ONE IS THE LONELIEST NUMBER
A sermon by Rev. Wayne Arnason
West Shore Unitarian Universalist Church
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READING

“I’M A TRANSCENDENTALIST”
--from a sermon by Rev. Dan Harper

“I’m a Transcendentalist. When I was about sixteen, I had a transcendental experience. I was sitting outdoors at the base of Punkatasset Hill in my home town of Concord, Massachusetts, with my back against a white birch tree. There was this alley of white birches that someone had planted along an old farm road, and the fields on either side were still, at that time, mowed for hay twice a year. So I was just sitting there on a beautiful late spring day, and I was suddenly overwhelmed by a sense of the oneness of everything. I mean, this was an overwhelming experience; I really don’t have the words to describe it. Since then, I’ve had numerous other transcendent experiences, some more powerful than others.

What do these transcendental experiences mean? Well, I suppose I’m still trying to make sense out of those experiences. When I was about twenty, I found William James’s book Varieties of Religious Experience, in which he describes the various mystical experiences that people have. James said that perhaps a quarter of the population has mystical experiences of one sort or another, and in his descriptions of the various kinds of mystical experiences I could see the outlines of my own mystical experiences. But James’s book didn’t tell me about the meaning of my mystical experiences.

I found something of the meaning of my transcendental experiences in a book by my fellow townsman, Henry Thoreau. I had always disliked Thoreau when I was a child; when you grow up in Concord, and go to the Concord public schools, you get force-fed Thoreau and Emerson, and Alcott and Hawthorne for that matter. I don’t take well to force-feeding and so dismissed Thoreau. But at last I found that Thoreau’s book Walden probably described what I had been experiencing better than anything else, especially when he writes:

I love a broad margin to my life. Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a revery, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, ...until by the sun falling in at my west window... I was reminded of the lapse of time.

I discovered that I, too, love a broad margin to my life. That broad margin is a margin to my life in which I have the time and the space to be able to be rapt in a reverie, to reflect on the ultimate meaning of the universe. It is also a margin to my life where I can reflect on the difference between real
religion, and religion as it is imperfectly practiced in the world around me. When I have been able to sit “rapt in a revery,” I have come to the inescapable conclusion that there is a unity which binds all human beings together, which binds all living beings together — which, indeed, binds us human beings to the non-living world as well, to the sun and the moon and the stars above and the rocks under our feet.”

SERMON PART 1: 

In the course of my life, I have had several experiences of the Oneness of Everything. They included moments of deep peace, encounters with grandeur and awe, and experiences of deep beauty. Some of these experiences happened in relationship to the natural world, and some of them happened in meditation, and some of them happened in states of heightened awareness.

My guess is, that many of the experiences I have had are not unfamiliar to many of you and that you have had them too. In our encounters with nature, they happen in small ways quite often, and more rarely, they happen in expansive ways in unique places.

Even the most dramatic and hard to describe experience of the Oneness of Everything that happened for me, an experience in which I lost my sense of having a separate self and body and could not attach the consciousness that I was experiencing to any physical form or identity, even that kind of experience, is one that some studies suggest one-third of human beings have at some time in their lives. It could be more than one-third, because of the complexities of whether and how we talk about such experiences.

Indeed, the integration of experiences like this as a component of spiritual life has become more widely accepted in our culture during our lifetimes. The reasons aren’t that hard to identify. If you had a chance to see the wonderful exhibition on Yoga at the Cleveland Museum of Art this summer, you were probably as amused as I was by the ways that Asian spiritual practices like Yoga were first portrayed in mass media in the West starting in the early 19th century. The Transcendentalists in New England Unitarianism were influenced by their early more sophisticated and open encounter with Asian thought, but they also signified a cultural turning point in American religion. These Unitarian Christians were allowing their personal experiences of transcendent beauty and unity in nature and in intellectual pursuits to shape and change their theology, rather than forcing these experiences into traditional Christian doctrinal boxes.

