

The Possibility of Spiritual

Transcendence

A Message for All faiths Unitarian

Congregation

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Before we can understand the possibility of spiritual transcendence it is important for us to make a distinction between spirituality and religion.

Religion is conceptualized as a set of formalized behaviors (e.g., prayers,

meditations, rituals, etc.) and beliefs (e.g., adherence to a set of creeds necessary for salvation, etc.) associated with distinct faith traditions. In contrast, spirituality is the emotional connection individuals experience with whatever they consider to be divine. This may be one divinity for the Abrahamic traditions (i.e., God, Allah, Jehovah), multiple divinities for polytheistic traditions (e.g., Vishnu, Brahman, etc.), the universe/Void for mystical traditions (e.g., Buddhism), or nature/the universe for atheists. And so,

what is it about humans that allows us to experience spiritual transcendence?

I read a study from the University of Missouri that argued that “spiritual experiences are based in the neuropsychological process of “selflessness.” Psychological research and neuropsychological case studies clearly indicate that certain parts of our brain are related to defining and focusing on the “self.” The less we focus on self, the more capable we are of focusing on things beyond the self (which is the basic definition of

transcendence).” All of us have experienced a decreased focus on ourselves (or increased selflessness) at times in our lives. For example, have you ever become lost in reading a book, watching a movie, or listening to a piece of music and feel the need to orient yourself after it is finished? For me it is when I immerse myself in the poetry of Mary Oliver or Led Zeppelin’s Stairway to Heaven or sadly after enjoying a cream puff from Veneirio’s bakery in the West Village of Manhattan. Have you ever become

lost, less focused on yourself, while listening to an inspirational speaker or taken by a charismatic person? I must come to mind when you think about that! Have you ever become lost when falling in love for the first time, totally absorbed in your devotee? Or, have you ever become lost in prayer or meditation during which you feel a sense of connection with your god or universe, feeling at one with everything? If so, there's a good chance you minimized your focus on your "self."

I have experienced spiritual
transcendence throughout my
preparation for the Unitarian
Universalist ministry. I remember
being brought to tears by a feeling of
something so great, so much larger than
me and my thinking holding me,
comforting me. I can only describe a
very large object in front of me. I lift
my eyes and head to take it all in. In
brings me down to the ground of being
where I can contemplate ultimate
things. I still periodically get this sense
of awe and reverence that I let myself

go in it, accept it, and be moved by it.

For me this is a spiritual experience of transcendence. I describe myself as a theist with strong humanist leanings.

This means I believe I am held by someone or something greater and that I am open to revelation. You're welcome to call it God, the universe, or what you can relate to. I also believe in the potential and agency of human beings individually and socially. That is, I believe we can save ourselves.

Spiritual transcendence represents our ability to stand outside of our

immediate sense of time and place and to view life from a larger, more objective perspective. I think the best way to define transcendence is as a conscious ability to choose how you respond to any situation. Many of you may already think that you are doing this, but I challenge you to really look at yourself and your feelings. Look at ways where you react to something and then later you have to clean up a mess caused by that instant reaction. I can give you a few examples from this past week! When I'm talking about

reactions, they primarily are driven by fear, hostility, or some other response that is at heart self-protective. The space of transcendence doesn't think in this way. It doesn't exactly think. It's very intertwined with intuitive knowing that allows you to see a bigger picture, and from this greater awareness, you can choose your actions. Acting on your ego, you would choose something that you think would get you the best result or would get you away from uncomfortable feelings. From the place of transcendence, you have a sense of

what is the right course of action, and this one may bring more discomfort or less. It just depends on the situation. Understanding yourself is part of awakening and transcendence.

Let's do a quick assessment together.

As I read a statement, I want you to think whether you agree or disagree with that statement. Let's begin. * In the quiet of my prayers or meditations, I find a sense of wholeness. * I have done things in my life because I believed I would please a parent, relative, or a friend that is deceased. *

Memories and thoughts of some of my relatives continue to influence my current life. * I find inner strength and peace from my prayers or meditations. *

I do not have any strong emotional ties to someone who is deceased. * There is no higher plane of consciousness or spirituality that binds all people. *

Although individual people may be difficult, I feel an emotional bond with all of humanity. * My prayers or meditations provide me with a sense of emotional support.

