of his poem, *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*.

And I have felt a presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts;  
A sense of sublime of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
A motion and a spirit,  
that impels All thinking things,  
all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.

The Rabbi Lawrence Kushner has said that a mystic is “anyone who has the gnawing suspicion that the apparent discord, brokenness, contradictions, and discontinuities that assault us every day might conceal a hidden unity.” Whether you liken yourself a mystic or not, I am sure you have had these moments as well, when the profound truth of our unity breaks through.

A modern UU mystic, the Rev. Mark Belletini shares this beautiful story of a mystical moment in *On Not Being Embarrassed Anymore*.

I remember once I stood near a pear orchard late at night. I had been taking a walk by myself at midnight. The blue-black shapes of the trees gathered in rows beckoned to me. The air was damp but warm and laden with the scents of nocturnal herbs I could not name. Crickets soothed me. The stars were in their full glory over the orchard which was set away from the orange glare of the streetlamps. For some moments I stood there, when suddenly I was “struck” as if I were a temple bowl-gong. I shivered in the warm air, overcome with the “that-ness” of everything, knowing my “me-ness” was not an isolation but a continuity with the stars which appeared to me as fragrant pears ripe for the picking. I no longer knew where I left off and “everything else” began. I was filled with such a sense of joy, joy that “I” was alive to experience that moment at all, that I no longer felt myself to be the son of Elisa and Louis of Detroit, but the co-equal companion of them, and all women and men and children, and each tree and every dear star, and the vast processes of life and death and, yes, “God.”

This experience I suppose lasted for only a minute. I walked home in the same manner I had come to the orchard; that is, one foot in front of the other. No one would have noticed I looked any different or suspected that my wet cheeks were from anything more significant than wind in my eyes. I myself did not think of this experience as a talk with God or an angel; I knew quite clearly it was “merely” chemicals rushing about and current crackling in that lump of matter resting soft and warm and round under the dome of my skull.<sup>[1]</sup>

Belletini's beautiful rendering of this moment expresses so well how such profound truth can be revealed in even the most ordinary moments, and even while acknowledging that the brain was at work helping to create this mystical moment.

Mysticism for me is about the breaking-in of a greater truth, and yes, of a sacred presence in this world. It is about paying attention to the experiences in our lives that might put us in touch with the mystery of life.

Today, I ask you to consider how you might invite the spirit of the mystic into your own life. How might you allow yourself to tune in to a deeper sense of oneness, of the sense of the sublime?

These don't necessarily have to be earth-shattering moments. But they are moments of a perhaps deeper awareness or of more alive-ness. Of being present to that deeper truth that on any other day or in any other moment you might ignore.

In *Freethinking Mystics with Hands* Tom Owen-Toole writes, "Unitarian Universalist mystics proclaim two main convictions: our lives are embraced by a mystery that is gracious and trustworthy, and our human fulfillment lies in surrendering to it."<sup>[2]</sup>

May we embrace the mystery that surrounds us.  
May we sink deep into the truth of our unity even a midst life's discord.  
May we keep our hearts open to those moments of more than mortal splendor,  
when there is indeed a touch of glory in just being alive.

Amen.

**CLOSING: *In Our Hungering for Meaning* by Bruce Southworth. ©**

In our hungering for meaning,  
In our aching for friendship,  
In our yearning for justice,  
In our heart's remembering of finer days,  
May we look deep within the mystery of things  
and gather our strength.

May each of us proclaim  
the graceful power of life and love  
and so may we live in hope.

Amen, and Blessed be.