In the mid-twentieth century, after 1965, that Transcendentalist stream running through American religion expanded into a mighty river. That was the year when immigration laws were liberalized and more Asians were able to come to the United States. The religions of Hinduism and Buddhism that see profound experiences of oneness as a desirable state to attain started to become more directly accessible and culturally acceptable in the United States. Add to that the boom of interest in psychedelic drug-induced mystical experiences that started in the 60’s, and we find a different conversation happening in American religion about the place of mystical experiences in religion and in life,
and not only among theologians and scientists, but also in popular culture. When jokes like: “What did the Buddhist say to the Hot Dog vendor? Make me one with everything!” become widespread and well-known, something has changed in the religious and cultural literacy of a country. But that joke tells us something else has happened since the sixties: “The Oneness of Everything” has become a religious cliché.

Religious cliché have some similarity to literary clichés. A literary cliché is a metaphor that has been used so often that its original cleverness and insight has become muted. Phrases like “a diamond in the rough”, “the writing is on the wall” or “every cloud has a silver lining” are literary clichés. Everyone knows what they refer to, so they continue to convey meaning, but they no longer pack any punch in a piece of writing. English majors are told to avoid them.

Religious clichés similarly continue to convey meaning. You have a general idea about the human experiences that are behind these statements of belief or folk wisdom. You think you know what someone is talking about when they are used in conversation – but do you really? Rev. Kathleen and I started talking about religious clichés last spring, and as we talked about them we realized that some were important than others, because they were truly dangerous! Dangerous! Now that’s an unusual claim! In a time when the cultural prominence of religion has declined, and in a church where we explore the spiritual practice of many paths in religious understanding, what would be dangerous about some religious clichés?

Our conversations together about this question went on for several weeks and were rich enough that we decided we could explore Dangerous Beliefs all year in our sermons. So that’s how our overarching theme for this year’s worship: “A Year of Believing Dangerously” came about. You’ll find as the year goes on that some of the Monthly Themes we’ve chosen may surprise you and be misinterpreted if we’re not careful about the sermon titles we put on the sign outside. Take the religious cliché “We are a Christian Nation”. When we take up that theme in December, our purpose will not be to proclaim that we are a Christian nation! Our purpose will be to explore two different ways that such a belief is dangerous! It’s dangerous if you take it literally and act as if it were true and ignore or denigrate or marginalize all the other faith traditions that are part of America. But it’s also dangerous if you try to take seriously what the Christian faith calls upon nations to do in their roles as moral actors in the world! We might have to change our foreign policy and military priorities! What would we be doing if as a nation if the demands of our country’s Christian heritage and roots were taken seriously? You get the idea?

Not all of our “dangerous belief themes” are religious clichés found in traditional faiths. We are going to take on some of the ones that have been dangerous for Unitarian Universalists as well – for example “you should be able to believe anything you want” which we’ll take up next May – or in October “The moral arc of the universe bends towards justice”. Do we really believe those things? What if they are true? What if they aren’t true? What would “true” mean?
I was talking about these questions the other day with Clint Anderson and Tom Smith in our Connection Circles Facilitators meeting, and Tom challenged me on how you can ever know whether a religious belief is true. If the belief has some element of faith, that cannot be verified by the scientific method, can we ever call it true?

And then later in the week, Tom sent me a strip from that great spiritual teacher who has been holding forth in her own quiet way in the comics for decades: Mary Worth! Mary is asked by a child: How will I know when I’m right? Here’s what she had to say: (Slide) “It’s impossible to be right all the time about everything. (Several of us in the room are thinking right now – Tell that to my spouse!”) But Mary goes on to say: “Speaking from experience, when it’s an unshakeable feeling, when it comes from deep within, and you feel it almost physically...” and the child finishes Mary’s thought: “Then I know it’s truth!!” So what do you think of that statement?

Is the test of truth how it feels to you? Our Unitarian Universalist General Assembly has affirmed a list of the sources of our UU faith, and the very first one in the list is this: “Direct Experience of that transcending mystery and wonder which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and openness to the forces that create and uphold life.” That sounds to me an awful lot like an experience of the Oneness of Everything. Is that what the UNI in Unitarianism means? If you have an unshakeable feeling that comes from deep within that you and the whole universe are one, is that a true experience? Can you build a church, or a personal religious life upon that rock?

