

## Direct Experience of Transcending Mystery and Wonder

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*Something happens after a span of days on the trail. The bare essentials become all important. Where will I find the next water? Will the rain hold off long enough for me to set up the tent? Cold meal or hot? Stop here, or keep going? How much time left of daylight? Preparing a meal becomes a sacrament, each step a litany of perseverance. The mental static - which is a constant backdrop to my thoughts fall away. I am not planning, not waiting, not expecting and the thoughts that come unbidden are anchored to my mind in the same way that my body is anchored to the planet. Journal entry, Long Trail, Vermont June 2016*

Our Unitarian Universalist faith is not formed from one fixed and unchangeable belief system, but is rather a living tradition” of wisdom and spirituality, drawn from sources as diverse as science, poetry, scripture, and personal experience.

the first of these six sources is stated as

- 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;

I have a short term for this lovely declaration, what I like to call “wow” moments. However I might title them; the sunrises over the ocean, the woods in autumn, the moonlit hush over deep winter snows, the greening of the land in springtime, the last breath of the dying or the first cry of a newborn, they all have something in common. I cannot put words to them in ways that adequately describe what happens in those moments. I believe that these are moments we know and understand in undefinable ways that bring us closer to the ineffable.

I promise that if each person in this sanctuary looks to the moment in which you cannot find enough of the right words to illustrate the enormity or the beauty or the sorrow or the wonder you experienced, you’ve got your own very personal definition of transcendence. But transcendent moments and realizations are not such that can be planned, but rather things that come into our hearts and minds and beings, almost as an act of grace. I have been acutely present to my mortality on the knife edge of a cliff face. I have been present to indescribable love when I saw my child take his first breath and when I watched my mother take her last. At

those times and others like them, I was more than me, part of nature, part of the mystery, part of everything that has come before and everything that will come after. As I wrote in my trail journals, those are the moments when everything else falls away. No static.

Not every day on the trail was full of epiphanies, many were simply full of blisters and bugs and putting one foot in front of the other. But without the contrast I don't know that the "wow" of transcendence would happen at all.

While some transcendent moments can make our hearts sing and connect us to all of life, some bring us to a sobering reality of our own ephemeral natures and the cycles of death and decay. As much as I would like to be moved only by joyful uplifting moments, suffering can also bring moments of transcendence – when our humanity is broken wide open and we touch the all.

During this bicentennial year of Thoreau's birth, it is fitting to explore his experience of transcending mystery and wonder as we come of age in environmental stewardship and personal spiritual authority. Although I am emphatically not a Thoreau scholar and can still recall the deep resentment I held during the required reading of *Walden* in high school, I have found some kinship with his brand of direct experience. I propose that we can take some important lessons from Thoreau – but rather than look just to his writings, though prolific and spanning daily minutiae to profound insights – I look also to the example of his life.

While Emerson created a heady philosophical scaffold for Transcendentalism, Thoreau famously took to the byways, mountains, woods and coastlines. He lived for two years in the woods at *Walden*, a time for which he is arguably best remembered. But mostly he walked. And as he walked, perhaps he too, let the static fall away so that the thoughts recorded in his journals emerged from underneath it.

Those wow moments of which I spoke a moment ago? As much as we might wish to do so, we can't program them. Beautiful sunset 6:12 PM, transcendent moment to follow. Maybe, but not if I'm racing from sunset to obligations. Thoreau's walks remind us to make space in which those moments might emerge. It takes slowing down, a willingness to say "Less" rather than more and gifting ourselves with time, time to be rather than time to do. It takes a commitment to process rather than product.

In his reflections on a climb up Mount Katahdin in Maine, Thoreau, perhaps as touched by endorphins as by the rawness of the rocky plateau, details his reaction in paragraphs full of exclamation marks and capital letters - concluding with the words "Talk of mysteries!—Think of our life in nature--daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The SOLID earth! The ACTUAL world! The COMMON SENSE! CONTACT! CONTACT! WHO are we? WHERE are we?"

Who are we? Where are we? Those questions could be asked out of a carefully considered theological or psychological framework, but would they be asked with the same depth of passion, were it not for that transcendent moment on the side of a mountain?

