

Ecstasy?
August 30th 2009
Rev. Mark Belletini

Gathering
Welcoming
Centering
Kindling
Opening:

We are here
to link to something larger than ourselves,
the vastness of history, the wonder of galaxies,
the mystery of Love, and the ecstasy of truth..
And so we claim this moment with these words:

Mindful that we share a common world,
but approach that world in different ways, we begin our celebration together by
kindling our promise of mutual honesty, attentiveness, and deep courtesy. May we
become more proficient at gratitude and awareness, that we might more deeply
embody the kind of justice and peace which embraces everyone on earth.

Singing #398 To See The World
Ingathering The Wonderful Happens by Cynthia Rylant
Greeting
Affirming #499 and #337
Communing

There it is! The world! The earth!
Do you see it? It's round and blue and green.
Watch it spin, wobbling round the sun,
a circle dance, dip and leap, bow and bend.
Watch the sun too, circling at the edge of
our great disc of stars, threading its way
allemand left, allemand right, all the way
toward the constellation of Hercules
in the merest flash of 75,000 years!
There it is! The world! The earth!
Do you see it? A misty vast patch of
molecules and quarks, atoms and yet-to-be
named particles and empty, empty, empty
space all woven together to make mums and peppers and whales and viruses and ginkgo
trees and us. Keep your eyelids closed while you look.
Use your *real* eye, the one inside you,
the one you use to see children rollicking
on the lawn or grandma rocking on the porch

remembering everything; the one you use to see a lover's face, or a beautiful hand folded in a lap, now or long ago. That eye. Your wonder-eye. And now look very carefully, and if you're very lucky, you'll catch the barest glimpse of the shadow of the silence as it passes by.

silence

Open your wonder eye again. Look for the loves of your life, the family and friends, alive or long gone, whose image quickens your heart. Bow to them with an inner bow, and say their names inside or whisper them aloud...and say thanks to them for all they have done so that you have lived to see this day, and gaze upon them once more for a moment.

naming

Now let eye give way to ear, wonder eye to wonder ear. Let the dance of atoms and galaxies and globes give way to the dance music of dancers... the music of the spheres yielding at last to the music of musicians.

Readings

The First Reading comes from Marganita Laski's classic book *Ecstasy in Secular and Religious Experiences*, written in the early sixties. She was an atheist who succeeded in writing a classic text on the ecstatic experience in all of its forms, religious and non-religious.

I do not think it sensible to ignore, as most rationalists have done, ecstatic experiences and the emotions and ideas to which they give rise. To ignore or deny the importance of ecstatic experiences is to leave to the irrational the interpretation of what many people believe to be of supreme value... I do not believe that to seek a rational explanation of these experiences is in any way to denigrate them, but rather that a rational explanation may prove at least as awe-inspiring as earlier interpretations.

The Second Reading comes from *Lying Awake* by Mark Salzman, a novel written in 2000. Some of you may have read his novel *Iron and Silk*, or seen the film of the same name in which he starred, playing himself. He's a friend of my friend Jim Vetter, and I met him years ago, before he started writing all of his wonderful novels. This novel is unusual. It's about a cloistered nun who has ecstatic visions which move everyone around her. A doctor discovers that her ecstatic visions are stimulated by a brain disorder that is operable. Despite her sense of joy at her experience of ecstasy, she humbly undergoes the surgery and loses her visions. This reading is taken from her recovery period.

She dressed quickly. The wound over her ear had closed, but her heart gaped. Her doctor was right. Life after epilepsy seemed dull.

She felt as if she had tumbled out of a sacred mountain into a ruined village. The cloister buildings looked institutional, piety showed signs of wear, and the psalms read like the libretto of an opera delivered as a speech. God's presence was replaced by an atmosphere of human compromise.

Sermon

Lots of things happened this week.

Personally, first off, I got to hear a Muslim friend grouching about the lunar calendar used by his tradition. The moon sometimes puts the great fasting month of Ramadan in the winter, and sometimes, in the summer. If you have to fast during all the daylight hours, December is clearly going to be your month of choice! We had a great talk about the benefits of fasting, and his culture which supports that religious discipline. But was frustrated his culture refuses to consider changing its calendar so that it can be even more supportive of this act of fasting.

My best friend who was in town last week for a visit...some of you met him... is soon going to Jerusalem to study Torah with an orthodox rabbi over Rosh Hashanah. While he was here, we talked about how his shift from a Reform/ Reconstructionist Jewish temple to a more Orthodox *shul* had enriched his life with a change toward a culture of more traditional rituals that are deepening his spiritual life as he weathers the tragic California economy right now.

