

UU Mystical Experiences

Standing on a windswept beach and feeling suddenly overwhelmed with love, being stopped on a busy street corner by a sense of oneness with all life in the city, touching something eternal and infinite within while praying for help—all are examples of mystical experiences.

Mystical experience is not confined to any particular faith tradition. Rumi, the great Sufi, asked, “Who . . . like Moses, goes for fire and finds what burns inside the sunrise?” The Christian Mystic Hildegard of Bingen described her experience this way: “Like a flame that does not burn but enkindles, it inflamed my entire heart and my entire breast, just like the sun that warms an object with its rays.”

Our own beloved Unitarian Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote this about an experience: “In the woods . . . standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.”

These experiences happen to so many of us that we know them to be part of our human nature. But what are they really?

William James and Walter Pahnke said mystical experiences have four general characteristics:

- ineffability (they defy expression in words)
- noetic quality (they provide deep insight)
- transiency (they don’t last long, though their effects can be profound)
- passivity (we don’t make them happen; they happen to us)

They may also have qualities of unity, transcendence, awe, positivity, and distinctiveness.

The Unitarian Universalist Living Tradition draws from many sources, including mystical experience, referring to it in our first Source as the “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.”

There is a wealth of tradition and theory to help us understand mystical experiences, but what we wish to share with you here are personal accounts from people who have had such experiences, in their own words.

—Susan Manker-Seale

It happened unexpectedly, unsought . . . on an ordinary “ho-hum” day. On that crisp Spring morning I sat, alone, pondering the immense power and timelessness of the sea. After a while, the roar of the crashing waves, the kiss of the salty breeze on my face, the coolness of the sand beneath me, and all else in my conscious awareness just floated away. An overwhelming peacefulness embraced my whole being. In that moment, an intense experience of Self merging profoundly with what I have come to name The Spirit of Life was the entirety of all I sensed.

Our Transcendentalist forefathers and foremothers, process theologians, and others affirm such experiences as genuine. I have never doubted the authenticity of this deeply intimate spiritual experience. I carry with me the truth that we are interwoven in one intricate fabric of existence. We are all good. We are One.

—Rev. Christine Riley, Unitarian
Universalist Community Church of Washington County, Hillsboro, OR

Preparing to preach, I withdrew to a quiet room to ground myself. As I thanked the universe for

speaking and acting through me today, I felt a flood of love pour through me. It was so powerful that it almost knocked me over. I tipped my head back to more fully drink in the feeling. A physicist in college, I knew cosmic rays were racing through me all of the time. This felt like love was cascading through me in a similar way. It became wholly obvious that this love was pouring through me (through all of us!) all the time and I had simply awakened to the experience for these few moments. This experience is part of what informs my belief that Life and Love are evolving through us, one universal consciousness becoming ever more self-aware.

—Rev. Chip Roush, First
Unitarian Church of South Bend, IN

It was Spring of 1992, on a beautiful Jazz Festival day. Like any good New Orleanian, I was kitted out: a bag holding essentials around my waist, a handkerchief for waving and mopping sweat, and a long pink shoelace attached to a maraca tied to my belt. In one hand I held lemonade; in the other I balanced a jambalaya plate.

I made my way to where the Creole Wild West Mardi Gras Black Indians were performing “Hatchet in the Ground,” a peace chant. I moved to the front and stood near a young woman, both of us dancing. We smiled at each other, and smooth as anything, she took the maraca from my belt.

. . . And yet, somehow, I was not just on the ground but also high above the Fairgrounds, looking down. I could see everything below: myself dancing, the girl next to me, and the bright line of pink connecting us. It came to me in a flash, “What a mistake to think we’re separate — we’re all one.” As soon as I thought it, I was back. The song ended; my maraca was returned. I never forgot the wonder of it, or the lesson.

—Rev. Melanie Morel-Ensminger, Our Home Universalist Unitarian Church, Ellisville, MS

It was my 47th birthday. I was taking stock. What did my life to that point mean? Soon I’d be dead. What did that mean? Then something inside me clicked. Something let go, and I had the sensation of a weight falling off me. “I’m going to die,” in that moment, felt like such good news. What a relief that I won’t live forever! I don’t have to get it figured out. Whether life lasts a minute more or fifty years more, it’s still a little blip on the map of eternity. As I looked around the room, the objects around me had a sharpness they hadn’t had before, a kind of poignant yet majestic quality. All of them were as temporary as I was, and they seemed so beautifully self-sufficient being what they were just at that moment. This runaway train is headed for the cliff, and there’s no way to stop it. It made me love the scenery on the ride. The ecstatic quality of that moment passed. But I have carried with me ever since an abiding gratitude for my mortality. We are not given tomorrow, and that makes having today such a delightful, beautiful joy.

—Rev. Steven Meredith Garmon, Community Unitarian Universalist
Congregation, White Plains, NY

When I became a Unitarian Universalist, I felt spiritually renewed and liberated. To my delight, I found my way back to the spirituality of my childhood. I had attended a few services at a Unitarian Universalist church. This particular Sunday, the minister asked us to join hands and to slowly start chanting “Om.” The resonance of the chant and the joy of belonging once again to a spiritual community made me feel, just for a second or two, as if my body had disappeared and I was lifted from the earth. In that momentary state of utter nothingness, I had a very clear and complete realization. I totally understood one thing: that we are all one. In that instant I knew that the whole universe is a seamless tapestry of people, animals, vegetables, rocks, and more—all sustained and nurtured by the Great Mystery. In the midst of this knowing, a voice said clearly, “For a moment like this, it was worth having been born.” The power of that essential awareness ended my feelings of isolation. I knew I was

one with the universe and with all that is and that I must use my gifts to contribute to the welfare of all.
—Rev. Lilia Cuervo, Cambridge, MA

Questions for Reflection

Have you ever had a mystical experience? Who did you tell about the experience? What was their response?

Have you spoken about your experience in a Unitarian Universalist context? What was that like?

If someone were to share a mystical experience with you, how might you respond?

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Resources

UU Mystics in Community, uumystics.org and on Facebook

William R. Miller and Janet C'de Baca, *Quantum Change: When Epiphanies and Sudden Insights Transform Ordinary Lives*, Guilford Press, 2001.

Tom Owen-Towle, *Freethinking Mystics with Hands: Exploring the Heart of Unitarian Universalism*, by Tom Owen-Towle, Skinner House Books, 1998.