

Are You a Mystic?

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The title of this sermon is really a ruse. I'm not really asking you if you are a mystic. I'm really asking if I am. I'm not sure yet why it would matter if I am or not. How is it possible to really know? Is it even desirable, especially if you are a minister to a group of Unitarians, many of whom are humanist in their perspective? Is being a mystic something that you are born to be or is it something you can become? What difference would discovering I am a mystic make for others or me?

I'm not sure when I began to suspect I might be. Maybe about 12 years ago, but my suspicions have grown much stronger in the last few years. Before that I doubt I would have even asked the question, for the idea was preposterous.

Most of what I knew about mystics was from the lives of Christian saints. Women such as Hildegard of Bingen, Teresa of Avila, and Julian of Norwich defined my understanding of what a mystic was. They all had ecstatic visions of God. Julian describes hers this way:

All this blessed teaching of our Lord was shown to me in three parts, that is, by bodily vision and by words formed in my understanding and by spiritual vision. But I may not and cannot show the spiritual visions to you as plainly and fully as I should wish; but I trust in our Lord God Almighty that he will, out of his goodness and for love of you, make you accept it more spiritually and more sweetly than I can or may tell it to you.

Based on their experiences, my being a mystic was out of the question. This is not language I would ever use as the son of a scientist or as a non-theist, someone who has let go of the idea of a personal god. The closest I ever came to having a vision was when I denied having one. At my final interview to be approved for ordination, the first question I was asked was how did I know I had been called to the ordained ministry. Having been asked that question repeatedly over my four years of preparation, I was more than a little exasperated by it. I told them I had never had a dream where God's hand came out of a cloud and wrote my name. Frankly, I had no idea what God thought of my being ordained. At that precise moment the chair I was sitting in collapsed under me.

Another reason my being a mystic was nonsense to me is that mystics are held up as being holy heroes full of wisdom. I have never felt holy or sufficiently heroic or wise to be counted in their number. Clearly if this exploration is going to go any further I need to understand mysticism better. It turns out that is no easy task. This is not because it is so complex. It turns out it is, in fact, strikingly simple in structure. It is infinitely less complicated than Christian theology. What makes it so hard to grasp is that it is buried in confusion and misunderstanding. People approach mysticism with preconceptions and prejudices that cast a murky cloud over the phenomenon.

A good place to start is determining what mysticism is not.

It is not concerned with the supernatural. Miracles are part of popular religion, not of mystical religion. Nor is God necessary to mysticism, though many mystics do describe their experience in terms of a relationship to God or Allah or Brahman. Buddha is an example of a major mystic who did not.

Mysticism does not involve having visions or hearing voices. It has nothing to do with the occult, ghosts, extra-sensory perception or out-of-body experiences. It is not concerned with spiritualism or clairvoyance, or telepathy, though it is often muddled in many people's minds with these phenomena.

Some think fundamentalists are mystics. They are not. They are fervent believers. They don't need mystical awareness; they have their convictions. Mystics have little enthusiasm for believing as the way to greater awareness. As one mystic put it: "for the convinced believer, understanding or direct contact with reality is exceedingly difficult." For mystics it is

“understanding” and “direct contact with reality” that matter above all.

The mystical experience is not intellectual. It is not rational. Not analytical. It is non-conceptual and non-verbal. This is where the idea of mysticism loses most Unitarians. If it is not rational, of what use is it? Our overpowering affection for the rational mode of understanding, our thinking that rationality is the only true worldview – the ultimate truth – makes mysticism something to be discarded as being misty, foggy, vague or fuzzy. In fact, mysticism is neither vague nor muddled nor misty. On the contrary, it possesses a jewel-like clarity. It is simple, uncluttered, and direct. It is a direct experience that changes our understanding of reality.

In order for us to make sense of the world our brain divides it into parts even if we can't see them, like an atom, which we divide into ever-smaller parts. In the visible world we open our eyes to a new day and see sunshine, eggs, toast, and coffee. We divide reality into discrete parts, and give each part a name, a handle by which we can hold it in our minds and manipulate it. Mystical awareness does just the reverse. And therein lies its value.

A mystic understands the nature of things most fully by setting aside all concepts, all cultural conditioning, all verbal formulations, all beliefs, theology, philosophy, ideas, and develops a direct, non-verbal awareness of the world, others and his or her self as a unity, as one, as a living whole.

The mystical experience at its peak is an intense, sweeping awareness of the whole nature of things, and our selves as an inherent, inseparable part of it all. It is an experience of “all that is” as a meaningful whole.

It is a way of integrating, unifying, making whole. Instead of trying to understand the world in our minds by breaking it down into small parts, naming each part, the mystical mode puts it all together, nameless, including the self, into one vast, rich, unified whole, radiant with meaning.

Mysticism throws off the limitations of verbalised, socially accepted truths and concepts about the nature of things, and makes direct contact with what is, experiencing not words, not ideas only but the whole itself, as it comes to be contained within us, in our accumulated experience of it. It is a deep awareness of the unity of all that is, and of the self as an intimate part of it.

Albert Einstein understood this way of experiencing the world. He thought, “the religion of the future will be a cosmic religion. It should transcend a personal God and avoid dogmas and theology. Covering both the natural and the spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things as a meaningful unity.”

This is the heart of mysticism: the experience of all things as a meaningful unity.

What is this unity mystics experience? Some mystics simply call it the One. Others call it reality or ultimate reality or ground of being or God. Since what they experience is beyond words, how they name it is less important than where their names for it point us. They are signposts pointing towards all that is, was, and is to be. Known to us in part; and in part unknown, a mystery. It is where we live and move and have our being.

So why is experiencing this mystical unity of any value, our pragmatic selves ask?

