

Transcendence in the Natural World

by
Rev. Jeffrey G. Jones

Thermal Belt Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
March 18, 2018

I heard the following story a few years ago.

A new monk arrives at the monastery. He is assigned to help the other monks in copying the old texts by hand. He notices, however, that they are copying copies, and not the original books.

So, the new monk goes to the head monk to ask him about this. He points out that if there was an error in the first copy, that error would be continued in all of the other copies. The head monk says, "We have been copying from the copies for centuries, but you make a good point, my son."

So, [the head monk] goes down into the cellar with one of the copies to check it against the original. Hours later, nobody has seen him. So, one of the monks goes downstairs to look for him. He hears sobbing coming from the back of the cellar and finds the old monk leaning over one of the original books crying. He asks [the old monk] what's wrong.

"The word is celebrate not celibate," says the old monk with tears in his eyes.

I tell this story because we, who are part of a liberal faith like Unitarian Universalism, are not unquestioningly bound to tradition. What is more, I believe we are called not only to question traditional practices, we are also called to explore and even expand on the use of traditional religious language.

We do this, because we have a proud religious heritage of women and men who were not satisfied with the status quo, who demanded more of religion than dogma and creed, and because as human beings we wanted, and still want, an authentic experience of everything life has to offer us.

In my own spiritual journey, one of the many religious words I have enjoyed exploring is the word "transcendence." I like the Merriam-Webster simple definition of transcendence: It is, "beyond the limits of ordinary experience."

This morning, I would like to explore transcendence with you in three ways: through our experiences of the natural world, through our ideals in how we treat one another, and through our sense of belonging to the world around us.

PART I—THE PHYSICAL WORLD

In Genesis 6 through 9 in the Hebrew Bible, we find the story of Noah and the Flood. As the story goes, God is so distraught at the wickedness of humanity, that God destroys all the animals and people he had created except for Noah and his family and a pair of each kind of animal.

God succeeds in this destruction, and yet, at the end of the story, promises never to do this again. As a sign of God's continuing promise, the rainbow is cast into the sky. A god who is distraught, a god who after destroying humankind has second thoughts, these are, in themselves, ample sermon fodder. But today, my interest is in the rainbow.

This story of the rainbow has played a crucial role in my understanding of religion. Religion, as I have come to understand it, is our search for truth and meaning and order in life and in death.

Religion is our effort to make sense of the world around us, to understand our relationship with and our place in the world, and to find some assurance and hope that life is not as menacing as it sometimes appears. In a pre-scientific world, the story of God's promise through the rainbow touched on each of these.

Today we have scientific explanations for many things, and while we have these rational explanations, I believe they must in no way diminish our sense of awe and wonder, beauty and joy. It is my hope that we are genuinely mesmerized by the natural world that surrounds us. If I had told a Story for All Ages this morning, I would have shown the children and youth the most beautiful, awe-inspiring pictures, full of splendor that words cannot even begin to describe.

Whether it is the rainbow in the sky, a sunrise or a sunset, the stars above or the inner workings of the human body, we are rightly held in awe of these natural phenomena, these wonders of nature. And the Responsive Reading this morning by Robert T. Weston (#530) stirs me when I think that out of the stars emerged life, singing, and love.

To me, they are transcendent experiences; they put us in touch with the deepest recesses of our human experience. They transcend what might be thought of as ordinary and common experiences. And yet, despite their seeming rarity and sometimes incomprehensibility, they emanate from the natural world and are gloriously worthy of celebration.

Of course, there are many things we still do not understand, and that sense of mystery and wonder remains steadfast in our hearts. Holding on to the mystery rather than attribute things we don't understand to speculation, to me, is the greatest act of humility. In my own religious and spiritual journey, holding on to mystery acknowledges our human finitude, and allows us to be in relationship with that which is beyond our understanding.

PART 2—HOW WE RELATE TO OTHERS

There is another extraordinary experience that has captured my attention. In the course of evolution, humanity has witnessed increasingly meaningful ways of how to be in relationship with others; I am speaking here of our experience of love and compassion and more.

Perhaps it is my bias, but it seems to me that religion has had a critical role in our understanding of how to embody these values. I am speaking about teachings that have ancient roots, and inspire us in how we are to treat one another.

From the Abrahamic religions the values that touch me most deeply are love and forgiveness, kindness and mercy, as well as justice, seeking a more just world for all. And from eastern religions, we learn of our interrelatedness and that compassion and lovingkindness for ourselves and others are ways to free ourselves from desire. These are ideals that we will spend a lifetime trying to live up to.

