

The Mystic Way

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“Practical Mysticism”

By Wendy Bartlett

I seek out a connectedness in my spiritual life every day. It's something that I've practiced for a long time, and it's hard for me to imagine what my life would be without it.

Many people have the luxury of scheduling such practices in the early morning, which always sounds wonderful, but my mornings start at 4:30 when all I'm interested in connecting with is a serious cup of coffee. So my spiritual practice takes place in the evening, preferably as the day starts to wind down. If I wait until I'm too tired, I don't have the mental discipline to really enjoy the practice, or to do it justice.

First, I read a devotional reading. This serves to help me to “change channels” and take the focus off myself and my endless to do list, and gives me a chance to think about something outside myself. I read a few verses of the Bible that relate to that reading, giving me an opportunity to try and understand what relevance that passage has for me, or just as often, an opportunity to appreciate the poetry and the majesty of the language itself. These readings serve to quiet my spirit and focus my attention.

And then I pray. I pray first for the people in my life who have either asked me to pray for them, or for whom I feel moved to pray. When I was younger, I didn't have to write them down. Now I have a list in the back of my to do list notebook—yes, it takes a whole notebook to contain my multiple to do lists—where I list people for whom I want to pray. I hate the thought that I might forget someone, because over the years, I have seen how incredibly powerful the act of praying for someone can be, both for that person, and for me. I think of this part of my prayer life as the “it's not about you” spiritual practice. Sometimes

people don't know what to pray about or feel self-conscious. Well, good news. It's not about you. You can transform yourself praying for someone else—it can be extremely powerful.

And then I just pray for the chance to commune with God. To touch base. To check in. Sometimes we talk. Often, I bring a worry. I like to worry. Hell, I love to worry. As soon as I begin to talk to God, I am filled with an all pervasive and deep sense of peace and comfort. Anxiety—an old enemy—falls away, no match for the profound peace that settles over me when I pray. I relax, my breathing slows, and time falls away. I feel connected to something out of time—something vast and endless. It can last for a few brief moments or several long minutes. The longer I stay connected, the deeper the sense of well-being.

And sometimes, but not always, answers come. "Praying for discernment" is what some people call it. I have to confess, it's never that deliberate on my part. I may come to prayer with something bothering me, but it may be days, weeks, or years before I realize where that something fits in the larger picture. And when that answer does come, it's always a surprise. I never expect to really figure things out in prayer—that's not why I show up to pray—but it's great when it happens.

That's been my experience with everyday mysticism. And I hope the joys of the holiday season help you to deepen your spiritual connectedness; however that may happen for you. Thank you.

Rev. Tim's Sermon

"The Mystic Way"

Before I share some thoughts with you about mysticism and the mystic way, I want to begin by offering my prayers for the family of Eric Garner. Eric Garner is the unarmed African American man who died at the hands of the New York City Police Department last summer. As I'm sure most of you know, a grand Jury failed to indict the officer responsible for Garner's death and that failure has once again sparked numerous protests across our country. I'm sorry to say that the unwillingness of our criminal justice system to prosecute the use of excessive force against people of color is becoming a pattern – a pattern that must be changed. How much longer will it take for we the people to treat one another as if we are one people, one community, one human family? I wish I could stand before you today with an answer for how such a change can be accomplished or optimism that it will happen in the near future. I cannot. What I can offer this day is prayer – prayer for the

families that are grieving and prayer that a path to justice and compassion will be found and that we will have the courage to journey on that path together.

Now I know that prayer may not sound like a very concrete place to begin such a journey but in some ways I think it's the only place from which we can begin if we are to make real change. And the reason I say that gets to the theme of today's service. Our world is so broken and at the root of much of that brokenness is pain, anxiety, fear, and anger. As Wendy said so well in her reflection, prayer can put our hearts and minds and spirits in a place from which we can relax and breathe and begin to heal that brokenness – a place in which we can experience a sense of peace and deep connection to ourselves, our neighbors, and our world.

Wendy, I want to thank you for sharing your experience of practical mysticism with us. I so admire the commitment and intentionality you bring to your spiritual life. I'm moved by your prayers of love and compassion for others, by your conversations with God that bring you peace, and by the answers that, at times, emerge out of those conversations.

I am also especially inspired by the way you describe your experience. You speak of an all pervasive sense of peace and comfort, of slowing your breathing and of time falling away. In those moments, as you say so beautifully, you become "connected to something out of time, something vast and endless." And the longer you stay connected, the greater your sense of wellbeing becomes.

And it is that deep sense of connection and the wellbeing that flows from it that are at the heart of mysticism and the mystic way. Mysticism is about experiencing something greater, something that is part of and yet just beyond our everyday awareness – something that enables us to realize that we dwell in a world filled with awe inspiring beauty and wonder – a world in which, as that beautiful song Hallie, Scott, and Oliver shared with us, "everything is a miracle and everything is holy now."

