

## Mystical Moments and Ordinary Ones

Preached by Rev. Dr. Roger D. Jones

Epiphany Sunday, January 6, 2019

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #305, De Colores (Spanish verse last); #123, Spirit of Life/Fuente de Amor; #126, Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing. Piano music: Epilogue I by Yukhi Kuramoto; Claire de Lune by Claude Debussy; Solace by Scott Joplin.

### Reading

“The Mountains of California: Part I” by Al Young from *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* (ed. Camille Dungy).

“The Mountains of California: Part I”  
by Al Young, a former Poet Laureate of California

These demonstrations of the one God,  
green in the springtime in wintertime too  
and all that time John Muir was out here  
living with them,  
breaking himself in  
on them,  
I just ride amongst them inside a car  
flip the radio off out of respect  
and out of the feeling that there are  
more important waves floating in and out of us,  
mostly through us.  
The mountains of California, do I have to say  
anything?  
I love all this evidence set up to surround me this  
way, mountain, ocean, you just name it.

### Sermon

I was 10 or 11 years old, and it was winter in my small town in the middle of the Midwest. We’d had a snowstorm a few days earlier, and more was falling on this night, which was a Friday night. I put on my hooded winter coat and left the house to walk my neighborhood. There were a just few tracks in the snow on the street as I trudged past the homes of neighbors. It was very dark. Yet as I neared the corner a streetlight on a high pole illuminated thick snowflakes as they poured from the black sky. The snow came down fast but quietly. No cars passed by. I felt as if I had the out of doors all to myself. Rising up from the street corner and the light pole was a short, steep hill. At the top was a tall spruce tree and another tree which had shed its leaves. The neighbor’s house was behind these tall trees, whose big branches were bearing the heavy weight of the snow on them. It wasn’t a very high or large hill, but I was a little guy, so I ran up and rolled down it. Underneath me was the blanket from an earlier snow and around me was the new layer falling down. I tried making a few snowballs to see how suitable the snow was—thick and wet, just right.

Mostly I just looked up. I’m not sure how long I was there. I didn’t walk beyond a couple more blocks. This was an uneventful, ordinary outing of a child in a few familiar blocks of my neighborhood on a Friday night. Uneventful, but in retrospect it feels like an event. It seems like a magical Friday night. I was excited by the falling snow and the quiet cold covering of the street and the blanketed white yards, trees and hills around me. I was excited, yet I also felt calm. I felt open. I felt at home. Perhaps I was feeling held by Divine Love, embraced and reassured. Or perhaps, from another perspective, I was feeling at one with nature, at one with its processes and cycles of renewal; I was not separate from the snow but at home in it. Or perhaps, from yet another perspective, my good feelings came from the fact that I had made a daring venture out in the wet snow in the dark of a cold evening. I slogged the

distance of a whole two blocks, and made it back unfrozen, or at least not caring if I was frozen.

This is a fond memory of mine, and an enduring one, now almost a half century old. It's amazing I feel so connected to that cold and snowy night, because during what we call winter in Sacramento I shiver and whine when the temperature falls below 40 degrees Fahrenheit.

In the calendar of the Christian tradition, today is Epiphany. January 6 is the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas, also known as Three Kings Day. It commemorates the visit of the magi to the stable in Bethlehem to see the incarnation of God in the Baby Jesus. Epiphany celebrates a revelation of the divine in a little child. Yet in a broader sense that word *epiphany* can mean any kind of sudden revelation, a moment of insight, or a surprising spiritual experience.

Our Sunday service theme for this winter will be sources of inspiration and meaning. Our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition affirms our experiences of wonder, mystery and sudden insights. As officially stated by our national denomination, one of the sources of our UU tradition is

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 which create and uphold life.<sup>1</sup>

One way to refer to such experiences is mystical moments. California poet Al Young writes that the beauty of nature is for him evidence of a spiritual reality, and that he was meant to see that. Indeed, he says: "I love all this evidence set up to surround me this way, mountain, ocean, you just name it."

Young's poem refers to John Muir. John Muir was a Scottish immigrant who explored California's diverse and vast wilderness. And he was an advocate for its protection and preservation. He wrote many journals about his observations of nature and his hiking adventures. In one account, he recalls a powerful moment of grace—a moment of survival. He was climbing a rock face on Mount Ritter, at an elevation of 12,800 feet. Suddenly, he "became unable to move." His muscles went limp

and weak, he was losing his hold, he was sure he was going to fall down to the glacier below him. The end was near, and he accepted that. Then, in one brief moment, "life blazed forth again with preternatural clearness," he said. "I seemed suddenly to be possessed of a new sense. The other self, bygone experiences, Instinct, or Guardian Angel—call it what you will—came forward and assumed control. Then my trembling muscles became firm again...and my limbs moved with a ... precision with which I seemed to have nothing at all to do. Had I been borne aloft upon wings, my deliverance could not have been more complete.... I ... soon stood upon the topmost crag in the blessed light."<sup>ii</sup> That experience of John Muir is one that I hope never to have. Rather, it's an experience I won't go looking for—I'm afraid of heights. More specifically, I'm afraid of falling from heights.

