

# Are Experience and Faith Opposites?

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## Greeting, Centering, Kindling, Opening Words

We are here  
*as the red maples and firebushes*  
gift us once again with their light  
*to worship in community,*  
to shift our awareness from routines  
*to larger visions, from self-doubt*  
to a healthy and healing humility.

**Grounded in gratitude for the cosmos that is our home, claiming deepening wisdom as our authority, and daring to engage joy, burden, loss and insight in a deliberate community of many ways and ages, the flame summons us to *awaken*: to listen with our whole lives, to open, to serve.**

## Installation of the Teachers Announcements

### Affirmation:

The clouds above us join and separate.  
The breeze in the courtyard leaves and returns.  
Life is like that, so why not relax?  
Who can stop us from celebrating?

*Lu Yu c. 740*

### Autumn Hymn:

*O Slowly Slowly, They Return*

## Sequence *(a reworking of one of the Desert Father Stories of the 4th and 5th centuries)*

Once upon a time, there were some monks who formed a community at the edge of the desert. They had thrived there for many decades. They worked together, worshipped together, and together worked to make the world a better place by their quiet contributions to the community. One day a runner arrived with news: The most important person in their religious order, their High Abbot, at once their greatest theologian and their most respected and loved elder, was going to pay the community a visit. The usually silent and serene monks all rushed around to make preparation. To and fro. To and fro. The local cleric who led the monks in their work came out of his cell and saw the hubbub, and asked them why they were running about: "We have to offer the High Abbot our best. We have to offer him a concert of our best songs, read him our best poems, preach inspiring sermons to him, and pray beautiful prayers – all to celebrate his presence among us."

"Really?" said the cleric. "It seems to me if the High Abbot was not "celebrated" with our silence, then why would our words be able to do so?"

*silence*

Once upon a time, there where people who gathered from all over the Columbus, Ohio area to celebrate together on Sunday morning. Each of them came with a personal story that flowed every week into the larger Story of the community. But every week they came with their hearts: hearts that grieved for, or congratulated loved ones, hearts that laughed with, or worried about, loved ones, hearts that struggled with difficult loved ones – these they then remembered, by face and by name, to hallow their silence, to hallow their celebrations, and to hallow their lives.

*naming*

Once upon a time, a choir sang together, to remind everyone who heard them that working with each other always produces more beauty and delight than working against each other.

### **Music/Anthem**

**The First Reading** *is the poem Today by Ruth Stone, written in 2004*

October's brilliance is half gone from the avenues,  
or, lies on lawns and gutters;  
and rain, the blessed curse in dissolved frost,  
yields ropes of mirrors.  
The cheap, chiming clock says almost ten.

Then why this happiness in *muted* things?  
Some equation of time and space,  
a slowed perception of the battered brain  
strips back, like leaves, to unexpected glittering.

**The Second Reading** *is from the most excellent book Faith Without Certainty, written by Paul Rasor, arguably our best and most respected Unitarian Universalist theologian alive today.*

There is no such thing as raw or pure or un-interpreted experience. All of the perceptions, activities, thoughts, wonderings, pains, pleasures, and other events of our daily lives are always experienced in terms of the structures supplied by our cultures. This is true for ordinary experiences, such as whether a particular kind of food is appealing or nauseating; for moral questions, such as whether a baby girl is to be valued as highly as a boy; and for "ultimate" questions, such as how we respond to our own finitude, or whether we experience the universe as friendly or unfriendly. These occasions never occur in a vacuum; our conceptual and cultural frames of reference inevitably affect the experiences themselves. Experience is not first had, and then interpreted; it is always already interpreted.

This principle has obvious implications for religious claims. We could not understand a particular experience as being "of God" unless we first had available to us the *linguistic symbol*

God, as well as supporting concepts or images of God to draw on. "Religious experience cannot be identified without reference to concepts, beliefs, grammatical rules, and practices supplied by our cultures and our languages."

## **Sermon**

"Unexpected glittering." Those two words from Ruth Stone's poem about her sudden burst of happiness in mid-autumn leapt out at me. Not just because they reminded me of the sheer beauty of the glittering yellow and red leaves pasted on the wet sidewalks by the rain, which surprise me every year, even though I know Fall always shows up. But because those two words beautifully summarize the first time I looked up and saw the stars.

Let me be precise. The first time I REALLY saw the stars.

I was in my senior year in high school. My friends and I gathered after school one Friday just to hang out, when one of them abruptly shouted: "ROAD TRIP!" So with that as the stated reason, my friends and I called our folks to let them know we wouldn't be home for dinner. The four of us drove downtown and cruised across the Ambassador Bridge which connects the USA and Canada across the straits of Detroit. In those days, of course, you could go across into Canada without a passport; it was easy to drop over to Windsor for dinner back then. The four of us had a bite to eat, but then decided to continue driving on past Windsor. So we drove through the tobacco fields of southern Ontario, and arched around to the Canadian shore of Lake Eire. We found Pt. Pelee on our map, and decided to go there, since it looked like it was the southern most tip of continental Canada. We thought it would be cool.

The sunset that day lavishly painted the whole sky to match the October trees that lined the tobacco fields. It was beautiful. By the time we reached Pt. Pelee, the red sky had given way to indigo, and finally to deep black. It was about 8:30. We parked, followed a dimly lit path through a wood, always led by the call of lapping waves on the other side of the trees.

