

Experience of “Transcending Mystery”

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One of my chief worries about becoming a Unitarian, and about serving in its professional ministry, was this: in moving from a religious tradition that sustained and provoked me most of my life, and then becoming a Unitarian and casting my lot, my fate and life here—would the wellsprings of mystery run dry for me; would I ever experience deep and meaningful mystical, religious thoughts and feelings ever again? I’m serious. They occurred at moments in my life before I became a Unitarian; extraordinary experiences crucial in helping me to make decisions that would influence who I was, what I would become, what I thought and believed about the world, nature, of everything. There have been times, I have had experiences, when I felt that it was not just me, but something much greater that spoke and moved beyond, within, and through me with such power, content and affect, that it bestowed meaning, intent and purpose to my life. Were such moments, such experiences still accessible, still possible within a tradition frequently characterized by the way it has privileged an overtly rational and naturalistic understanding and approach to the public expression of religiosity?

In these remarks I want to consider, in turn, first, how what we call the “Sources” of our “living tradition” function to authenticate core Unitarian Principles. Second, I’ll look at what we mean by “direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder.” Following that, we’ll look back to individuals within our tradition for whom “direct experience” was central to their understanding of an authentic, living faith, and whose witness to having experienced “that transcending mystery” could serve as a resource for a

contemporary retrieval, for an opening up to “mystery” that is consistent and familiar with our tradition.

Through myriad expressions, we have created religions to provide an all-encompassing interpretation or vision of life: what it is and ought to be, what hinders us from realizing that vision; and then how religions work to identify and make available the enduring means and ways to make life deeply meaningful and worth living. In spite of deeply flawed histories, we still strive through our many religions to make three basic assertions: a) that there is an essential *problem* that thwarts genuine human flourishing; b) that a religious vision of life contains an *ideal* that humanity ought to seek in order to overcome the basic roadblocks to our deepest needs and aspirations; and c) that there are effective *means* available by which persons can be transformed in order to attain our ideal, our essential goals. (see Hall, Pilgrim and Cavanagh, *Religion: An Introduction*, 1985, pp. 99-104)

Our Seven Principles roughly sketch out a Unitarian world-view, an encompassing vision of life. As all religions strive to do, these Principles identify an essential *problem*; claim an *ideal* state of things which, if achieved, will overcome that roadblock to profound human flourishing; and they suggest the *means* at hand for achieving our ideal.

Think of the first and seventh principle: *behind* them lurks what Unitarians assert is the essential problem: in #1, we’re acknowledging that the worth and dignity of persons is neither recognized nor achieved; and in #7, we see that there is a fatal lack of mindfulness with regard to the interdependence of all existence. As a result, human dignity and the extensive well-being of what we call “the web” are imperiled. Now step out from behind these two principles, and what do we see? What stands forth is the

explicit assertion of our essential, transformative ideal, that about which we dream—in the words of the First Principle: affirming and realizing the inherent worth and dignity of every person (#1), and in the Seventh: human beings finally wised-up, and in possession of sufficient information, humility and commitment to respect and promote the interdependence of all things.

Achieving those ideals....it would almost be heaven. But how? What are the means to bring about such a transformation? That is where Principles 2-6 come in: these are the practices and disciplines we pick up and put to use in order to overcome and transform that which most fundamentally besets us and the world. They are the material we use to build. Put them to work, and piece by piece we raise walls and a roof over our heads—a home capacious, compassionate, just, democratic, truthful and spiritual enough, caring enough, for abiding and thriving in this world and amidst its myriad ways of being.

But how on earth do we know this house can stand? That the plans are well drawn? That the materials are any good? What about when it's in need of repairs? What do we use? And how do we know that those taking up residence inside are worth the risk to claim as kin and community? That's what our Six Sources are all about: "The living Tradition which we share draws from many sources."

