

**“The Sources of Our Tradition –
Direct Experience of Transcending Mystery and Wonder”**

**A Sermon by Beth Collins
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As Unitarian Universalists, we claim as one of the sources of our beliefs "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." "Direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder..." Our personal experience of the Divine.

In the book *A Chosen Faith*, Forrest Church writes:

"We cannot pin it (the spiritual experience) down or mount it as a trophy on the wall of human knowledge All we can do is return from our journeys with symbols, metaphors, and stories, the basic building blocks of religion."

My journeys and stories will surely be different from yours, but this morning I offer you some of my stories and thoughts on our experiences of the Divine. First off, I guess I should stipulate that I do believe in the existence of a Holy and Divine Spirit, a spirit known by many names. God, Goddess, Great Spirit. Great Mother, Great Father, Great Mystery, Chi, Spirit of Life. I think these are all names for the same thing, and of course there are many other names.

I believe that this Divine Spirit resides both in the universe and within each of us. I hold the Pantheistic view that there is a divine presence in every person, every animal, every plant, every rock.

I would say I believe in a personal God. I don't imagine God in the classic image of an old guy who lives in the clouds, who would take time out of his busy schedule to check in with me. I might express it more as a life force flowing through all of us. We can become more aware of that Divine Spirit of Life and thereby live more in harmony with the Divine.

Theologian Alan Jones says that most of us live secondhand lives, depending on secondhand information about almost everything - what to eat, how to take care of our bodies, even how we should feel. Entertainment, world news - all secondhand. There is very little original experience in our lives, and in many ways that serves us well, as when we see someone trained as a doctor to help us care for an injury or illness. But Jones says, "when it comes to questions of meaning, purpose, and death, secondhand information will not do. I cannot survive on a secondhand faith in a secondhand God. There has to be a personal word, a unique confrontation, if I am to come alive." In other words, each of us has to meet the Divine Spirit face to face.

When I was young, I had a real sense of the presence of the Divine in nature. I felt peace, awe, and wonder. I felt as if the Divine was near. I have come back around to this, sensing Spirit in the woods, fields, even my garden, but for a while, it was not so.

My childhood sense of the Divine faded as I grew up. I went to college. I learned about logic and scientific method. I became even more scornful of the miraculous teachings of the Christian church. I called myself an atheist, but I think I was more of a hardcore humanist. There were times when I tried to be a Christian, to believe by blind faith, but I just couldn't do it.

I wanted to believe. I wanted to fit in. I just couldn't. A prime example was the Apostle's Creed, the doctrinal test for Methodists. I quit saying the parts that I didn't believe, and found that there was nothing left. I left the church. Time passed.

Then something happened. I had a dream. I dreamed of ducks, and turkeys, and a dead wild turkey. The next day, I took a ride into the countryside, heading for a nearby historic site. I was sidetracked by a sign directing me to a roadside "wildlife museum". The "wildlife museum" turned out to be the shop of a very prolific taxidermy artist, but when I pulled into the driveway, I was greeted by a flock of ducks and turkeys. Inside, the first exhibit was a dead wild turkey. The Divine Spirit had whacked me upside the head.

In the words of M. Scott Peck, from his book *The Road Less Traveled*, "The fact that highly implausible events, for which no cause can be determined within the framework of known natural law, occur with implausible frequency has come to be known as the principle of synchronicity." Peck also notes that a significant number of such occurrences seem to be fortunate - beneficial to those involved. Peck cites an example recorded by Carl Jung. These are Jung's words:

My example concerns a young woman patient, who, in spite of efforts made on both sides, proved to be psychologically inaccessible. The difficulty lay in the fact that she always knew better about everything. Her excellent education had provided her with a weapon ideally suited to this purpose, name, a highly polished Cartesian rationalism with an impeccably "geometrical" idea of reality. After several fruitless attempts to sweeten her rationalism with a somewhat more human understanding, I had to confine myself to the hope that something unexpected and irrational would turn up, something which would burst the intellectual retort into which she had sealed herself. Well, I was sitting opposite her one day, with my back to the window, listening to her flow of rhetoric. She had had an impressive dream the night before, in which someone had given her a golden scarab -- a costly piece of jewelry. While she was still telling me this dream, I heard something behind me gently tapping on the window. I turned around and saw that it was a fairly large flying insect that was knocking against the window pane from the outside in the obvious effort to get into the dark room. This seemed to me very strange. I opened the window immediately and caught the insect in the air as it flew in. It was a scarabaeid beetle, or common rose-chaffer (*Cetonia aurata*), whose gold-green color most nearly resembles that of a golden scarab. I handed the beetle to my patient with the words, "Here is your scarab." The experience punctured the desired hole in her rationalism, and broke the ice of her intellectual resistance. The treatment could now be continued with satisfactory results.

