

“Coming Face to Face”

Sermon by Rev. Stan Barrett, Affiliate Minister

February 27, 2022

Rev. Rebecca gave us a real gift in her December 5th sermon last year. She told us about an encounter with “the Holy,” as she put it, a reconnection with “God, eternity, goodness.” She and Bart had just arrived at the Grand Canyon. For her, at least, it was a return after an absence of 33 years. She described for us how they entered the room where they’d be staying and set down what they’d carried in.

She went over to the window which looked out over the canyon and the river far below. “Leaning my forehead against the window,” she said, “the rest of my body began to let go. I allowed myself to begin to slide down the wall and involuntarily fell to my knees...The canyon was so beautiful that it took my breath away...My tears started as soon as I realized what was happening.” “I began speaking,” she went on, “talking to the canyon as though she were a wise woman, as I believe she is.” Rev. Rebecca was renewing a relationship with the river and canyon which “...I had spent many years largely forgetting.” She was remembering the truth of being part of the mystery, “knowing which had made all the difference.”

I begin by recalling Rev. Rebecca’s experience at some length because her description and understanding of it touch on a number of common characteristics of what we typically call mystical or spiritual experiences, which is my focus today. I want to lift up the importance of that, the importance of noticing and paying attention to spiritual experiences, of opening ourselves to them, and, yes, inviting them through spiritual practice. You can call this inner work or the inner path, the inner aspect or inner direction of spirituality. Spirituality has an outer direction, too, which focuses on community and on how we live in this world, on justice. I’ll return to it briefly before concluding.

The importance of experience to Unitarian Universalists is testified to by the priority it’s given as the first in the list of Sources of Our Faith. It says in part: “Direct experience of that transcendent mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit...” Direct experience of transcendent mystery and wonder: i.e., direct experience that

calls to us from beyond ourselves, from that which transcends us.

Or perhaps it’s better to say it calls to us from beyond the limits of who we know ourselves to be. We know ourselves in a certain way or ways, and then something outside seizes our attention, stops us in the path of our usual way of doing and being and perceiving, and something within us hears, responds, recognizes. Something inside us – something unknown or forgotten – wakes up, our sense of who we are becomes larger and richer, and, at the very least, it’s harder to forget again to go back to sleep.

Direct experience of the transcendent mystery awakes us to the immanent mystery, the Holy within. Deep calls to deep, deep answers deep, and life is changed. Changed forever, or for a moment: changed until we forget, until we fall asleep again.

So, such an encounter can open our eyes to a larger self than we had previously recognized or had forgotten. But paradoxically it can also make us feel very small. In fact, it’s fairly typical at such a time to lose one’s usual self-awareness, being completely absorbed in the experience, in the other. If this sounds a bit like falling in love – losing the self in the beloved – you’re on the right track. One spiritual tradition after another gives a central place to love imagery in its depiction of spiritual experience and the work of spiritual growth.

One such image is that of melting. Feeling something like melting in the presence of someone we love is a common experience. If we go back to Rev. Rebecca’s sermon, especially her recounting how she slid down the wall and involuntarily ended up on her knees, she’s relating, it seems to me, a melting of the ego – one’s usual sense of self and self-control.

My own spiritual teacher and friend, Refik Algan, has said that real prayer is to melt in the face of God. Could it be that when we melt, we are in prayer whether we know it or not? Might we be in prayer, call it that or not, when we’re brought to our knees – from sorrow or joy? When we’re in tears – happy or sad? When our hearts are

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overflowing with a wordless yearning for we-know-not-what?

This leads me to another aspect of spiritual experience: the face-to-face nature of it. When you're stopped in your tracks by an awe-inspiring experience, when something deep within you recognizes something from far beyond, when your sense of you disappears or melts in this presence, you are far beyond questions like "Is there God?" or "Is there anything beyond this life, this world?"

Those questions are fine in their time and place, but when you're face to face, well, you're face to face: you're in relationship with whoever or whatever is in front of you. And remember what Rev. Rebecca did next: she spoke. To God, to the Canyon. She spoke, and it wasn't about the weather. It was personal and intimate. It wasn't conversation about the Holy. It was conversation with the Holy.

Now let's stop for a minute and take a deep breath. It may seem that so far, I'm describing spiritual experiences as something so high and rare as to be a once-or-twice-in-a-lifetime occurrence. That's far from the impression I want to give. I believe that for most of us, most of the time, spiritual experience is much closer to everyday experience, though pointing beyond.

The Qur'anic verse on our Order of Service says: "We will show them our signs in the horizons and within themselves." The signs of the Holy are everywhere – inside us and in the world, the cosmos. Experience of the transcendent can happen any time. Any time our heart opens wider than usual, for example, any time we are stopped by beauty; any time an unaccustomed kind of peace settles on us, that is deep calling to deep, and deep invited to answer to deep, whether or not it's the kind of earth-shaking, life-altering experience I seem to have been talking about up until now.

My connection to church is so tied up with music that it's not unusual for me to get choked up singing a hymn here. I've come to realize recently that this connection is rooted significantly in the occasional solo during my childhood and youth by a mezzo-soprano in the choir of the Second Presbyterian Church in Chattanooga. Maria Ransom's beautiful voice, breath control, and

mastery of her art opened for me a window on the Holy.

Many of us, on the other hand, find signs of holiness most often in nature: the flight of birds, the sound of the ocean, rain or a waterfall, the multi-sensate joy of just walking or sitting in a special place.

Signs of the Holy are all around us if we have eyes to see – sweetness with a companion animal; human love given and received; a baby's first steps, first words; a relationship mended; a feared diagnosis not confirmed by the pathology report. All around us, all the time, are opportunities to follow the signs, the pointers; pointers to depths that usually escape us. As the hymn says, "The soul has lifted moments, above the drift of days."

