

First and Foremost

Unitarian Universalism as an American Mystical Tradition

By
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Although today's message is ultimately about Unitarian Universalism in terms of mysticism, its title, "First and Foremost," has three meanings. As my first official sermon as your minister, it is the *first and foremost* thing I want to say; secondly, when it comes to defining our UU faith, I'd argue ours is *first and foremost* a mystical tradition; and, perhaps most importantly, I believe we ought to approach our lives and the world, *first and foremost*, as mystics.

Nevertheless, I realize there many Unitarian Universalists who aren't really sure what *mysticism* really means. This is so because the word "mystical" is arguably the most misused and underused word in the English language! It is often *misused*, almost synonymously, to describe states of mind, experiences, and things that are considered extraordinary, magical, or simply unreal. We might describe a unicorn, for example, as a *mystical* creature. But mysticism actually has everything to do with this world, with the here and now, and nothing to do with things that aren't real. Yet, because we don't understand its genuine meaning, it is also *underused*. We tend to use the word, "spiritual," when what we really mean is, "mystical."

To help us understand all of this, it's seems best to begin by illustrating what mysticism is *not*. For the mystical approach is one of negation, not affirmation, of questioning, not answering. Imagine the woodcarver or stonemason who creates by simply removing what's already in the way, that which is preventing us from seeing what's really beneath the surface. They work with the negative spaces, by letting go and letting be, in order to discover what's really there. This is precisely how mystics attempt to get at ultimate truth, by letting go of what we think we know. We understand what Socrates meant when he said, "I am wise because I neither know, nor think that I know."

A few weeks ago, for example, while at a coffee shop with a friend, the barista thought we looked enough alike to ask if we were related. Being the mystic that I am, I immediately began struggling with how to answer such a deep and complicated question. It was like the lightning strike that set my brain ablaze with even more questions. *What does it mean to be related? Would it be true or false to simply say, "No, we're just friends? Should I merely reinforce the false cultural paradigm that we're only akin to the people closest to us, or to those who are most like us? What is family? What is truth?* Fortunately the human brain processes thoughts in just nanoseconds, so I seamlessly responded, "As I understand it, there's more genetic difference between two chimpanzees living in the same troop than there is between any two human beings living anywhere on the planet. So, yes, I'd say we're related."

"Huh?" The barista replied.

"There's more genetic difference between two chimpanzees living in the same troop than there is between any two human beings living anywhere on the planet," I repeated, "So I'd say we are at least cousins."

"Oh," she said, "Is that true?"

"Yes," I said, "As I understand it, the genetic line we come from is so narrow that all humans ever to have lived are very closely related."

She took a couple of seconds to process the synapses that were now firing in her own head, then replied, "But I don't believe we're monkeys."

"Huh?" I responded.

"I don't think we came from monkeys," she said.

Without hesitating a synaptic second I blurted out, "But you are a monkey!"

"What?" She asked.

"You are a monkey," I reiterated.

Just then one of her cohorts approached and asked, with a smile on his face, "Did you say she's a monkey?"

"Yes, we're all monkeys," I said, "Well primates, apes," I specified.

"We're ape-like," he argued.

"No, we're apes," I insisted, "classified by our brachiated shoulders, and the fact that humans, orangutans, gorillas, and chimpanzees all stem from a common ancestor, making us genetically almost identical."

Given that the coffee shop was so close to the Southern Baptist seminary, I should not have been surprised to learn all three of the baristas working behind the counter that day were students there; nor that my comments would end up sparking a short-lived debate over evolution.

One argued that all she needed to confirm her creationist beliefs is faith. "You get your beliefs from a book," she said, "and so do I."

Another said, quite defiantly, "I will never believe in evolution! Never! No matter what anyone says!"

After I argued that there is much scientific evidence for evolution and that the Bible is but a book of stories and myths, another commanded, "That's it! This conversation is over!" So, I ordered a cup of coffee and sat down to visit with my cousin.

The moral of the story is, next time you're asked if you're related to someone, pull a Nancy Reagan and, "just say no!" But the real point I'm making is that these three young people, all students in an accredited graduate program, felt it was perfectly sound to engage in an argument by saying, 1) I only need faith, not facts; 2) I will never accept something contrary to my faith, no matter what facts are presented before me; and 3) I will stick my fingers in my ears and say, "la, la, la," if I hear something I don't like!

