

**“Welcoming the Mystic Within”**  
**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Oregon**  
**Easter Service Words by Rev. Heather Starr, Minister**  
**Host: Cindy Palmer**  
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*“Between the pillars of spirit and matter the mind has put up a swing.”*  
– from the 15<sup>th</sup> century mystic Kabir

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

Good morning. It is good to be with you this morning. We arrive to this sanctuary this morning with many different experiences and thoughts, apprehensions and anticipations. For some, this Easter Day reminds us of family traditions, of gathering together to celebrate the Spring Equinox, the knowing that even here in chilly Central Oregon, spring will, eventually, come. It *is* on its way.

For some Easter is a central Holy Day, a day to honor and to ponder ancient Christian stories of sacrifice and salvation. ...For some, Easter is a day to endure, a troubling story that seems violent and strange, sweetly smoothed over with chocolate and pastels. Some seek out the pagan roots of this holiday and the celebration of spring, and others carry on family and community traditions out of love and appreciation for the familiar stories and gatherings. It is even possible that a few of you are just now thinking to yourselves—oh, it’s Easter?! – What’s that all about again? (Talk to me after the service & we’ll catch up).

The religious histories we share as a species and as individuals form a complicated and multi-layered tapestry—and it is difficult, even perhaps pointless—to attempt to make any one all-encompassing, definitive meaning out of this tapestry. I invite you today, during this brief time this morning, to suspend all your reactions and carefully crafted stances—at least until coffee hour—and, for now, just be here, be here, in this sanctuary, for this time, beside each other, one tender, imperfect human being next to another. Let your overactive mind take a rest. Be here, and let something unexpected from this service today surprise and nourish you. Come, let us worship together.

**SERMON**

**“Welcoming the Mystic Within”**

**Rev. Heather Starr**

In order to welcome the mystical into your life, into your inner self, into your imagination, you must first be open to its possibility, you must be open to looking for it. So begins the challenge for many Unitarian Universalists who are attached to reason and evidence. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengali mystic Ramakrishna presents this challenge this way: The student asks: “Sir, why are there so *many* different opinions about God’s nature? Some say that God has form, while others say that He is formless. Again, those who speak of God *with* form tell us about His different forms. Why all this controversy?”

The teacher replies: “A student thinks of God as he sees Him. In reality there is no confusion about God. God explains all this to the student if the student only somehow realizes Him. *You* haven’t yet set your foot in that direction. How can you expect to know all about God?”

Listen to a story, [Ramakrishna goes on]. Once a man entered a jungle and saw a small animal on a tree. He came back and told another man that he had seen a creature of a beautiful red color on a certain tree. The second man replied: 'When I went into the jungle I too saw that animal. But why do you call it red? It is green.' Another man who was present contradicted them both and insisted that it was yellow. Presently others arrived and contended that it was grey, violet, blue, and so forth and so on. At last they started quarreling among themselves. To settle the dispute they all went to the tree. They saw a man sitting under it. On being asked, he responded: "Yes, I *live* under this tree and I know the animal [you're referring to] very well. All your descriptions are true. Sometimes the animal appears red, sometimes yellow, and at other times blue, violet, grey, and so forth. It is a chameleon. And it has no color at all. Now it has a color, and now it has none.'

Ramakrishna sums up: " Only the man *who lives under the tree* knows that the chameleon can appear in various colors, and he knows, further, that at times it has no color at all. It is the others who suffer the agony of futile argument." It was the man who lived at the base of the tree, day in and day out, who knew the contours and colors of the animal that the others could only conjecture about. That man had made the time and space in his life to truly study, learn about, and *experience* the Mystery.

