

*The Anthropology of Religious Experience*

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The subject for my sermon this morning comes from a seminary course I took one winter called “the anthropology of religious experience.” We studied no theology. Instead, we focused on the songs, prayers, dances and experiences of religious groups – everything from small Hindi tribes to Jerry Falwell. Worshipers of virile bearded gods and nubile goddesses. And one divine baby.

We did not study the Unitarian Universalists. Even though we claim to base our faith on reason and experience, let’s be honest, we’re much better known for our reasoning ability than for religious experience. In fact, we’re suspicious of religious experience. Suspicion is part of our heritage. American Unitarianism began developing back in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century as a response to what church historians call the Great Awakening, a period during which tent revivals attracted people in droves back to the churches, in an emotionally-laden fervor. Some people were appalled by all the emotionalism – people rolling in the isles, barking like dogs in church. Some people felt that Christianity should not be about conversion, but about leading a righteous life. These people broke off from the evangelical movement to become Unitarians. This common sense approach to religion would be challenged a century later by the Transcendentalists, of which Ralph Waldo Emerson was a member, but it was a much more dignified religious experience than the previous century. Less emotional. Less scary.

When I think about scary religious experiences, it always reminds me of something that happened to my daughter Kellie when she was about five years old. We were visiting my parents in Minnesota. They had just returned from a fishing trip and asked Kellie to go clean up in the shower in the basement, which she did. But after that afternoon she refused to go back down in the basement. After a couple days, I asked her, Kellie, why won’t you go down in the basement? She said, because there is an angel down there. She scared me when I was taking a shower. What was the angel doing? She was just sitting on top of the shower door, watching me. Did she say anything? No, she just kept opening and closing her wings like this, and she was making kind of a pouty face, like this. What did the angel look like? Well, she was about this tall... and brown... and kind of furry, with little beady eyes.

Sometimes we’re ready for the Sacred to swoop down and bump her chest against ours, sometimes not.

Well, clearly, Kellie was not having a religious experience that afternoon. We need to be a little suspicious of her conclusions. Reason tells me she was not visited by an angel. What exactly is a religious experience? What do we as Unitarian Universalists have in common with the people I studied in my anthropology class this winter? We claim as one of the sources of our faith, (and I quote), “direct experience of that

transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of that spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life.”

One description that makes sense to me is based on the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher, a 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy and theologian. One night, as Schleiermacher sat listening to an orchestra performing Bach, he was suddenly filled with a sense of awe and incredible wellbeing. His theories on religion are largely based on that single experience. Schleiermacher wrote that when there is an uninhibited “flow” between our conscious thinking selves and our feeling, emotional selves, it results in a sense of awe, of wonder, of deep connection with our immediate environment, which may then extend to all that exists beyond that environment. This shift in consciousness that results from a convergence of thought and feeling, this strong sense of a link between our thinking selves and our exterior sensing selves *is* the religious experience. There is recent evidence that when this happens, there is actually a shift in the neurological pathways of the brain.

The ability to have this kind of experience, this unencumbered “flow” between thought and feeling, is part of our human nature, experienced in every culture, available to everyone. This is what we have in common with the other religious groups I studied in class. This experience can be triggered by pushing the mind or body to extreme limits, by physical or mental repetition. It can be triggered by crisis, it can occur spontaneously. Religious practices are often designed to allow our anxious, problem solving brains a chance to slow down long enough to lengthen that moment between thought and sensation, sensation and thought so that we can pay attention to it. We are given the gift of awe, and often profound insight follows. In the Christian tradition, this moment is called grace.

Schleiermacher called this moment the “natal hour of everything living in religion.” He said that this is the moment in which God resides. It is undifferentiated, not yet religion. Like a stem cell that has not yet matured into its environment. But humans are intent on problem solving and so when the moment is over, we begin to create meaning from the moment, reasons why it occurred. A religion comes about when a community develops a common language about the experience, when explanations are given for the experience, when rituals and doctrines, sacraments and sacred texts are developed around the experience for the community to share. People can then begin to believe that their experience is different from someone who doesn’t hold the same set of beliefs. It is not different.