Scan down the list of the "Sources." It reads like an outline of Unitarian Universalist history and experience. The Sources tell the story of a questing, heterogeneous religious community that, over time, has grown to draw upon a dazzling range of materials to explore, critique, authenticate and build a distinctive religious and ethical tradition. We turn to the myriad texts, experiences, disciplines and practices

within these sources to deepen our spiritual selves, to locate us both within the household of our own tradition and within a worldwide community of religions. We claim them in order to keep us honest, to constructively critique our faith and institutions. And they enjoin us to connect with and celebrate the sacred circle of life and the rhythms of nature. They are there, at hand, awaiting use, in order to build, explore, affirm, critique, and connect, and thus make fresh and relevant our encompassing, religious vision of life: its problems, its ideals, and the means to achieve our vision.

And the first source is “direct experience with 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.”

Direct encounter with the abiding mystery and wonder of existence, across history and cultures, is central to religious experience and expression. Sacred stories, belief systems, rituals, moral codes, and the arts—behind, beyond and within all these types of symbolic expression the human family has groped to convey an intimation of a “presence,” “mystery,” “wonder,” the “holy” abiding in and through all things. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna’s charioteer reveals himself as the Lord Krishna, and in amazement Arjuna exults: “I see all gods within your body...all sages and holy serpents. Universal Form, I see you without limit.” As a boy, Black Elk was out on the prairie hunting and just as he was about to shoot a kingbird, it spoke to him: “Listen! A voice is calling you!” it said. And looking up, thundering down from the clouds, two men streaked toward him like arrows drumming and singing: “Behold, a sacred voice is calling you,” they cried out. “All over the sky a sacred voice is calling....Take courage

younger brother, on earth a nation you shall make live...with power...[and a] cleansing wing.” (see Hall, etc., 29, 30; Haught, *What Is Religion*, 161-2.)

Far removed from the prairie and the battlefield of Kurushetra, Alfred North Whitehead puts it this way: “Religion is a vision of something which stands behind, beyond and within the passing flux of immediate things—something real, yet waiting to be realized.” In describing his friend Samuel Johnson, the mid 19th century Unitarian minister and scholar, Samuel Longfellow wrote: “He instinctively sought spiritual truths by direct vision...by immediate inward experience, rather than by inference from outward experience. God, Right, Immortality, were to him realities of intuition; that is, of direct looking upon; shining through their own light, [and] spiritually discerned...”

(from Samuel Trumbore, “Samuel Johnson,” March 18, 2007, First U Soc of Albany, NY)

In his book *Cosmic Consciousness*, published in the first decade of the 20th century, the Canadian psychiatrist Richard Bucke, described how, while being driven in a carriage home from a lecture, he experienced a life-changing illumination. Though lasting only a moment, Bucke writes that: “[I] saw and knew...that the Cosmos is not dead matter but a living Presence, that the soul of man is immortal, that the universe is so built and ordered that...all things work together for the good of each and all, that the foundation principle of the world is what we call love and that the happiness of everyone is in the long run absolutely certain.” (from John Horgan, *Rational Mysticism...*, 2003, p.6)

These few examples indicate several features of this phenomenon that I want to emphasize. First, direct, or mystical experience of “mystery and wonder,” has and does take place. I think that it is pointless to attempt to refute this, or to write it off merely as a species of abnormal, or pathological mental and psychological states and behavior. It is an empirical artifact like others in human culture available for study, interpretation and

understanding. Direct, or mystical experiences, occur in widely diverse settings across time and cultures. Their occurrence is attested in ancient mythic accounts, aboriginal experiences, in the studies of university professors and ministers, and in the report of an amazing event that occurred to a respectable citizen while riding in a carriage through the streets of a major Canadian city. They happen; I am not going to argue that they don't.