That’s the question we’re going to explore in the second part of the sermon today. But first we are going to affirm, through a personal act of generosity, another kind of rock upon which we build our church, the financial rock that sustains the building, the staffing, and the outreach that West Shore Church undertakes every day. The offering to support the work of this church will now be received.

**Offertory: “One is the Loneliest Number”**

**SERMON PART 2:**

Somewhere deep in the recesses of your memory, you knew that today’s sermon title was attached to a song, and maybe you’ve been trying to remember the tune. Thanks to David Blazer for bringing it all back to us. There’s not much to that song but that lyric has always intrigued me. As someone who grew up Unitarian and was taught that God was one and God was love, singing that “one is the loneliest number” casts some doubt on all that. There’s no doubt that experience of the Oneness of Everything is a singular experience. When body and mind fall away, when “you” become just point of consciousness without a sense of where you end and the whole universe begins, there isn’t any “other”, any “one” else. No “you and God” – just God – and if you and God are one, how can that be a lonely experience? The Christian mystic and monk Thomas Merton once wrote: (Our) loneliness is, in the fact, the loneliness of God. That is why it is such a great thing for a man to discover his solitude and learn to live in it. For there he finds that he and God are one: that God is alone as he himself is alone. That God wills to be alone in him.” (from *Disputed Questions* p.189-190 Farrar and Strauss edition 1960).
I find this quite provocative, as I have most of what Thomas Merton has written. This Trappist monk explored the depths of his monastic meditative spiritual practice all the while struggling with his attraction to and his place in the world, as a popular spiritual writer. Late in his life, which ended accidentally and far too soon, he was just beginning an exploration of the common ground in all mystical and meditative experience. He was meeting with Asian monastics and exploring whether their experience of the oneness of everything and his experience were one and the same.

How you identify yourself religiously and the religious language that you feel most comfortable using to talk about mystical experiences will make a big difference in what they mean to you. A person with a firmly fixed and defended ideology about the way that the world is will have the ability to pack that mystical experience into the familiar and comforting theological categories and stories that are the building blocks of their identity. Judaism tells us that God was indeed lonely so Yahweh made human being because God loves stories. And what is religion, after all, but a story about what this world and this life means to us? So a Brazilian Roman Catholic and an Indonesian Muslim and an American secular humanist could each have a mystical experience that analytically and biochemically might look pretty similar from the outside if they each had to respond to the same questions on a survey that broke the experience down. Yet each would tell a different story about what the experience meant to them. And -- each would have a different interpretation of what the experience required of them.

Psychologists, psychotherapists, biologists and biochemists all have their own questions to ask and their own explanations to give about mystical experience -- but I’m a minister -- so the mystery to me about mystical experience is not that it happens, and not how it happens or where it comes from. The mystery to me is what does it mean? Despite my openness to and enjoyment of experiences of the Oneness of Everything, the questions I really want to ask are: So What? and What does it matter?

Is the experience of and belief in the Oneness of Everything a Dangerous Belief? Earlier I said that there are two ways that a cliché belief can be dangerous. The first way is that you can accept it literally and completely. The experience of the oneness of everything can become an experience you strive to have over and over again. Far from being experienced as lonely, that mystical union is sought after as a place that heals all wounds, and banishing all fears. Whether it is through aesthetic meditative practices and renunciation, whether it is through chemicals, whether it is through extreme sports experiences, the high that comes when there is no longer Two, you and the universe, but just One -- is a very seductive one that is hard to leave when it ends. And that’s dangerous. It’s dangerous because these experiences outside of time inevitably come back into time. It’s dangerous because our lives are in the world. It’s dangerous because the purpose of our human lives is not limited to finding God, but includes finding and living with each other as the eyes and ears and hands and feet of God. We are God when we do God’s work, and as Ani di Franco’s words reminded us when this service first
began, “God’s work isn’t done by God. It’s done by people.”