Opening ourselves up to allow in surprise takes risk, it takes time, energy, and it may take something new, some new behavior or practice, that at first seems odd to ourselves and certainly to others in our lives. It may require changing up the routine of how we are living, now. Many people who are drawn to Unitarian Universalism are drawn to these communities in part because we tend to be, stereotypically, a highly rational, practical people focused on our lives in the here-and-now. We tend to be a little wary of ritual, of religiosity, of anything that seems too ethereal, new-agey, or out-of-control. Easter Sunday can be an awkward annual occasion—some of you may not be entirely sure why you're here today, what brought you here, why you acknowledge Easter in some ways and not in others, believing, like me, in enjoying any opportunity to enjoy chocolate wrapped up in colorful tinfoil, but not entirely sure how much you want to consume of all the rest of it.

As a life-long Unitarian Universalist, I've been aware of this annual Easter awkwardness my whole life. I also recognize that for some people coming to any church on any Sunday morning of the year brings up this awkwardness—will I fit in? Will I do it right? Will I be asked to do or say or participate in something that doesn't feel good or comfortable to me? There is something inherent in any religion which involves at least considering, if not encountering, the transcendent and the mysterious—the Mystical—and that involves giving up some control for a time. Letting go of what little control that we have is scary, for sure. I was reminded this week of what it's like to step warily into any church or religious space. I decided to attend the services of a friend and a colleague who is the Pastor of Nativity Lutheran Church. I went out of curiosity last Sunday, Palm Sunday, with another friend of mine who attends there, and decided then to go for the Whole Holy Week Enchilada, to experience it all for myself. Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and a Sunrise Service this morning at 6am on Easter Sunday (so if I'm a little sleepy this morning, you now know why).

I have been reminded through this experience of what a risk it is to enter a church community as a stranger—to step in wondering if anyone will talk to me, or, even worse, if *everyone* will talk to me. If I'll know what to do at the right time, if whatever happens will be okay for my spirit. Will my soul be okay here? Will I be made to feel good, or bad, about

myself? Will something transformative happen? Will I be alright? We bring some or all of these trepidations with us into a new religious setting—and yet we come anyway, seeking something.

Part of the Maundy Sunday service at Nativity this year involved sitting at tables as Jesus and the Disciples did during The Last Supper. One-by-one, we turned to each other and washed one another's hands with a simple pitcher of water, a bowl, and a towel. One-by-one, we gave communion to our neighbors at the table. Now let me be quite clear: I am no expert at traditional communion, giving or receiving. But I had stepped into this community and decided to, for the time I was there, go with the flow, and see what I could learn, what it felt like, what this Holy Week meant to this community.

In the Lutheran tradition, at least the way I absorbed things over at Nativity, communion is offered to everyone. And, that night, we were offering it to each other. Somehow I ended up being the first at my table to receive it. So I did what seemed natural—I took the piece of bread and put it in my mouth, and then I lifted up the glass of wine and drank from it. And no one gasped, or said anything at all other than some sacred and slightly familiar phrases I was trying very hard to catch. It was only when my turn had passed and I watched everyone else around the table give and receive communion that I realized I had done it wrong—I was supposed to *dip* the bread into the wine, not take a gulp directly from the glass. Apparently I need to get out more. It didn't matter. This was a community with the central value of grace, just as ours, here, is a community with the central values of acceptance, and love. We shared communion around the table. We held hands and prayed together. We laughed and listened together. We walked back out into the night, silently, back into our separate lives, reminded of grace, reminded of community, reminded of love.

The most mystical parts of this experience for me came at the doorway—walking in, and surrendering to the unknown, to be in the present moment, to sing words to songs with familiar tunes but words that, on another day, and in another place, I might—and probably would—argue about vehemently. There, in that Fellowship Hall, it was good to sing together, to be together, to fumble along together, and to attempt to understand the overwhelming miracle of life and all the unknowable mysteries that make up our world, our human history, our clumsy searches for meaning.

[...]