Second, to be sure, there is disagreement over what constitutes the attributes that would identify experience as authentically mystical. Still, I think that an essential characteristic of direct experience is that it conveys some key insight, a moment of affective knowledge deeply felt, such that the person gets a glimpse or vision of what they believe is the "way things really are," even if that which is perceived is an irreducible mystery at the heart of all things. And that feeling or knowing, though transient, is conveyed with such power that it can transform the person's life. (see Horgan, 7)

Third, that while described as *directly* experienced, it is clear that mystical, direct experiences are *mediated* by the cultures in which they occur. Contrary to the claims, like those of Huston Smith, that mystical perceptions "transcend time, place, culture, and individual identity," and that spiritual traditions, "in spite of their obvious differences, express the same fundamental truth about the nature of reality," direct experience of "that transcending mystery and wonder" are deeply contextual and diverse; while they may be special, metanormal and immediate, they are *mediated*. The forms of consciousness that the person brings to experience is intimately, necessarily connected with and influenced by the prior concepts, expectations, texts studied and assimilated, and the mystical reports of others that the person brings to experience. . (see Horgan, 17; "Mysticism," *The Harper Collins Dictionary of Religion*, "Jonathan Z. Smith, general editor, 1995, 747-9)

In the reports cited above, Arjuna has a Hindu experience; Black Elk a 19th century aboriginal experience of a native youth, Richard Bucke reports his experience in the terms available to a respectable, urban, upper-middle class, nominally Christian Canadian psychiatrist, etc. It is clear to me as well, in retrospect, that while I do not question the reality of the mystical experiences that occurred in my life prior to becoming a Unitarian, what I felt, understood, and interpreted as taking place, were inescapably influenced by the religious culture in which those experiences occurred.

But then, here, I arrive back at the crux of the matter, at least for me: for I am no longer located within the religious culture in which those previous experiences took place. The symbols, the sacred texts, the mystical path and experiences reported by others in that religious culture, the environment in which the experiences happened, the presumed objects with which I believed I interacted—all have changed, and irrevocably. And now, I have taken up residence and commitment within a tradition frequently characterized by the way it has privileged an overtly rational and naturalistic approach to the public expression of religiosity and in its understanding of the nature of the world.

This is a conundrum similar to the crisis that drove a new generation of Unitarians in the 1830s to near despair. For them, that generation in the 1830s-50s, their religion, their Unitarianism, had become “corpse-cold.” Their elders mined Sacred Scripture obsessively for rational proofs of the existence of god, and were tone-deaf to its spirit-filled poetry and myth. In schools and universities, their teachers drilled them in the rote memorization of the classics, yet never once asked them what they thought or felt about the issues and passions teeming in the books and words before them. And their ministers?

Emerson, in a speech to graduating divinity students in 1838, told them a story about going to a worship service whereafter he nearly vowed “to...go to church no more.”

A snow storm was falling around us. The snow storm was real, the preacher merely spectral, and the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, and then out the window behind him into the beautiful meteor of the snow. He had lived in vain. He had not one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love...If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it....In how many churches, by how many [ministers], tell me, [are we] made sensible that [we] are an infinite Soul; that the earth and heavens are passing in [our] minds; and that [we are] drinking forever the soul of God?” (from *The Complete Essays...of Emerson*, Modern Library, 1950, 76, 77. Hereafter: Emerson.)

This was the particular project of the Unitarian Transcendentalists: to awaken themselves and others to what they ardently believed was the mystery and wonder of the “Infinite” coursing through the earth and heavens, and that it was immediately accessible through direct experience. This was not something far off or fit only to be encountered second-hand in ancient accounts of epic heroes or god intoxicated prophets. It could happen anywhere, anytime, to anyone in the most unexpected ways and places. “Crossing a bare commons,” Emerson wrote, “in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky...I...enjoyed a perfect exhilaration...glad to the brink of fear....Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the air and uplifted into infinite space...I became a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all, the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and parcel of God.” (Emerson, 6)

It is a curious way of telling, but the language of direct experience always is.

