

**Transcending Mystery and Wonder**  
**November 7, 2021**  
**Rev. Dr. Judith E. Wright**

Our Unitarian Universalist tradition has identified six sources of our faith. Sometimes, as life hurries on, we, as UUs, may not fully remember all of these roots of our faith. So, I have decided this year to preach at least one sermon on each of the six sources. This morning let's look at our first source:

*Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder,  
affirmed in all cultures,  
which moves us to a renewal of spirit and an openness  
to the forces that create and uphold life.*

**Direct experience.**

Our faith arises from our **own** religious and spiritual experiences, beginning often early in our lives.

For example, UU minister Forrest Church wrote of his first experience of religion when he was ten years old.

He was attending a Presbyterian Sunday school, and remembered coloring, according to him, not too well, pictures of stories about Jesus and his life.

Then his father gave him a copy of a Bible –

Not an ordinary Bible, but a *Jefferson Bible, the Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*.

For Forrest Church, reading the Jefferson Bible was his first religious experience, with the traditional story of Jesus's life, ministry and death transformed by Jefferson into a story of Jesus

as a human being, living a life of great service, who then just dies.

No virgin birth. No resurrection. No miracles performed.

For Forrest this and other religious experiences to come gave him the conviction that, in his own words:

*Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.<sup>1</sup>*

Knowing that our lives are limited, and certain that we will die, accepting this as truth, such an understanding can make us more alive, cherishing our lives and those we love and serve.

As Forrest wrote, *the fact that death is inevitable gives meaning to our love, for the more we love the more we risk losing.*

*Love's power comes in part from the courage required to give ourselves to that which is not ours to keep: spouses, children, parents, dear and cherished friends, even life itself.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> John A. Buehrens and Forrest Church. *Our Chosen Faith*. Beacon Press, Boston, 1998. P. 5

<sup>2</sup> Buehrens and Church, p. 5

Thus, our own direct experiences of the limitations of our lives, realizing and accepting the shortness of our brief time here, can inspire us to live lives full of meaning and love, as did Jesus, and as did Forrest Church, one of the great UU ministers of our time.

This first source of our UU faith proclaims that one main root of our faith is of *transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures*.

As Unitarian Universalists we draw our own spiritual truths from many of the world's great religious traditions.

What do I mean by spiritual?

I agree with Friedrich Schleiermacher's definition of spirituality –

Living in eighteenth century Poland, Schleiermacher, as a Lutheran theologian, biblical scholar and philosopher, said something like, spirituality has to do with a special kind of connectedness – of “intuitions of the infinite in the finite.”

Spirituality is thus the place where we may meet the infinite within the finite; however, you may choose to define the infinite.

UU minister Jacob Trapp wrote beautifully about such an experience – when he wrote spirituality is where “the window of the moment opens to the sky of the eternal.”

Our Time For All Ages Story about prayers for the earth provides another illustration of finding the “infinite within the finite.”

Prayers arise from each finite object – the trees, the rocks, the streams, the wind, and especially human beings, giving off, as Schleiermacher wrote, “intuitions of the infinite in the finite.”

As humans we are often unaware of the vastness of the infinite, as we act in ways that disregard or harm how we each are interconnected with every living being and with the earth itself.

But if we have experiences of awakening to the truth of the interconnectedness, of the *finite within the infinite*, then we will understand better the mystery and wonder that surrounds us every moment of our lives.

As UUs some of us believe in a personal God and others of us do not. However, believing that we are part of all Holiness doesn't mean that we can do anything we wish, whether we believe in a personal God or not.

Ramakrishna, a well-known Hindu mystic gave the following teaching as a way to help us realize that the world we believe in may not be exactly as we think.