So, we have such moments: moments of contact with a deeper level of ourselves, moments of encounter with the transcendent. How then shall we live differently? What then must we do?

Perhaps nothing, or nothing beyond being present in the experience, staying awake as long as we can to what it opens in us, and pondering it in our hearts, as the Gospel of Luke says Mary of Nazareth did after an awesome experience of the divine. Be present, stay awake, and ponder in our hearts: that's already a lot.

But something more is possible, something that may call to any of us at any time: that is, to investigate such experiences: to welcome them, but more, to invite them; to put ourselves in situations where they have happened before. So far, we have been talking about spiritual experiences, which can be and often are spontaneous occurrences. Now we are considering the possibility of intentionally adopting a spiritual practice or path, a path which calls to us, fits us, even excites or delights us, and which inspires our trust.

Let me say right away that if you're a member or friend of this church – or any religious congregation – and regularly participate in its worship services *with an openness to the quickening of your inner life*, you are already engaged in a spiritual practice.

Our worship services also contain within them spiritual practices which can help open us to the

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Depths: for example, prayer, stillness, listening to music, singing hymns, listening with our inner ears for how the Spirit may be speaking to us in readings and sermons, saying together our Affirmation of Faith. Also, you may be already participating in such activities as chalice circles, Monday meditation Group, and the Tuesday Spiritual practice meeting.

Each person's path is unique, so it's not surprising that some of us come here with an established spiritual practice or find one after arriving here: not one which draws us away from this beloved community, but which deepens our inner life within it and enriches what we bring to it.

There are UU Buddhists here and those who follow indigenous practices alongside people of indigenous descent. I'm sure that some of us still find value in Jewish or Christian prayers – or other practices – we grew up with. If the path we follow doesn't come to us by birth and upbringing, it usually arrives in the form of a group we're drawn to or a person in whose presence our hearts are opened. For me it was both.

Having been introduced in college to the poetry of Rumi and other great Sufis, I found my way in 1993 to a group in the Mevlevi Order, which springs from Rumi's life. The Mevlevi are the proverbial whirling Dervishes. I was profoundly drawn to this work. It spoke to a deep longing, a yearning I once heard expressed as follows: "I want God to become for me more than just a rumor." I became deeply involved in the life of the group. Spiritual experiences I had were for the most part fairly close to everyday experience. For me it was more or less one step at a time, following the inner attraction.

Since 2001, Refik Algan, whom I mentioned earlier, has been my spiritual teacher, friend, or – as he likes to say – consultant. He has often said that moving ahead in the spiritual work requires getting out of our comfort zone. Of course, getting out of our comfort zone is...uncomfortable, and sometimes we need a push. Years later I got one.

It was the First Covid Year, 2020, and I was physically very uncomfortable. After about 10 months of uncertainty, my PCP and I concluded that I was suffering mainly from anxiety, probably

on top of some relatively benign changes due to aging. Before that, I went through one diagnostic test after another. My doctor said later, "We've given you just about every test we can without doing an autopsy." It was an astute intervention: my laughter was a great relief.

Anxiety: I'd never thought of myself as a particularly anxious person, and yet, there it was. Of course, it was an anxiety-laden year for many of us, between Covid and the political situation. I was still adjusting to recent retirement, and there were those symptoms and a long-unproductive diagnostic slog. Whatever the cause, I was anxious and scared, and the fear showed up in my body first, only gradually entering my awareness. It drove me to my knees. Thank goodness I had a long-established, if sometimes indifferently observed, spiritual practice. I engaged in it more than ever: prayers, both ritual and spontaneous; meditation; chanting; zoom talks with Refik.

My dream life quickened. One night I dreamt I was riding a bicycle and realized I was being pursued by another bicyclist. I wanted to get away and managed to escape him one time, but as the dream sequence repeated, I failed to elude him. I missed the subway train I was attempting to catch to get away. As I came out of the station, there he was beside his bike. He looked at me, put his hand on me and said, "Don't worry – it'll be OK. I'll be with you in life and in death."

The dream was not so much a culmination as one outgrowth of a time of inner struggle, but an unmistakable gift from the source I point toward when I say "God." The impact of that dream and that year remains, though the intensity is less. Life both is and is not the same as before. I haven't entirely gone back to sleep. I'm truly grateful for being pushed into the deep end of the pool.

Your path isn't my path nor Rev. Rebecca's, though we can support, walk besides, and learn from each other. If you find in yourself an interest – even a longing – to go deeper, Rev. Rebecca and Julie Parker Amery, our Director of Faith Formation and Spiritual Exploration, are resources for support and ideas about moving ahead.

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This month's theme has been integrity. It seems to me that the integrity of any church's life depends on actively nurturing the outer and the inner directions of spirituality. Both doing the inner spiritual work and focusing on community and on justice in the world are integral to congregational life. Each depends on and supports the other. We as individuals need to integrate both aspects into our spiritual lives as well, though the best balance of inner and outer focuses varies from person to person, and with factors such as time of life and circumstances.

And the two directions of focus – inner and outer – have much in common. Both require getting out of our comfort zone in order to grow. And both are about love, about relationship, about coming face to face: face to face on the one hand with the Holy and our essential selves, and on the other hand with human beings, especially those who seem like “other” to us.

Daring to let ourselves move beyond our comfort zone, in order to move toward greater love, inside and out, love within ourselves and in each other, love in the world of the senses and in the cloud of pure mystery: daring that is surely a worthy intention for moving ahead as individuals and as a people of faith.

Amen and Blessed Be.