

Mystical Humanism: What a Wonderful World

December 12, 2021

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Songs: #126 “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”; “Because We Are All Kindred” (revision of “Because All Men Are Brothers”), and “What a Wonderful World” (texts at end).

Piano/cello: “Hallelujah” by Leonard Cohen, “What a Wonderful World,” by Thiele and Weiss, Irina Tchantceva, piano; Cynthia Davis, cello.

Readings:

- “Louisville Epiphany, 1958” by Fr. Thomas Merton (quoted in sermon).
- Words of the Rev. Erika Hewitt, a UU minister:

Let us remember and celebrate, this morning,
that each of our bodies was woven together in the depths of mystery:
cells multiplying, tissue taking form, organs taking up their function,
all under the silky cover of skin.

Let us gather in reverence for the gift of these bodies,
whatever their ages, their shapes, their abilities,
and may we know them to be channels of the world coming alive through us.

These bodies, these blessings, bring the world to life
through seeing, taste, hearing, scent, and touch.
May we bring to our intricately woven bodies a sense of sacred caretaking.
In doing so, let us also be grateful for the embrace of the Holy:
the Presence that creates and sustains life,
the Mystery that knit together each of our bodies,
and the force of Love that celebrates our desires.

Sermon

Our Soul Matters theme for this month of December is Opening to Joy. As Rev. Lucy said in her sermon last Sunday, opening to joy doesn’t mean being joyful on demand. It means choosing attitudes and actions which prepare the way for joyful moments to be able to appear. It means opening to the possibility that joy can surprise you. When I think about moments of joy that arrived as a surprise in my life, I come up with several experiences that I would call “mystical humanism.” It’s a feeling of human kinship. It’s the sense of belonging to the human family and loving it. It’s what we sang about when we sang “Because We Are All Kindred.” For some people, human kinship may be an ordinary attitude; it may seem habitual. What makes it mystical?

In the world of religions and spiritualities, mysticism has to do with a feeling or an awareness of something larger than ourselves. Whether it is God, the natural world, or the human family, that “something larger” is not separate from us. It is holding us. It is deeper than what we could name with words. So far as I know, mystical experiences are present in most of the religions and spiritual traditions around the globe. Each version has its own views and practices.

Thomas Merton was a Catholic priest, scholar of religions, and social activist. For the last 27 years of his life, he was a monk who lived in a monastery in a small town in Kentucky. He wrote about mysticism and the religions of East Asia, and how Christian mysticism related to their forms of mysticism. In one book he recounted a spiritual experience he had among a crowd of strangers in downtown Louisville, at the corner of

Fourth Street and what is now Muhammad Ali Street. It's called his Louisville Epiphany. On March 18, 1958, he writes, "[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... There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around/ shining like the sun."

Merton is describing a mystical experience, which he felt in the midst of humanity rather than in a meditation room. Although Merton had entered the monastery to pray and experience the presence of God, he kept his heart open to the human family. His felt experience of kinship caused him to become an activist in the 1960s. He wrote and spoke against the US war in Vietnam, racism in America, and the nuclear arms race.¹ I'd call this mystical humanism.

Humanism has appeared in various forms in many lands, and it has evolved over time. In general, we can say that humanism affirms the worth and value of the human person. Humanism promotes the full flourishing of human life. It celebrates the human mind, human body, and human community. It lifts up our ability to reason and investigate, our creative talents and our endeavors of art, literature, music, engineering, democracy, and athletics, among many other endeavors. In the European Renaissance, the movement of Christian Humanism explored human life and human beings as expressions of the divine impulse. From the late 1800s till the present day, non-theistic Religious Humanists and Secular Humanists have said that you don't need a belief in God to affirm and celebrate human life and human kinship. They are worthy of celebration on their own.

Mystical humanism is the experience that human life is a miracle. It's a mystery that we are here. And it's a miracle! As UU minister Erika Hewitt has written: "Each of our bodies was woven together in the depths of mystery: cells multiplying, tissue taking form, organs taking up their function, all under the silky cover of skin." Our skin and our senses bring the world into our bodies. Our interactions with others, our appreciation of human creativity and of human cooperation can bring to us the sense that there is a human family, and we belong to it. Everyone one does—you, me, everyone. In some special moments, we might see ourselves in the flow of human history from the pre-historic peoples, up to our own families. Given the long span of history, when we realize how brief is our time to contribute to the world, it can be humbling. Yet it can also be precious to realize that we are part of the flow. We belong to the earlier ones, we belong to all who share this world with us now, and we belong to all who will come along after us.

This misty-eyed and mystical sense of humanity is easy when we're around people we enjoy, or we're thinking about those we have admired, whether in our own lives or in human history. Yet history has many accounts of the worst actions and ugliest motivations of human beings. And, of course, there are people we know whom we just don't like very much. Driving in traffic when I'm feeling rushed is not always a time when I can recognize human kinship. If I'm feeling stress while on the road, and another car doesn't move to let me merge on the freeway, or somebody fails to use a turn signal when I think they should... it's not a mystical moment. I want to HONK and give them a piece of my mind. Somehow, I think honking will draw their attention to their mistakes, which of course will be a benefit for them. Now and then I do honk. But most of the time, instead, I take a breath. And I think: Well, blaring on the horn isn't going to change other people. If I do, of course, they might feel shame or irritation or

confusion. But my horn is not likely to put them into the mode of self-examination and self-improvement. I find that if I pause, if I refrain from reacting out of irritation, I will feel good again, pretty soon.

