

Spiritual Ecstasy for UUs
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This summer our transformational worship theme has been Joy and Ecstasy – and what a summer. In Ruth Gendler’s The Book of Qualities there are 76 in all and the quality of Joy is the final essay. She writes this of joy – “Joy drinks pure water. She has sat with the dying and attended many births. She denies nothing. She is in love with life, all of it, the sun and the rain and the rainbow. She rides horses at Half Moon Bay under the October moon. She climbs mountains. She sings in the hills. She jumps from the hot spring to the cold stream without hesitation. Although Joy is spontaneous, she is immensely patient. She does not need to rush. She knows that there are obstacles on every path and that every moment is the perfect moment. She is not concerned with success or failure or how to make things permanent. At times Joy is elusive – she seems to disappear even as we approach her. I see her standing on a ridge covered with oak tress, and suddenly the distance between us feels enormous. I am overwhelmed and wonder if the effort to reach her is worth it. Yet, she waits for us. Her desire to walk with us is as great as our longing to accompany her.” That feels deep and true and comforting. To meditate on this quality for a while could be quite fulfilling and satisfying – just like joy.

But we enter a whole new world when we try to talk about ecstasy. I use the word “try” for a reason – for ecstasy can be experienced and not always understood – let alone be able to capture the experience into words. Poet and author Kathleen Norris reminds us that “the root meaning of ecstasy is to put out of place, to lose one’s stand. It is scary because it takes us out of a place we are certain of, into one that commands our full attention, but without offering the comforts of everyday distraction.” Out of certainty without distraction. This is frightening. Gendler writes that: “Ecstasy builds slow fires, but they burn for a long time....he loves the drum

and the flute and the dark winter moon. He knows many things but he does not talk much. If you try to pin him down, he will answer you with music. You have to decide for yourself what he really means. Ecstasy runs an inn for travelers high in the Turquoise Mountains. It is an interesting job because he is never quite sure who will turn up. There are no reservations here and the meals are free. The mountain air brings clear dreams and some of the guests start to settle in. Ecstasy insists that no one stay too long. He is running an inn, not a boarding house. ...the inn is not always easy to find. It is not on the main road, and sometimes the signs disappear. Don't attempt the journey if you are in a rush or are scared to be by yourself." This sounds intriguing, wild and a little scary even. And ecstasy, and spiritual ecstasy can be just that. Ecstasy is something beyond the usual, the normal and yet includes the normal – somehow. Norris describes it like this: "In an ecstatic moment – making love is a vivid example – we are most ourselves, and yet not our ordinary self. Ecstasy is resoundingly physical, and deeply spiritual."

When we think of spiritual ecstasy, usually (broad brush stroke here) maybe we think of people other than ourselves, who are in faith traditions other than our own. Or at least publicly that seems to be the case. One of the more famous spiritual ecstasy experiences happened to a woman we call Julian of Norwich – that wasn't her real name; we actually don't know it. She lived in the 14th century and "is one of early English's literary pioneers. In fact, hers is the first book written in English by a woman. She was a devout woman – who longed for God in a way that consumed her. She had prayed to become ill – for she felt it would purify her and draw her closer to her God. She wanted to be compassionate, a true follower of Jesus – she wanted deep connection with that which was greater than herself. At twenty nine, she experienced an illness that took her to the brink of death and in that state of being she had sixteen visions. After her recovery she wrote them down and wrote about them. Then twenty years later she wrote them

down again after having reflected on them for twenty years. We call her Julian because she was an anchoress at the church of St. Julian in Norwich, England. An anchoress is a person who allowed herself to be shut into a single room for the rest of her life. The Catholic Church has since forbidden the practice of this ‘morbid seclusion’ “but in medieval times, it was quite common.” Her life wasn’t a lonely one for one window in her room looked into the church so she could participate in the mass; another window allowed her to commune with nature, receive her meals and offer spiritual direction to pilgrims who came seeking her advice. And her cat lived with her as well.