This, then, is an example of what mysticism is *not*. Mysticism, like its root implies, means entering into the *mist*, into the *mystery*. Mysticism is fundamentally

about questioning and emphasizing how much we don't know, how much there remains to be known and understood. The mystic's quest is but to question. This is why I'm convinced Unitarian Universalism is fundamentally a mystical tradition. No matter how different our individual beliefs might be, whether we consider ourselves Pagans, liberal Christians, humanists, deists, atheists, agnostics, or something else, UU's tend to question just about everything! Indeed, the reason we're able to tolerate, if not celebrate, so many different beliefs is because our questions open us to other possibilities.

This is why I think the first source of inspiration listed in our denominational bylaws has been appropriately placed. We call it, "The direct experience of that transcending mystery of wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life." For if we did not begin here, by directly experiencing *mystery* and *wonder*, we would not, could not, enjoy that *spirit of openness* that is so distinctive to our faith. Nor would we be open to those other sources of potential inspiration—the words and deeds of prophetic women and men; wisdom from all the world's religions, Jewish and Christian teachings included; as well as from philosophy, science, reason, and humanism; and even from the forgotten and oppressed voices of the *anawim*, the *pagani*, the Native Americans, and the many other indigenous peoples throughout history whose Earth-centered teachings and ways may be more poignant today than ever. Were it not for our openness to the questions and mysteries of life, or for the awareness of how little we truly know, and how much there is still to be known, we might very well find ourselves with our minds already made up, like those Baptist seminary students, with no need for facts, no need to listen to other opinions, and no courage to even speak to those with whom we disagree.

As mystics, however, Unitarian Universalists truly are more comfortable living with our questions than any answer we might hear. We understand, as my college philosophy professor taught me so long ago, that no human statement is ever adequate, that there is always more to be said, and that the opposite of all we believe might be equally as true. We understand, as theologian Matthew Fox insists, "that religious experience... begins with awe and wonder."¹

Of course Unitarian Universalism isn't the only mystical tradition. Virtually every major world religion has a mystical strain. The Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart, for example, who described God as "Absolute Nothing," also said, "Love God as God is a not-God, a not-mind, a not-person, a not image."² This is not unlike what St. John of the Cross was getting at in his poem about *not knowing*, "Not knowing where I entered," he said, "Many things I suddenly learned... The higher he climbs,

¹ Fox, Mathew, *Wrestling with the Prophets*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 1995, p. 37.

² Fox, Matthew, *One River, Many Wells*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 2000, p.157.

the less he understands... it is an act of clemency that leaves us not-knowing.”³ St. Denis said, “The most divine knowledge of God is that which is known by not-knowing,”⁴ And the unknown author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* said there must be a “cloud of unknowing,” a mist, if you will, “between you and your God.”⁵ He also said, “When I speak of darkness, I mean the absence of knowledge⁶... [you must] learn to be at home in this darkness.”⁷ Likewise, the *Tao te Ching* tells us, “The Way that can be spoken of is not the real Way. The name that can be named is not the real Name... Mystery within Mystery is the gateway to all understanding.”⁸ It goes on to say, “The Way objectified is nebulous and blurred.”⁹ Hinduism tells us, “one can only say, ‘not... not’ [neti... neti]. [It] is ungraspable, for [it] cannot be grasped.”¹⁰ Likewise, Zen Buddhism, according to Fritjaf Capra, “transcends all categories of thought [and] is not interested in any abstraction or conceptualization. It has no special doctrine or philosophy, no formal creeds or dogmas, and it asserts that this freedom from all fixed beliefs makes it truly spiritual.”¹¹ “Similarly, the Jewish Kabbalah tells us that, “Every definition of God leads to heresy; definition is spiritual idolatry.”¹² Like a woodcarver or stonecutter, it tells us genuine theology is about removing our ideas about the divine. “With every increase in the negations regarding God,” it says, “you come nearer to the apprehension of God.”¹³

Even many secular thinkers understand this approach to ultimate truth and understanding. The poet, John Keats, coined the phrase, *Negative Capability*, referring to those who are, “capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” The popular philosopher, Bertrand Russell, raised a Unitarian, once wrote, Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves.¹⁴ Einstein once said, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead.” And the contemporary writer, James Carse, author of, *The Religious Case Against Belief*, tells

³ deNicolas, Antonio T., *St. John of the Cross: Alchemist of the Soul*, Paragon House, New York, NY, 1989, p. 135f.