Indeed, when I am reading John Muir's lovely writings, or the nature poetry or prose of some recent writers, I am impressed by their spiritual interpretations, but I am also intimidated by their capacity to find spiritual revelations out in nature. I conclude that I am an inadequate mystic, unqualified for special insights. Deficient in epiphanies, I stay close to the ordinary. I leave mysticism to bolder, braver people, who see life blazing with preternatural clearness, as Muir said.

Yet, there are spiritual guides who will not let me off the hook so easily—or let any of us off! Brother David Steindl-Rast is an Austrian-born Benedictine monk with many popular books, essays and videos. He says that everyone—all of us—can be open to special moments if we merely *are* open to them, if we take the time to reflect on them and honor them. He writes: "The [people] we call mystics differ from the rest of us merely by giving these experiences the place they deserve in everyone's life. What counts is not the frequency or intensity of mystic experiences, but the influence we allow them to have on our life. By accepting our mystic moments with all they offer and demand, we become the mystics we are meant to be. After all, a mystic is not a special kind of human being, but every human being is a special kind of mystic."

And of course, I know special kinds of mystics right here in this congregation. In small group meetings and one-on-one conversations, in

Religious Education classes and in words from this pulpit, I've heard people of all ages testify to special moments in life, in particular in the natural world. Such rich experiences happen on the coast or the river parkway nearby, in the mountains not far away from us or those on another continent. There are people whose special moments take place doing the most ordinary things. The baker who becomes suddenly aware of the weight and softness of the rising dough in the hands; the gardener who becomes captivated by the bee dancing in the flowers, and suddenly feels a kinship with it. The photographer out in a kayak early in the morning to make portraits of birds along the river, and to make friends with them without ever speaking.

David Steindl-Rast says it is important for us to give ourselves time to reflect on our experiences—and honor them. This can be private contemplation while rolling or walking in the neighborhood, doing chores, or preparing to go to sleep. Paying more attention to daily experiences can help us appreciate the ordinary moments we have. Contemplation can help us notice their significance in the bigger picture of life. Contemplation may not itself be a peak experience, but it can prepare us to be open us to the power and wonder of our ordinary experiences.

In her book *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, Kathleen Norris writes:

I find that I appreciate mysticism in its most ordinary manifestation, as a means for tapping into the holiness that exists in us all. A first-time mother or father, for example, engaged in giving their baby a bath, will suddenly realize that this is about more than getting an infant clean. Time [for this parent] may feel suspended; the light in the room, the splashing water, the infant's cooing with delight, the skin-on-skin feeling of loving touch—all of it might come together so powerfully that the parent inhabits in a more complete way this new and scary identity as 'parent.' And, at this moment, it is pure joy."

Norris goes on to say: "In traditional contemplation, which always leads away from the self and back toward God, this realization would

lead to a heightened empathy for all parents and children."<sup>iii</sup>

As I contemplate my childhood walk on a snowy street at night, and as I recall those moments of safety, freedom, belonging and connection, Norris's words about empathy have caused me to think of the children in this country who are denied such an experience of belonging and freedom. There are kids who live not far from a river, a lake or a forest, but have never seen one. There are kids in this country who have no access to a park or a garden, and who are not safe at home or at school or a sidewalk in their neighborhood.

The work of religious communities and spiritual writers and of poets and artists of all kinds—their work includes reminding us of the special dimensions of ordinary moments. They invite us to notice those moments.

Consider yourself invited. Pause, notice and give thanks. In this community, we gather to invite one another to appreciate those ordinary but holy moments. We remind one another of the special moments and special gifts that are available to our experience and our imagination.

For example, at UUSS we have talked about the ritual of a blessing for a meal—a spoken grace. There are many options for the words you might say to recognize the bounty and blessing of a meal, to remember the web of connections and mutual dependence reflected in the food on the plate. Whether with religious language or with other words or with a time of shared silence, a blessing for a meal is an invitation to contemplation.

In John Muir's dramatic account of his dangerous moment on the rock face on Mount Ritter, it's worth noting that he gives credit for his deliverance, possibly to a guardian angel, possibly to instinct, possibly to his bygone experiences. Indeed, perhaps it was all of his climbing experiences before that one which prepared him for the moment of danger and the moment of grace, when he received his deliverance without effort. Perhaps it was Muir's many ordinary hikes in the Sierra Nevada and his ordinary walks in mountain meadows which had prepared him to pause, consider his fate, not panic, and then receive help without effort. Perhaps his years of observing and writing about the grace and beauty of the mountains

are what gave him the grace to accept that help. Perhaps his practice of contemplation gave him the open spirit to describe his experience as a nearly angelic rescue.

So, I am following what spiritual teachers have to say about the importance of practice, of taking time, or doing ordinary things with attention and appreciation. I am taking time to be intentional about noticing special moments. But unlike Muir, I'm doing it at a much lower altitude. Starting in my one-story house.