And, of course, beyond the personal, there is my larger life. All of us are aware, I suppose, that Senator Ted Kennedy died this week, and his life was lifted up every day across the media. His culture too was illumined, both in the Irish Catholic prayers we heard, and in the form of a televised Irish wake which, I have to say, sometimes resembled a comedy show with a flag-draped coffin present more than anything else. Remarkable! But humor at a wake is a part of Irish culture I'm glad has not changed.

And again, more personally, since my diagnosis with diabetes last June, I have found myself immersed...to my doctor's delight...in a whole new culture unknown to me previously. A diabetic culture of sugar-limited recipes, portion changes, more frequent eating, hanging out in the supplement aisles of Whole Foods looking for chromium and bitter melon extract, and grazing on dozens of books with titles like *Zen and the Art of Diabetes Maintenance*.

Conversation about culture and culture change is all around us in other ways too. The over-the-top resistance to any rational national health care conversation, with folks shouting vulgarities and packing switchblades, the continuous dehumanization of same-sex couples who want to get legally married...culture change gets some folks so upset that they'll say and do almost anything to keep the change from coming. Change can be terrifying. Others sometimes find blessings in culture change, like me with my diabetes. Strange to say, I've actually found it exciting, almost joyful, to be creative and come up with new ways of cooking that totally satisfy my gourmet taste-buds, but successfully

keep the cholesterol, sugars and refined flours at bay. Not an easy task for a man of Italian heritage raised on buttery polenta and pasta, but so far, a decidedly giddy one.

Cultural change featured in my summer activities too. At General Assembly this year, our annual Unitarian Universalist national gathering, I attended many workshops, had splendid meals and talks with colleagues. But the highlight for me was a most unusual conversation about cultural change... and ecstasy.

It was at a dinner for the senior ministers of large Unitarian Universalist congregations, of which this congregation is a good example. I always enjoy these dinners...the issues faced by larger congregations are simply different than those faced by smaller or medium sized congregations, and it's just great to be able to talk about them with colleagues without having to translate.

Well, this particular dinner, I was seated next to the most wonderful man, Marlin Lavanhar, who is the senior minister at All Souls Church in Tulsa, one of our largest congregations. Jay Leach was there, our minister in Charlotte, and Galen Guengerich, senior minister at All Souls in New York, and several others. Marlin began by joyfully telling us all the story of what happened at All Souls in Tulsa last year.

Seems that a Pentecostal church in Tulsa, pastored by the dynamic Bishop Carlton Pearson, had simply fallen apart. Because the good bishop, once the apple of Oral Roberts' eye, had become convinced that a loving God could never damn people to hell forever. Anyone. Ever. In short, he became a classic Universalist. And as a man of integrity, Bishop Pearson naturally shared his conviction with his own church, which had the hopeful name New Dimensions. Most of them, sadly, didn't buy the Universalist gospel, and preferred the old dimension of hellfire kindled by God's vengeance. So fewer and fewer people showed up to church. Vibrant thousands became a few hundred stragglers. Thus, Bishop Pearson gave up the building he helped build, and found himself having to rent quarters to preach to the remnant who shared his theological viewpoint. He approached All Souls Unitarian in Tulsa, and asked to rent their spacious worship center for their summer services. Marlin graciously agreed. The Pentecostal congregation arrived sufficiently earlier on Sunday than the main All Souls summer service. To Marlin's surprise, however, some of the All Souls' folks started to come to that early service, where there was shouting, waving, dancing...and speaking in tongues. After all, it *was* a charismatic style service. And some of the Unitarian Universalists, largely Euro-American, found themselves entranced by this boisterous style of worship in an African American congregation. A totally different culture than they were used to, even though they shared much of the theology. But some of them just loved it. They loved the let-go-of-everything ecstasy welling up in the service, the sudden upwelling of improvisational singing.

Others, you may not be surprised, didn't like it at all, and were very uncomfortable. Some were disturbed because even a *rationalist* interpretation of speaking in tongues...and they *do* exist...was not helpful to them. They simply felt it was too much off the deep end for them.

Nevertheless, while Bishop Pearson eventually left Tulsa, to accept a clergy call elsewhere from the liberal United Church of Christ, his remnant flock did not leave with him, but rather, stayed in Tulsa...and joined the UU church.

Now mind you, the Tulsa church looks a lot like a traditional Unitarian Meeting House near Boston. Clear glass, white walls, plain design, a standard rectangular building like you would see with high steeple poised on the Green of many a New England town.

