Many Paths
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Wow! Now! Awaken, to the many wonders of this unfolding universe! My favorite mystic telling of the creation of the universe, and our role within it, is a little more expansive then the story told in Genesis. In the beginning was God. God was not a finite being but everything there was. God was pure potentiality, but since none of it was realized, God was lonely. So, began the Big Bang and the unfolding of the universe. Galaxies and star systems emerged. Matter began to revolve around even the most remote stars, and this third rock from the sun was no different, except its balance of temperatures and gases, hydrogen, oxygen, and carbon dioxide, provided a space in which life could emerge. Water, land, plants, and animals gradually emerged from the chaos of creation, but divine mystery did not yet feel totally realized.

So, God took soil from the earth, and dust from the stars, and breathed life into it. God created humankind in its image; male and female it created them. Then all hell broke loose. Humanity ran amuck. The earth has never fully recovered from this anthropomorphic age of humankind. A human being is created from dirt and star dust, and upon death returns to dust of the earth, yet retains the spark or breath of the divine within. Our lifelong spiritual journey we yearn for reunion with divine mystery, and however we conceive of it, which is beyond naming, no earthly pleasures or material wealth will ever satisfy the divinity sized hole placed in our souls. We seek ultimate union with it!

Yet, growing up in a largely secular American society, and being the son of a Baptist minister, going to church every Sunday, from birth, I was thoroughly confused! Through experiences in church, and even more often experiences outside of church, the spiritual journey was awakened in my soul very young. I knew a little of what the soul was capable of, this sense of ecstatic transcendent experiences, but I had no real understanding of what IT had to do with religion as Baptists practiced IT. I found I could not ask the adults I knew, they just got angry, they didn't seem to have answers to my metaphysical questions.

At the age of eighteen I left the Baptists of my birth and my childhood, primarily over not believing the Nicene creed we recited every Sunday. I did this with considerable regret, I cherished much about Christianity, especially the promise of salvation and eternal life. I began studying other paths into divine mystery, and discovered they each had their own offerings and promises. Judaism offered the opportunity to become a mensch, a righteous being, at peace with God and creation. Islam offered paradise if I could only learn to surrender completely to it. Then I discovered the eastern religions and things got very interesting!

Reading Herman Hesse's "Siddhartha" in high school awakened me to the fruits of the spiritual journey. So, I became a spiritual pilgrim, a seeker, looking for what Unitarian Universalists call "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." If you are unfamiliar with these words, they are literally the first source of our living tradition listed in our Unitarian Universalist covenant of association, please check it in your grey hymnals if you doubt it. This has been a long, strange, wondrous, and profound journey for me over sixty years along many paths to God.

I have told you much already about my journeys with UU mystics, Islamic Sufi mystics, and Taoist mystics in China, so today I want to tell you a little about my training with shamanic mystics, Buddhist mystics, Christian mystics, and how they gradually awakened in me that I am a twenty-first century transcendentalist mystic. Which is very convenient since I have lived in Concord, Massachusetts for most of my adult life. Mystics might say my spirit was always transcendentalist, long before my intellectual understanding finally discovered this truth. Blessed be.

As I say in my book *SPIRITUAL PILGRIM:* "[Ever] since humans attained consciousness, there have always been some individuals thought to possess magic or superpowers when, in truth, they were simply more in touch with divine mystery than most. Over millennia, these people developed techniques for obtaining spiritual ecstasy, a trancelike state often described as a mystical journey, a magical flight, or an ascent into heaven. These techniques were passed down from teacher to student, from generation to generation, and varied from one cultural tradition to another around the world." I was seeking it in mystical experiences.

"Always there have been shamanistic techniques for encountering [it] and experiencing – albeit with fear and trembling – the awesome power of divine mystery. Whether gained through use of psychotropic substances and sorcery or through deep and meditative disciplines, spiritual ecstasy is considered an important stage on the journey toward enlightenment." In Ecuador I traveled with the Pachamama Alliance, met a Mayan shaman who taught me the wisdom of the talking python, and trained with a shaman of the Achura indigenous people, who introduced me to their plant medicine ayahuasca. On ayahuasca I soared through the heavens and eternity and nearly died.