In *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, Leigh Eric Schmidt makes a compelling historical case for the crucial role 19th century Unitarians played in the creation of that range of ideas, experience, and practices that fall within the rubric of North American “spirituality”; and, especially, they were the pioneer figures in the re-invention, or re-habilitation, of mysticism and mystical experience as an essential, core

feature in religious life. This was no easy feat; for they had to swim upstream against a powerful, centuries-old current in the English speaking world; one which negatively assessed mystical, direct experience for its “ecstatic extravagance,” “sectarianism,” “misplaced sexuality, unintelligibility, pretension, and reason-be-damned piety.” (see Schmidt, *Restless Souls...*, 2006, pp.35-40; hereafter, Schmidt)

On the one hand, the Transcendentalists despaired of the deadening formalism in the ministry and scholarship of their culture. On the other, they were emboldened to confront it by their appropriation of a stream in Continental philosophy that ran from Kant and Schelling through Coleridge; a resource which validated the presence and effects of what they called “Intuition.” “Intuition,” direct immediate insight, was for them an unimpeachable source for knowledge that validated their affective, unmediated traffic with the non-rational, supra sensible world. The combination of despair and this new philosophy enabled New England Transcendentalists to launch a powerful revalorization of direct, mystical experience as, in the words of William James, “the mother sea and fountainhead of all religions.” (quoted in Schmidt, 28)

Leigh Schmidt pinpoints the birth of mysticism in North America to May 20, 1838, in Medford, Massachusetts. On that day, the Transcendentalist Club, in its third year of existence and comprised mainly of Unitarian ministers and intellectuals, “met specifically to take up, in...Emerson’s phrase, “the question of Mysticism.” (Schmidt, 29) Two months later, Emerson delivered his notorious Harvard Divinity School Address, where, famously, he denounced Miracles as a “Monster,” the fixation on the divinized “person of Jesus” as “noxious”; and then kicked open the door to first-hand, immediate, mystical experience:

“The doors of the temple stand open, night and day, before every man, and the oracles of this truth cease never; it is guarded [only] by...intuition. It cannot be received second hand.... [Therefore] trust you own heart....dare to love God without mediator or veil....[for] the spirit only can teach....[A]cquaint men at first hand with Deity....The time is coming....I look for that hour when that supreme Beauty...shall speak....I look for the new Teacher....yourself a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost.” (Emerson, 71-84)

The roster of candidates who stepped forward almost immediately after Emerson’s July 1838 speech constituted a dream team on behalf of “direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder.” A few examples: Nothing by Emerson ever impressed the bookish, passionate Theodore Parker more than the Divinity School Address. “[R]esolved,” after hearing it, “to let out all the force of Transcendentalism in him,” for the next two decades Parker issued a near constant stream of essays and sermons exploring and defending the centrality of direct human “participation” with the divine through “feelings & prayers,” “revelation,” scholarship, “raptures,” and minute, sensitive observation of the laws and objects of nature. For Parker this was not a mere academic issue. Rather, it was based upon his own profound feelings of dependence upon a creative source and ground of all things, and on moments of profound personal insight. (see Dean Grodzins, *American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism*, 2002, pp. 141, 147, 170, 194, 204, 274, 277, 141)

Margaret Fuller, best known as a foundational thinker for the women’s rights movement, began to announce herself as a “mystic” within months of Emerson’s Address. In October 1838, for example, “she wrote to a friend about a ‘heavenliest day of communion’ in which ‘free to be alone in the meditative woods...all the films seemed to drop from my existence.’ That evening, standing by herself outside a church and looking up at the crescent moon beyond the pointed spire, ‘a vision came upon my soul.’” O, “may my life,” she cried at that moment, “be a church full of devout thoughts.” In this

immediate experience, Fuller perceived that “the real church was the inward life of...spiritual illumination, not the building, a relic of the external, whose very steeple pointed beyond itself” to the transcendent. (Schmidt, 47-8) Even in her formidable work, *Women of the Nineteenth Century* of 1845, Margaret Fuller “imagined such religious exaltation as an essential vehicle for the progress and elevation of women;” essential, because it was, in her words “an oracular promise,” a primal source of “spiritual dignity,” an intuitive spiritual quest for originality and transcendence that was autonomous and independent from ecclesiastical hierarchy and male subordination. (ibid)

