

Embracing the Ecstatic

preached by the Rev. Colin Bossen at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Cleveland
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The sixties were a time of generational conflict in liberal religious communities. One story that comes from that era is about a hippie who visited a stately old New England Unitarian congregation. He really got into the service. After almost every sentence of the minister's sermon he shouted out "Amen!" or "Alleluia!"

One of the ushers, a distinguished elderly gentleman, was not amused. He walked over to the hippie, who was seated in the back row, and quietly tugged at his sleeve, "Excuse me, uh sir, we don't do things like that here."

"But I got religion," the hippie replied.

"Well," the usher responded somewhat indignantly, "you certainly didn't get it here!"

Those of you who were here last week will know that I do not share the usher's discomfort with exclamations and responses from the pews during the sermon. I encourage them. They serve as a reminder that every sermon is part of a larger dialogue between the preacher and the religious community that takes place not just in the sanctuary but in everyplace we interact. They also make it seem a little less lonely up here in the pulpit.

Our story, which is almost certainly apocryphal, is an uncomfortable reminder of the discomfort that many Unitarian Universalists have with responses during sermons. For some such responses echo of traditional religion. And every Unitarian Universalist congregation, in my experience, has members who are unsettled by traditional religion, religious language and the idea that Unitarian Universalism is itself a faith tradition. The reasons for this discomfort are varied. However, most commonly the discomfort is felt the strongest by two groups in a congregation, those who described themselves as humanists and those who described themselves as refugees from another religious community.

Now, William Blake once warned, "To Generalize is to be an Idiot To Particularize is Alone of Merit." At the risk of being an idiot I am going to make a few generalizations about humanists and religious refugees. Listen to what I am about to say with caution. People are sufficiently complex that it is difficult, even dangerous, to attempt to make generalizations about groups of individuals. Even when such generalizations are offered in the spirit of love, as mine are, they can unintentionally wound. So if I offer a generalization now and it seems injurious I apologize. It is not my intention to insult any of you.

Holding onto to that caveat, I can say that most people who describe themselves as refugees from another religious tradition had a bad experience with the faith they were born, or in a handful of cases converted, into. Exactly why they choose to leave it varies from person to person: they find its teachings to be too dogmatic; they disbelieve in its self-proclaimed literal interpretation of the Bible; they think its treatment of the BGLT community abhorrent; or they have decided that its theology or religious hierarchy are misogynistic and oppressive.

Whatever the reason, such refugees often have a strong reaction to religious language and elements of a worship service like saying "Amen" when you agree with the preacher. Religious refugees' conceptions of religious language, and more broadly religion, can bear strong imprints from their previous faith tradition.

The late Forrest Church of All Souls, Unitarian, in New York had an approach he used to try and break open the religious conceptions of some religious refugees. Church liked to use God language. He was fond of saying, "God is not God's name. God is our name for that which is greater than all and yet present in each." Gripping firmly to this metaphoric concept of God, Church would ask those who were uncomfortable with his use of the word to describe the God that they did not believe in. After listening to them Church would almost always say, "Well, I don't believe in that God either."

Some of you might recognize Church's technique. I have used it in pastoral counseling conversations with some of you object to God language. In each of those conversations I have found that the God you object to is the God of your previous faith tradition. You might remember that when I make this discovery I ask why you let your concept of the divine be hostage to your history.

Simply rejecting something is not as interesting or exciting as trying to construct something new. God is a rich metaphor. It is a word that belongs to the realm of the imagination, even though many religious fundamentalists try to give it the solidity of the physical sciences. It is like the liberal theologian Horace Bushnell warned back in the 19th century, "If it were possible to get religious truth into shapes and formulas having an absolute meaning... it would very nearly subvert... all that is most significant and sublime in the discipline of life." God is an appealing word precisely because it cannot and should not be defined.

Many religious refugees and humanists would disagree with me. Humanists in particular might argue that God is an irrational concept that has been used to do great damage to the planet and justify violence. They would might also suggest that rather than focusing on the metaphysical we should direct our attention to this world. It is here that our troubles, pains, joys and ecstasies take place. Therefore, it is this world, and not some ethereal one, that we should to live in and for.

Essentially, I agree with both points. But I would complicate the first by suggesting that an enormous amount of damage has been done to our planet and violence inflicted upon humans in the name of many things, not just God. Some of the most damaging systems of thought make appeals to science rather than religion. Totalitarian communism was a disaster, supposedly based on a scientific understanding of economics, that cost the lives of tens of millions of people. Nazism used supposedly scientific theories of racial purity to justify genocide. Even contemporary capitalism, which I believe is precipitating an ecological crisis and has caused much human suffering, is supposed to be based on scientific understandings of human nature and mathematically rigorous models of human behavior.

Despite the brutal results of these appeals to science I do not dismiss science as fatally flawed. Instead I think that science has limits and that it can be misconstrued, misused and misapplied. The same is true with religion and God. The trouble is not with God, science or religion. The trouble

is with people who use scientific and religious concepts to justify violent or ecologically harmful behavior.

