

Good Enough: Humanism and Mysticism
Reverend Mary Ann Macklin

Allow me to begin with gratitude for our musicians, Bloominwinds, not just because of their wonderful music, but because this morning, they along with Haydn, Elgar, Colomer (blended with some sacred silence) have conveyed much of the essence of my message today. A part of me wants to begin with an apology for this sermon, not because it's not good, it's good enough, but because there's a part of me, like Rumi's Thirsty Fish at the end of the poem, who wants to invite in a great silence, and wonders 'why I ever thought to use language'. So in an odd paradoxical way, I want to apologize for the use of language in this sermon.

Also a sermon, by dictionary definition, 1) is an oral presentation, within a public setting, of religious nature. The other definition of a sermon is 2) an annoying harangue. With these definitions leading us forward, and with profound reverence for music and silence, let us further enter the realm of language (some might say the left hemisphere of our brain) without apology.

And if I am going to start with language, let me start with one of the best, William Shakespeare..

Horatio: O day and night, but this is wondrous strange!

Hamlet: And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy. (1)

In Shakespeare's Hamlet, this dialogue between the thoughtful and rational Horatio and his friend, Hamlet (who sometimes remind me of Star Trek's Spock and Kirk) occurs after Horatio discovers Hamlet having a conversation with the ghost of his father. Horatio and Hamlet are portrayed to be students at the University of Wittenberg which was a known location of Protestant humanism.

The academic subjects studied by these two young men probably included classical teachings such as ethics, logic and the natural sciences. The fact that Hamlet is having a conversation with a ghost, an entity not quantifiable by empirical evidence, is not dreamt of in Horatio's worldview. "*O day and night, but this is wondrous strange!*" Horatio exclaims. "*And therefore as a stranger give it welcome,*" his friend Hamlet instructs him.

As part of our welcome this morning I offered language after our Prelude, words from Reverend Kenneth Patton about this house of worship, this meeting room, this place of sanctuary. "*This house is for the ingathering of nature and human nature,*" Kenneth Patton proclaims, "*It is a house of freedom, guarding the dignity and worth of every person....It is a house of art, adorning its celebrations with melodies and handiworks....It is a house of truth-seeking, where scientists can encourage devotion to their quest, where mystics can abide in a community of searchers.*"

Kenneth Patton was minister at First Unitarian Society of Madison, WI from 1942 to 1949, a congregation, which I served from 1997 to 2002. Patton, a confirmed humanist, was a prophetic voice within our denomination during his ministry which lasted until 1986. He expanded the notion of Universalism from its origins of universal salvation that professed that all are saved, no one is condemned to hell, and that humanity is good enough within an all loving God.

Kenneth Patton preached a new Universalism, a Universal Religion that embraced all of humanity, the wisdom and symbols of all the world's religions, and the earth itself. He saw the circle as a great symbol of this spiritual outlook. Reverend David Bumbaugh said of Patton's impact on our denomination, "It was he who taught a monotone rationalism how to sing; it was he who taught a stumble-footed humanism how to dance; it was he who cried 'Look!' and taught our eyes to see the glory in the ordinary." Kenneth Patton, I believe, left an enlivened spiritual heritage for all of our congregations.

This house is for the ingathering of nature and human nature," Patton said "*It is a house of truth-seeking, where scientists can encourage devotion to their quest, where mystics can abide in a community of searchers.*"

This morning I simply want to embrace truth-seeking and explore this apparent dualism of the scientist and the mystic, the seeming paradox of humanism and mysticism, or as some might view it, the functions of the left brain and the right brain. I want to welcome the wondrous strange that is beyond Horatio's philosophy and seek to understand how our experiences, particularly those of a transcendental nature, inform our faith.

Faith, for me, is a verb. As liberal religious seekers, faith is part of our ongoing search for meaning which we find in the ordinary and extraordinary as we celebrate life, and faith is a part of our ongoing search for meaning which we need in times of challenge and suffering. To whom do we turn when we are suffering?

When we are suffering physically? When we are suffering emotionally? When we are suffering spiritually? And are those really distinctive categories? In our society they too often are. Hospitals and clinics over here. Mental health facilities over there. And then we have our religious institutions somewhere on the outskirts. Now I have family who work in all three of these areas so I am not denigrating this type of work, I am suggesting that much of it is a false separation.

In the book *The Observing Self: Mysticism and Psychotherapy*, published by our UUA's Beacon Press, author Arthur Deikman MD, traces the origins of those who tended to suffering people back to the early shamans, witch doctors, healers and priests, where there was not so much division between physical, emotional and spiritual. Anyone in these roles tended to human suffering, tended to mind, body and spirit, and helped create meaning for their patients. Deikman finds much of modern psychotherapy limited by western thought which tends to separate the rational and the sacred. "Certain sources of suffering cannot be dealt with from within a reductionist Western framework; it is far too narrow to encompass human consciousness." (2, pg 2).