Elizabeth Cady Stanton seized on this original insight decades later in her fabulously nervy *Women’s Bible* where she made a case for women’s rights by invoking “the immeasurable solitude of the self.” This solitude, Stanton believed, was an existential reality which could actually bring women into solidarity with Jesus’ experiences of betrayal. According to Stanton, the ease with which men deserted women, and the agonizing costs of dependency, constituted a kind of continuing revelation for women; a flash of self-recognition from which they could muster courage to face both the privation and the promise of individual responsibility and isolated, but free and sovereign interiority. (Schmidt, 90-1)

For his part, Orestes Brownson, felt the chill of technological practicality and financial calculation which dominated public life in the 1840s. And Brownson, the quixotic, some-time Transcendentalist, editor, and political theorist, lamented that “all our mysterious emotions, our interior cravings, [and]...longings” are “allowed to count for nothing” in that world of politics, technology and finance. Weary and wary of religious formalism, he extolled the warmth and light in what he called “the poetry of the

soul.” It was, he believed, an original, unborrowed, immediate intuition, a contemplative stillness that opened up the individual to the inward breathing of God’s spirit to the human the heart. (Schmidt, 60)

David Atwood Wasson, a successor to Parker’s Boston pulpit, imagined himself becoming a “leaf that quivers in God’s joy,” an experience of “pure participation in the Mystery of Being.” Thoreau sat “in the sunny doorway” of his Walden Pond cabin “from sunrise till noon, rapt in a revery amidst the pine and hickories, in undisturbed solitude and stillness.” Where, he says, “I hear beyond the range of sound, I see beyond the range of sight.” Even Henry Ware Jr., no friend to the Transcendentalist project, felt compelled to write about mysticism in an 1844 issue of the Unitarian *Christian Examiner*. To be sure his is a more rarified, respectable example of the phenomenon, yet a kind of heart-felt pathos enters into his closing lines: “Without mysticism,” he writes, “there is nothing to fill my soul’s longing....Without it there is, and there can be no religion.” (on Wasson, Thoreau, and Ware, see Schmidt, 60, 50-1)

And, finally, I have to mention William Rounseville Alger, who, like many of the Transcendentalists, turned to what he called the “mystic East” to balance out an overly materialistic “Occident.” His 1856 anthology, *Poetry of the East*, introduced the 13th century Sufi poet Jalal al-Din Rumi to the English reading world. (That’s a hundred and forty years before Coleman Barks managed to turn Rumi into the best-selling poet in contemporary North America!) Alger believed that Rumi’s poetry, his “spiritual contemplations...hallowed raptures...and boundless ecstasies” could serve as an uncommon stimulus to special inspiration and a means to enrich Western religious traditions. (Schmidt, 82-3)

In each case cited above, the formal conventions of religion, and of social, economic, and gender relations were deeply felt by the generation of New England Transcendentalists as massive obstacles to the genuine human project. *They* had become the problem: backward-looking, ossified religion, mere rational calculation, male hierarchy and dominance, reductive materialism—each and together, the Transcendentalists believed, obscured the essential purpose of religion. The goal of religion is to promote human flourishing and meaning by providing a vivid, all-encompassing interpretation or vision of life: what it is and ought to be. Instead of being essential, provident means for realizing that vision, these conventions had dammed up the channels of its realization. Human flourishing within a capacious, meaning-bestowing vision of life is the ideal. The Transcendentalist generation of the 1830-50s believed that immediate apprehension of the holy, the flashing insights of intuition, alert attention to the details of nature, the poetry, the solitude of the soul—in sum, direct experience was the means to effect the kind of personal and public transformation that religion is supposed to be all about.

It was a fleeting moment in our tradition and in the story of religion in North America. Attention to immediate, intuitive states and the practices which called them forth disappeared almost immediately under an avalanche of events, epic tragedies and controversies. Picture them: Civil War, world wars, and genocide, open conflict between science and religion, the secularization of European societies, the world-wide struggle between competing ideologies, the rise to predominance of the natural and physical sciences, movements for civil rights, the rights of women and the disabled, of gays and lesbians, the rise of fundamentalism, the post-modern deconstruction of all master

narratives as hegemonic discourse...all these and more congregated to overwhelm what we thought; it dictated the causes we embraced, and the institutions we undertook to build.

