

## **“Mystery and Mysticism”**

**By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD December 10, 2023**

Have you ever noticed God – the sacred – present in all that is? Seeing the holy in the eyes of an innocent child, present in the hope that makes the impossible possible, the divine in the grandeur of towering redwoods or in the artistic beauty of a poem? Have you ever felt at one with all that is? Your own breath mirrored in the breath of spring foliage, your own inner beauty reflected in the petals of cherry blossoms, your own cycles of joy and sorrow echoed in the changing seasons? Have you ever best understood the sacred when immersed in awe? Connecting to the great mystery, the unknowable, the ineffable, the source of all that is when enveloped in the grand expanse of the universe or immersed in a field of poppies?

These are the elements - the mysteries - of mysticism that we will explore today: one, that God is a sacred, unknowable, ineffable piece of all that is; two, that we are, somehow, intimately tied together in our interdependent world; and three, that we best grasp this idea of God through awe, wonder, and intuition. Mysticism is a way of engaging with the great mysteries of life and of God. I use the term “God” in my reflections because that is the language of many mystics. I invite you to interpret with whatever name for the sacred is held true for you.

Mysticism is a connection to the unknown and the unknowable - the mystery. Mysticism is best explained by intuition, by emotion, by feeling, by experience, by engaging with the great mysteries, and yet let us attempt to explain it in layman’s terms. It is an experience of “limitless belonging,” belonging to the sacred, to the world, to the universe, to each breathing creature and all that has come before.<sup>1</sup> At times we feel at one with all that is, sharing breath, sharing heartbeats, sharing a universal love with the finite and the infinite. Mysticism engages not with separateness or individualism but with divine and sacred unity, a way to engage with life not as an independent being but as a small yet critical piece of all things mortal and eternal.

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<sup>1</sup> David Steindl-Rast from “On Being”

Mysticism, at its core, is this oneness, this unity, with God, with the absolute, with this wildly unknowable, essence. In each day, yes, and in individual, unique, profound, and beautiful experiences. It happens in a moment, within minutes, within seconds. Perhaps preceded by prayer, by meditation, by an immersion in nature. We are exposed to this unity in a moment of ecstasy, of a momentarily altered state, a brief experience imbued with religious or spiritual meaning, and we carry the sentiments of this experience with us in each of our days. God resides within us and us within God simultaneously.

Let us reflect upon our first point. In Mysticism, the sacred is part of all that is, both transcendent and immanent; the holy is the mysterious source of life, while likewise a part of each tree, each canyon, each summer rainfall. Within every flower, within every cloud, is God. If we pause and intuit, God is also within us. Within each and every one of us resides an element of a great, unknowable essence, a piece of an expansive entity. God becomes laughter, God becomes tears of sorrow and lament. The divine – that great, unknowable mystery. Is the smile of an infant an expression of divine joy? Is the love of a partner or a sibling a way to experience the love of the divine? Is artwork a tactile piece of transcendent beauty? What of the relationship between the finite and the infinite; the sacred and the profane? Each is part of the other. Every living, impermanent being is imbued with the eternal, a spark of the divine. While we experience mortality, we also experience the eternal.

Let us explore our next point: Not only is God a part of all that is, but we are also each a critical and sacred piece of this interdependent world –intimately connected to beauty and all that is; with one another, with nature. Let us return to the words of Herman Hesse:

My soul turns and goes back to the place  
Where, a thousand forgotten years ago,  
The bird and the blowing wind  
Were like me, were my brothers and sisters.

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My soul turns into a tree...  
And an animal, and a cloud bank.  
Then changed and odd it comes home  
And asks me questions. What should I reply?<sup>2</sup>

This is our soul remembering that we have been part of existence for eternity. We are siblings with wind and birds, yes. We are siblings with joy and laughter and the sacred. Does this idea not evoke the mysterious? The words connote an idea of revelation and return, of searching beyond our present form to experience the awe and wonder of all life, of animals and cloud banks, of all of that of which we are a part, returning with nothing but questions and musings and an even deeper sense of mystery. In our reflections we are changed, we become odd to ourselves, asking of ourselves that which is unknowable. In our revelation we know unity, in our return we hold mystery. Let us pray, let us meditate, let us immerse ourselves in nature to evoke a moment with God where we become one with all of this and the divine answers our queries – answers with ideas of universal oneness, of a unity with God, of an invitation to awe and beauty.