So this points us towards the other way that experiencing and believing in the Oneness of Everything is dangerous. It’s dangerous because it if you truly accept and live into the everyday experience of the Oneness of Everything, it can change your life forever. You can’t go through your life believing that what happens to other people doesn’t matter, because other people are you. You can’t go through your life making sure that you’ve got yours, and if other people don’t that’s too bad and probably their fault. Those other people are you. Next Sunday I’m sure that President Morales will speak to this in a different way when he preaches about the Love that the sign outside says we say we stand on the side of. God is Love, but Love is not just an “unshakeable feeling that comes from deep within” – Love is an action, not a noun but a verb.

When Unitarian Universalists talk about the UNI that our name begins with, the oneness that we know we can experience as transcendent mystery and wonder requires something of us. We don’t just bask in it. It renewes us to be open to the forces that create and uphold life – and those forces, that power, that will to create and uphold life is in our human hands. In Buddhism, the religion best known for encouraging everyone to be open to the experience of the oneness of everything, the most substantive part of that tradition’s wisdom for living comes not from the encouragement to seek experiences of oneness, but through the precepts, the ethical and moral teachings of Buddhism. The precepts remind us that after that hot dog vendor makes you one with everything, you have to make a decision about whether you leave the guy a tip because you know he’s making minimum wage and that’s not enough to live on. After you give him back all the change, you have decide whether to lose your temper at the guy behind you in line, who is saying “Hey, hurry up buddy, I ain’t got all day”. And after you eat your hot dog, giving thanks for the sentient being that gave up its life so that you could eat meat, you go back to your job in a Wall Street firm needing to figure out whether this is the right path for you to leave a legacy of love to the world. Believing, experiencing, knowing that there is a fundamental unity that underlies all of life is meaningless unless it makes a difference in how you behave, unless it calls you to act and serve in ways that are more generous, patient, and life affirming.

There are actually two “Uni’s” in Unitarian Universalism. The Uni-tarian part of our theology affirms the Oneness of Everything, the inseparability of all of us and the world around us from the interdependent web of life. The second Uni in Universalist affirms that no one and nothing is expendable and can be left out or left behind in this interdependent web. We are all worthy, we are all welcome at the table, we all deserve to be treated with dignity, and we all need to share the gifts that our planet home offers us to sustain our life.

Most of you know I enjoy a Zen Buddhist practice and next Saturday in the diverse world of Buddhism that exists in and around Cleveland I could easily find a sitting meditation retreat to go to next weekend. But instead, I’m going to go to our church in Akron, hopefully with many of you to that a day-long emergency conference on the Immigration Crisis we are experiencing nationally and that is in our back yard here
in Northeast Ohio. If the Oneness of Everything means anything, it means that the fourteen year old Guatemalan boy who walked into Mexico with most of his mother’s savings to pay a coyote to get him across Mexico up to the US border in order to have some kind of future is My Son too. If you truly believe in the interdependent web, you get up off the meditation cushion and take responsibility for the next thing that needs to be done to make that web healthier and stronger for everyone, however large or small that thing might be. That’s why I’ll be at this conference. Because I believe in the oneness of everything.

In some ways, the Transcendentalism that emerged from our congregations in the 19th century and that continues to be a profound influence on today’s Unitarian Universalism has been a winner in the cultural battle for the hearts and minds of Americans. Transcendentalism is a dominant way of thinking and believing for the spiritual but not religious crowd. Transcendentalism’s emphasis on a unique and individual relationship with the divine, assisted but not mediated by scripture and by institutional religion, is the direction the culture seems to be going. But we know that this way of being religious falls short. We know that one is definitely the loneliest number. We know that living a religious life is not merely a solitary activity. Solitary practice, and an individual relationship with the Holy, is the foundation for the common life that we call Beloved Community, which is the goal and end of our religion ---- not individual salvation, but salvation for everyone.

As class, culture, race, religion and politics continue to divide and seek to conquer our better selves, we need to remember our sustaining conviction that there is a Oneness within everything – and remember it not just as an unshakeable romantic feeling deep inside – and not just because we once had a mystical encounter we will never forget – but because day after day we keep having those experiences of oneness in the eyes of those we love and serve, in conversations and shared tasks with people different than ourselves, and in Beloved Community made real in our lives. May it be so.