

First UU Church of Berks
Unitarian Universalist Source 1: Experience
Rev. Sandra Fees
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Many of us are spiritual seekers who are looking for a richer, deeper, and more embodied spiritual life. We want an authentic spirituality. We want to discover our own spiritual gifts and put them into service.

We want to be emotionally and spiritually transformed by religion as well as being intellectually stimulated. We want to have a sense of energy, purpose, and meaning in our lives that is grounded in a celebration of being part of something greater than we are. We want to know where we might turn to be enlivened in this spiritual journey.

Our Unitarian Universalist sources are a place to begin. They help to answer the question: “Where can we turn to find inspiration and meaning?” I think of the six sources as the deep wells of the spirit, where we can seek the healing power of the sacred. They are a spring where we can discover the great mystery of life that lies beneath and beyond the surface of things.

The sources, which we read together as our opening words, encompass the religious diversity in our tradition – ranging from our embrace of first-hand experience to earth-centered traditions.

This morning we will be reflecting on the first source: “direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life.”

This source points to the longing and desire we humans have for direct, personal religious experience. We want to have our own experience of God, the cosmos, beauty. The teachings of Ralph Waldo Emerson epitomize the centrality of experience to religion. Emerson was both a 19th century Transcendentalist thinker and writer, and a Unitarian minister. He recognized the great hunger we humans have to “have an original relation to the universe.” That original relation is a transforming one.

Emerson believed that God was not to be found in a book, not in the Bible or the Bhagavad Gita. Instead, the holy is known through experience. It is vastly different to believe doctrines we read in a book, to accept what someone else tells us to believe, or to follow religious conventions than it is to experience a thing for ourselves. For Emerson, lived experience trumps revealed doctrines.

Emerson, along with other Transcendentalists such as Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller, redefined spirituality to mean any human experience in which we feel a sense of oneness with life – with that which transcends our individual lives.

These spiritual experiences can happen anywhere. They can happen in nature, in church, in the check out line at the grocery store, in the shower, or walking the dog. They can happen in expected places where we seek them and just as easily come unbidden and unexpected.

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In recent years, I had a religious experience in what I consider an unlikely place. It was March of 2003. I was in Washington DC at a peace rally and march.

A small group of us had traveled there from Harrisburg, where I was then living. I was a ministry student at the time. One member of our group was a newspaper editor who was covering the event. We had parked at the edge of the city and taken the Metro to the Washington Monument.

Anyone who has gone to the peace events in Washington knows the drill. You arrive and listen to hours and hours of speeches on far-ranging topics. It wasn't until mid-afternoon that we would actually march. I always love the marching best. At 3, the announcement came to begin to move from the lawn of the monument to the streets of Washington.

An endless stream of people began to take shape. The throng chanted and walked toward the White House between police barricades. The chanting intensified as we flowed along. I knew that something was happening to me. I was having what I can only describe as a religious experience. The crowd of thousands became a living organism. I felt merged with it, swept up in the cadence, the chanting, the people. I had completely lost track of where I was. I have no idea how long that lasted. It was probably a mere few minutes.

It might have lasted longer, I don't know. But the reporter was suddenly by my side, interrupting. I didn't even know he was there. Somehow I think he knew something was happening with me. He wanted to understand what was going on.

He asked me, "What's happening for you right now?" The words I uttered to him seemed completely inadequate to the moment. They appeared nonetheless in the paper two days later. I said: "I'm just in the moment. It's like a big dance."

It isn't what I would have said had I had time to reflect. In fact, when I read my words in the newspaper, I cringed a little. I sounded a bit Kum ba yah, if you know what I mean. It was a raw uncensored moment. Religious experiences are that way.

American psychologist and philosopher Abraham H. Maslow coined the term "peak experience" to describe these kinds of experiences. They are marked by sudden feelings of intense happiness and well-being, the awareness of ultimate truth, and the experience of the unity of all things.

