

## **“Wonder”**

*A Sermon by Dr. Stephanie May*

*First Parish in Wayland*

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In September, I preached [a sermon](#) about the Rev. William Barber’s call for a Moral Revolution. In response to a highly fractious society, Barber calls for us to find common values that will help to move us towards a more just and compassionate society. As a Christian, Barber turns to the Bible to identify and name the values and convictions that animate his actions. He encourages all persons of faith to likewise turn towards their own texts and traditions to identify the values that ground their actions.

Barber’s challenge started me thinking about where a Unitarian Universalist might turn. What is our text? What defines our tradition? Many of you are aware that Unitarian Universalism promotes and affirms 7 principles that reflect shared values among our congregations. But there are also 6 sources of our tradition. You’ll find both the principles and the sources in the front pages of our hymnal as well as in the preamble of the bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

So what? Well, it’s a big deal to be a part of a religious tradition that is defined not by statements of religious beliefs, but by values and aspirations for how we will relate to one another. It’s also remarkable that the bylaws call for a review of the principles and sources every 15 years. The expectation is that the expression of who we are will shift and change. In other words, our tradition is not fixed but living.

For this reason, I think of the sources of our tradition as ever-flowing tributaries that feed the river of Unitarian Universalism. I find in the sources a story not only about who we are today, but also about how we came to be. Over this year, I want to both explore these sources and tell some of the stories about how and why each source came to be a part of our living tradition.

Although the order of the sources does not have a particular significance, we’ll explore them in the order that they are listed. Today we begin with the first source, which is:

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 which create and uphold life.

When I read this, my mind always goes to the Transcendentalists. I don't pretend to be an expert on Transcendentalism. But living as we do in the shadow of where this 19<sup>th</sup> century literary and spiritual movement thrived, I suspect many of us know a bit of something about it. Perhaps we've been to Walden Pond and added to the pile of rocks commemorating the time Thoreau spent in the forest seeking a simple life, a life connected to the sublime presence of the divine within the rocks and trees, water and wildlife of the pond. Or, maybe we've toured the historic houses of Concord where Emerson, Hawthorne, or the Alcotts lived. My personal favorite is to visit the Concord library and sit beside the glass-covered bookcases that hold the volumes from Emerson's own library.

While the Transcendentalist movement was not a Unitarian movement per se, many of the prominent figures had strong linkages with Unitarian Christianity—as it was then known. Emerson himself served as a Unitarian minister for three years, resigning in 1832. A graduate of Harvard Divinity School, he was invited to address the graduating class in 1838. In this “Divinity School Address,” Emerson made a passionate plea for a different kind of religion than the cold formalism he felt from so many churches.

To these soon to be ministers, Emerson admonished them “to go alone; to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil.”<sup>i</sup> Describing the secret of the minister's profession as “to convert life into truth,” Emerson denounced the preacher who “had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it.”<sup>ii</sup>

Although Emerson's sermon was received by some as a scathing criticism of the church, he wasn't rejecting religion. Rather he was trying to claw through the clutter of centuries of accumulated tradition that had formed around genuine religious experiences. What *matters*, Emerson pleaded, was not the *form* of religion, but the *direct experience* of feeling oneself alive and connected to the divine.

The answer, sung Emerson again and again, is *soul*. “In the soul, then, let the redemption be sought. In one soul, in your soul, there are resources for the world. Wherever a man comes, there comes revolution.”<sup>iii</sup>

Soul is an old word, a religious word, a word that may feel today like the very kind of religious formalism Emerson denounces. And yet, his words reflect a revolution of religious life that continues to shape our lives today.

What Emerson is saying is that the core of religion is not about the proper adherence to rituals and liturgies. Nor is religious life about obedience to a certain prophet or religious figure such as Jesus—though they may inspire us. Rather these forms of religion found in texts, rituals, and prophets are but forms into which our own lived experience of the divine might flow.

You don't need the church and the minister to be religious. They might, in fact, get in the way. Seek not the forms of religion . . . seek the direct experiences in which your soul opens to the transcending wonder of life.

Have you had such experiences? Have you found yourself aware of being small in the midst of something so much bigger, something transcendent? Have you felt a sense of wonder?

Speaking of religious experiences of the divine or of wonder, does not mean one must believe in "God." In an introductory book on Unitarian Universalism structured around the 6 sources, UU minister John Buehrens describes his sense of a direct experience of "God" by saying:

"I believe, as Dag Hammarskjöld did, that "God does not die on the day when we cease to believe in a personal deity. But we die on the day when our lives cease to be illuminated by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason." ... Through our own direct experience we too may discover a profound sense of wonder about the gift of life and be led to gratitude, renewal of the spirit, and openness to the forces that create and uphold life."<sup>iv</sup>

How have you experienced this kind of wonder?