In 1373 not only was Julian a great writer, she was a theologian and a religious and political genius. Her visions went against the teachings of the church and yet she was never condemned as she knew how to speak her truth in a bold way without offense. And given the integrity of her life and the example she set, the Church did not put her out. Her visions showed that God was not one of wrath but Love; she wrote that we have no reason to be afraid of God but rather we should enjoy the Love that is offered to us all, in the here and now. She said we need to forgive ourselves because God already has and that we should enjoy the life we have been given. In her visions she had hoped to see Hell and understand the Church’s teaching but she did not see it. Politically astute, she didn’t say hell doesn’t exist but rather she did not see it. These two visions alone bring to mind a Universalist understanding of the Divine and our role within creation. Time and again she refers to the Oneness of God...that God is “oneing” the universe – that God is in fact everywhere and in everything. *(this info on Julian and Meister Eckhart comes from John R. Mabry’s book Heretics, Mystics and Misfits, 2004)*

So what about us? What do Unitarian Universalists have today that might be considered spiritual ecstasy? I don’t think as human beings we are that different from the human beings in

medieval time who lived with such longing. I think we are very similar in our desires as our ancestors. And here we are in this faith tradition that can be very rational, intellectual and reasonable. And those qualities have served us well through the years but they are not the whole of who we are. And in fact, a closer look at our own history reminds us that in fact some of our own ancestors, like us today, had intense longings for connection and sought out experiences that were ecstatic.

There are today some Unitarian Universalists who identify as mystics – some who have had spiritually ecstatic moments in their spiritual practice. They are in good company with the likes of our ancestors including Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Transcendentalists. As my colleague the Rev. Ken Collier pointed out in his sermon *Confessions of a Unitarian Universalist Mystic*, (1/7/2007) “Even the rationalist followers of William Ellery Channing did not argue about whether Transcendentalist mysticism was an acceptable form of religion.” Mystics like Emerson did not throw away thought and reason; and he didn’t rely on that solely for his maturity as a spiritual being.

According to William James who wrote *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, there are four characteristics of a mystical experience – which could lead to spiritual ecstasy – first is that it is ineffable – it can’t be given to another person, not even shared with words. It is a direct experience. Second, it is revelatory; you come out of the experience having learned or realized something important or profound. The third characteristic is that the experience doesn’t last long – and finally, in the experience one feels it washing over them; it can’t be controlled or wished – it happens. We UUs have had, can have and do have these experiences – and they can be grounded in our Sources. You know we have seven principles – and listed on the same page in our grey hymnal are the sources from which our principles come. “The Living tradition we share

draws from many sources: the first being Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life”. Powerful words to describe that which is indescribable. Even here in our community we have folks who gather to support one another in exploring this way of being. Church member and children and youth choir director Lynn Mendoza Kahn is the leader of the Intuitive Explorations affinity group. She and the group have three different meetings to share and explore various experiences that people have including a Healing Circle, Getting to Know You group meeting and a Singing Meditation group. Details about their monthly meetings can be found in our newsletter The Window and Lynn will be on the patio to talk to you who are interested.

So how might we experience spiritual ecstasy? I turn to a theologian who is claimed by many traditions. Meister Eckhart was a German clergyman who also lived and wrote in the 14th century. He entered the Dominican order of a very young man and studied theology at Cologne and Paris, earning his Master’s degree around 1294. But in 1300 he went back to Germany for his ministry and in time become the Provincial of the entire Dominican Order with 60 religious communities. A unique clergyman at the time, he did well administratively and was well liked by the common folks. He taught, preached and wrote in common German – a heresy at the time. And he used examples people could understand; he supported alternative communities including the Beguines – communities of women who loved God and wanted to serve people. Not nuns because they weren’t connected to the church but not exactly lay women either for they weren’t married and made their own decisions. Big lifestyle changes given the time they lived.

Eckhart was a mystic who was a wonderful teacher and what he taught was extraordinary – especially at the time. He taught that was there was no distinction between God and what was

in the world. Creator and creation were the same. Therefore no one need to work or strive to be chosen by God – because we were already chosen, united with the Divine. This doesn't mean people were perfect – they still needed to learn and grow. According to Eckhart we grow cyclically. He wrote there are four spiritual paths that everyone participates in, whether they want to or not – it's happening. The key is to participate in the path, the growth, consciously, to follow the flow as the paths merge into one another and to be aware as one's spiritual life takes root and deepens.