Since my own whack-upside-the-head experience of synchronicity had taken the form of a dream, I was very interested in learning more about dreams. At UU Leadership School at The Mountain, I had a great opportunity. At Leadership School, our time was scheduled from sunup to long after sundown. At lunchtime, we selected our dining companions by forming focus groups to discuss topics of interest. I joined a group of ladies who wanted to discuss dreams. Several had been studying and interpreting their dreams for a long time, and had a lot of wisdom to offer. They all recommended keeping a dream journal, so I started that practice and kept it up for the next 5 years. I learned a lot from my dreams.

Dreams generally speak to us in symbols rather than words. There are some symbols in dreams that are considered universal. For example, a house in a dream represents our life. If we keep a journal, we can see that the words, phrases, and idioms that we use to describe the houses in our dreams can also describe our lives. For example, I once dreamed I was living in a house standing on piers, with no floor. I realized that the issue I was dealing with at the time had no foundation. Dreams of transportation relate to how

we are going through life. I have had many dreams where I missed the boat. At least once I dreamed that I was paddling down the street in a canoe. My therapist at the time suggested that I am moving through life in an unconventional manner. Indeed!

One of my Feng Shui books (*Interior Design with Feng Shui*, by Sarah Rossbach) has an appendix that includes a section on dreams. Among other things, it says that our dreams are influenced by

- . Our senses**
- . Our memories**
- . Our desires**
- . Our fears**
- . and balances or imbalances in our bodies.**

The book says that dreaming can be divided into 3 time periods:

- . A dream in the first part of the night is influenced by the day's happenings and thoughts.**
- . A dream in the second part of the night represents our past experiences or lives.**
- . And a dream in the third section, right before we wake up, is a message or premonition.**

You might also like to know that the book says that if you dream of someone dying, it is very good luck for the person you dreamed of, and a dead person who is alive in a dream means good luck for the dreamer.

Another technique that is similar to dream interpretation is called active imagination, a kind of daydreaming. We can intentionally let our minds drift through the misty world of dreams and symbols. We can relate our mental images with issues we are trying to resolve, in the same manner that we interpret dreams. We can bring back images and ask ourselves or our companions, what does it mean?

Through synchronicity, the Divine comes to us unexpectedly, but as with active imagination, we can see that there are other more intentional ways for us to communicate with the Great Spirit.

The when we talk of intentional spiritual experience, I think among the first things to come to mind are prayer and meditation. Some say that prayer is talking God, while meditation is listening to God. (Fox Mulder, on the X-Files, says when we talk to God it's called prayer. When God talks to us, it's called schizophrenia.)

Some of you know, many of you don't, that I am preparing for a vision quest. The actual quest will be performed near Auburn, Alabama on Labor Day weekend. By that time we will have spent about 6 months preparing by practicing various meditations, contemplations, rituals, writings, and more. One thing we are supposed to do is pray for 15 minutes a day and meditate for 30. I can't say I have been successfully doing that every day, but I am praying and meditating much more than I had been. Regarding prayer, I subscribe to the philosophy that we should be careful what we ask for. We might get it.

I heard some interesting remarks on prayer from Grandfather Yellow Horse Man, who spoke at a celebration that I attended as part of my vision quest preparation. He said we should be specific when we pray. The more specific we are, the less room there is for miscommunication.

Grandfather Yellow Horse Man told a story about an old pickup truck he had. He loved that truck, but it was becoming untrustworthy - just worn out. I believe he said it was a 1975 model. He said he wished he could replace it with one just like it, only a little newer, in better condition, more reliable. He started praying, asking Great Spirit for a new truck. Soon he spotted one with a "for sale" sign, the same make as his old truck, but a 1985 model; same color, even. His petitions to the Divine became more specific. "Great Spirit, I want that truck. That specific truck. I need that truck to take care of my family and my community." He didn't have enough money to buy it, but as he talked to people in the community about the truck, he found that some of them were willing and able to contribute to the cause. The people donated enough money to allow him to get the truck he needed. His prayers were answered. I had another friend who prayed for "direction" and soon discovered that she was pregnant. As I said, be careful what you ask for. Specific is good.

I try to spend more time listening than talking, but when I do talk, I generally offer prayers of gratitude. I try to be very careful with public prayers too. I don't want to ask for, to claim, something for others that they might not want.

As for meditation, in addition to meditating on my own, I have been participating in some very nice meditations in Buddhist classes on "The Problem of Anger" and "The Rope of Attachment" at Fruition Yoga on Vineville Ave. There are lots of other things going on at Fruition Yoga, by the way. If you are interested in those classes or other Yoga and Meditation events, check out their web page, fruitionyoga.com, or stop by there and visit.

Another intentional method of experiencing the Divine is through divination. Reading palms, tarot cards, I Ching coins, tea leaves, or chicken entrails. There are undoubtedly thousands or tens of thousands of divination techniques. We can even be original and create our own divination method. In general, divination works like dream interpretation. There may be some degree of synchronicity in what images or symbols appear, as with tea leaves or tarot cards. Or there may be firmer rules and meanings, as in astrology or palm reading. Of course, what ever is revealed can be changed by other influences, including the will and actions of the subject.