In a dichotomy that I do find helpful, Deikman distinguishes between religion and mysticism.

Religion and mysticism are both concerned with the sacred realm, but most religions tend to associate the sacred with a deity, whereas mysticism associates the sacred with the unrecognized Real Self of each human being.

[what some Buddhists might call the Buddha self, what Quakers might call the Inner Light, what others might call Soul, Spirit, or Higher Self]

Thus, followers of formal religions often try to affect the behavior of a god—propitiating, pleasing, seeking aid. In contrast, the mystical traditions assert that the Real Self (within me is sacred) is God. (2, pg 3)

A mystic is someone who believes that direct experience with the sacred is possible through intuition, faith, spiritual practices, sudden insight, rather than through rational thought.

What Deikman calls the Real Self, this sacred self, is what many experience in spiritual practices such as meditation. It is our observing self. It is an expanded consciousness. It is our awareness, not the content of our awareness such as "emotions, thoughts, impulses, images, sensations." These are the *contents* of consciousness. Too often we mistake this content (emotions, thoughts, impulses, images, sensations) as all we are. That is the sum of our meaning. But this Real Self, what one-time Unitarian Minister, Ralph Waldo Emerson would the *intuitions of the mind*, which calls us into a deeper spiritual relationship with ourselves and our world.

In the mid-eighteen hundreds a group of Unitarians began exploring consciousness, and the idea that there was a divine spark within and the sacred, what some would call God, was all around us to be experienced. Thus began the mid 19th century Transcendentalist Controversy within Unitarianism with the likes of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Theodore Parker and Henry David Thoreau.

In the book *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, author Leigh Eric Schmidt cites these early transcendentalists as key figures in shaping the landscape of the developing spiritual character of mysticism within religious life in America.

As my colleague Reverend Steve Epperson states in his essay entitled *Experience of: Transcending Mystery and Wonder* from the Journal *Religious Humanism*:

Leigh Schmidt pinpoints the birth of mysticism in North American to May 20th, 1838, in Medford, MA. On that day, the Transcendentalist Club, in its third year of existence and comprised of mainly Unitarian ministers and intellectuals, “met specifically to take up, in...Emerson’s phrase, “the question of Mysticism.”

Two months later, Emerson delivered his notorious Harvard Divinity School address where he...kicked open the door to first hand mystical experience.... Margaret Fuller, best known as a foundational thinker for the women’s rights movement, began to announce herself as a “mystic” within months of Emerson’s address. In October 1838, for example ‘she wrote to a friend about a ‘heavenliest of communion in which free to be alone in the meditative woods...all the films seemed to drop from my existence. (3, pg 12-13)

Fuller also saw such “spiritual illumination of the inward life” as a vehicle for the progress and elevation of women in society. This mystical experience was empowering and offered a healing balm for suffering.

How do our experiences inform our faith? What constitutes a religious experience? In the book *The Natural Mind* (4) Andrew Weil M.D. argues that we humans have an innate, natural drive to periodically alter our consciousness. He also notes that ...most of the world’s highest religious and philosophic thought originated in altered states of consciousness in individuals (Buddha, Paul, Mohammed, etc.)...and that creative genius has long been observed to correlate with (altered states of consciousness) and that intuitive genius is often associated with daydreaming, meditation, dreaming, and other non ordinary modes of consciousness (Weil, pg 36).

It has been my observation that experiencing meditation, music, the creative process, nature, and heartfelt connections often creates a transcendent experience of reality for many of us, myself included. Thus, I find it rather ironic that one of my most “significant” mystical experiences occurred, no not on the top of a mountain or in a worship setting, but in the women’s dressing room of the YMCA.

This experience occurred about twenty years ago. I had just finished about 45 minutes of swimming laps, and returned to an empty dressing room and was walking across the carpeted floor to my locker. I was rather absent-mindedly looking down at the carpet when suddenly everything opened...I mean opened. It was as if for the first time I was experiencing reality, love, joy in all its truth. I was awake. Fear did not exist. I as an individual did not exist except for a timeless feeling of pure interconnectedness with...everything. There was no past and no present. It was timeless. It was eternal. (I’m talking “Toto we’re not in Kansas anymore”).