Who are WE? We are heirs to a tradition that places high value on the application of reason and inquiry, but those mountainside cries are not reasonable. Nor are the unexpected intoxications of love, or tears that come unbidden when art and music touch our very souls. WHERE are we? In our bodies. On this earth. In this room. With each other. Ordinary. Real. Transcendent.

But lest we forget, Thoreau wasn't all that. Although he declared a desire to live as self-sufficiently as possible, he enjoyed plenty of meals at the table of friends and family. Unaccustomed to domestic chores, the province of women in his time, he had no problem carrying his laundry home to his mother. And although he was increasingly anti-slavery, the driver for his declaration of conscience "On a Duty to Civil Disobedience" was a single night spent in the relatively posh Concord jail when he ran afoul of the tax man.

May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1844, The Concord Freeman - "A fire broke out in the woods, near Fairhaven Pond, in this town, at 10 o'clock last Tuesday forenoon" The report details the speed and extent of the fire, estimating damages at "no less than 300 acres burned and at least \$2000 in lost property and ends with this rebuke, *"the fire we understand was communicated to the woods, through the thoughtlessness of two of our citizens who kindled it in a pine stump, near the pond."* The two citizens were twentysomething Thoreau and his companion who had set the woods on fire while choosing to "cook a fish in the Indian fashion. The efforts to douse the inevitable flames failed and the woods began to burn in earnest. After alerting nearby landowners to the conflagration, Thoreau took a seat to observe the events unfolding before him. In what may have been an effort to turn an "oops" moment into a "wow" moment, Thoreau wrote of the fire, years later, in a

long journal entry. *It was a glorious spectacle and I was the only one there to enjoy it. Side note – BECAUSE the others WERE trying to put out the fire.*

In the same journal entry he declared “*I have set fire to the forest, but I have done no wrong therein, and now it is as if the lightning had done it.*” *These flames are but consuming their natural food.*’

Although Thoreau disavowed feelings of guilt, he spent as much time explaining away why he didn’t feel responsibility for the fire damage, as he did marveling over the elemental force and the havoc racing before it. Perhaps his lived experience couldn’t contain both wonder and guilt. Transcendence doesn’t exist in a vacuum. Neither do we. Our wow moments might bump into other obligations, other sensibilities.

After earning the censure of the towns people and various epithets, including the name “woodsburner”, a year later he took to the woods at Walden Pond and there began the two-year experiment in self-reliance.

At Walden, Thoreau lived on the wrong side of the tracks. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Walden was populated by people who did not take to the woods because they desired freedom from the tyranny of civilization, or out of a desire to live independently, but because they were welcomed no place else. The settlers recounted in Elise Lemire’s book, “Black Walden” were comprised of people who were formerly enslaved, Irish laborers, and women. They eked out a living on the poor sandy soils of Walden and eventually their tiny enclave disappeared from the woods. Although Concord thrived, they did not, excluded from the prosperity of the industrial revolution. Did they too, experience the woods of Thoreau’s journals? The splendor of the seasons, the ice on the pond, the buzz of summer? When our first source claims that transcendence is affirmed in all cultures, what would the neighbors at Walden be able to teach us about transcendence in the cultures of the marginalized? What have we missed by not asking?

Life is full of contradictions; the gap between our aspirations and our lived experiences. We are not immune to cultural contradictions. The places we expect to find safety, hospitals, schools and churches, have been shocked by violence in the past days, months and years. We are not immune to individual contradictions, giving into ease rather than rigor, declaring values which are inconsistent with our choices. The search for transcendence a lifetime practice. Like Thoreau we will move between our all too imperfect selves, and our highest

ideals. We will not be flawless in our pursuits, we will not be consistent in our lives, but that should not deter us from making the effort, and embracing the paradox by saying “and”.

This too is me, this too is true.

It is after all, the month when we celebrate abundance. And what would it feel like if that abundance were to be a sense of spaciousness, a freedom to have and do less, not more. What would it look like if that abundance took the form of uncertain days and unfamiliar companions? What would it sound like if that abundance took the form of birdsong, or silence. What would it be like if that abundance took the form of shrinking inconsistencies between lived experiences and aspirational thought? What would it be like if we refused to practice resignation, and lived deep, sucking the very marrow out of life?