In the midst of these massive, multiple shocks and break neck developments, what room was left for “direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder...”? That impulse, that assertion, seems almost quaint by comparison. It’s no wonder, then, I hear reports of how, for decades, Sunday morning Unitarian worship services became characterized as sites for soberly rational “public lectures.” I can imagine what was going on: ministers and congregants were struggling just to keep up with, make sense and get their bearings in a violent, rapidly changing world.

And yet, and still...we are born, we age, we couple, we sicken, we die; we struggle to achieve something lasting and of worth, before we pass away. In the midst of these life changes, of our crossing one threshold after another, we seek and thirst for meaning. At different times in our lives, extended and transient, we are on high, sensitive alert for signals and signs of transcendence to assure us that it is not merely all “sound and fury.” That is what I believe is behind the refrain I hear from congregants who say they want more “spirituality” in their lives and in our churches.

Well here, I want to pass on a prescriptive injunction I grew up with: “stand ye in holy places and be not moved.” Direct experience with that transcending mystery and wonder doesn’t just happen. I can’t go back to the places and times in my life before becoming a Unitarian where I experienced directly what I understood to be the divine, the holy, the mystery. But with Emerson, I believe that even now we can be acquainted first-hand with it and acquaint others in ways congruent with a Unitarian setting.

Let me suggest several avenues, which, if we'd only walk down them, could bring us into the presence of transcendence. As a minister, I can attest to the near palpable immediacy of the Mystery and Wonder that accompanies ritual, attentive focus and celebration of threshold, transitional moments in our lives; birth, coming-of-age, marriage, and death. Rites of passage allow human beings to rise above or go beyond the merely animal functions of our bodies. They clear the ground and open up a space for the experiences of transcendence; here perhaps as in no other place, human beings reveal themselves as most human—that is, only a “little lower than the angels.” (Ps. 8:4-6; Hebrews 2:6-8) I would encourage you to grab hold of opportunities to attend child dedications, coming-of-age ceremonies, weddings and memorial services—the kinds of events and sites that the Unitarian philosopher Robert Corrington calls “sacred folds.” (Robert S.

Corrington, A Semiotic Theory of Philosophy and Theology, 2000)

And for bringing us at least up to the threshold of wonder, for us there's nothing like a sustained course of reading and study of our New England Transcendentalists. We are their direct or adopted kin. We're grappling with similar questions, faced with the familiar dilemmas of trying to create a satisfying narrative identity, and dealing with the manifold challenges in a culture wracked with religious formalism, reductive materialism, and rational calculation. We have a lot to learn from these, our forebears. And I hope that through programs of religious education in our congregations, across the spectrum from children to adults, these women and men will become familiar family, and not remain strangers to us.

Two more examples; and I'll bring these remarks to a close. I have really become convinced that a prime, holy place for epiphanies to occur in this world is disclosed by the sciences. Far from disenchanting nature, the testimony and findings of the sciences

can inspire a profound sense of wonder. Albert Einstein wrote about his “rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law....The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious....Whoever does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his eyes are dimmed.” (quoted in Haught, *What is Religion?...*, 164)

Even Steven Weinberg, the Nobel Prize winning astrophysicist and atheist, hardened by the murder of family members in the Holocaust, followed up his famous observation with a significant qualification—and insight. First, he said: “The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it seems pointless.” But then, he added: and yet, “I have to admit that sometimes nature is more beautiful than is strictly necessary.” (quoted in Horgan, 227)

There is a growing treasure trove of contemporary popular science writing that conveys the rapturous amazement, mystery and beauty that close observation of nature and its laws discloses to many of our most thoughtful scientists. Chet Raymo’s *Skeptics and True Believers*, John Horgan’s *Rational Mysticism*, Bill Bryson’s *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, Joel Primack’s *The View from the Center of the Universe*, Tim Flannery’s *The Eternal Frontier*...I have turned to these books time and again during the past nine years to create special worship services and seasonal pageants for all ages in order to celebrate the mystery and wonder of nature. We’ve had intergenerational services on plate tectonics, shore bird migrations, the structure of the cell and the atom, the rise of life from the earth’s primordial stew of elements, and the life cycle of Pacific salmon. We even did a pageant on 65 million years of natural history of North America in Five Acts.

