

## **Transcending Mystery and Wonder**

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching

Sunday, December 4, 2022

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

### Music:

*Hymns:* #38, Morning Has Broken; #126, Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing, #368, Now Let Us Sing. *Background on a featured UU hymn* (#126, Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing) printed after sermon. *Quartet:* The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, #1038 by Bobby McFerrin. *Piano:* A Child Is Born, by Thad Jones (played in Oscar Peterson's style), and O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, adapt. T. Helmore, arr. J. Martinson.

### Introduction and Reading (The Stream of Life, by Rabindranath Tagore)

The service today is part of our series on the past, present, and future of Unitarian Universalism. Today we're looking at one of the spiritual sources which we claim as part of our living tradition. It says: "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."

Today's reading is by Rabindranath Tagore. He lived in India from 1861 to 1941. He was a poet in Bengali and English, and he won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913. He was also a painter, musician, social activist and religious reformer, and Tagore was a leader of a liberal Hindu movement in India called the Brahmo Samaj, which has had a relationship with British and American Unitarians since the 1800s.

From Rabindranath Tagore's many writings, our 1993 gray hymnal uses his words for six hymn texts and readings. This reading is #529, The Stream of Life.

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day  
runs through the world

and dances in rhythmic measures. It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust  
of the earth in numberless blades of grass  
and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.

It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle  
of birth and death, in ebb and in flow.

I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life.

And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.

### Sermon

Who are we as a religious movement? What are we *about* as a collection of UU congregations? Well, one set of answers is contained in the bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association. For bylaws geeks, you can find this official statement under Article II. Actually, if you are a bylaws geek, you probably know about Article II already. But even if you are not, here at church you may have heard about the UU Principles, which embody the values we promote as congregations. Along with the list of [Principles](#) is a set of the [Sources](#) of our tradition. There are six of them listed. The first one is the longest. It's also the Source that I'm talking about today.

It says: "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."

Over the decades and over the centuries, who we are as a movement has not stayed the same, just as the world around us has not stayed the same. In recognition of this, our UUA bylaws require a review of our official self-description every 15 years. Our denomination is in the middle of that right now. The UUA Board appointed a commission of UU volunteers to take a fresh look at Article II, and get congregations involved, and propose new language for our congregations to vote on. Here at UUSS, we will have a forum about it after this coming winter. At General Assembly, this coming June, delegates will take the first vote on proposed language.

The UUA Board told the Commission it can start with a blank slate. It said there is nothing permanent about the title “Principles and Purposes” or the title “Sources of Our Living Tradition.” There’s nothing sacred about a numbered list of statements, either.

The first draft of some new language came out last month. After it got some feedback, the [Article II Commission](#) began working on a second draft. To be honest, on my first reading I thought it was eloquent. It mentions our theological heritage with pride. It puts Love at the center of our tradition. That is, Love is a motivating value for coming together in community and for how we seek to relate with one another. Love is the generating power for the actions we take in the larger community, this country, and our world. Love is the ethical standard by which we measure our social action work and our personal inter-actions.

The draft of the document seems to capture who we are, even without numbered Sources or Principles. It reflects our commitment to racial equity both inside our movement and in the country at large. I thought it was fine. On further contemplation, however, I said: “Wait a minute! Where’s any mention of transcendence? Where is a mention of direct experience of mystery and wonder? What about inspiration and spiritual renewal?”

I think leaving out such references would be a mistake. I believe it is important for us to state that inviting spiritual experiences of awe and wonder remains a key part of who we are. It’s important to name this for those outside our faith and for newcomers to it. It’s important for all of us to remember it. “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.”

To be sure, our Unitarian Universalist values call us to confront the suffering, ignorance, injustice, and unfairness of the world in which we live. As people of good will, compassion, and social awareness, we are called to challenge the systems and structures of evil around us, including even those systems which give some of us privilege, profit, or comfort. Yet the primary thing that draws people to a religious community is... *our need* for community. And along with that is the need for inspiration and guidance. We need motivation to keep going. As we go through our lives, as we go through our days, we seek to feel connected, to feel part of something larger than ourselves.

As a minister and as a person, I think that all of us need reminders that it is a blessing we are alive, we are worthy of love, and we have something to contribute. Whoever we are, we all have blessings to appreciate, and we have gifts to share—starting with the gift of our presence.

