

What If I Feel? What If I Don't Feel?

Exploring the First UU Source

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After the recent vigil and memorial for Darryl Mount last Monday night, I got into a conversation with a couple young adults. (There are more and more young people every year. Have you noticed that?) They had noticed the clerical collar I was wearing and has some questions about the church I served. One of them asked me about the moment I knew I was called to be a minister. They wanted to know what that had felt like.

I haven't been asked this question in a while, but I used to get this question all the time. Especially, as you might expect, while I was in seminary. In seminary, everyone seemed to have this amazing "call" story — a story about this moment of exceptional experience when new doors of perception opened and they experienced a profound sense of the presence of God. I believe that I have experiences of the divine and sacred, but I don't have a story that can identify the moment when I knew I would be a minister. I don't tend to have experiences like that. In my experience, experience is a much more subtle, cumulative, meandering thing. I've never had an "I am saved" sort of moment.

What I'm thinking about is the pressure we can feel to have certain kinds of experience or feel in certain ways. We Unitarian Universalists list six sources that we draw on for our faith, and the first is this:

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

While it is impossible not to have direct experiences, what's named here is a certain kind of experience that has certain effects. I believe we all have immediate access to experiences of the divine, of mystery and wonder, of the sacred. And I believe that the notion of "direct experience" can be tricky, especially if we're thinking we already know the experience we should be having.

The Reverend Adam Lawrence Dyer wrote a wonderful book of meditations called *Love Beyond God*. One of the poems in that book¹ describes a young Black person's experience in church:

He sits in the pew feeling outside of himself,
Knowing everyone can see

¹ Adam Lawrence Dyer. "Call to Worship." *Love Beyond God: Meditations*. Skinner House Books, 2016. 40-41.

That he doesn't belong here.
"The Spirit" is not in him.
Even though he tries to find *It* every single time,
It does not come.

On top of feeling out of place because he's not feeling it, the "church ladies" watching him have even more expectations for him:

They only want to see him as they dreamed he would be.
They only feel for what they hoped he would become:
The tall, black savior affirming their blood and sweat.

All this expectation makes him ache. Maybe more so because he feels these expectations for himself, too. He's heard the praise shouts

Intoned with voices that have richness and timbre,
Full with history and deeply lived life.

It feels to me that he longs for a deeply lived life. But he takes in the expectations of his elders, tragically

Damning everything he really is
Missing every blessing he'll become.

Thank goodness the poem is written in the past tense and that we know that the author is now a minister and serving The First Parish in Cambridge, MA. We trust that this young man in the poem was able to being to trust in himself, to look within, and eventually, one day —*now today feels* that there is nothing between him and God or the sacred Love that holds him. To eventually feel what he feels and know that it's all right. To know that he is a blessing.

I first learned of the children's book *All I See Is Part of Me* by Chara M. Curtis² at a memorial service. A woman had died from cancer in what should have been her ripe middle age. Her husband told the story that on their first date, she read the book to him.

I am part of all I see
and all I see is part of me

The child looks within and around, experiences himself as connected to everything, containing everything, from puppies to stars to candy bars. When I think of the first UU source of *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*—It's this kind of *I am part of all I see / and all I see is part of me* experience that I think of. We are each full of wonder waiting to be discovered. The new widower I

² Chara M. Curtis. *All I See Is Part of Me*. Illustrations by Cynthia Aldrich. Cacc Publications, 2015. First published in 1989.

think took comfort in how *I am part of all I see and all I see is part of me* leads to a sense that, as the child concludes in the book, with this sort of a reality, there is no end.

The *It* we're going to feel is probably going to be different from the *it* we might have thought we were going to feel or that we thought we should feel. But *it* is there. In the words of a prayer by Rev. Angela Herrera, along with our aches and regrets, we can have faith that

All that you need
for a deep and comforting peace to grow
lies within you.³

Let that faith come into your life, and let that blessing spread from you to the world and its beings.

When we get in trouble is when we don't listen to that "inner God" as the British poet Clifford Bax says in the hymn we sang just a few moments ago.⁴ That failure keeps from a fair earth. That failure keeps us from all earth's people being one.