In his 1902 lecture on Mysticism, psychologist-turned-philosopher William James said: “So many men, so many minds: I imagine that [mystical] experiences can be as infinitely varied as are the idiosyncrasies of individuals” (445). Every world religion has a “mystical” path, a component of its faith tradition that focuses on direct and personal experience of the transcendent. Years ago, when asked about how I experience the sacred, the mystical, the reminder that there is more going on in this world than just me and my concerns, I might have said what people often say to me—and I understand it completely: I experience the sacred in nature, in the trees and in the wind, in the gorgeous light that falls onto the Deschutes River and dances over it in unspeakable beauty. In the natural world we are moved to silence, and to a greater awareness of our own insignificance. Absolutely.

What I want to share with you on this day though is a mystical experience of a completely different nature. I've been working a fair amount as a Chaplain at the hospital lately, and one day this week I was called in by an Emergency Room Nurse to be with a woman from out-of-town who was experiencing something along the lines of a heart attack. She had asked for someone to help her contact her church in her hometown, and I was called.

I went to her room in Emergency, and it was, naturally, chaotic there—there were multiple doctors and nurses moving around and over her bed and discussing names of medications and procedures, technicians and radiologists coming in to prepare her for transport to a lab, there was a lot going on—I waited for a while and then in a brief moment of quiet introduced myself to her. We talked for a little bit, I tried to reassure her and help her relax. A doctor interrupted and I stepped back and then something surprising happened—she called to me and asked me to pray for her. It wasn't surprising to me to be asked to pray, it was surprising to me that it was so important, so essential, that I pray with her right then, right in that moment, when there were over half a dozen people leaning over her and talking and so much was going on.

I took her hand, and I leaned in, and I encouraged her to imagine a place she loves, a beautiful, quiet place that brings her peace. She closed her eyes. I led us in prayer, talking just to her—we removed ourselves for a moment from that hectic room and spoke just to each other and to her God. I prayed for strength, for courage, for calm, for trust in her caregivers, for the deep knowing that her friends and family were all thinking of her and sending her their love and care, for God to guide her through this crisis and bring the spirit of grace into this chaos. While I was speaking, saying whatever words came to mind that I thought would be helpful, she was whispering, too, saying “yes, yes,” taking in my words and sending them on their way with her blessing. It is not for me to say with certainty what was happening during those moments—I have no idea. I couldn't tell you what was going on with her body or with her spirit. Something beyond words was taking place—the medical personnel could not say for sure what was happening in her body, nor could I pinpoint the exact journey of her spirit. But we all stayed present with each other, doing what we could, witnessing the mystery of life, and longing for it to continue. We created a realm of calm in that storm, renewed in her that quiet place that would carry her through the next few hours and be a part of her healing when she returned home a few days later.

When I let go of her hand and stepped back as she was taken into the heart lab, I felt, still with me, the power of mystical experience: the mystical is whatever lifts us out of the mundane daily details of our lives and connects us with universal experience, universal longing, universal life, universal spirit. There are so many words, so many ways to speak about transcendent experience—so many ways because they are *all* searching and none are adequate or complete. I believe that all of us, no matter how great our skepticism and our doubts, all of us have moments of deeply feeling that there is more going on this world than we can ever truly know and understand. This is The Mystic Within, cajoling and loving us, and holding us in grace, even when we so eagerly gulp the wine of life or make judgments about the color of the creature in the tree we are so quickly passing by that we stumble past the sacredness that is right here, right now, in this holy place, in this tender world, in our fragile, human hearts. —The surprising sacredness that is right here, right now, within each and every one of us.

May it be so. Amen, and Blessed Be.

[...]

#### \*BENEDICTION

In the words of scholar and contemporary mystic Andrew Harvey: “Whatever path you are on, use the [sacred] texts [and stories] not as intellectual puzzles [to be solved] but as signs of *your* essential splendor; pray, meditate, and serve others so that the wordless truth

behind these truths can be revealed to you in your own life.” Go in love, go in laughter, go in joyful, hopeful *anticipation*, and go in peace.