In a peak experience, the individual is filled with wonder and awe. I was feeling that sense of unity with all things. In the words of Elizabeth Jones, a Unitarian Universalist layperson, these are moments that "partake of another, higher order of experience." ([A Chosen Faith](#))

Some peak experiences partake of that higher order. They have a timeless, mystical quality to them. We feel we are one with the world.

As former President of our Unitarian Universalist Association and minister John Buehrens says, these spiritual moments "remind us what a gift it is to be alive and to be able to love." ([A Chosen Faith](#)).

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That does not mean all of them are necessarily joyous. They can also be painful. They can emerge from deep grieving and despair, from the death of a loved one or another experience of loss. Nearly any kind of intense experience – whether joyful or sorrowful – can open us to life's transforming moments. ([A Chosen Faith](#)) It can sometimes take an extraordinary event – even a crisis in our lives – to break us out of our kind of sleepwalking.

There is, however, a distinction between an authentic religious experience and the extremes of fanaticism or addiction. These can be seductive and mimic in unhealthy ways some of the effects of a spiritual experience but leads ultimately to destructive results.

The mystical types of experience are the ones we may most often identify as peak experiences. But they are not the only ones. There are also everyday moments of insight and awakening, such as seeing a sunset, climbing a mountain, or holding a newborn. These experiences are available to us all the time, if we but stop to notice them. Each moment offers us a new chance to awaken to life – in a field we walk by where we may encounter one another, or God, or be struck in awe by the color purple.

For me, one of the most significant things Maslow has to say about experience is that everyone is capable of having a peak experience and being transformed by it. Everyone. The shift of emphasis from doctrine to experience levels the spiritual playing field.

Insight is no longer seen as the exclusive province of spiritual elites, clergy, or mystics who must interpret the ideas to others. There is not a unique revelation of the divine that we must each attest to. There is not one unique revelation of the divine that is limited to one teacher or one religion. Instead, first-hand experience is accessible to all people in all its varieties.

As John Buehrens says, “In Unitarian Universalist congregations we do not try to make one another fit a given pattern of experience. But we do discover together that there are religious dimensions in all our varied human experience.” ([A Chosen Faith](#))

These varied human experiences include the experiences of people of all walks of life, all levels of education, regardless of ethnicity or gender or age. Children often have incredibly powerful religious experiences. And many adults are able to recall vividly at least one religious experience from their childhood.

Jeanne Harrison Nieuwejaar, author of the UU book, [The Gift of Faith: Tending the Spiritual Lives of Children](#), recalls a “meadow experience” from her childhood. This is a book I highly recommend to parents, grandparents, and others who are involved in raising and nurturing children. It explores ways to tend childrens' spiritual lives at home, at church, and in the world. Nieuwejaar describes her meadow experience this way:

When I was a child, the fields and forest were my playground as they have been for generations of children and still are for a lucky few. I can remember moments of lying in a meadow, grass and wild flowers tall above me, vast sky overhead, insects buzzing and brushing by me. In such moments I felt a sense of near dissolution into the earth, the sky, the grasses, moments of feeling that the boundary between me and the meadow was a

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permeable boundary, not clearly defined by the layer of skin on my body, but a gentle merging of me into it, it into me. When I was a child I was a spiritual being – as all children are spiritual beings.

I invite each of you to reflect on your own religious experiences. Perhaps you have had significant mystical experiences as a child or as an adult in which you felt connected to everything and everyone. You may have even heard the voice of God or had a powerful religious dream or vision. Perhaps you have had moments of inspiration and deep religious insight.

We are very much heirs to Emerson's reliance on experience. It is why we Unitarian Universalists emphasize the sharing of our stories and personal experiences.

I encourage you to share your religious experiences with one another. Join a small group or participate in a workshop or class. Share your religious experiences at home with your partner and children, and invite them to share theirs with you.

Don't be afraid to tell your children and grandchildren about your earliest religious experience. Ask them about theirs. You may be amazed at what you learn. So be it. Amen.

Let us join in a moment of silence.