When we Unitarian Universalists dismiss religious language and religion as a whole we lessen our own religious tradition. You might remember that a decade ago there was the then President of the Association William Sinkford sparked a debate about religious language. In a sermon at a large congregation in Colorado he called for Unitarian Universalists to develop a vocabulary for naming the divine. He preached, “we need some language that would allow us to capture the possibility of reverence, to name the holy, to talk about human agency in theological terms—the ability of humans to shape and frame our world guided by what we find to be of ultimate importance.”

Sinkford’s sermon was then misquoted in a Texas newspaper as a call for Unitarian Universalists to add the word God to our statement of Purposes and Principles. Even though the newspaper soon issued a correction, the article stirred up the proverbial hornets nest. Unitarian Universalists from across the country wrote letters to the UU World both supporting and declaiming the need for a language of reverence. Ministers preached sermons on the subject.

One minister who did was David Bumbaugh, at the time a professor at Meadville Lombard Theological School, the Unitarian Universalist seminary in Chicago (and my alma mater). Bumbaugh is a staunch humanist. He informed people that the flak that started with Sinkford actually should have started with him. In Sinkford's misquoted sermon he had quoted Bumbaugh’s own call for a humanist language of reverence. Bumbaugh was critical of the over reliance of reason by religious liberals. He preached, “We have manned the ramparts of reason and are prepared to defend the citadel of the mind... But in the process of defending, we have lost... the ability to speak of that which is sacred, holy, of ultimate importance to us...” This language, Bumbaugh continued, “would allow us to enter into critical dialogue with the religious community.”

I think it is worse than that. I think that our hesitancy to use religious language has truncated the range of religious experience that we are open to in our congregations. In particular, I think that many Unitarian Universalists are hostile the mystical realm of religious experience.

According to the Jewish philosopher Paul Mendes-Flohr, the Jewish theologian Martin Buber defined mysticism as, “an exceptional moment that takes the individual beyond the divisive world of individuation.” The philosopher of religion William James argued that mysticism had several characteristics. In his view the mystical experience is ineffable, it must be directly experienced and cannot be adequately translated into words. It is also noetic, that is it imparts knowledge. Frequently this knowledge transcends the kind of knowledge is available through the use of reason. Finally, it is transitory.

Most religious traditions draw upon the mystic as a source of inspiration and religious authority. We Unitarian Universalists rarely do. This is odd since we proclaim that personal experience is the starting point for theological reflection. Personal religious experiences are often mystic in nature.

Nonetheless, if I were to stand up here and proclaim about a vision that came to me from God, or of God, most of you would look at me as if I was crazy. You might indulge me in a reverie on the transcendental gleanings found in an early summer walk or a reflection on the scientific demi-

mystical soundings of Carl Sagan or Loren Eiseley. It is doubtful that you be open to a long meditation about how in my dreams an image of God came to me.

This is curious because of inspiration for our Universalist ancestors theology came from mystical experiences. The early 18th century Universalist George de Benneville was inspired to believe in universal salvation not by a reasoned reading of the Christian New Testament but by a series of mystical experiences he had throughout his life.

De Benneville was born in England of Huguenot refugees. He first became convinced of universal salvation when at the age of 12 he went to sea as a sailor. His ship was part of a small diplomatic fleet on a mission to the Barbary Coast. While in Algiers he witnessed two Moors healing a third. The Moors' treatment of their companion was so compassionate that it led de Benneville to proclaim "Are these men Heathens? No; I confess before God they are Christians, and I myself am myself a Heathen!"

This experience led de Benneville to a crisis of faith. He became convinced that he was destined for eternal damnation. This conviction did not last. Within a few years de Benneville had another series of visions which lead him to have faith in "the great wonder of the wisdom and power of thy God, who hath employed all these boundless, incomprehensible miracles to restore and to save thee, and not thee only, but all the human species..."

After those visions de Benneville became an evangelist for universalism. He travelled throughout Europe preaching universalism. He was jailed more than once for his efforts and narrowly escaped execution when in France. A reprieve came as he waited for the executioner's axe to strike. Eventually he studied medicine, became a doctor and moved to Germany. There he continued to preach universalism, especially after he had near death experience. He took ill with a fever and lost so much weight he was, in his words, "reduced almost to a skeleton." He was declared dead and placed in a coffin. While in a comatose state he had a vision of heaven and hell. He found himself in a field with two guardians. They promised to show him the "manner [God] will restore all his creatures, without exception, to the praise of his glory and their eternal salvation..." Then they provided de Benneville with a tour through the afterlife. He returned to consciousness, found himself in the coffin and arose to begin to preach universal salvation with even more passion than before.