This is what brings us here, when we have so many other options for how we spend our time. What keeps us here, I think, is a growing sense of connection between our own hopes and those we witness and feel among us when we come together.

Whether we come together on Zoom or in the sanctuary, in a Sunday school room or a small group discussion, over a meal or at a work party—when we connect in a spiritual community, we give one another tangible reminders of what Courtney spoke about earlier: reminders of the sacred part of ourselves and the sacredness of our lives.

Earlier I told you about the Reverend Eugene Navias, who was a leader in religious education starting in the 1950s. Based on years of consulting with congregations, Gene wrote that too many UU families and individuals were starved of ritual and starved of the experience of wonder. He said that in our congregations we were avoiding the exploration of personal faith and the expression of our experience of life in terms of our faith. Writing in 1980, Gene said: "Unitarian Universalists typically define themselves according to the beliefs they *no longer hold*, and secondarily by [the beliefs] they hold by rational scrutiny. . . . Yet we live by more than rational belief. There is that which we trust but which lies beyond belief." This awareness moved him to create educational materials to celebrate the emotional richness of life and build community through ceremonies and authentic exchanges of our stories.

As Gene said, we live by more than rational belief. Theological beliefs are not the same thing as religious experience. If you are beholding a red and purple sunset, feeling the rain on your face, climbing up a mountain or down a canyon, the important thing is that you have the invitation to express your experience of it, whether you speak of God the Creator, Mother Nature, or the forces of the universe. Such experiences can remind us that we are held by powers greater than ourselves, and that we participate in a larger life which *connects us* to all that is and all that will come.

In a faith community we can share our experience of mystery and wonder. We can experience moments that leave us with a lump in the throat or with a song in our heart. Moments like these can open us to realize me that the mystery of life is much bigger than any of our current worries and aggravations.

Whether you are holding an infant in your arms, watching a toddler engage with the world, or hearing an elementary school child ask *why*, it may occur to you that any one of those moments can be seen as a miracle. The Reverend Dr. Kendyl Gibbons has asked: "What is there in human experience more [likely] to incite reverence [and wonder] than a little baby?"

Today is the Second Sunday of the season of Advent in the Christian calendar, a season when many Christian people look toward the day of the celebration of the birth of Jesus. Yet in this country and beyond it, many non-Christian people celebrate Christmas. Kendyl Gibbons points out: "It is no accident that a helpless newborn child lies at the center of the [story] of the *one remaining* ceremonial holiday of our [secular Western] culture." Perhaps the reason for its enduring appeal has to do with "direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder" which opens us to the sources and forces which renew our spirits.

You know, I think the realization that all kinds of people in all parts of the world can experience the same feelings and emotions is the reason that we try to respect the variety of religious meanings and words which people of the world use to name or explain their experiences and feelings.

Yet it is fair to ask: How necessary is it to our UU congregations that we have an explicit statement listing all of our spiritual Sources, beginning with "Direct experience of transcending

mystery and wonder.” Perhaps that poetic language, or maybe a more eloquent way of saying the same thing, belongs in a service on Sunday, and not in our denomination’s bylaws.

Kendyl Gibbons is a distinguished leader and preacher who is a lifelong UU. She has written: “The bylaws of our Association are not necessarily the place to seek the poetry of our faith, and I don’t suppose that most religious traditions would suggest that their denominational constitutions be read at [our] deathbeds.”

Unlike Kendyl Gibbons, I grew up in a mainline moderate Christian congregation. I learned to sing hymns, share communion, and appreciate the spiritual poetry of the Psalms in the Bible. So if I were on my deathbed, I’d rather hear you read me the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm (or sing it to me) than to hear you read me the bylaws of the UUA. Yet after 35 years as a Unitarian Universalist and 25 years as a UU minister, I’m so familiar with the list of our spiritual Sources, and so fond of it, that if I were near the end of my life, I would be moved if you read them to me. Of course, I’d want you to sing hymns too.

The church of my childhood wasn’t repressive enough to drive me away, yet it didn’t inspire me enough to keep me in the same denomination after I grew up. I wonder if it could have given focus and energy to the leaders in its congregations if that religious denomination had actually claimed the importance of “direct experience of mystery and wonder.” Perhaps more people would have been inspired and fired up if it had been able to claim the importance of wonder.