The upshot of these sources and stories affirm, at least for me, that non-theistic naturalism can inspire in us a sense of wonder, value, awe, and enchantment. The

surprise here, and this is just a guess, is that contemporary sciences can function to validate our own direct, intuitive experiences in interesting ways. They are analogous to the role early 19th century Continental philosophy played to validate the Transcendentalist appeal to “Intuition” as an authoritative source for religious experience.

Sustained engagement with works of art can also open the doors of perception for us to mystery, wonder, pathos and consolation; they can serve as signs and signals of transcendence. Mark Rothko’s luminous canvasses, the “Pieta” in Florence carved by Michelangelo late in his life come to mind, as does Sylvia Plath’s poem “Black Rook in Rainy Weather” that you picked up on your way in here.

In a letter Plath wrote to her mother, she stated that she believed in “the impersonal laws of science as a god of sorts;” and in a religion course she wrote a paper on Unitarianism where she identified herself as a Unitarian and an “agnostic humanist.” In “Black Rook in Rainy Weather” (*The poem is printed at the end of this text*) those impersonal laws are at work, and her humanism is evident: she doesn’t “expect a miracle;” she doesn’t seek “some design” or “portent” from “the mute sky” or the “dull, ruinous landscape.” And yet, and yet...like the physicist Steven Weinberg, Plath’s close attention to that “wet black rook,” to “kitchen table [and] chair,” even to the “desultory weather” and “this season of fatigue” yields the recognition “that sometimes nature is more beautiful than is strictly necessary”; that it can, at moments, quietly overflow with a superabundance of meaning and luminous being that invites us to wait again for the “rare, random descent” of “whatever angel may choose to flare suddenly” by our side.

There’s something else I want to say about the poem. While I love reading poetry, I am not the best of readers. I aim primarily at getting the meaning, the gist of the

thing, and at scanning or reading the lines so they make sense. But my friend Mark Baker alerted me to something else going on in “The Black Rook...” that I hadn’t noticed at all. Each line of each stanza ends where it does for a reason. It’s not obvious, but look closely. The whole poem has an “*interlocking rhyme*” scheme. That is, words unrhymed at the end of each line in the first stanza are then linked internally to words rhymed in the following stanzas to create a continuing pattern through the whole poem. (Compare the last word in the first lines of each stanza: “there,” “fire,” “desire,” “chair,” etc. Scan down the last word of the second lines in each stanza: “rook,” “seek,” “took” etc.) They’re not exact, but slant, or near rhymes that approximate the sound from the preceding stanzas. The effect, for me, when I discovered it was an “ah ha!” moment; a revealing, a quiet, but very satisfying epiphany.

Discovering the interlocking rhyme scheme in “The Black Rook...” enhanced my pleasure in reading it; the joy in seeing similarity in dissimilarity, likeness in difference. By subtly linking sound, Plath also weaves thought and feeling through and among the stanzas, pulling our mind back from line’s end to the lines which preceded it, and thus helps to convey more powerfully her private vision of longing, of miracle, of superabundance of meaning, in spite of “the mute sky” and “ruinous landscape.”

Epiphanies, intuitive insights, moments of direct experience cannot save us. They cannot guarantee that harm will not come our way. They cannot assure us that those we love will stay true, or that our days and nights will not be haunted by depression. Would that the interval between Plath’s long wait for the angel had not been so rare, so random; that it would have more generously poured out its incandescent, hallowing light upon her!