Here is the fable, as retold well by UU minister William H. Houff:<sup>3</sup>

*A young spiritual novice has just been taught by his Guru that he is identical in essence with the power of the universe. He walks away in a state of ecstatic absorption, and as he is going down the road leading out of the village, he beholds coming in his direction, a huge elephant with a driver riding on the beast's back. Striving along, the young candidate for sainthood is meditating on the preposition, “I am Brahman; all things are Brahman.”*

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<sup>3</sup> William H. Huff. *Infinity in Your Hand*. Melior Publications, Spokane, Washington, 1989, p. 37 (adapted).

*When he sees the huge elephant coming toward him, he thinks, "The elephant, too, is Brahman. We are all one."*

*Meanwhile the elephant, with its bells jingling to the rhythm of its stately approach, is bearing down upon the novice who, in his ecstasy, is maintaining his course in the middle of the road.*

*And the driver, seeing this, becomes alarmed and starts shouting, "Clear the way! Clear the way, you idiot! Clear the way!"*

*But the youth, caught up in his rapture, is thinking, "I am Brahman; the elephant is Brahman," And when he hears the shouts of the driver, he adds, "Should Brahman be afraid of Brahman? Should Brahman clear the way for Brahman?"*

*The distance rapidly closed.*

*The driver keeps shouting; the elephant lumbers on; the youth, continuing the meditation, holds the center of the road. Suddenly, as a collision is about to take place, the elephant reaches out with its trunk,*

*picks up the novice and hurls him into the bushes.*

*Physically shocked, and spiritually stunned, the youth recovers, his senses enough to stand up, dust off his clothes, and return to the Guru for further instructions.*

*Somewhat indignant, he blurts out an account of his experience with the elephant and continues, "You told me that I was Brahman."*

*"Yes," said the guru, "and so you are."*

*"You told me all things are Brahman."*

*"Yes, responded the guru, "all things are indeed Brahman."*

*"That elephant, then, was Brahman, too?" asked the youth, his voice edging towards hysteria.*

*"So it was," replied the Guru. "That elephant was Brahman.*

*But why didn't you pay attention to the voice of Brahman, shouting from the elephant's neck, and get out of the way?"*

Whether or not we believe in a personal God, many of us have had spiritual experiences, what Abraham Maslow called "peak experiences."

Maslow pointed out that even though we may have peak experiences, we may be reluctant to share these with others, even to allow ourselves to know we had them.

I well remember profound experiences I had in my mid-thirties where I was truly afraid to tell anyone about them, I wondered what was happening to me that these experiences occurred.

I found myself seeking spiritual teachers from many different religious traditions, to corroborate my own experiences.

I eventually discovered and owned, that yes, indeed, such experiences of transcending mystery and wonder were well documented and affirmed in all cultures.

Importantly, reading Evelyn Underhill's classic book, *Mysticism*, helped me to better understand what was happening to me.

I wasn't crazy, but still I was careful with whom I shared these experiences.

In some ways my own spiritual experiences are closer to those found within more orthodox religious traditions.

I didn't know in my mid-thirties if I could remain a Unitarian Universalist, and went through a period of deep questioning, where did I belong religiously?

Studying other world religions closely, I learned that most religious movements began with a founder

having profound personal religious experiences.

As Abraham Maslow wisely discerned, *"The very beginning, the intrinsic core, the essence, the universal nucleus of every known high religion has been the private, lonely, personal illumination, revelation or ecstasy of some acutely sensitive prophet or seer."*

Today much of the original experiences of these prophets and seers, such as Jesus, Mohammed, or Zoroaster, appear to be at best channeled through the institutionalization of their spiritual teachings and messages.

I remain a Unitarian Universalist as Unitarian Universalism of today allows me to have my own direct spiritual experiences as well as continually brings into congregational life the richness of spiritual and religious truths found in all cultures, as described in this first source of our faith.

We don't have to believe in a personal God to claim this first source of Unitarian Universalism.

As UUs we are often filled with wonder and awe and mystery when we think about the vastness of our universe, -something that, in truth, I believe, is really too difficult for us to fully comprehend-

This past week I received from Gerry Long a link to a YouTube video describing the incredible scientific work of astrophysicists in creating the James Webb telescope, which will compliment

and extend beyond the discoveries of the Hubble telescope.