It is what breaks us out of what the mystics call “the trance of every day life.”

The reality we think we know is in truth what we learned from the people around us as we grew up. It is true in every society. We learn to name all the parts of the world around us as dictated by our cultural background. Some of us here live in New Zealand. Others live in Aotearoa. Same place, different cultures. In our society we learn that women and people of colour are inferior to white men, that the poor deserve their plight, that war may be regrettable

but essential to civilised life, that the earth's resources are to be exploited; that our goals in life should be success, security, status and productivity. We weren't born thinking these things. Our people taught us to think, feel and strive in this way, just as they were taught.

We all live in a world created by words, ideas, values, rituals, myth, and the mass media. These elements together create a worldview, which most people assume is the only proper way of looking at the world. All of our activities, our thoughts and feelings, the very shape, texture and quality of our lives are defined by this loose, messy collection of ideas and images. This worldview or framework of orientation is so close to us, so taken for granted, that it limits our freedom to see the world in any other way.

It is as though we were hypnotized early in life to see, feel, think, and behave in certain ways, and, like hypnotic subjects, we dutifully do as we have earlier been instructed to do. It is a serious problem because, as it turns out, many of the instructions we have been given in this way are destructive and self-destructive.

Mystical awareness is the antidote. It can set us free from hypnotic captivity to the basic, largely unconscious, taken-for-granted assumptions of our society. This kind of awareness of the undivided whole may expand and complement our rational understanding, in order that we may rise above the insistent pressures of the modern world view that is now pressing us toward extinction.

It is a basic insight in mysticism that reality as we have been instructed to perceive it is seriously, destructively distorted, and that much human suffering is the result of people taking for granted that these distortions are a true image of the real world. As mystics see it, life as it is ordinarily lived is often out of touch, out of harmony with reality, and that this is why there is so much misery and destructiveness on earth. Mystics propose that we escape the hold of our social conditioning upon us, not let it totally determine any longer the way we understand the world and our selves.

While Unitarians today favour a rational view of the world, our spiritual roots are firmly planted in the mystical realm. In the late 19th century, Francis Greenwood Peabody, who was on the faculty of the Harvard Divinity School, went abroad to study at the University of Halle in Germany. He was greeted by the then famous German Professor Tholuck who, when he learned that Peabody was a Unitarian, and the son of a Unitarian minister, declared, "Ah, you are an American Unitarian. They are the true mystics."

Professor Tholuck was referring to the influence Transcendentalism had upon Unitarian thought in America. Emerson, who had been hailed as the first true American philosopher, advocated a kind of nature mysticism based in part on the writings of Hindu and Buddhist mystics. His concept of the Oversoul is indistinguishable from the Hindu notion of the human soul being one with the divine soul of the universe. He talked about becoming "a transparent eyeball" to the currents of the Universal Being manifest in nature and in the human mind.

Everything hinges on whether you buy the bag of skin theory of human nature. Do we extend beyond our skins, and if so, to what degree? W. G. Roll reflects, "If the borders between self and environment can be made to disappear, this is likely to have profound effects on our attitude to our environment, both social and physical. If the self is experienced as actually embracing other people, self-consciousness becomes social consciousness." And social consciousness embraces social and political structures and relationships. This means that a true social prophetic conscience is grounded in a mystical experience of our connection to one another and the realisation that what we do to others and to our environment we ultimately do to ourselves. We are the stewards and keepers of all life on this fragile green earth with which we are one. And we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, because our brothers and sisters are our selves writ large.

Mystics have often been the heretics and even revolutionaries of their respective religious traditions. Meister Eckhardt, a late 13th, early 14th century German theologian and mystic whose writing walked a thin line between heresy and orthodoxy during his lifetime. He was

called on the carpet and challenged for his views on more than one occasion. He died while on trial for heresy, but before learning the verdict. His writings were declared heretical because he implied that the human soul and God at their core were one. The Islamic Sufi mystic, Al-Hallaj, was tried for heresy and executed because he wrote in a state of mystical ecstasy, that he and God were one. The author of the Gospel of John was a mystic, and while Jesus never said it, it is not surprising that the author had Jesus make the heretical statement, "I and the Father are one."

As the classical heretics of our Protestant Christian tradition we Unitarians should pay close attention to anyone who has been labelled a heretic by someone else. We just might have something in common with them. Heresy means to choose for oneself and that has always been a hallmark of our religious tradition. There is a kind of universalism of the spirit that mystics both feel and seek to articulate. Carl Jung, another mystic, called it the "collective unconscious." Mystics declare in one way or another that revelation is not sealed, that the discovery of truth and the encounter with ultimate reality is a continuing process. Walt Whitman, America's poet of the soul, put it this way: "I do not say that Bibles and religions are not divine. I say they have all grown out of you, and may grow out of you still. It is not they who give life. It is you who give life."

In the course of my spiritual journey it has become clear to me that both the rational and the mystical worldviews are necessary for a full grasp of the nature of things. Either one, pursued exclusively, limits, cripples, distorts our understanding of reality. Both ways of viewing the world are important to us. That is not to say they should be blended, for they just do not mix. It is that we must include both rational and mystical awareness in our approach to understanding the world and ourselves.

Unitarianism is essentially a rational mysticism; and this is, in fact, its most valuable characteristic. We have managed to create a form of institutional religion which continually brushes aside the idea that any verbal formulation can be the final statement of truth. Instead it remains deliberately, consciously, and reverently open, knowing that the truth that matters most is not that which can be stated on paper, but that which lives in the self, the inner nature of each living human being.

So am I a mystic? I must be. I'm a Unitarian. I am committed to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning and I experience myself as part of the interdependent web of all creation.