(I discovered the Plath poem in *American Religious Poems: An Anthology*, Harold Bloom and Jesse Zuba, editors, 2006, pp. 451-2)

If they can neither guarantee salvation nor avert harm, we may be left with a big SO WHAT? And here I want to end. Attending rites of passage, reading the Transcendentalists, engaging with contemporary findings of the sciences, with the arts, encourages me to see Nature, Mystery and Wonder, though perhaps divested of a personal god and providential design, as sources of deep moral and aesthetic value. In a world “gone slightly mad in its quest for transcendental consolation” (George Levine, *Darwin Loves You...*, 2006, p. 30) a close, sympathetic reading of our Transcendentalist forebears, alert, sustained engagement with the awe and reverence provoking “book of nature,” and taking up the artists’ way both with sympathetic imagination and as makers ourselves—walking with intent down these avenues can reignite in us a sense of wonder and respect for all things inanimate and living; as such, they constitute a compelling vision that is emotionally, ethically and spiritually engaged and engaging.

The world is a tough and painfully fragile place; all the more reason to see ourselves as part of a great continuum, as woven into that interdependent web of all existence. Intellect alone is not enough; humility and sympathetic imagination, the kind that can feel its way beyond ego, a feeling to and for others is also an essential trait we have inherited, a trait crucial if we are to have a future. They argue for a spiritually affective and ethically responsible public engagement with the world; a world overwhelmed with inhumanity and catastrophe, but a world also full of meaning, teeming with life and new life, with Mystery and Wonder.

(For background sources not cited in this paper: on Transcendentalism, see Phillip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History*, 2007; *Transcendentalism: A Reader*, edited by Joel Myerson, 2000. On some recent developments in theology regarding “direct experience”: see Thomas M. Kelly, *Theology at the Void: The Retrieval of Experience*, 2002 (Roman Catholic); Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*, 1993, (*liberal Protestant*), and for Unitarianism see: Richard Grigg, *To Re-Enchant the World: A Philosophy of Unitarianism*, 2004; William R. Murry, *Reason and Revelation: Religious Humanism for the 21st Century*, 2007; Robert S. Corrington, *A Semiotic Theory of Philosophy and Theology*, 2000. The latter, while an incredibly rich source, is very ‘technical’ and ‘academic’; for a more accessible approach to Corrington’s ideas, see his autobiographical *Riding the Windhorse*:

Manic-Depressive Disorder and the Quest for Wholeness, 2003. On the importance of the sciences for renewing theology, see Norbert S. Samuelson, *Jewish Faith and Modern Science: On the Death and Re-Birth of Jewish Philosophy*, 2009. We have lessons to learn here!)

Black Rook in Rainy Weather by Sylvia Plath

On the stiff twig up there
Hunches a wet black rook
Arranging and rearranging its feathers in the rain.
I do not expect a miracle
Or an accident

To set the sight on fire
In my eye, nor seek
Any more in the desultory weather some design,
But let spotted leaves fall as they fall,
Without ceremony, or portent.

Although, I admit, I desire,
Occasionally, some backtalk
From the mute sky, I can't honestly complain:
A certain minor light may still
Leap incandescent

Out of a kitchen table or chair
As if a celestial burning took
Possession of the most obtuse objects now and then –
Thus hallowing an interval
Otherwise inconsequent

By bestowing largesse, honor,
One might say love. At any rate, I now walk
Wary (for it could happen
Even in this dull, ruinous landscape); sceptical,
Yet politic; ignorant

Of whatever angel may choose to flare
Suddenly at my elbow. I only know that a rook
Ordering its black feathers can so shine
As to seize my senses, haul
My eyelids up, and grant

A brief respite from fear
Of total neutrality. With luck,
Trekking stubborn through this season
Of fatigue, I shall
Patch together a content

Of sorts. Miracles occur,
If you care to call those spasmodic
Tricks of radiance miracles. The wait's begun again,
The long wait for the angel,
For that rare, random descent.