Now, let us think about our answers. If you agreed more than you disagreed, this tells you that there are times when you get emotional satisfaction from your prayer or meditation, that there are times when the pressure of daily life interfere with, or prevent, you from engaging in such practices, but you return to them for comfort. If you agreed more than you disagreed. Then you are someone who has created a space in your life for transcendence-going beyond yourself. It tells you that you tend to find a personal sense of

emotional satisfaction, strength and support in connecting with some larger reality. If you disagreed more than you agreed, there is no hope for you. I'm kidding. This simply means that you are distracted by the immediate demands of your life that prevent transcendence. This doesn't have to be permanent.

There is no right or wrong here. It simply points out that there is the possibility for transcendence for us all and that if we desire it we can achieve it through the spiritual practice of

selflessness or allowing ourselves to go beyond the day to day stressors that allow us to only focus on ourselves, our situation. What does this mean for us as Unitarian Universalists? It's interesting to think about transcendence in the context of Unitarian Universalism.

Because we are so diverse, we find the divine along an expansive spectrum.

On one end, we do have people that identify as Christian, and we move to the other end of non-believers. In between we have nature, earth based beliefs, paganism, agnosticism, and the

League of Woman Voters. Yes, that's true. You've never heard about the UU family that moved into a new neighborhood. Their little girl finds a new playmate, and they are happily getting to know each other. One day, the playmate says, "We're Episcopalians, what are you?" The UU child thinks for a minute and says, "I'm not sure, but I think we're League of Women Voters."

I do think that especially for us as Unitarian Universalist, these peak or transcendent experiences are a core

element of our faith going back at least to our transcendentalist forbearers. We list them as the first of the six sources of our faith. “To connect with wonder and awe of the unity of life”. So the rituals, music, sermons, readings, fellowship opportunities and other activities we engage in here at the church are intended at least in part to help lead us into this type of experiences. I know for me, very often our music moves me into an altered and wonderful state of being. What about when we share our personal joys, sorrows, and other

experiences and our passion for justice with one another? It is moving and powerful and difficult and cathartic, and I suspect for many of us it forever alters our consciousness about that which we speak of and of one another. We transcend beyond ourselves.

And I think that a key reason we seek such experiences when we have gathered as a spiritual community is that they can help move us toward and even into another of our values transformation, which we define as “To pursue the growth that changes our lives

and heals our world”. I want to close
by offering a poem titled *The Night
House* by American poet Billy Collins.

THE NIGHT HOUSE

– *Billy Collins*

*Every day the body works in the fields
of the world*

Mending a stone wall

*Or swinging a sickle through the tall
grass-*

*The grass of civics, the grass of money-
And every night the body curls around*

itself

And listens for the soft bells of sleep.

But the heart is restless and rises

From the body in the middle of the

night,

Leaves the trapezoidal bedroom

With its thick, pictureless walls

To sit by herself at the kitchen table

And heat some milk in a pan.

And the mind gets up too, puts on a

robe

And goes downstairs, lights a cigarette,

And opens a book on engineering.

Even the conscience awakens

*And roams from room to room in the
dark,*

*Darting away from every mirror like a
strange fish.*

And the soul is up on the roof

In her nightdress, straddling the ridge,

*Singing a song about the wildness of the
sea*

*Until the first rip of pink appears in the
sky.*

*Then, they all will return to the sleeping
body*

*The way a flock of birds settles back
into a tree,*

Resuming their daily colloquy,

Talking to each other or themselves

*Even through the heat of the long
afternoons.*

*Which is why the body-the house of
voices-*

*Sometimes puts down its metal tongs, its
needle, or its pen*

To stare into the distance,

To listen to all its names being called

Before bending again to its labor.

Let us be open to the mystery and possibility of spiritual transcendence, no matter what we believe. Let us accept the gifts of selflessness, healing and reverence. Let us practice our bodies, our hearts, our minds, and our souls roam our night house.

May it be so.