

"Types of UU Transcendence"

Sermon by the Rev. Jim Eller

**All Souls
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allsoulskc.org**

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Readings

"Beloved Presence," by Mohammad Hafiz

Cloak yourself in a thousand ways; still I shall know you, my Beloved.

Veil yourself with every enchantment and yet I shall feel you, Presence most dear, close, and intimate.

I shall salute you in the springing of cypresses and in the sheen of the lakes, the laughter of fountains.

I shall surely see you in tumbling clouds, in brightly embroidered meadows.

Oh, Beloved Presence, more beautiful than all the stars together,

I trace your face in ivy that climbs, in clusters of grapes, in morning flaming the mountains, in the clear arch of sky.

You gladden the whole earth and make every heart great.

You are the breathing of the world.

From "Passage to India," by Walt Whitman

O Thou transcendent!

Nameless—the fibre and the breath!

Light of the light—shedding forth universes—the center of them!

Though mightier center of the true, the good, the loving!

Thou moral, spiritual fountain! affection's source! thou
reservoir!

Thou pulse! Thou motive of the stars, suns, systems,
That, circling, move in order, safe, harmonious,
Athwart the shapeless vastness of space!
How should I think—how breathe a single breath—how speak—
if, out of myself,
I could not launch, to those, superior universes?

Passage to more than India!
Are thy wings plumed indeed for such far flights?
O Soul, voyagest thou indeed on voyages like these?
Disportest thou on waters such as these?
Soundest below the Sanscrit and the Vedas?
Then have thy bent unleashed.

Passage to you, your shores, ye aged fierce enigmas!
Passage to you, to mastership of you, ye strangling problems!
You, strewn with the wrecks of skeletons, that, living, never
reached you.

Passage—immediate passage! the blood burns in my veins!
Away, O soul! hoist instantly the anchor!
Cut the hawsers—haul out—shake out every sail!
Have we not stood here like trees in the ground long enough?
Have we not groveled here long enough, eating and drinking
like mere brutes?
Have we not darkened and dazed ourselves with books long
enough?

Sail forth! steer for the deep waters only!
Reckless, O soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me;
For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,

And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.

O my brave soul!

O farther, farther sail!

O daring joy, but safe! Are they not all the seas of God?

O farther, farther, farther sail.

Sermon

There are many ways of understanding transcendence. Consider seven ways of transcendence. This is not all of the ways we can understand the transcendent, but I start from the perspective that there is a lot of room between a maximal image of an interventionist or an anthropomorphic deity and a completely secular reality.

First, consider the value of extremes as a way of reaching transformation.

I was traveling to Washington D. C. for a conference. I had heard that my good friend and mentor, Rev. David Eaton, was suffering from liver failure. He had Hepatitis C and was a lifelong heavy drinker. Although he was on a liver transplant list, he was not a likely candidate. I hoped that I might visit him, to see him one more time before he died. I called. "Hello, it's good to hear from you." May I come visit, I asked. "No, I don't think so. I don't want to be seen like this. I am not having visitors, but it's good of you to call. How am I? Well, I'm fine. Really, I am fine. Sure, my body is failing, but my spirit is strong and my spiritual life has never been richer. (pause) The kids are good and Wanda is patient with me. Life is so sweet.... (pause) I tire easily, but it was good of you to

call. Thanks for thinking of me. Thanks for everything." He lived a few more weeks and was gone.

I do not know what happens after you die. About an afterlife, I am a skeptic. It's possible, but I do not place a lot of emphasis upon it or count on it as a place of hope or expectation. I doubt that we leave this "world of pain and sorrow for a better place in the hereafter," although I am willing to be wrong. Any grace or salvation we can count on, I believe, will be in the here and now. Unitarian Universalists don't agree on an afterlife, but we do agree upon a this-worldly emphasis.