Such universalist visions are not unique to de Benneville. The contemporary universalist Carleton Pearson was converted to universalism through a mystical experience. Pearson, as some of you may remember, began his career as a pentecostal preacher. He was mentored by Oral Roberts, built-up a megachurch in Tulsa, Oklahoma and was one of the few African Americans to have a show on the Trinity Broadcasting Network. All of that began to change when he saw a news report on the genocide in Rwanda. He prayed to his God, "God, I don't know how you can sit on your throne there in heaven and let those poor people drop to the ground hungry, heartbroken, and lost, and just randomly suck them into hell."

His God answered him, "We're not sucking those dear people into hell. Can't you see they're already there--in the hell you have created for them and continue to create for yourselves and others all over the planet? We redeemed and reconciled all of humanity at Calvary."

Many of you are familiar with the rest of Pearson's story. He began to preach his universalist vision from his pulpit. He was shunned by his pentecostal colleagues. His church shrank from several thousand to several hundred and eventually merged with the local Unitarian Universalist congregation. Pearson continues to minister but not as a Unitarian Universalist. Supposedly he says that our worship style is too stifling for him. I suspect that he also finds most of us unfriendly to the sort of mystical vision that he brings.

Mystical visions do not have to come unbidden like those of de Benneville and Pearson. There are rich traditions of spiritual practice that aid people in having mystical experiences. Broadly speaking these tradition break down along two lines. There is the contemplative tradition and the ecstatic tradition.

To the extent that most contemporary Unitarian Universalists are open to mystical experiences it is through the contemplative route. Contemplative mystical practices include two favored by Unitarian Universalists, journal keeping, which was used by our Transcendentalist fore-bearers, and Buddhist inspired meditation. Most of the Unitarians, and the majority of the Universalists, who might be labeled as mystics fall under the contemplative category. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau, and more recently Marilyn Sewell, might all considered contemplatives. Within their published works can be found passages suggesting or claiming mystical insight. A famous one from Emerson's essay "Nature" reads, "Standing on the bare ground, my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball-I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me-I am part or particle of God."

Emerson's mysticism is quite rational compared to that of de Benneville or Pearson. It is born as much in his study and his journal as from any sort of sudden vision. It does not speak of some highly theistic cosmology. Instead, Emerson's God appears as almost a metaphor for an experience of oneness with the universe.

We Unitarian Universalists tend to like such accounts. They are cerebral and not particularly emotional. They can be recounted in a sermon without fear that someone like our hippie friend from earlier will suddenly shout "Amen!" and usher in the unexpected. They speak of an ordered universe.

While we like the accounts of the contemplatives we do draw upon the reflections of the ecstatics. We do not, however, have many, or possibly any, ecstatics within our tradition. Ecstatic mystical practices focus on the body and engaging it so furiously that a sense of self melts away. Ecstatic practices include dance and intense physical pain or pleasure induced by body piercing, tattooing or even sex. The testimony of the ecstatics include poetry like that of Rumi which many of us find inspiring. Within the ecstatic tradition there are often appeals to follow advice like Rumi's "With / passion pray. With / passion work. With passion make love. / With passion eat and drink and dance and play." Such passion can provide insight into the difficult metaphor of God.

To invoke a little of that sense of passion and the ecstatic tradition Karin and I are going to throw in a bit of a dance break before I close the sermon. William James warns that the mystical experience does not come bidden. It is not, a voluntary experience, you cannot will yourself to have one. You

can, however, open yourself up to such experiences. For the ecstatic the path to do so is through the body. Let's just try that for a few minutes.

Karin's going to play a dance tune. I invite you to stand up and start clapping along. Ok, now once you have been doing that for a minute or so trying wiggling your butt or shimmying from side-to-side. Maybe grab a partner and spin around a bit.

How does that have you feeling? I imagine that for some of you it was a bit of an uncomfortable experience. For others it was probably a release. To have a real ecstatic mystical experience most people have to dance for a several hours. Still, I wonder what it would do to our tradition if we were to try to incorporate the ecstatic into our worship services and communities. Maybe Carlton Pearson would have felt more welcomed amongst us. Perhaps we would be able to reach a broader demographic. Instead of largely appealing to those who delight in the contemplative practices of the mind we would be more open to those who experience unity through the ecstatic.

And it does not have just be about dance. It could be an inclusion of the chaotic, and sometimes uncomfortable, unpredictability of performances like the one by the Possibilitarians earlier. Such performances impact people at a level that words do not. They can create a more open culture by not letting the highly verbal, such as myself, dominate the community. Instead they open up other possibilities for expression and communication of and about what is most important in our lives, whether we call it God or something else entirely.

Such elements might open us more to the meaning behind the words of Rumi, not just the delight of the words themselves:

"The broken shells fall on the grass,
and the grass looks up
and says,
"Hey."

And the squirrel looks down
and says,

"Hey."

I have been saying "Hey" lately too,
to God.

Formalities just weren't
working."

May we all be a little more open to the ecstatic
and, in doing so, learn to say, "Hey."

Amen and Blessed Be.