We live in a façade of individualism, of being surrounded by strangers, of isolation and a renunciation of holiness. I offer another quote, this from monastic and author Thomas Merton. “In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers.”<sup>3</sup> Through our connection with all that is we are inevitably connected to each soul on this earth we all call home. Even if we have never met, we have a sense of love for one another because we know of an intimate unity we are a part of; our souls are siblings. We belong to one another, both in this finite realm and within the breath of the infinite; the transcendent. Imagine a world where each being knew one another as brother and sister, as

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<sup>2</sup> Untitled words of Herman Hesse

<sup>3</sup> Untitled words of Thomas Merton

mother and child, as friend and lover. What blessings would humanity bestow upon one another, what hate and animosity and violence would quickly come to an end?

We are one with the natural world. The carbon we inhale and oxygen we exhale offers a dance with the breathing of the trees, the bushes, of everything green. Our soul communes with what is held within a tree, with the air that graces our cheeks. Our inner beauty is reflected in pansies, daisies, roses. Just as we cycle through joy and sorrow so, too, does the earth know winter and summer, coldness and warmth, darkness and light. So, too, do we all know life and death, held within a mortal world.

All of this is to know God. It is awe that brings us closest to knowing – to understanding – God. Which brings us to our next query – how can we best experience God, the greatest mystery we will ever encounter? Our unity with all that is holy is felt in these moments of beauty and grandeur, of towering mountains and plummeting oceans. If God is part of all that is, then to relish in this divine natural world is to become proximate to the holy. God is not an entity or a being but an intuition, an emotion, and this is what is evoked in a moment of wonder, awe and, yes, mystery.

We often – I often – try to intellectualize the holy. Is God all powerful? All knowing? Forgiving? All loving? This is the basis of any theological quest – what is God? How can we know? Mysticism releases us from these questions of reason. Again, the sacred cannot be intellectualized, it can be intuited. We intuit the sacred when we are intentional in moving through the woods, noticing the crunch of leaves beneath our feet, the trees creating shadows from above, the small creatures digging in the earth. We experience the holy when we are intentional in engaging with the wonders of falling in love, of giving birth, of witnessing acts of profound compassion and empathy. Experiencing beauty, immersing oneself in awe – that is to know God; for that is to feel God. We become one with all that is holy, through our hearts, our meditations, our engagement with the senses. Our pulse is God's pulse, our breath of life is God's breath of life.

There are two complementary ideas I want us to engage with. Philosopher Howard Thurman recounted an intimate experience he had while fishing. On the water, immersed in nature, he reflected, “It was a time of watching and waiting for what I did not know—yet I always knew.” We are looking for an answer, and yet the answer is in our hearts, in our souls. To Thurman what he always knew was that there was some sort of presence – some sacred presence – an essence of which we are each always in communion with, bidden or unbidden, exchanging intimate thoughts and feelings. Thurman writes, during his time immersed in nature, “There was no voice. There was no image. There was no vision. There was God.”<sup>4</sup> God is all that is – all to be heard, all to be seen. And yet, just when we think we know God, we are truly the furthest from knowing. If I feel I have a moment of understanding while immersed in study, I am, indeed, far away from the intuited. Instead, let us pause and immerse ourselves in profound mystery, inviting and welcoming into our hearts and minds the wildly unknowable, the remarkably beautiful. That which is part of all that is.

The sacred is immanent and transcendent, a part of the great mystery of life. We are interdependent, connected to all that is through souls and mystery and wonder. We best experience an unknowable God through awe and intuition. I leave you with a story. I was anxious. I was angry. I was tearful. I lay in bed hour after hour – unable to sleep. The velvety darkness of the night sky cloaked me in sorrow and pain. Ten pm became two am became 6 six am, and I noticed a change in the night sky. The black was slowly subsiding, and pink sunlight began to crawl into my bedroom. I rose and wandered into my mother’s backyard, met with the most spectacular sunrise I had ever seen, the emerging sunlight illuminating the flowerbeds and lifting the veil of sorrow from my heart. In that moment I knew my God was that rising sun, that the beauty of those flowers was something I could hold inside my being for eternity. I knew I had briefly touched the realm of the infinite as sorrow lifted and interdependence took its place. In that awe I knew God, and in knowing God I knew the beauty within myself. It was my

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<sup>4</sup> Untitled words of Howard Thurman

own mystical experience. I leave this as an invitation to reflect upon your own experiences. To invite one into your future. To live in mystery. To live, if just for a minute, as a mystic.

May it be so, and Amen