But the meaning-making impulse is very powerful. Most, if not all, religious movements have started with one individual’s religious experience. Martin Luther was almost hit by a lightning bolt in a tower and we got the Lutheran reformation. John Calvin heard God’s voice urging him to mend his ways, and we got Calvinism. John Wesley, during prayer, all of a sudden felt his “heart strangely warmed” and we got Methodism. And here’s my favorite story – Thomas Aquinas, the systematic theologian who developed much of the complicated doctrine of the Catholic church – when he had finished his major work, exhausted, he is said to have remarked, “all my work is as

straw.” Church historians will tell you that Aquinas said that as the result of a physical and emotional breakdown. I think he had a religious experience. I have always wondered what the Catholic Church would have looked like if they had taken Thomas’s profound insight seriously.

I am interested in Schleiermacher’s concept of the “natal hour of religion” because it seems to me that if orthodox religion is defined as the degree to which reasons for religious experience are dictated, then the degree of liberalism of a religious tradition could be thought of as the degree to which the experience itself is respected. Out of that sense of respect, for my final project for the course I spoke of earlier, I decided to ask several Unitarian Universalists to tell me about a religious experience they had had. Not surprisingly, each of their stories and the meaning they created from their experiences was very different. But I also noticed three common threads running through each story which I think is important to add to Schleiermacher’s insights.

First, each experience was described as difficult to describe. Each person tried to explain their experience by telling me what they thought, what they felt, what meaning they derived from the experience, but the long pauses during these portions of the interviews were very telling. Because the experience itself takes the person beyond thought, beyond feeling, to a place where both meet, language seems totally inadequate for expressing the experience. This fact helped me appreciate the almost impossible task that the writers of sacred texts faced. Language is always tricky. Unless we are clear that the religious language we use is metaphorical and provocative, not descriptive, we begin to slip into orthodoxy and idolatry.

Second, each experience was self-authenticating. By that I mean that in each case the experience left the individual with an assurance about something in his or her life, an insight that had left the conviction that something was True for that person. That conviction needed no outside authority. Authority was felt to be intrinsic, and in fact in some cases where an outside authority conflicted with this new sense of conviction, the authority was discredited.

Third, each experience gained meaning over time. In each case there was a direct correlation between the meaning derived from the experience and how each person now sees him or herself in community, in relationship to the world, including the individual’s responsibility to community and the community’s responsibility to the individual. In each case the experience deepened the person’s relationship to that interdependent web of which we are all a part, bringing passion and meaning to their lives. It was a springboard from which an individual’s identity and world view is strengthened.

Powerful stuff! Now, here’s the really scary part. The religious experience itself is value neutral. The religious experience does not teach about morality. It calls one to create meaning from the experience, leads the individual to an unshakable conviction that *something* is true, and that one’s life can only feel authentic if it is aligned with that truth. But we don’t learn how to be moral creatures from God. We learn how to be moral from one another. The content of the message that comes through during this moment of awe

and wonder is largely up to us. What we have learned about what has ultimate value is re-inforced during those moments. This is why the principles and practices, the values, of a religious tradition need to be heard by our children from an early age. So that when the Sacred swoops down and bumps into them, as it will – children are much better at paying attention to these natal moments than grown-ups – that they have something to hang those experiences on, a language and set of values that can be used to create meaning from the experience. So that the meaning-making is life-affirming. So that they don't think angels are small, brown and furry.

And here's another thing I think is important. It has been said that we are now in a war for the soul of this country, and I agree. I am using the term "soul" as a metaphor for that part of us that has affection for places, people and things, for relatedness, for being embedded in life. We are becoming passionately divided in this country with regard to what soulful living looks like! How do we address, as a community, how to be in relationship, to be thoughtfully, responsibly, soulfully, in relationship? The religious experience strengthens the convictions we hold, it solidifies our worldview. We give it the content. When we enter into dialogue with someone who is passionate about an issue, especially if they are coming from a religious perspective, it helps if we can remember that that persons views have probably been shaped by a profound experience that has led to a deeply held conviction. I can't argue from a standpoint of reason. I have to speak from my heart about what my own experiences have taught me, through my own meaning making, my own religiously held values.

What is a religious experience? It is a religious experience if it calls us out of our little local universes and invites us to see ourselves in terms of the largest self we can imagine. It is a religious experience if it suggests to us that the universe is seeking to be understood. It is a religious experience if it implies a broader ethic for our lives. How do we honor this direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder that is part of our human nature? Believe it exists. Pay attention when it calls to you. Recognize its power for transformation. Respect its presence in yourself and in others.

Amen. So be it.