Some two hundred years ago a revolution took place in American religion. It was the revolution that brought God down from above the world into the world itself. This revolution was called by different names. We know it as "The Enlightenment," as "Transcendentalism," and as "Early American Unitarianism." We, UUs, were the Transcendentalists. We were those who were not in looking for wisdom from outside intervention, but by finding transcendence in a "this world" concern.

One of the key figures in this revolution was William Ellery Channing. Channing said that we could know wisdom and find spiritual truth in a number of ways. He wrote in his essay on Religious Education that we can find wisdom and enlightenment by studying the scriptures of all the great religions, the great literature of human history, the examples of women and men of courage, and from life's hardships. He also said that we do not need to seek out hardships in order to grow personally. Plenty enough will find their way to our door. Another way of seeing his quest for wisdom and spiritual depth is to say that personal growth or, if you like, transcendence, comes from times of

wisdom and from times of extreme. All times of extreme lead toward the creation of meaning and toward new images of our relationships between ourselves and the Universe.

Channing focused upon just the suffering side that leads to growth, but times of great joy, fulfillment and success can be equally transforming. In order to make sense of our suffering, we are required to rethink who we are and how we are in the world. The same seems to be true for times of great joy and delight.

Channing's thinking gave rise to the Transcendentalist movement and our American UU faith tradition. I have always thought it odd or paradoxical that our "this-worldly" theology was called Transcendentalism. Are we somehow supposed to transcend from this world to some other? Or is some other outside force intervening in order that we might know a different or better world? This is how "the transcendent" is often considered.

A second way to understand transcendence is as the intersection between the ideal and the real.

Bernie Norcott-Mahany wrote me about a youthful encounter on this issue.

When I taught Latin at St. Ignatius HS in Chicago some 20+ years ago, one of the counselors at the school was also the pastor of Church of the Ascension in Oak Park, IL. The church has a great copper dome, and atop the dome is a bronze statue of Jesus, arm raised and in ascent. With a serious look on my face, I ask the pastor/counselor if there was a control panel in the rectory, which allowed him to send Jesus up, up and away

every Ascension Day... He looked puzzled at first, then stern. "No," he said. I think he realized I was kidding him (though I did think it was a great idea -- great visual at any rate), but we had no further discussion on the matter.

This is playful and metaphoric hyperbole, and in fact Jesus helps us transcend by offering higher values and a real image of the ideal.

On the serious side about UU transcendence, my friend, the UU minister Roy Phillips, believes there are times when a kind of "something more" does take place. These are, or can be, transcendent moments. It is the same as any other moment; it is just that there is somehow a greater fullness. This kind of moment may be like any other moment, or any other day and yet at the same time like no other. It is like falling in love, or like seeing a great work of art for the first time, or like a special sunset. It is a kind of awakening that lets us arrive more fully within the present.

Yet, we are so often asleep and unaware in our lives. We miss the grandeur and the glory of life itself. William Ellery Channing 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 ...clatter of machinery. (p. 940, Works)

This call to awaken to the moment can be seen in *Island*, which was written in 1962 and is Aldous Huxley's last novel. Huxley's shared insights represent much of what he had learned about being human. In this novel, there are parrots in the trees whose call is "Here and now." "It's here and now." So, a third kind of UU transcendence is simply being more awake, more aware, being "here and now" and available.

My mother offered me this UU vision as a child. I asked her many years ago, "Mom, do you believe in God?" I remember the day and her answer. She said, "I look at the stars in the sky and the cascade of time and space, at the amazing order of life and the universe, and I am in awe. This is the God I know." I appreciated her honesty and her willingness to answer.

I heard the same vision of life, awe and wonder expressed some years later, when I watched one of the first television mini-series, "Roots". In an early episode, Kunta Kinte presents his newborn baby to the sky. He said, holding his infant over his head and facing the sky, "Child, behold the Universe. Universe, behold my child."

The great 20th Century theologian, Paul Tillich, wrote of transcendence. It is that which enables us to move toward the ground of all being and becoming and to be more fully connected. This is the kind of transcendence to which most UUs aspire. This is the third kind of transcendence I offer as a form that religious liberals accept.