The Feng Shui book mentioned a famous Taiwanese face reader who predicted that President Kennedy would die near the age of 40 because he had bulging eyes. The book also told of a successful restaurateur who perplexed face readers. He had unfortunate marks on his face which indicated that he should have died years ago, but he felt that feng shui had helped mitigate his negative influences. I sometimes read tarot cards. I am somewhat out of practice, but my method is to learn the meaning of the cards and simply "read" the meaning of the cards that appear in a spread. I find that people who have more experience with energy work and spiritual practices generally feel that their readings are quite accurate. My readings provide cues for them, for their intuition or subconscious mind, to figure out their own answers.

I have had two readings done for me by a woman who has been reading for people in Macon for many years. After the subject shuffles the cards, this lady just holds them in her hands, slides them around, and starts talking. She is amazingly accurate regarding past and future events. I asked her about her technique, how she interprets the meaning of the cards. She told me the cards don't mean anything. She just uses them as a prop to give her something to look at instead of staring at the person she is talking to the whole time. She has a real gift.

Omens: I think interpretation of omens is a combination of synchronicity and intentionality. I have noted for most of the last half of my life that I often see shooting stars and sun dogs on auspicious occasions, so I have begun noting them as "good omens". Once I worked in Alabama for six months. I was driving home for the last time, having finished my "tour of duty". As I drove across the county line back into Houston County, I saw a bright meteor welcoming me home.

When I was at the Mountain for Leadership School, I went on the "trust walk" to Dry Falls. We trust one another by holding hands in the dark, with our eyes closed, and walking down a series of stone steps and landings to a path that leads behind the water fall, which despite the name is certainly not dry. Each person has to depend on the person in front of her to accomplish the walk safely. On this memorable occasion, as we were standing behind the falling water, I opened my eyes. Through the veil of water, I saw two shooting stars -Whoosh! Whoosh! - parallel and almost simultaneous. Indeed, that week at the Mountain was one of the best experiences of my life.

Sometimes we ask for an omen or a sign. On any given day, a bird could land on our head and all our friends would get a big kick out of it. But if we ask the Divine, "Give me a sign. Tell me what to do here," and a bird lands on our head, we would probably take that as a major omen and start trying to figure out what it means. I might drag out Animal-Speak by Ted Andrews and study the symbolism for that particular bird. A bluebird means happiness. A dove means love and security. A woodpecker, to me, means use your head.

And speaking of using one's head, let me say that I have not lost all my reason and rationality. I have not flushed my whole education down the toilet. In fact, I don't see that this conflicts with what I know of science and natural law. This dream realm, this spirit realm, is part of what Forrest Church calls the transrational realm - beyond rational. It is that great part of reality that transcends the small portion that we can comprehend and imagine, that we can understand in our simple minds. I am humbled before the Great Mystery.

I believe that the Divine speaks to each of us in whatever way we can hear, if we are willing to listen. Some people believe that God spoke to Moses as a burning bush. Why can't God speak to us as turkey or a scarab beetle? Why can't the Divine appear as a cool green tree, instead of a burning one, or as a bird, as Goddess, or even as a neighbor who sits down with us for a cup of tea? I believe that we can hear the voice of the Divine in all these and many more ways.

Here is a final reading from M. Scott Peck. Peck told of a time when he was frustrated in his writing until a woman, the wife of a colleague, appeared unexpectedly at his home with a book that resolved his dilemma. Peck says:

This was not a stupendous event. There were no trumpets to announce it. I might well have ignored it. I could have survived without it. Nonetheless, I was touched by grace. The event was both extraordinary and ordinary -- extraordinary because it was highly unlikely, ordinary because such highly unlikely beneficial events happen to us all the time, quietly, knocking on the door of our awareness no more dramatically than the beetle gently tapping on the windowpane. Similar sorts of events have happened dozens of times in the months since my colleague's wife lent me her book. They have always been happening to me. Some of them I recognize. Some of them I may take advantage of without even being aware of their miraculous nature. There is no way I have of knowing how many I have let slip by.

I have tried this morning to articulate my own experiences of transcending mystery and wonder, and offer some thoughts that might enrich your spiritual experiences. At Alcoholics Anonymous, they say "It works if you work it." I encourage you to choose a spiritual practice or adventure that suits you and "work it". Meditate, keep a dream journal, work in your garden, visit a psychic. Whatever works for you.

I have to tell you that after writing down most of these ideas Friday, I woke Saturday morning with a head full of dream images. I dreamed about Grandfather Yellow Horse Man and my canoe. And part of the time I was wearing these wild, flamboyant turquoise and orange cowboy boots. Can you imagine? And of course, I missed the boat.

I hope that I have not been too flamboyant this morning, and I certainly hope that I have not missed the boat. I hope that I have given at least some of you something worthwhile to think about.

I would like to conclude with a carefully prepared prayer.

Great Spirit, we are grateful for your presence in our lives. We are thankful for the beauty of this world around us and the beauty we see in one another. Let us remember our covenant to accept one another and encourage one another in spiritual growth. Let us affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

So may it be. Amen.