Soon to be launched, the Webb telescope has a precarious journey for 30 days before the telescope can begin to send back to earth its findings. This will be so exciting for us to follow, for sure.

As Gerry commented, the Webb telescope will be using the universe's energies itself to probe its secrets,

Prior to the pandemic, a small group of us studied regularly some of the new discoveries in astronomy, through our UU group, called the Quarks. We were in the process of learning about recent findings of what are called exo-planets - .Until the mid-1990s, the only planets we knew about were the ones that go around our the sun : Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto, once thought to be a planet, but not anymore.

While some of the recent explorations about exo-planets have been about trying to find another planet like our earth, most of the recent discoveries have been of planets very different from what is within our solar system.

For example, there is an Earth-sized planet that goes around its sun every eight hours!

There have been discoveries of planets that orbit backwards compared to the rotation of the stars that they orbit.

There are planets that orbit around two different suns!<sup>4</sup>  
There is so much we may learn about our universe and all that is inside of it.  
It is mind-boggling and yet, at the same time, so inspiring and fascinating.

And then there is the question of whether or not this is the only universe that exists.  
My Buddhist teacher says that Buddha taught that there are multi-universes. I have often pondered what made the big bang. Have you? What caused the Big Bang to happen in the first place?  
Now, that's a question full of mystery and wonder, for sure.

Moving down from the study of the universe to just looking at our lives, moment by moment, here in the lakes region, we are surrounded by mystery and wonder, as well.  
Life itself is a wondrous gift.  
I truly experienced such mystery and wonder in giving birth to my children, as well as being graced with two other children, both three weeks old, when we adopted them.

Is it not amazing that within the vastness of our universe, we find ourselves on a planet called Earth,  
where after a long period of time and complex processes, eventually our human species arose?

And then there is beauty all around us  
– such beauty captured in some of the autumn days including this morning  
– with golden and red leaves falling, with the lakes shimmering in the sunlight.

All of these experiences – from reading a sacred text, as did Forrest Church,  
-listening to sacred teachings, such as Ramakrishna's story,  
- sensing *the Infinite in the finite*, as did Schliermacher, -  
- learning about the vastness of the universe, and exoplanets,  
- stopping to really see the beauty in our own lives,  
-witnessing the wonder of life unfolding,  
all of these and so much more, contribute to the continual renewals of our own spirits as UUs.

And such a renewal of spirit leads us to act in ways that *create and uphold life*,  
the last sentence in this first source of our UU Faith.  
We are spiritually fed by our spiritual and religious experiences to then move into the world, into life, refreshed again and again, to do the work of beloved religious community, *to create and uphold life*,

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<sup>4</sup> This information about Exoplanets is found in Joshua N. Winn, *The Search for Exoplanets: What Astronomers Know*, The Great Courses, Chantilly, Virginia, 2015 p. 11.

to perform as Victoria Safford states in our reading this morning  
*the daily practice, a spiritual politics,  
that requires inclusivity, nonviolence,  
and the hard discipline of radical hospitality.  
It requires love, agape.*

I will close this sermon with some questions for us as UUs, posed by Forrest Church, to help us explore further the meaning of this first source of our UU faith:

*Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder,  
affirmed in all cultures,  
which moves us to a renewal of spirit and an openness  
to the forces that create and uphold life.*

Forrest's questions will take at least a lifetime to ponder and try to answer for ourselves about the mysteries and wonders all around us.

*Where do we come from?*

*Who are we?*

*Where are we going?*

*How do we attain salvation, that is, spiritual health or wholeness?*

*How can we live a life befitting our promise?*

*How should we face death?*

*And how, when our lives reach their close, can we be sure they will have been worth dying for?<sup>5</sup>*

Peace and love to you.

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<sup>5</sup> Buehrens and Church. P, 17.