Step one – Via Positiva – the way of wonder. the first step of spiritual life is awe, gratitude, amazement. Our poets help us see this, our children do too; one only needs to be aware. This body is a miracle, this ability to sense and feel and rejoice in the feeling of touch...of drinking a cold drink on a hot day or to feel the cool breeze come in after a sticky, humid day. Wonder and amazement.

Step two – Via Negativa – the way of sinking, of pain and letting go. This is, by nature, harder than the first path. Like the poet describe, not all that is gold can stay – life ebbs and flows, there is a natural letting go; this letting go is not a bad thing, according to Eckhart. It's a part of reality that exists and if we can embrace it, enter into the pain, the letting go willingly, knowing it is not the end, we can rise to the next path. Embracing the pain allows for the learning that we can live with detachment, we can not take ourselves or our plans too seriously, too literally, too closed and stuck in the rut. This second path is serious spiritual maturity work. And making it through, we end up on the third step – Via Creativa – the way of creativity. Our pain leaves us and we become open to what is next – how we might make sense of it, use it to our advantage, be creative with what we have and what we have learned. “the wonder and pain of all creation pours through us as the spirit (of God) in us gives us utterance.” Art, music, poetry,

dance, cooking, wood-working – and more are all made from the first two paths. Via Creativa allows us to share our experience with others and thus we find ourselves on the fourth path – Via Transformativa, the way of transformation and reformation. We are moved by the art we produce to act in the world to make it better, to ease suffering, to feed the hungry, to be about creating the Beloved community. Transformation – re-formation. What path are you on today? Are you stuck on one step?

It is a cycle. Just as we have become transformed, we see wonder in a new way, with a different sense and are back on the Via Positiva again; to continue to live and grow and experience all life has to offer. “The advantage to making this process conscious is that one is less likely to get stuck in one of them, especially Negativa. And one is also more able to support others on their paths, as it is often evident which stage they are in and one always know what is coming next, and so in which direction they should head.” This is communal work. This makes a lot of sense – as it did back in 1325 and today.

Mystical experiences...spiritual ecstasy is not for the faint of heart – it’s work that can leave you broken if you don’t find your way to the creative path. Here’s the story of a woman who did – and who is still on the path.

Liz is a woman who feels lost in the middle of her life. She is longing for something more...she is tired but it’s something more than that – she is beginning to question if she has a life...if she has ever lived; she’s feels empty inside. So she goes on a hero’s journey of sorts: she went to Italy b/c she wanted to marvel at something in life; we need to know pleasure. She learns to appreciate the small things – that in reality, when seen in their wonder – are not so small – delicious food that she can taste, works of beauty and history that have stood the test of time. In Italy she gets in touch with that part of herself that allows for her basic, deep needs to be met.

We need beauty in our lives, we need wonder and to be amazed and sometimes we need to step outside our daily routine, our everyday world to notice again the important things, the things that make life a life. Then she travels to India. With the physical needs stated, she needs connection with the Divine. It's hard to go into the higher spiritual plane if your basic needs aren't met. Having them met allows for India. And there she confronts her fears, her habits of thinking that hold her back, keep her from experiencing connection and deep love. She wrestles with the concept of forgiveness – of others and herself. She practices and practices and practices various spiritual disciplines – like scrubbing the floor on her knees with a brush and water, like meditation, like helping others and being a watchful presence to other travelers. In India she found that God dwells within...the holy isn't something out there, but something here, lived through us, *as* us –we are holy (our first principle and the belief that we are good from the beginning – that's so counter cultural it's hard to wrap our minds around it). Having connected with the Divine – she travels back to Bali – to learn from a teacher about healing and balance and how to live a life with integrity. The key as Meister Eckhart would say is being conscious while doing this work. Taking the time for reflection and awareness. ...It is our work. I read the book, Eat, Love, Pray – I saw the movie too and upon reflection have realized the deep need still present – to cultivate the ability to practice and explore within my normal routine, within my daily environment – in my own neighborhood, within this, my own faith community. Simone Weil said, “The highest ecstasy is the attention at its fullest.” This becomes sacred work. May it be so – for all of us. Join me.

Benediction – May the spirit of Truth light your way at every turning and deciding place and give you courage when the choice is hard. May the strength of Love uphold you when you most need it and the Joy of Life surprise you when you least expect it. Go and pay attention.