

Modern Mysticism  
worship at First Unitarian Church of Victoria  
January 18, 2015  
Rev. Shana Lynngood, Co-Minister

#### Reading

From an op-ed piece in the New York Times by columnist David Brooks entitled *The Subtle Sensations of Faith*, published on December 22, 2014 it incorporates many words from one of the books I spent time with this summer *My Bright Abyss* by Christian Wiman a professor at Yale Divinity School and poet:

You'd think faith would be a simple holding of belief, or a confidence in things unseen, but, in real life, faith is unpredictable and ever-changing.

It begins, for many people, with an elusive experience of wonder and mystery. ...[In] "My Bright Abyss" by..., Christian Wiman...he writes, "When I hear people say they have no religious impulse whatsoever ... I always want to respond: Really? You have never felt overwhelmed by, and in some way inadequate to, an experience in your life, have never felt something in yourself staking a claim beyond yourself, some

wordless mystery straining through word to reach you?  
Never?”

Most believers seem to have had these magical moments of wonder and clearest consciousness, which suggested a dimension of existence beyond the everyday. Maybe it happened during childbirth, with music, in nature, in love or pain, or during a moment of overwhelming gratitude and exaltation....

These glimmering experiences are not in themselves faith, but they are the seed of faith. As Wiman writes, “Religion is not made of these moments; religion is the means of making these moments part of your life rather than merely radical intrusions so foreign and perhaps even fearsome that you can’t even acknowledge their existence afterward. Religion is what you do with these moments of over-mastery in your life.”

These moments provide an intimation of ethical perfection and merciful love. They arouse a longing within many people

to integrate that glimpsed eternal goodness into their practical lives. This longing is faith....

Insecure believers sometimes cling to a rigid and simplistic faith. But confident believers are willing to face their dry spells, doubts, and evolution. Faith as practiced by such people is change. It is restless, growing. It's not right and wrong that changes, but their spiritual state and their daily practice. As the longings grow richer, life does, too. As Wiman notes, "To be truly alive is to feel one's ultimate existence within one's daily existence."

## **Message**

I think this morning's reading does a wonderful job of expressing what Rev. Melora and I have attempted to explore and define (as loosely as possible) in our years with you. Spirituality, or its more formal cousin religion, are all about the moments in life when we feel closest to the mystery. All about the moments when we feel connected to something beyond our individual ego or self—sense a one-ness or awe about the remarkable ride of being alive and being human. As Wiman

and Brooks explain—we come together in religious community or explore all things spiritual in books and practice because we long, we yearn to feel a sense of meaning and purpose. To feel that we have made the most of our days, that we have lived that which is life (not not life as Unitarian mystic Thoreau said). We want to integrate the grand moments of wonder and understanding—to see we have one life not two (one sacred/spiritual and one mundane/profane). We want to have the “overmastery” moments more often and integrate them seamlessly as mystics do so well.

- I have always admired the mystics since I was first introduced to them in undergraduate school. Julian of Norwich, Hildegard von Bingen, Simone Weil, Meister Eckhart, Thomas Merton, Lao Tsu, Rumi, Hafiz—from every tradition and time—just this list dates from 531 BC to 1958. The definition of a mystic is simple—deeply or mysteriously spiritual. I have always thought of mystics as those who have an especially deep connection with the Holy. I have aspired to and been enamored of their capacity to reach God, to write poetically about the universal, the beautiful, the wonder-full, and the awe-inspiring. I want that deep and

easy connection with God. I want to sense and see my connection to all that is.

- The historic mystics lived in dramatically different times. Most lived monastic and spirit-centered lives. It is easy to focus on the ultimate and God and love and prayer and meditation when you don't have to concern yourself with paying bills or grocery shopping or other routine decisions. By the same token, many mystics lived lives full of a discipline and rigor most of us can hardly comprehend. Little sleep, prayer 5 or more times day, fasting or begging for meals—living in times and conditions that were challenging to say the least. Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) about whom little is truly known is known to have lived through a time rampant with Plague. She may have lost her family to it or been sent to her cell as a sort of quarantine. Hildegard von Bingen whose music the choir sung this morning and who wrote on scientific and medicinal subjects was likely offered to the church by her family at the age of 14. From a young age she said she had visions and though hesitant to share them, she said she saw all things in the Light of God through the 5 senses. Although there are

many aspects of mystical experience that can be hard to relate to or understand—the life of a hermit and being cloistered away from everyday life—it is perhaps these visions and their writings about what they have seen and sensed of God that is resisted most. What if we were more open to hearing not only their visions but one another's? What if you felt you could speak openly about the times you have felt most in love with life? The times when you felt in your bones that you were connected to every living thing? The time when in the midst of your sorrow a sense of calm overtook you that felt like a “blessed assurance” (as the hymn says) that an immense love with a capital L was holding you and would for the rest of your life?

- When I have gone on retreat to my favorite places—typically Benedictine monasteries— I have been moved by many things and reminded of some essential aspects of my spiritual life that remain with me whether I am on retreat or not. There is a spaciousness. Time slows and I see the ways I can appreciate what is in each moment, which makes time feel more abundant. Of course time doesn't change, a

- minute is still 60 seconds, but my perception of how much can be contained in 60 seconds is so much more expansive. When at the monastery I remember the ingredients of a spiritual life that I all too often only nod toward in my routine comings and goings—reflection (journaling), spiritual practice (the discipline of singing and worshipping 4 or 5 times a day), silence, embodiment (singing, breathing, walking), and the power of both being alone and being a part of a community of seekers.
- What can we would be modern mystics learn from those of the past—those of us interested in being as close as we can to life’s meaning? To God? To the source of life and love?
  - 1) Practice matters. We may not be monastics, but we can carve out time for our spiritual life, our inner voice, our essential self. The practice makes it possible for us to bring those shining moments into the fabric of the everyday. To see the one-ness of our life.
  - 2) We can share our mystical stories. What visions have you had? What transcendent moments have you experienced? Have you never shared them because you thought others might think your were crazy? The more we share them the

more we see how much we share this sense of connection to and with the pulse of life.

**3)** Smile, sing, dance, pay attention—offer gratitude—and do it all over and over again. Often I have few to no words for that which moves and changes me most. And yet, I need to keep finding ways to express the magic and marvelousness of the journey. This poem spoke to me most of this feeling this week. From Anne Porter:

### Looking at the Sky

I never will have time  
I never will have time enough  
To say  
How beautiful it is  
The way the moon  
Floats in the air  
As easily  
And lightly as a bird  
Although she is a world  
Made all of stone.

I never will have time enough  
To praise  
The way the stars  
Hang glittering in the dark  
Of steepest heaven  
Their dewy sparks  
Their brimming drops of light  
So fresh so clear  
That when you look at them  
It quenches thirst.