Our own Unitarian Universalist faith follows in these traditions. When we speak of the inherent worth and dignity of every person—no exceptions—we are clearly in step with religious teachings that speak to our better natures.

I maintain that these are transcendent values. I call them transcendent because they represent ideals, states of perfection that we can imagine, that we can strive for, that we can partially achieve, but that we will never completely embody because we are human beings.

A few years ago, I gave a sermon in which I said I believe that we in liberal religion have moved from worship of transcendent beings to a deep yearning to live by transcendent values. These values and ideals that call to us, hold before us a way of being in the world that is beyond our grasp in their perfection, and yet appeal to our spiritual natures and inspire us in profound ways.

I call these values and ideals transcendent because we will never be able to live them perfectly, and yet there is nothing more compelling, nothing more humbling, nothing more magnificent than striving for these ideals, being willing to fail, to humbly acknowledge our humanity, to dust ourselves off, and try again.

I call our ideals like the inherent worth and dignity of every person transcendent because we have no factual basis for asserting them, and yet, we are called to live our lives as if they were true.

I am in love with these ideals that call us to be our best selves. I can think of nothing more important in the religious search for truth and meaning.

PART 3—A SENSE OF CONNECTION, BELONGING, A UNITIVE EXPERIENCE

Finally, I want to speak about one other kind of transcendent experience.

As human beings, we have a deep sense of belonging and connection to life. Perhaps this begins with our animal natures, from our need for security and that we are social creatures. And yet, I have the sense that it is much more than that. I think our presence here this morning speaks to our desire to belong to something larger than ourselves, that we seek connection and purpose in life.

As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm the oneness and connection of all life and all that is not life. We see this in the affirmation of our seventh principle, “the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part” which speaks to the vital role of our shared interdependence in this life.

When speaking of belonging, of connection, of oneness, I include here a wide range of experiences including what we traditionally call mystical experiences. These are peak experiences of belonging and a feeling of oneness with the universe that defies description.

I don't know the source of these experiences. Because these are very unique and personal experiences, I think that question must be answered by each individual. What I do want to offer, and this is perhaps again my bias, is that there are deep recesses of the human

experience that we barely understand and may never understand. And so, for me, mystical experiences emanate from the mystery of life.

When I speak of a sense of belonging or purpose, I include here my own sense of ministerial calling, a calling that to me is not a calling to a profession, but to a deep sense of purpose. And I don't believe there is anything unique about a "ministerial" calling, because a calling comes in all shapes, sizes, colors and textures.

What these callings have in common is a strong sense of purpose. If I chose to, I could say that it feels other worldly; it feels that I am being drawn from something outside myself. And yet it also feels very natural, intense, but natural, a peak experience of the world of which I am a part. My calling feels bound together with a sense of awe, of reverence, of joy, of gratitude, and a deep connection with life.

TRANSCENDENTALISM

These three experiences of transcendence—of the natural world, of our ideals and values, and of our sense of purpose and meaning—all bring to mind our very own Transcendentalist Movement of the early and mid-19th century, led by Ralph Waldo Emerson, a Unitarian minister for a brief time.

Emerson was light-years ahead of the mainstream culture and even the orthodox Unitarians of his day. Emerson wrote of God and miracles, but not as traditionally understood. He wrote not of the God in the Bible, but the God found in nature and within each person. He wrote of miracles, but not those performed by Jesus; he wrote of the miracle of the birth of a child. When speaking of transcendence, there is room for God—God of the natural world.

A REVOLUTION IN LANGUAGE

For most of human history, the realm of God, miracle, awe, mystery, and wonder—our biggest and best words—have been reserved for another realm. And yet, I believe we are part of a transformation, if not a revolution, in the way we think about, talk about, and experience life. And I am so grateful that my Unitarian Universalist faith allows me to embrace these transcendent experiences of life in the natural world.

CONCLUSION

As I hope you can appreciate, I was very motivated to write this sermon as spring approaches. Whether it is the bursting forth of new life, or the deep feelings of connection inspired by this season and all seasons of the year, each of these connections is very much part of our human experience.

May we continue to find joy, gratitude, awe, beauty, wonder, mystery, belonging, purpose and oneness in this life that calls to our hearts and calls us into new ways of being and new ways of being together.

May it be so.