This first UU source is really important, I think. We have faith that we can experience directly a transcending mystery and wonder, and that experience renews us and opens us to being active allies of life. And that faith needs awareness of another wrinkle. In addition to the *what if I feel or what if I don't feel* issue, there is this realization from a UU commission charged with examining our UU faith and our UU institutions. I've shared this in a previous sermon, but it's worth sharing again:

[...] over the decades since the consolidation of Unitarians and Universalists, an overemphasis on individual exploration and experience as the primary, if not

³ Angela Herrera. "All That You Need Lies Within You." *Reaching for the Sun: Meditations*. Skinner House Books, 2012. Pages 44-45.

⁴ "Turn Back" is hymn 120 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

Turn back, turn back, forswear thy foolish ways.
Old now is earth, and none may count its days;
yet humankind, whose head is crowned with flame,
still will not hear the inner God proclaim—
"Turn back, turn back, forswear thy foolish ways."

Earth might be fair, its people glad and wise.
Age after age our tragic empires rise,
built while we dream, and in that dreaming weep:
would we but wake from out our haunted sleep,
earth might be fair, and people glad and wise.

Earth shall be fair, and all its people one;
nor till that hour shall God's whole will be done.
Now, even now, once more from earth to sky,
peals forth in joy that old undaunted cry—
"Earth shall be fair, and all its people one."

sole center of religious experience developed. This centering of the individual de-centers the communal as a locus of theological exploration. One of the unintended consequences has been the atomized individualism of the search for truth and meaning without accountability to its impact in communities.⁵ [10]

When I was deciding to become a UU minister, I did pay attention to my inner experience. But I never would have become a minister if I hadn't been paying attention to what other people told me they heard and saw in me. My own "inner God" would never have been enough.

We need to get outside of ourselves. If *I am part of all I see and all I see is part of me* then we have to value other people's lived experience, and not just our own. That first UU source names "direct experience." That's not just my direct experience, but the direct experience of others. OK: Got that: and there's one more wrinkle.

James Baldwin wrote a famous published letter to his nephew called "My Dungeon Shook" that is part of the book *The Fire Next Time*. In that letter, he explains to his young nephew the way racism and white supremacy culture twists our society and harms Black people, to prepare his nephew for the world he's growing up in. He tells his nephew: "this innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish." Baldwin tells his nephew: "You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being." Baldwin admits that his "countrymen" would disagree with what he's saying; that they'd say he was exaggerating. Then Baldwin tells his nephew: "They do not know Harlem, and I do. So do you." And then he continues: "Take no one's word for anything, including mine—but trust your experience. Know whence you came. If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go." Baldwin's critics, they have no experience of Harlem as a black person. They are not speaking from their direct experience. We need to pay attention to the forces—like racism and white supremacy culture—that ask us defer to an ideology first, before listening to others. Forces that deny life.

So we want to draw from direct experience — lived experience. We want this so that we experience a transcending mystery and wonder — but not just so that we are having an experience — what we are looking for is a renewal that moves us to openness to the forces that create and uphold life. Which also means recognizing forces that are tearing down lives, forces that are taking lives. Transcending mystery and wonder — that means taking me out of whatever limited context, limited understanding, limited living I've confined myself to. It means opening to life beyond ourselves. This *is* a particular kind of experience that we're striving for. But that it leads to mystery and wonder doesn't mean it's going to be comfortable and easy. The deep peace it leads to

⁵ Widening the Circle of Concern. Report of the UUA Commission on Institutional Change. June 2020. Page 10.

is not a place absent of tension. Renewal that moves us to openness to life — that isn't just watching the sunset. It might include watching the sunset. Taking a holiday, taking a break, unplugging. All that is part of it. But renewal leads to movement. And to movement in community, not just as a separate individual. I was nervous taking part in the vigil for Darryl Mount last Monday night, Darryl who died as the result of an encounter with Saratoga Springs police seven years ago. There's the COVID worries of being with lots of people, even if it we are outside. And there's the militarized equipment that the city and county law enforcement had parked right around the corner from us. And protestors being shot. And for me, participating was a way to renew and to move in concert with the forces that uphold life.

None of us is going to be the savior. We shouldn't put that kind of pressure on ourselves or each other. To move in the direction of renewal means transcending *What if I feel...?* and it means transcending *What if I don't feel...?* It means opening to what we do feel. It means trusting our experience. And renewal means opening to the experiences of others. It's not just the experience of a moment. It means moving in harmony—moving with the harmony that is yours to sing—in harmony with the forces that create and uphold life.

May you find the harmony that is yours to sing. May you find renewal even in practicing for your part, learning the new skill, the new melody, that asks you to transcend yourself. May that transcending fill you with wonder. May you be every day renewed. May it be so.