On most mornings of the week I sit at the kitchen table with a cup of tea or coffee. Outside my window is a 10-foot holly tree in the yard by the wooden fence. A thin, bare trunk ends with a large green round ball of holly, from which a few stray branches reach out and away. One morning as I sat there, the holly tree was shaded by the roof of the house, so it was a large dark green sphere. At my table I wrote some notes on my gratitude list. I said a morning prayer of thanks and prayers for the wellbeing of people who were on my mind. After these things, some time had passed. Then I looked out again and saw the top of the round holly tree was now catching the sun, and it was glowing. Wow, glowing—shining! It was as if the waxy leaves had light inside them. It was as if I had noticed it for the first time. Maybe that was the case. No matter. This time I did appreciate the sight of it. It was an ordinary moment, made special. The next morning, I sat there with my coffee, but no glow came from the tree. Too many clouds? Was I too late—had the sun moved on already? Did the sun not wait for me to come back for the show? I was disappointed. But then I realized that's how ordinary moments become special—not because you can count on them or control them, but because you practice being open to them. Fortunately, I was early, that's all. It wasn't too cloudy, so I did see that friendly bright green glow before I set off on my day's work. But I want to remember how ordinary moments become special—not because you can count on them or control them, but because you practice being open to them.

I can imagine this experience for those who cook meals. It would be so much easier to open a package and consume it fast. But if you are handling the food, washing it, slicing it, seasoning

and cooking it, you have a physical sensation. If you think about it, you also have a physical connection to the people whose hands have made it possible for you to receive this food, these ingredients, which you are turning into a meal. It is a miracle of mutual dependence and interconnection. Preparing a meal is ordinary in many ways, but in other ways it is profound. You may be so involved in the flow of preparation that you don't realize it at the time, but later in contemplation you might. Poet Al Young is thinking of John Muir hiking the mountains, while he is only driving a car through them. Yet he says it does occur to him to turn off the radio out of respect for them. There are so many ways to honor the moments we live.

In the book *Earth Angels*, Shaun McNiff writes: "We can walk through kitchens and backyards with the imagination and enthusiasm of a ... trek [in the Sierra Nevada]." Indeed we can. We can sit in a park, ride in a bus, roll in a wheelchair down the sidewalk of the city, look up at skyscrapers, listen to the hum of conversation in a coffee shop, or smell the aromas of a kitchen. As we do this, we can also consider the wonder of ordinary life.

Let us give our special experiences the place they deserve in our lives, the place they deserve in everyone's life. Our ordinary experiences can be full of meaning for us; they can be special. By our contemplation and attention, let us honor our ordinary experiences and consider the possibility that they are more than ordinary. By doing so with openness and curiosity, may we honor the gift of life, and the gift of every new day. So may it be. Amen.

## Reflection by Frances Myers

One of my most mystical experiences happened in a bathtub.

I have always loved baths....The warm water, the quiet, the peacefulness...So it is no wonder that when Dan and I were having a house built in Pennsylvania, my focus was the tub in the master bathroom.....And what an amazing bathtub it was....It was stand alone - no sharing a shower.....it was deep enough so that I would be submerged but not so big that filling it with warm water would be too expensive....and it had WATER JETS.....Because it was near a window, on cold winter evenings I could even watch the snow fall from the warmth and comfort of my tub.

That tub became my sanctuary....It was amazing how much of my crazy life (4 children...husband...job...bills) I could tune out for a few minutes by simply turning on those water jets....In my water cocoon my brain could relax...and allow random thoughts to flit in and out.

Before I get to the mystical experience, I need to take a moment to briefly explain my journey to becoming a UU.

I was not raised with any religious upbringing...in fact my parents were anti organized religion. Dan had been raised Catholic, but was no longer practicing. After our second daughter was born he really wanted to find a church where we could go as a family...In 1994 we found a church home at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Lancaster.

So back to the tub....One evening about 2 years after we joined that congregation....while

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<sup>i</sup> See <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/sources>

<sup>ii</sup> Quoted in David Richo, *The Power of Grace* (Boulder, 2014: Shambhala).

taking my bath, I was thinking about the UU Principles, trying to figure them out...they seemed too simple to explain the complexity of human nature....The worth and dignity of Every Person, what about Hitler or Idi Amin? A loving god? Then why do so many innocent people get hurt?

As my thoughts went round and round....I clearly heard a voice say:

“You don’t have to figure it out or even understand it. A cat knows that a car exists...even if it can’t understand how a car works”

HUH?

But the voice was right....a cat knows there is a large thing that makes noise...that moves and could do it harm, or ....could provide a warm place to lay on cold days.....And that is enough for the cat.... The cat accepts the car as part of its life and then goes on with important cat business.

After that I felt an enormous sense of relief....and then calm. I did not need to “figure out” Unitarian Universalism....I could just be open to the mystery, accept that there were things that are just part of life that I may never fully understand....and that was okay.

The voice and its message was a remarkable gift that I was able to receive that day....thinking about it still makes me feel warm all over, just like a soak in a great bathtub.

<sup>iii</sup> Kathleen Norris. *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York, 1998: Riverhead Books), p. 285.