As I considered this question, I have reflected upon many such moments of wonder in my life. Seeing mountains for the first time. Summiting my first mountain peak. Standing on the edge of Lake Michigan, wet sand cool between my toes, the sky on fire with color. Or laying late at night on the same beach, mesmerized by starlit skies.

Yet, wonder is not always about experiences in nature. I remember too kisses that stopped my breath. I remember lightly resting my hands on my lower stomach hours after learning I was pregnant. What will I teach my child about God, I wondered?

Emerson's own lyrical delight of the world is evident in the poetry and texts that he left behind. Yet, Buehrens notes that Emerson's childhood experience of the death of his father also opened him to new depths of life. Buehrens writes,

Based not on revelation, but on his own difficult experiences, Emerson discovered within himself and yet transcending him, something deeper and higher than his grief. He discovered it not on a ladder to heaven, but on earthly stairs, representing a sense of indebtedness to those who have preceded us and of obligation to those who will come after we are gone. Yet the renewal, the affirmation, the wonder of being alive, can only come in the present, while we have time to be amazed and grateful.<sup>v</sup>

Experiences that rend our hearts and saturate us with grief, even these shape our understanding of life. Experience teaches that life does not only promise joy, but also bears sorrow and confusion. And yet, we learn also of a force that carries us through difficult experiences, sustaining our life, renewing and remaking our life even after we have been broken.

In my life, one such experience of brokenness opening me to new joy came in seminary. After my divorce, I reentered seminary as a single mom of a three-year old son. Terrified to be on my own a thousand miles from anyone I knew, I soon was welcomed into an existing circle of friends. Their embrace of me into their numbers gave me a place to belong, to be held, to be loved. One night after singing and playing music, dancing and laughing, we gathered in the cool night air and simply listened to Jeff Buckley sing the song, *Hallelujah*. My spirit soared—connected in love to these friends, to the wonder of cool air upon my sweaty skin, to the gift of a life remade . . . that I had not been broken by all the pain and sorrow I had experienced in the years before.

I speak of my experience as Emerson admonished so that you what you hear from this preacher will be the truth of life, everyday this world life. With Emerson, I believe that this longing for truth in our lived experience is why we come here. We need to be held by a force of life that transcends our heartaches and fear. We need to be opened by the power of songs and stillness that remind us we are connected to something larger than ourselves. We need to experience a sense of wonder that keeps us feeling alive, that renews our faith in and gratitude for the gift of life.

Religion is not about the forms. It's about the experience of being alive. It's about being opened by the experience of life to all kinds of emotions and insights that reveal a bit more about the possibilities of life. We're here because life is more than routines of simple sustenance. We're here to experience life, to reflect upon and seek deeper understanding of this life, or to simply wonder in the face of its miracles and mysteries.

Thinking again of Barber, I wonder how this first source, this direct experience of transcending wonder and mystery, might be a moral guide for our actions? I suspect that such experiences might challenge us to ground our actions in a reverence for the very gift of life. Such a reverence might lead us to ask what might allow the forces of life to flourish in a particular situation or decision. Or, we might choose to order our resources of time or money in ways that allow us to express gratitude for the gift of life or to insure that we have opportunities to delight in and reflect upon these gifts.

In a world that demands so much of our attention to responsibilities, to the media, and more, it is no small thing to intentionally make space for wonder, for opening oneself to feel and reflect upon the experience of life. And yet, when we do find ourselves by choice or by circumstance in such moments of wonder, our spirits can be renewed. We can remember that we are buoyed by forces that create and sustain life within and around us.

Life itself is a mystery and a wonder. The first source of our living tradition calls for us to be awake to this wonder and open to its possibilities. By doing so, we may find the very renewal of spirit that we ache for amidst an everyday world that can be exhausting, overwhelming, or even frightening. If we are to work for a more just and loving world, as Barber urges, then we must be grounded in sources that renew our spirit and inspire our imagination.

So may it be.  
Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Divinity School Address," in *The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings*, ed. Lawrence Buell, (New York: The Modern Library, 2006), 142.

<sup>ii</sup> Emerson, "Divinity School Address", 138-9.

<sup>iii</sup> Emerson, "Divinity School Address", 141.

<sup>iv</sup> John A. Buehrens and Forrest Church, *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 36.

<sup>v</sup> Buehrens, *A Chosen Faith*, 36.