On one hand, it’s more important to cultivate and practice such openness than it is just to make a statement about it. But if we are not explicit that it is important to us, we could neglect it. Or we could be misunderstood as not caring about it.

Unitarian Universalism is a faith tradition where we don’t expect everyone to believe the same thing about matters of theology in order to come together as a church community. We don’t all follow the same spiritual practices or use the same words to answer religious questions. For this reason, many of us feel a longing to hold on to some words which describe why we *do* come together. Many Unitarian Universalists like to be able to refer to some commonly held and official words which explain: *these values are what hold us together and call us forward. These spiritual sources are the foundation of our faith tradition.*

As you may know, many of us have relatives who think of a religious community in more conventional ways. Then they ask us questions about *our* tradition and *our* faith. We want to be able say: *these things express why this religious community matters to me so much.*

As the Indian artist and activist Rabindranath Tagore said, “The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day/ runs through the world.” And he could have added: It runs through *your* veins too. It runs through the body of every being that shares life with us. The stream of life runs through the world. It dances in rhythm. “The life-throb of ages dances in my blood.”

That is one person’s way of affirming the sacred nature of life. It is the poet’s way of expressing that *we are part of something much greater than ourselves.* We cannot control the stream of life, but we can let it move in our lives. We can open ourselves to it and give thanks for it.

As religious liberals, we are part of a tradition which invites the direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder. We invite it and listen for it. When we admit our dependence

on forces larger than we are, it can help us let go of trying to control so much of life. It can help us let go a little bit more. In the face of the complexity and grandeur of the natural world, we can feel powerless and insignificant. And then, we can feel amazed to be part of it all. In recognizing this miracle together, we can pray, sing, cry, and celebrate.

Let us feel how amazing it is to be alive, here and now, and let us express it. Let us give thanks. For all of these moments, let us give our thanks. So may it be.

~ ~

### Featured UU Hymn

During our monthly sermon series, once a month we've chosen a well-known UU hymn to tell you about and sing with you. Today's choice is in the gray hymnal at #126.

The tune is familiar to those in traditional Christian churches, but our hymnal commission kept only the first verse from the original 8 verses. A UU minister wrote verses 2 and 3 about 35 years ago and this is what we sing. Before we sing it, I want to tell you about this minister.

Eugene B. Navias was born in 1928 in Upstate New York. His Jewish Lithuanian father had immigrated to the US at age 16, and his mother's parents were immigrants from Germany and Poland. Gene grew up going to a Unitarian church and Unitarian summer camps, and then attended a Universalist college and theological school. He was ordained 71 years ago and served two New England congregations as a minister of religious education. After the Unitarians and Universalists merged, he was recruited to serve the new denomination. He consulted with congregations and wrote curricula. As Director of the Department of Religious Education, he made sure that new education materials would stimulate emotionally rich experiences and expressions of UU faith as well as a commitment to social change. He led the creation of About Your Sexuality, a course which was the earlier version of what we now call OWL, Our Whole Lives, and which we provide here at UUSS.

Eugene Navias was loved by other UUs for his creativity, his devotion to religious growth and learning, and his personal courage. Indeed, he was courageous. Gene was one of the first openly gay ministers to serve in this denomination. He died eight years ago at age 86.

Gene was a musician, and he wrote a book about two centuries of Unitarian Universalist hymns in 1976, entitled *Singing Our History*. I remember his enthusiasm leading a workshop I attended about hymns on the Universalist side of our heritage. He tried his own hand at hymn writing as well, including this one, Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing.

Taking the original hymn's metaphor of a fountain as the source of divine goodness and human possibility, he created two new verses reflecting our UU hopes. Using the Bible's image of the lion and the lamb lying at ease together, verse two seeks peace in the human family. It reads:

Come, thou Fount of every vision,  
lift our eyes to what may come.  
See the lion and the young lamb  
dwell together in thy home.  
Hear the cries of war fall silent,  
feel our love glow like the sun.  
When we all serve one another,  
then our heaven is begun.

And then, verse 3 urges us to make the best use of the gift of each day, and it looks forward to the miracle of an earthly paradise as we live out the vision of love in action. It reads:

Come, thou Fount of inspiration,  
turn our lives to higher ways.  
Lift our gloom and desperation,  
show the promise of this day.  
Help us bind ourselves in union,  
help our hands tell of our love.  
With thine aid, O Fount of justice,  
earth be fair as heav'n above.