

Roots and Sources: The Mystic Path

Rev. Kate Rohde

A young woman was in my office this week, a young scientist who is finishing her doctorate in evolutionary biology. She told me how the first time she visited our church she began weeping – weeping because she had found what she had been searching for. She was more articulate than most in talking about her hopes for a different kind of religion. She had, she said, been brought up in a religion consisting of a lot of rules that didn't seem connected to life as she knew and felt it. Yet, as a science student without religion, she felt as if all of who she is was not being spoken to. Indeed, although she loves the rationality and logic of her field, that was not, she said, what first attracted her to science. Her attraction, it seemed, came from what she called the womanly part of herself: the wondering, the emotional, the intuitive bond she felt with the world around her. Her process might be intellectual, but her motive was far deeper and less explicable. Here, she felt, those two halves could be united.

In our UU tradition there have been those who felt we had to choose between the head and heart, the rational and the mystic, tradition and personal experience, modernity and spirituality.

From almost the beginning some, like Emerson, complained about a tendency to be intellectual and detached, while others, and Emerson himself, looked askance at the pure emotion of the revival styles of his neighbors during the 19th century's version of evangelical fervor, The Great Awakening. But we have been at our best when we have treated these things not as mutually exclusive, but more as polarities that we range ourselves between, both as individuals and as congregations: head *and* heart, rational *and* mystic, tradition *and* experience, logical *and* intuitive, modernity *and* spirituality.

Many years ago when I was in theological school, our teacher of liberal religious theologies divided the course up into five strands: liberal Christianity, Humanism, Personalism or Process, Scientific Theology, and Mysticism. It was an interesting division of the various strands within our approach, and this morning I want to take a look at the mystic strand – in part because it is something difficult to describe and examine but, I think, important to lift up among us as being a part of our UU tradition even though it never has nor, I expect, never will predominate.

One reason I want to lift it up is that I have run into so many UU's for whom a religious experience has been important, who felt that it set them up as an outsider. Some have even left us, feeling that our tradition would no longer welcome them.

Probably those who are most involved in a mystic path are something of outsiders no matter which tradition they are in. Although there are mystic Catholics, the mysticism of the Sufis, Buddhists, Hindus, Native Americans, in no tradition does this form the core for all, rather it is a path for a few and a fleeting or partial experience for many more. And although the mystic experience is one of connection, it is also so personal and so

difficult to communicate that it is likely to influence the religious life of an individual or a small group, but not a congregation or other larger group. It can't be institutionalized as can doctrine, ritual, or other practices. Yet for some it is a powerful and transformative aspect of religion. Often it is deeply personal and not spoken of. Most great religious figures from Jesus to the Buddha are said to have had some mystic or conversion experience as a source for their life and teachings.

William James, in his seminal work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, written a century ago, did a remarkable job of collecting and classifying these experiences – the more remarkable because he himself had little religious experience of his own.

He talks about people who fall in different categories of religious experience. One of the things he suggests is that just as we have different talents and tastes, we will have different ways of experiencing religion. He talks about the Once Born, those whose religion is something learned and a part of day to day life. They are people who have not had the kind of mystical or conversion experiences described in the rest of the book. In that chapter he quotes quite a number of Unitarians, as well as Walt Whitman, whom he suggests is a quintessential example. To some extent you might say the Once Born are the lucky ones who get it right the first time! Certainly life is less of a spiritual struggle for them. They are less likely to feel divided and out of place, but rather experience the world directly. Reality for them is all of a piece. There is a sort of optimistic, happy flavor to life, almost a naiveté. There is a sense that they are healthy and at peace with the world. The Once Born often have such a benign experience with the world that they are not searching for anything which transcends it, and their God is a benign and embracing figure.

It can be difficult for such people to be a part of religions which expect them to have a conversion experience, a trance-like state, or which heavily emphasize some nether world, because they are not temperamentally attuned to it. I have talked to many a UU who has told me that they felt like a changeling in their family when it came to religion – pressured to be born again, to see the blackness of their soul, or to engage in ritual which didn't nurture. They felt color blind in a red and green world. Sometimes they left as soon as they could, but without animus, other times they felt damaged and shamed and rejected religion all together.

There are a number of Protestant sects which actually require that to become a member you have a conversion experience, sometimes called being Born Again, and friends tell me that when they came to a certain age and hadn't had such an experience they either talked themselves into believing that they had had one or sort of faked it in order to go down the aisle with their peers. Surprisingly, our Puritan ancestors required a conversion experience of anyone who wanted to be in full covenant with the church and, unlike the Baptists, you had to *prove* to a special group within the church that your experience was genuine in order to be accepted. This became a problem after a while when the children of members who wanted to join as adults couldn't come up with such experiences, so a sort of half-membership was invented for those who wanted to join the congregation but had no evidence of a conversion experience.

Since UU congregations are often made up of Once Born individuals, including quite a number of people with some negative and even shaming experiences inside other traditions, some deny the power and reality of religious experiences, pushing away or silencing those who have them, in effect punishing those with a different sensibility just as they were punished for being different. Still, when we do that we are not true to ourselves and our tradition.

Among the experiences that William James describes, the most specific is the conversion experience. This is an experience of the Holy that lifts a person out of a state of fear, depression, or some other dark place, and sets them on a path forward in greater union with God or some other form of the Holy. Sometimes it is a sudden and specific, almost an otherworldly, experience, at other times more of a process. One of the famous stories of such an experience is the one told by Martin Luther King early during his leadership in Civil Rights. It occurred soon after his house had been bombed, as he sat in the kitchen fearing for the future of his family. In that moment, he said, God spoke to him and reassured him that he, King, was not alone on his journey. This, he says, gave him the strength to continue and a feeling of wholeness. Conversion experiences are described as bringing comfort and wholeness and a way forward to those who are facing what is frequently referred to as “a dark night of the soul”.