But inside, besides the elegant, poetic and rational sermons offered by Marlin, there was singing and shouting and glossolalia...tongue speaking. Something so totally foreign from traditional Unitarian worship in New England that the old saw about apples and oranges doesn't begin to express the difference.

Marlin told us all this at the dinner table. He was planning on telling the whole Assembly later, and there is a recording of that session which is making the rounds here at the church. But we, his colleagues, were fascinated right then and there, and engaged Marlin with our observations and questions and yes, "buts." And so began a conversation about ecstasy in religion.

Yes. Ecstasy. Not the drug, of course. But a sense of transport and excitement that has been found in many religious traditions around the world. And, as Marganita Laski reminds us by the mere title of her book, ecstasy is found in many secular, non-religious areas of life as well.

The word *ecstasy* is almost self-defining, if you go back to its roots. Ek-Stasis are the two Greek words which compose the singular word in English; and they mean standing (stasis) outside (ek), that is, standing outside oneself.

Ecstasy has many shapes and forms...from Sufi dancers whirling during Ramadan or Jewish men on Purim spinning around till they're beyond dizzy, to the raptures of medieval nuns like Catherine of Siena or Teresa of Avila, who both found literate ways of trying to describe their transforming experiences of ecstasy, always tending to use words like *fire* and *flow* and *light*. John of the Cross, another medieval saint of literary accomplishments, compared his sense of ecstasy to tender love-making in the middle of a monastery garden at night. Secular writers also describe ecstatic experience... English poet William Wordsworth in his long poem, *A Few Lines Written Above Tinturn Abbey*, which we recited a small portion of earlier, commonly experienced such transforming elation, a sense of connection to all things, a sense of permeability where he felt as if the whole universe was rushing in as he was rushing outside of himself. Many other poets, from Tennyson to Szymborska, and religious leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. also described experiences of ecstasy. That trip King took to "the mountain top" where he saw "the promised land" wasn't just a stray biblical image he was using, or worse, a geographic site, but it was deeply felt, ecstatic experience, an empowering transport transforming his worries and fears, and empowered him to do his work, which he only put into words in a sermon later on.

Marganita Laski, the scholar of ecstasy I quoted, was very clear about her theology...she was an atheist. But she didn't think that ecstasy in all of its forms was somehow foolish, an escape mechanism of some sort for people who are afraid of life and hide in a dubious Deity. Instead, she suggested that states of ecstasy could be reasonably studied; and she was critical of rationalists who dismissed it all as mere escapism, or even a form of mental illness.

Laski theorized instead that states of ecstasy are often deeply related to our capacity for creativity, our remarkable ability to solve problems. I would have to agree, in part based on ecstatic experiences I have had in my own life. I'm talking about those smaller experiences of wonder when I stand rapt under stars, or hear our Chalice choir sing those heart-breaking modulations in Fauré's *Agnus Dei*, to more significant experiences of ecstasy which really transformed my life over a time through steady reflection on the meaning of those experiences.

Sometimes, however, I have also had brief experiences of being outside myself when I have been out dancing with friends for five hours at the old I-Beam in San Francisco, or even longer ago, participating in exhausting Bulgarian folk-dancing circles down at the Detroit Institute of Arts while in college. Or more recently, just *watching* modern dancers like Bill T. Jones or Lar Lubovitch leap on the stage. These were *not* problem solving activities exactly, so I don't agree with Laski at every turn; but they *were* pure pleasure, akin perhaps to the orgasmic experiences of great lovemaking, which I think of as the most common ecstatic experiences easily known to most people in their lives. But even if such raptures solve no problems, they are, I think, still fairly described as ecstatic experiences.

But what about the charge of mental disturbance? Mark Salzman's novel, *Lying Awake*, is about just that question. A nun who experiences ecstatic experiences all the time undergoes surgery for a kind of epilepsy, and immediately afterward, her rapture is gone. He writes: *She felt as if she had tumbled out of a sacred mountain into a ruined village. The cloister buildings looked institutional, piety showed signs of wear, and the psalms read like the libretto of an opera delivered as a speech. God's presence was replaced by an atmosphere of human compromise.*

Her rapture? A misfire in her brain. And this is indeed true of some other forms of rapture. Many folks who suffer from various forms of mental illness routinely hear the voice of God sounding in their head, and it's real to them, until the medication takes effect. Or they feel a deep ecstatic experience because of a brain dysfunction, and *unlike* the nun in the story, refuse to take any medicine so that they can continue to live with that riotous sense of rapture full time. They often end up destroying their lives because they never are able to put their feet on the ground.