The following year I trained with a high sierra shaman who introduced me to the mysteries of the sweat lodge, fasting under the desert sun in isolation for several days, and the power of peyote to transform reality. My next journey to South America was in Peru in August 2015, when I became spiritually entangled and enmeshed in the amazing unfolding of creation, which transformed me even while engulfing me within IT. That journey culminated in a far sweeter ayahuasca experience which left me resting contentedly in the bosom of divine mystery. So sweet!

But the acknowledged masters of awakening to the present moment are Buddhists, so, I traveled with them whenever I could. At the age of 27, I encountered Mahayana Buddhism in India and Nepal. I was too young, anxious, and ambitious to walk their path then. But after training with Zen Buddhists in Japan, and Ch'an Buddhists in China, in 2016 I finally felt ready to travel up the Ganges to the Bodhi Gaya temple to walk in the footsteps of the Buddha. This was the first time that I was acknowledged by spiritual masters as a newly awakened human being. Subsequently I traveled with Theravada Buddhists in Vietnam and Cambodia, and Tantric Buddhists in Bhutan. Awakening!

Yet having grown up Christian, my spiritual teachers said I could not be considered spiritually mature until I made my peace with Christianity. So, I longed to travel with Christian mystics in the footsteps of Jesus. Serendipity has often guided my way. Six months later the Christian Knights Templar invited me to go on pilgrimage with them in the Holy Land. I walked with Jesus along the shores of Galilee, prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, and contemplated his death sitting by the empty tomb in Jerusalem. This

pilgrimage culminated in my rebaptism in the Jordan river at the site of Jesus' baptism. Salvation was mine!

My Christian mystic soul was ecstatic! So, I continued my spiritual exploration along the Camino de Santiago, a pilgrimage journey across the north of the Iberian Peninsula. Over the course of that journey I learned much about how western Christianity was transformed over two millennia, from the fall of the Roman Empire, to the rise of Islam, the discovery of the New World, growth of imperialism, and capitalism, and secularism, and the challenges Christianity faces to remain relevant in the world today. It turns out my small-town Baptist Christianity is not the only, or even the most common, form of salvation in Christ. At Compostela Cathedral I was awarded a certificate of recognition for my many paths by its council which says: "the Council, prompted by the duty of charity, and in a time of joy, greets you in the Lord and prays, with the intercession of the Apostle [James], that [God the] Father… grant your spiritual requests and material blessings. Sanctified bliss!

Having reconciled with Christianity, it was time for me to return home to Concord, and its transcendentalists, to plant my spiritual experiences firmly within twenty-first century Unitarian Universalism. "There are sacred places to which humans are naturally drawn. Such places lift our eyes to heaven and help us experience transcendentally the divine mystery." For me, Concord is one of those places. I have lived there over thirty years, and still when I wander in Estabrook Woods, or the Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge, or paddle along the Assabet, I can be lifted transcendentally into a different sense of space and time.

When I walk the Emerson-Thoreau Amble trail through Walden Woods, or around Walden Pond, or over towards Fairhaven Bay, I often find Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, or Bronson Alcott walking with me, just beyond my peripheral vision. I am accompanied by divine mystery as much there as I was in the various religious holy lands in which I have traveled. Their holy waters, literally and metaphorically, all interconnect and recycle themselves with the turning of the earth. As Thoreau might say, "The Concord river is now my Nile, my Ganges, my Mekong, and my Amazon. All these rivers flow through me in divine mystery, and I am grateful for the many paths my soul has traveled.

I have come to cherish the wide universe and this blue boat we call home. Now I don't expect any of you to have my spiritual wanderlust to travel this blue earth as I have for decades. But Mary Oliver, who died last month, managed to capture this same sense of spiritual awakening walking on Cape Cod. So, I will end with her poem, *The Summer Day:*

"Who made the world? Who made the swan and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper? This [particular] grasshopper, I mean –
The one who has flung herself out on the grass,
The one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
Who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down –
Who is gazing around with her enormous complicated eyes…

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down into the grass,

How to kneel down in the grass, how to be idle and blessed,
How to stroll through the fields, which I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
With your one wild and precious life?"

The question is always the same. Yet we each get to choose how we will answer IT. Breathe freely and deeply. This is our God given right. We should cherish our every breath! Blessed Be. Amen.