It is often said that mystical experiences are ineffable. I’ve found this to be true. I don’t know how long I stood there, but at one moment, I had the thought “I can’t wait to tell Deborah about this.” And as soon as that sense of “I” entered, it was as if time, space, and all elements as I had known them slowly closed like curtain. It was empowering experience, and it is one of the reasons I love reading the ancient texts of the mystical traditions of all faiths

The most pragmatic western description I’ve found of an experience such as I had at the YMCA comes, oddly enough, from a neurologist, Dr James Austin. In the May 2001 *Newsweek* article entitled “Religion and the Brain: Neurotheology Seeks the Biological Basis of Spirituality: Is God All in our Heads?” Dr. Austin describes an experience which occurred decades earlier while he was waiting for a train in London; he felt a sudden sense of enlightenment unlike anything he had experienced before. He described it as follows:

His sense of individual existence, of separateness from the physical world around him, evaporated like the morning mist in a bright dawn...The sense of “I, me and mine disappeared. Time was not present.” He goes on, “I had a sense of eternity. My old yearnings, loathings, fear of death and insinuations of self-hood vanished. I had been graced by a comprehension of the ultimate things (*Newsweek*, pg 53, May, 2001).”

For me this constitutes a mystical experience such has been recorded since the early Hindu and Buddhist texts. For Dr. Austin this experience is simply “proof of the existence of the brain,” and it prompted him to begin to study the biological basis of mystical and spiritual experiences within an emerging field of study, neurotheology. A number of scientists (and a few ministers) have heeded the call to this new area of study since that time. Certainly a gift within our Bloomington community in this area is brain scientist Jill Bolte Taylor. If you have not seen her TED lecture or read her book entitled, “My Stroke of Insight”, then I invite you to do so. And

I have to admit that I am a fan of her proposed Brain Extravaganza that will feature twelve 5 foot brains displayed throughout downtown Bloomington.

For me the ultimate question in neurotheology is do mystical and spiritual experiences only reflect the brain's experience of itself or the brain's experience of a deeper, sacred reality? In my ongoing search for truth and meaning, it is...both.

Lastly, in this little journey of language this morning, allow me to turn to a book which I have just begun to explore, *Einstein's God: Conversations About Science and the Human Spirit* by public radio's Krista Tippet, and offer a few quotes and comments.

Tippet begins her book with the following:

The science religion debate is unwinnable, and it has led us astray. To create a competition between them in terms of relevance or rightness is self defeating. Both science and religion are set to animate the 21st century with new vigor. (5)

And I appreciate the questions which she offers to be of a religious nature. Yet for me these questions invoke both scientific and religious reflection. They tug at the mind and heart. So let us take a moment to cradle them both in our arms as we allow these questions to enter our being: *What does it mean to be human? Where do we come from? Where are we going? How do we love? What matters in life? What matters in death? How can we be of service to ourselves, to others, to the planet?* (5, adapted)

In a dialogue with theoretical physicist Freeman Dyson and astrophysicist Paul Davies from *Einstein's God*, Tippet explores the mystery and wonder of science and religion. The following three quotes come from Freeman Dyson, Albert Einstein and Paul Davies.

Dyson: The world is full of mysteries, and I love mysteries. Of course, science is full of mysteries. Every time we discover something, we find two more questions to ask, and so there's no end of mysteries in science. That's what it's all about. And the same; 'es true of religion. Einstein said that anyone who does not approach science, with religious awe is not a true scientist. (5)

Einstein wrote a letter to the Queen of Belgium, a friend of his who had just suffered a great loss. After offering condolences he wrote:

And yet as always the springtime brings forth new life, and we may rejoice because of this new life and contribute to its unfolding. And Mozart remains as beautiful and tender as he always was and always will be. There is, after all, something eternal that lies beyond the hand of fate and all human delusions....For us there remains the privilege of experiencing beauty and truth in their purest forms. (5)

Astrophysicist Paul Davies responds to this quote: Those are beautiful words, and I was quite unaware of them, very poetic. And I can see where they're coming from because, as we discussed earlier, Einstein was the person to establish this notion of what is sometimes called block time---that the past, present and future are just personal decompositions of time, and that the universe of past, present and future in some sense has eternal existence. And so even though individuals may come and go, their lives, which are in the past for their descendents, nevertheless will have existence within the block of time. Nothing takes that away. You may have your three score years and ten measured by a date after your death. You are no more. And yet, within this grander sweep of the timescape, nothing is changed. Your life is still there in its entirety. (5)

O Day and Night, but this is wondrous strange!

And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.

The are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,

Than are dreamt of in your philosophy

And that, my friends, is good enough.

- (1) Shakespeare, William, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5.
- (2) Deikman, Arthur *The Observing Self: Mysticism and Psychotherapy* (Beacon Press, Boston, MA), 1982.
- (3) Epperson, Steven *Experiencing Transcending Mystery and Wonder*, (Religious Humanism, Vol xii, Number 1) Summer 2010.
- (4) Weil, Andrew *The Natural Mind* (new preface 1998, Houghton Mifflin Co, NY) 1972.
- (5) Tippet, Krista *Einstein's God: Conversations about Science and the Human Spirit* (Penguin Group, New York, NY) 2010.