In my work as a social worker I met more than one person for whom a conversion experience, while not setting them on the path to greatness as it did for King, helped them as individuals take a new and better direction in life – changing a self-destructive lifestyle for one more focused on a more positive way of living. It is not magic, however. It is a push in a new direction, but many a person who has had such an experience falls back. King himself, although he sustained his efforts for the rest of his short life, still had times when he acted in self-destructive ways, felt fear and depression. One of the reasons for rituals and institutional religion has been to sustain our remembered connections with the Holy.

The conversion experience is a particular form of the classic mystic experience. Mystic experience is a phenomenon throughout the human world. According to James, these experiences are described as ineffable, meaning that those who have them feel inadequate to describe the experience; they are more like feelings or sensations rather than logic or knowledge. How do you describe in words the difference between the 9th and the 7th Beethoven symphonies, or exactly what it is like to be deeply in love?

Even though such experiences are like feelings, a second aspect is that they are “noetic,” you feel there is a kind of deep knowledge imparted to you, a revelation of significance that lasts beyond the experience. Third, they are transient, lasting anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours, but remembered and often carried into life afterwards. Lastly, they are not voluntary. You yourself do not initiate them. There are techniques that various religions use to try to help induce such a state – meditation, fixed attention, prayer, dancing, the ingestion of certain substances – such actions are ways to make us more receptive to such experiences, but cannot cause them. I have most frequently heard

of mystical experiences occurring in a natural setting when a person seems almost to leave the body and merge with the natural world. They have a sense of being a tiny but important piece in a great, mystical, whole. I have also known a number of people who, in an ordinary setting, felt suddenly transformed and embraced by love, and hearing the reassurance of a voice within that was, however, not their own voice. Most mystical experiences have a sense of a temporary loss of the walls that divide us, a profound sense of connection to the Holy.

The Universalists, in particular, had a mystic side to their tradition. On the one hand, there were the logical sorts who read the Bible and reasoned their way to Universalism, to the belief in the all-embracing love of God. But there was the other side. The mystical Universalists began with personal experiences of God's love which brought them to embrace Universalism. Having felt the strength and all-encompassing nature of God's love themselves, they felt that the love was too strong and powerful not to extend to all of creation. The Universalist belief that "nothing can separate us from the love of God" was, for these Universalists, a personal experience rather than a reasoned philosophy.

Two of the most prominent early Universalist mystics were George de Benneville, a resident of Germantown, Pennsylvania, who was heavily influenced by German mystics and also by his own vision of Jesus, and who was almost guillotined by the French for his views. He was the first person in America to preach Universal salvation. Elhanan Winchester, preacher at the most prominent Philadelphia Baptist church, read de Benneville's writings, became an outspoken, evangelical Universalist, and was forced to leave his church, taking a good part of his congregation with him. Although it was the writings of Universalists which initially attracted him, his own arguments for Universalism were based in his direct experience of God's love. Throughout the 19th century, many based their Universalism in their experience of a mystical relationship with God, rather than in logical or biblical arguments.

The Unitarians' break with the orthodox was ideological, but it was, in part, a plea to make religion more compatible with the experience of the age. Moreover, despite its affection for reason, there were many ways in which early Unitarianism can also be seen as a religion of the heart, stressing love and affection as the motive force in human dealings with God and one another, rather than the more traditional emphasis on sin and fear. In the mid-19th century, the famous Transcendentalist controversy in which Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker, and other younger Unitarians took on the older generation, many elements of the mystical and intuitive came into play. One of the great arguments of the Transcendentalists was for the authority of personal experience and intuition in discerning religious truth. Emerson's "oversoul" was one of the earliest attempts by an American to incorporate Eastern philosophy or mysticism into religion.

The dark side of the mystical has always been of concern to institutional religion and to an ethical and ordered society. When religion is grounded solely in the individual's experience, there is no check by the community or by tradition, and no clear way of determining that the experience is truly rooted in God, the Holy, or something that is of positive value. History has been replete with people who claimed that God was leading

them in a direction we see as harmful or even evil. There was a rather grandiose mystical side to Fascism. There is also a rather immature approach to mysticism in which a young unformed person looks to merge with a charismatic leader or wisdom tradition rather than having a self that is augmented by a transformative experience. Yet it is also the mystical which has often challenged the authoritarian side of religion. Traditionally, the only way to judge whether an experience is of the Holy or something else is by the effect it has on the person.

As they used to say, how do you know if the voice you are hearing is from God or the Devil? As a religious liberal, I am skeptical when someone wants to use their own private experience to gain authority over others, and I am more trusting when their experience changes their own life and their own way of being for the better.

Although a majority of UU's may be Once Born and never experience the mystic side of religion, a large minority have something like the experiences James described. Moreover, even among the Once Born there is an aspect of the spiritual that is not of the head or the rational mind. It may be aesthetic as through art and music, it may be emotional as in the experiences that move us to action, it may be intuitive as knowledge that comes through apprehension, it may be naturalistic in the felt connections with the natural world. And even within these categories there is great variety: some are moved by a great symphony, others by a gospel choir, some are drawn to the ocean, others to the prairie.

Even if we are not mystics, there is that intuitive, emotional, aesthetic side to us that motivates and inspires us. As the young biologist said, it may be her mind that helps her gain her doctorate but it was her spirit that drew her to love the world so much she longed to discover its secrets.