Now I know some of the language I'm using to describe mysticism can be, well, a bit mysterious. But in many ways, that's the whole point. Mysticism is not about having all the answers or about possessing the correct belief or beliefs. In fact, you don't have to be religious or a believer in anything to be a mystic. Mysticism is about being open - open to experiencing awe and wonder, open to experiencing a deep sense of connection – open to experiencing the unity and oneness at the heart of existence – a unity and oneness that we may never fully understand or be able to explain but that somehow connects us to each other, to all of life, and to this marvelous planet and universe that we call home.

I may be going out on a limb but I'm guessing that everyone in this room has experienced a moment or moments of deep connection. Perhaps you were engaged in a spiritual practice like prayer or meditation that enabled you to find that sense of peace and of being outside of time that Wendy described. Or maybe you were taking a walk in the woods, gazing at a magnificent sunset, or listening to a piece of music that moved you to tears. And perhaps you were simply with people you love and care about – people whose mere presence fills your heart with joy and happiness.

I know that when I have experienced those moments of deep connection, it almost feels as if my sense of self and separateness disappear. When I am standing on a beach looking out over a vast ocean, gazing up on a clear night at a seemingly infinite number of stars, or singing a moving hymn with all of you, I become lost in the beauty of what I am seeing and experiencing. In that moment there is no more separation, no more division, no more us vs. them or me against the world. There is only unity and connection and love as I become part of that ocean, part of that night sky, and part of that beautiful hymn.

As I experience that unity and that connection, I often find myself wondering what it all means. Am I experiencing God or some kind of divine presence or simply the beauty and majesty of the universe and the natural world? Am I truly connected to all that I am experiencing or is that sense of oneness and unity a mere illusion?

As a religious leader, I sometimes feel that I'm supposed to have definitive answers to questions like those. I'm supposed to be able to define and explain exactly who or what is causing my experience and, while I'm at it, to define and explain your experiences as well.

But I can't do that because for me, the mystic way invariably leads me to mystery rather than easy answers – to questions about ultimate reality that stir my imagination but that I cannot finally and definitively answer. Not that answers don't sometimes come, just as they do for Wendy. But no matter how many times I stare up at those stars or gaze out over that vast ocean, I am always left, at some level, with ambiguity rather than certainty, with more questions than answers, and with a continuing and awe-inspiring mystery that calls and inspires me to keep seeking and to keep exploring.

There was a time in my spiritual journey when I thought that having more questions than answers was far from a good thing. Having questions about God or ultimate reality meant that one was spiritually lost or confused. It also meant that my immortal soul was at risk and that a one way ticket to a very hot and unpleasant place might very well be in my future.

But then I discovered this faith and my whole attitude about mystery and questioning changed. Unitarian Universalism is a religion that embraces mystery, that celebrates our questions, and that invites and encourages us to seek and to explore as we experience the beauty and wonder of life. One of the things I love most about being a Unitarian Universalist is our willingness to affirm that we don't have all the answers, that we are always learning and growing, and that questions about God and the nature of existence require, first and foremost, that we explore them from a place of openness and humility - a humility that embraces the mystery that surrounds us and that is open to new truths, new experiences, and new ways of understanding ourselves and the universe.

And that takes me back to those moments of deep connection that are at the heart of the mystic way. When we open our hearts and our minds and our spirits, we may find answers to those ultimate questions. Or we may not. I know that I am still searching, still experiencing, still questioning. I don't know if I will ever find a single truth or a final answer that captures everything I experience in those moments. If I do, I'll be sure to let you know. But for now, I'm content to live in the mystery of a world and a universe that can take my breath away and that fill my heart with awe and wonder - a world and a universe that let me know that I am deeply connected and part of something that I will never fully understand but that always calls to me and welcomes me - a world and a universe that I can always call home.

And perhaps it is that same spirit of openness and humility that can guide us as we look for answers to the many challenges we are currently facing. I don't know if there is a single answer or a single solution that will right all the wrongs and heal all the wounds. I'm guessing there are many answers and solutions that we have yet to discover. What I do know is that if we are to find a way forward, we will need to begin by listening to one another, by remembering that none of us has all the answers, and by being open to the experiences and ideas of others.

And while we may not know where those experiences and ideas will take us, I think they will ultimately reveal that in the midst of all of our differences and all that divides and separates the human family, we are ultimately one and deeply connected. There is unity in the midst of our diversity and oneness in the midst of our variety. Perhaps that is the beginning of an answer and a path. We are one and we are connected. May we join together and journey together on that path of oneness and connection with openness, with humility, and with love.

Blessed Be