The German philosopher, Ludwig Feuerbach, says that transcendence is when resources outside of ourselves move

toward us and lead us toward greater fulfillment and closer alignment with that which is ideal. Such a story is the Jonah's story and so many of our stories, when we take time to reflect on the ways that our lives have been and continue to be transformed.

The fourth form of UU transcendence is to find connection to that which greater than ourselves. This is a kind of transcendence that is somewhere between the divine maximalism of an interventionist God and the anti-theism of mere secularism. There is so much interesting life experience and theology, which falls into this arena of naturalistic philosophy. It is the place out of which our movement has emerged.

Any of us can easily come to think that we are the center of the universe. Our lifelong task of spiritual and psychological maturation is the realization that we are not. The universe does not rotate around us, but we around it. This is a gift and not a curse. UU Carl Sagan put it so beautifully in his Public Broadcasting program called "Cosmos." There are times when we realize that we are specks of dust, small dots, amidst a whirling and expanding universe that is within and so beyond our comprehension. Yet, the life force is strong with us, reaching out and encouraging life and our life.

The UU prophet and literary giant Ralph Waldo Emerson put it this way, "We are a part of the Oversoul. . . 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. . . 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."

To be part of a caring community is to witness this flow of life, to realize that it is great and greater than any one of us. With luck, the community, the faith, the tradition, our beloved humanity will be here long after we are gone, but we are a part of it. We are a part of Life, of Love, and of a community of caring and visionary souls.

Nothing for me captures this sense of transcendence more than watching our children grow and having fulfilling adult lives. Being at the wedding of a beloved child can be transcendent for a UU. I love doing weddings for church families; it offers this kind of connection to the broader flow of life. I delighted in, and will always remember Stacy and Michael's wedding. She was so happy, yet scared and a bit pale before, and so radiant afterwards, and he, so gentle and shy, was all the more the man he is and is becoming. Oh, Life, Oh, sweet Life. I asked them, "Do you really want to go through with this?" She yelled out, "You damn bet you!!"

Fifth, play is a form of UU transcendence. In play we lose ourselves and enter a kind of time out of time. When we play full on, we can fall out of regular time and enter time as defined by that play. We become lost in order to be found. It is what holidays can offer. It is a place to stretch and be stretched. It is like the Kennedy family football games, or croquet on the lawn in my childhood. *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 is to be in the moment of joy and ecstasy with another and 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. It can be a place of pure joy, which seems to reach beyond time for a moment or two.

The sixth form of UU transcendence might be called growth, discovery, or becoming more fully our best selves. It can be found in times of dynamic personal change or in times of accomplishment. If transcendence means to go beyond what one has understood to be their personal limits, or the limits of their world, then times of profound re-formation may well be understood as transcendent.

On a small scale it can be like the time my wife said to me, after I found a really cool bright pink shirt I really liked. "Oh, you don't wear pink shirts." Well, the person I have been doesn't, but I am not sure that the person I am becoming might not want to wear such a shirt.

On a larger scale I think of a young man, Jonah, who after college decided he wanted to make a difference by trying to find a way to address the AIDS pandemic Africa. He raised money to buy recording equipment, so he could interview community leaders, health workers, people living with AIDS, and musicians singing about AIDS. He raised enough money to travel for six months in Africa. He obtained sponsorship from the Minnesota public radio network. They offered him technical support, and placed his show on the air and built a website with links to AIDS relief agencies. A young man went from being an

unemployed college graduate, to becoming someone who created a wonderful documentary about Africa and AIDS, who is a fundraiser, promoter, organizer, builder for a more just world, and a solo traveler to far off places. He is not the same man who left. Even liberals know when the stone rolls away from the door of the tomb.

The seventh, and 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.

To these many ways our lives are made new, let us rejoice and be glad in it. For it is life, the Life of life.