Speaking of traffic—how about rush hour? Or any time, if the freeway is congested—say there’s road work ahead, or an accident being attended to. In such a traffic jam, when I see other cars maneuvering between lanes to get the advantage of a few minutes on the way to their destination, I get annoyed. I feel envious and competitive. At other times, however, I am lucky enough to pause and merely behold the scene of so much humanity, together. I look at all those red brake lights in front of me. I see the white headlights behind me in the mirror. I realize we are all going through this delay together. I think: You know, among us at this moment is no doubt a wide variety of emotions and concerns, yet by and large we are showing tolerance and practicing patience. We may think we’re separated, but in the big picture, we have so much in common.

Leading teachers and writers in the field of religious mysticism have said that even with prayer and contemplation every day, sometimes a person won’t feel the presence of the divine. This can be frustrating for those devoted to the practice. Yet the teachers remind them that even when they can’t feel it, they are held all the time in divine love. I look cultivating at our sense of connection to other human beings in the same way. We may not always feel kinship; we may not want some people to be part of the human family. Sometimes we don’t feel part of the family. But we are, even when we don’t feel it. We are connected. We are all kindred. The special moments when we do feel it can be our touchstone. Remembering those moments can be our guide for how we live, behave, act, and speak with others, even at those times when we don’t look at them with a mystic’s loving heart.

When we think of mystics, we often think of pure, saintly types, people who are far away from us in time, location, and personal qualities. Yet the written evidence is that the famous mystics had spiritual struggles familiar to us, and ordinary human weaknesses. For them it was not easy to feel a sense of divine connection. Likewise, for us it not always easy to feel our human kinship. But we have ways that we can practice. We can sing songs about it, as we do on Sundays, and in holiday carol-singing, and other kinds of music. Consider the energy of the song made famous by Louis Armstrong: “I see trees of green, red roses too/ I see them bloom/ for *me and you!* And I think to myself, what a wonderful world.” That is mystical humanism.

When I read about Thomas Merton’s realization in Louisville ... “that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs,” I heard Louis Armstrong’s voice: “I see friends shaking hands, saying, ‘How do you do?’ They’re really saying: ‘I love you.’” Saying “How do you do?” or asking, “How are you?”—and listening for the answer—is a practice for cultivating human kinship.

We can develop our sense of connection. We can do this in simple ways. As I noted, we listen to songs about it, or we sing them. We do this when we hear poetry, read it, or write it. We look at pictures, or take them, and share them. We treat people with respect, we nod at others, we wave, we say *Hello*. Rather than glaring at people about whom I’m tempted to make a judgment, I can smile and say, *good morning*. Rather than blaring my horn, I can give it a break.

Our everyday lives provide many opportunities to cultivate the conditions to make it possible for the sense of human kinship to show up, and to give us joy.

Other ways to cultivate this connection include participation in causes that are larger than our own concerns. We give donations to charities that will help so many people we will never meet. We join organizations whose mission draws us to work together and cooperate with others, including people we probably wouldn't seek out for companionship otherwise. We can practice empathy, which means trying to imagine or learn about the experiences of others. We can try to keep an open mind and an open heart. When that's not easy we can pause, and center ourselves in our breathing, our senses, the sensation of sitting where we are, or if we are moving, the sensation of rolling, walking, riding, or swimming.

The powerful sense of human kinship has inspired acts of courage by human rights protestors and marchers in freedom struggles. At the same time, people who take such actions often say that doing so has *deepened* their experience of kinship. The sense of being part of the human family generates deeds of generosity and service, but the doing such deeds can also develop our sense of belonging to the human family. Our sense of kinship and interconnection leads to gestures of kindness and patience with our imperfect fellow humans. At the same time, treating others with kindness and patience can also lead us to experience the powerful sense that we are connected.

On this day, and in the days to come, let us remember that we are connected. We are kindred. We are related to all the people who have lived before us, to all who share this world with us today, and all who will come after we are gone. We are part of the human family. What a miracle! Let us live out of this awareness. Let us be surprised by it. And let us give thanks. So may it be. Blessed be and amen.

Hymn texts

Because We All Are Kindred

Words: T. Glazer, rev. A. Tavianini. Music: H. L. Hassler/J.S. Bach; adapt. R. Decormier.

Because we all are kindred, wherever we may be,
Together we're one people, forever proud and free.
No tyrant shall defeat us, no nation strike us down.
All they who toil shall greet us, the whole wide world around.

My family is all others, forever hand in hand,
Where chimes the bell of freedom, there is my native land.
All others' fears are my fears, they shall not hold us down.
My family's tears are my tears, the whole wide world around.

Let ev'ry voice be thunder, let ev'ry heart beat strong,
Until all tyrants perish, our work shall not be done.
Let not our mem'ries fail us, the lost year shall be found.
Let slav'ry's chains be broken the whole wide world around.

What a Wonderful World

By Bob Thiele & George David Weiss

I see trees of green, red roses too
I see them bloom for me and you
And I think to myself, what a wonderful world.

I see skies of blue and clouds of white
The bright blessed day the dark sacred night
And I think to myself, what a wonderful world.

The colors of the rainbow, so pretty in the sky
Are also on the faces of people going by
I see friends shaking hands, saying, "How do you do?"
They're really saying: "I love you."
I hear babies cry, I watch them grow
They'll learn much more than I'll ever know
And I think to myself, what a wonderful world.

Yes, I think to myself, what a wonderful world. Oh, yeah.

¹ Thomas Merton Center: <http://merton.org/T2071MSQ.aspx>