But Laski is quick to point out that while some forms of ecstasy are indeed pathological, rapture far more resembles a universal experience like falling in love. You can, you know, tamper with a section of the brain and make *love* disappear too. But who wants to

stamp out love, for everybody, once and for all, just because it isn't always pleasant or healthy every time, or sometimes has pathological expressions?

As we ministers talked at the table, we spoke of ecstasies we had known. I spoke of the ecstasy I felt during certain rituals in my childhood faith, like when the communion bread was placed into a silver mandala and we simply stared at for an hour....or hours. I almost felt as if I was lifting off the ground. Makes no sense to me now, but my experience was real as a child...and yes, culturally shaped.

Just like speaking in tongues is culturally shaped. And NOT speaking in tongues is culturally shaped, as in all Unitarian Universalist congregations that I know *save* Tulsa. It would be pretty arrogant of us, wouldn't it, to think of ourselves as the "default" culture, the "neutral" culture, as if we ourselves are not culturally shaped.

Although there is some suggestion by scholars of religion that speaking in tongues is historically rooted in some Yoruba African religious practices of trance that over the generations survived into the twentieth century when Pentecostalism technically began, its also true that many historic African American churches are simply against the practice, so its not really an ethnically rooted practice by any means.

It *is* a cultural practice...but within a religious context. Marlin, the senior minister at Tulsa, is perfectly happy to apply rational understandings of this form of cultured ecstasy. It doesn't have to be the Holy Spirit making people speak in different languages, but simply the mind letting its censoring mechanism go to sleep and allowing an unconscious flow of pure phonemes, syllables, the ones we first heard as children, come out of our mouths. I can speak that way at will, actually. But so can Ella Fitzgerald when she is singing...blissfully, ecstatically...scat music. Scat music, a form of jazz improvisation, is not, I hope I don't have to remind you...an illness of the mind. But it *is* a form of play, as technically, all worship forms...sermons, singing, silence... are a kind of play, play wed via our Jewish roots to soulful education, yes. But play nevertheless. I even said to Marlin, "Do you think there is room in your congregation for the kind of ecstasy around the communion bread that I felt as a child?" He gave it some thought and said: "Maybe. Who knows?" His eyes twinkled, and he smiled his gracious and always warm smile. "Maybe on Thursday nights?" But what I am saying is that when people feel ecstasy, culture shapes the form of that ecstasy. And culture does shape a thousand forms of ecstasy. Can they all live together?

I know. I know. You don't like the words. Ecstasy. Rapture. Flow. Why not just say we all experience the world as wonderful sometimes? Because it is. Just like our story said this morning.

Well, fine. Use whatever words you want. Or, like the great ecstasies in some traditions, refuse to use any words at all to describe your experiences of deep wonder when you are, as it were, standing outside yourself for a moment.

But do meditate on what cultural forces shape you, no matter what words you use. Family, ethnic, religious, secular. Do try to imagine what you would feel like if other cultural forms could be wed to Unitarian Universalism in this congregation. How would you deal with that? Is your own cultural style really without critique? Or question?

I'm not offering final answers this morning obviously. And I have a few thousand more questions I'd like to explore with you. And with Marlin and my other colleagues. And with myself.

But do wonder, this week, about this ecstasy business. Do wonder about cultural change and how it affects you. Do wonder about the cultural changes in your life as I wonder about mine...diabetes, friends wrestling with their religious deeps, life and death. Do wonder about culture, and ask yourself what the forces are that make you open or closed to change, to ecstasy, to other forms of wonder.

I think all of this wonder could actually prove to be quite...well...you know...wonderful!

Offering: To bless the world we must also bless ourselves, for we are part of the world, and to nurture ourselves as we allow ourselves to deepen, become more conscious and aware, we support this home for the heart which embraces us. There are many ways to support this place...pledges, time, wisdom...this is but one way. But we offer this offering now. Thank you for all you do for our shared community.

Concerto for Soloist and Ecstatic Words

Spirit flowing, spirit flowing
not obstructed, not dammed up, flowing, flowing, like comets in the sky,
or a thousand shooting stars, like fire leaping,
like dancers leaping or children playing,
like dervishes whirling or singers swaying.
Flowing, flowing, like birds on wing,
like flowers rising up from roots and opening, like the waves of the river,
flowing toward an ocean of justice, a lake of peace, but flowing, flowing, alive, alive,
alive, amen.

Singing

Blessing

Celebrating