⁴ Johnston, *ibid.*, p. 127.

⁵ Johnston, *ibid.* p. 45.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 44.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 41.

⁸ #1 [my own translation]

⁹ #21

¹⁰ Brhadaranyaka Upanishad 4.5.15.

¹¹ Capra, Fritjof, *The Tao of Physics*, (Shambhala, Boston, MA, 2000) p. 122.

¹² Matt, Daniel C., *The Essential Kabbalah*, Quality Paper Back Book Club, New York, NY, 1995, p. 32.

¹³ Matt, Daniel C., *The Essential Kabbalah*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY, 1995, p. 7.

¹⁴ Russell, Bertrand, *The Problem of Philosophy*, (Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 1912, 1959) p. 161.

us, “not knowing *is* the path. Knowing that we don’t know is not only a higher ignorance, it is the basis for all our hope.¹⁵ Even my favorite atheist, the great 20th century social psychologist, Erich Fromm said, “The most I can do is say what God is not, to state the negative attributes, to postulate that he is *not* unlimited, not unkind, not unjust.¹⁶”

Throughout our long history, Unitarian Universalists have also been increasingly reluctant to use definitive theological language. In short, we don’t like to talk much about God. This is so because of our mystical leanings, our awareness that there is always more to the story. So whenever we are presented with definitive answers about life’s biggest subjects—God, Truth, Morality—we start asking questions. 2000 years ago, when we were told Jesus is God, our Unitarian ancestors questioned it. The powers-that-be responded by drafting the Nicene Creed, inventing the doctrine of the Trinity, and outlawing Unitarianism. This ushered in the Dark Ages during which any questioning of Church authorities was strictly prohibited. But during the 16th century, after the printing press was invented, Michael Servetus read it for himself and again began questioning the official definition of God. We’ve been tweaking the Nicene Creed ever since by developing theological statements that better reflect our values and ideas. We kept coming up with more relaxed and nebulous statements about God and Jesus right up until the 19th century, when Ralph Waldo Emerson challenged us to transcend traditional Christian language altogether. A few years later, during the 20th century, the Humanists questioned whether we should be using “God” language at all. In 1985 we adopted our current UU principles that never mention the word “God.” And, as recently as 2003, the former President of the UUA, Rev. Bill Sinkford stirred up a denominational controversy after a Texas newspaper misreported that he wanted to reinsert the word *God* into them. What he actually called for was a “vocabulary of reverence,” complaining that our seven principles “contain no hint of the holy.” And, most recently, the UUA Committee on Appraisal began reviewing these principles to determine if there is need to tweak them further still.

I say all of this only to prove the point that, no matter what we believe as individuals, Unitarian Universalists, as a whole, continually question what we hear, even among ourselves. So while most mainstream religion in America continues to speak as if it not only knows God, but knows God’s will, mind, and intentions, we continue to question whether we should speak of God at all, and, for the most part, we don’t anymore, at least not in any definitive terms. “God cannot have a name,” Erich Fromm wrote, because, “A name always denotes a thing, or a person, something finite. How can God have a name, if [God] is not a person, not a thing?”¹⁷ So, as mystics, UUs have always been more comfortable with the phrase “God is not,” than with talk of what “God is.” We may not know what God is, or if God is, but we

¹⁵ Carse, James, P., *Breakfast at the Victory*, (Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1994) p. 185.

¹⁶ Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1956, 1989, p. 58.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

certainly know what God is not. God is not a person, or thing, as Fromm pointed out, nor is God the injustice, nor the ignorance, nor the violence, nor the oppression that has often been carried out in *his* name. For nothing can be carried out in the name of that which is nameless, in the name of that which is not. So, like Erich Fromm, I prefer to describe myself as an *atheistic mystic*; as a theologian who prefers not to speak of God. I do not know what God is, or even *if* God is, and like to use this word as little as possible. For, as Fromm said, the atheistic mystic, “does not pray for anything, does not expect anything from God, ...does not speak about God—nor even mention [its] name.”¹⁸ And like Unitarian Universalists everywhere, this has allowed me to approach others with a humble spirit, opening me to the diversity of beliefs around me, to infinite possibilities, to the *free and responsible search for truth and meaning*, and to the *worth and dignity of every person*.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 60.