We broke out onto the beach. We all remarked on how really dark it is when you get so far from the city lights. There was no moonlight yet that night, or maybe it was the new moon – I don't remember.

Suddenly, someone, I forget who, said quietly, "Look up! My God!" We all tilted our heads heavenward. I was immediately bowled over. It looked to me as if the glittering stars covered more area than the black background holding them. I saw the Milky Way for the first time in my life, that night – clear as a path on the sand in daylight. The small cluster of stars called the Pleiades was so vivid I felt as if they were only the width of a face apart from my own. Near my house on Detroit's East Side, I was able to pick out a few constellations – the Dipper, the huge W of Cassiopeia. But here at Pt. Pelee, I couldn't find them. The stars and the planets among them formed a whole for the first time. No patterns, no shapes, no fabled Greek stories across the heavens.

And within me, for but a moment, I felt transported beyond my own little life. I felt I understood in my whole being that I was on a small planet at the edge of things, suspended over an infinite abyss of both beauty and coldness; I suddenly could feel as if my skin was no longer a boundary between the inside and my outside, and I realized that the stars, the abyss, the small rocky planet I was standing on, my friends next to me, the waters of the lake, the sand on the beach made up but one indivisible Reality, one awesomeness that transcended my capacity to speak of it. I did not tell my friends what I was feeling. They were mostly silent too on the way home – perhaps they were just as blown away as I was.

However, I did recognize that even though I had not seen the stars before in this way, I had *felt* this way before – and that was when everything at church – music and chanting and ceremony and sermon – pulled together. When the perfect round wafer of blessed bread finally dissolved on my tongue, I felt as if *I* too had dissolved – into something larger than myself. In those days, I would have said I was in communion with God, the first and the last, the ground of all things, the main operative in the stories of parting sea and fiery chariot and loaves and fishes, each of which shaped my life and held me fast in a network of images that I could share with those around me.

On the beach at Pt. Pelee, I didn't think of God, but the feeling was exactly the same as far as I could tell.

I can't say for sure if everyone has experiences like that – although the esteemed psychologist Abraham Maslow certainly seemed to think that many of us do. He called such moments in a person's life "peak experiences." Sigmund Freud, no champion of organized religion, lifted up something similar, which he poetically called "the oceanic experience..." a sense that one could feel oneself but a tiny splash on the surface of an infinite ocean, and that such a feeling could be uplifting and meaningful, without being tied to creed or structured faith.

Maslow's peak experience was classically called the *mystical experience* in the literature of sober religious scholarship, even though some modern critics have cruelly tried to distort the simple meaning of that word by associating it with people who see pictures of Jesus in a scorched tortilla, who write books about their personal revelations about space aliens, or who, like Pat Robertson, claim to hear the voice of their God dictating right-wing political positions to them. If you want to understand the word mystical in the positive way used by scholars of religion, I suggest you look at the excellent words of Ludwig Wittgenstein at the top of your orders: "Not how the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is."

As usual I mostly don't care what words people use to describe experiences like my own at the beach at Pt. Pelee, or even in church. Vive la différence! But some days I do find myself wishing that some of these modern critics might take to heart the kindness of the great astrobiologist and prolific skeptic Carl Sagan, who was careful not to lump the completely eccentric with the more common and shared experiences of humanity.

Albert Einstein, like Carl Sagan, sometimes attended Unitarian Universalist services, without ever claiming to be of our community. But both of them valued the kind of experiences I had, and spoke of their own rather frequently. They used the words "wonder and awe" and "the

mysterious" to speak of such experiences. Peak experiences, oceanic, mystical...all those words are fine with me.

And although I have already invoked both Sagan and Einstein, neither of whom affirmed a personal God, let me say it plain: mystical experiences, wonder and awe, deep happiness, "unexpected glittering" are likely not intrusions from some other world, but part of the ordinary work of our human brains – in the words of Ruth Stone: "*Some equation of time and space, a slowed perception of the battered brain...*"

That such experiences rise out of the material brain does not reduce my wonder and awe, or temper it, as some have imagined, but rather doubles it.

This week, *Newsweek* magazine (which to my mind has become recently more and more like the sensationalistic *National Enquirer*), has a cover story with the title "Heaven is Real." The author of the article inside which the cover points to, calls his essay "My *Proof* of Heaven." He claims to be an active neurosurgeon, and the son of a neurosurgeon, which I have no reason to doubt. In 2008, he dropped into what he calls a serious *coma* because of a rare bacterial meningitis which shut down his brain.

For seven days he lay there, barely breathing. His eyes suddenly popped open on the seventh day, he said, contrary to medical expectations. He writes that while he was in a coma, he had an experience of what he called *heaven*. He described something beautiful. He saw *transparent* creatures that he could not describe – were they angels, he asks, or birds? Against a dark blue sky, beautiful pastel clouds rolled under him, gossamer as butterfly wings. Over the seven days he was "gone"...in his words, he heard these elusive beings telling him *You have nothing to fear. There is nothing you can do wrong. You are loved and cherished, dearly, forever.* He talks, quite paradoxically and yet poetically, about a *deep darkness brimming with light*.

The good doctor reports he experienced heaven. He insists he was a skeptic before this happened. He thought all the near-death *see the light and tunnel* experiences were chemical hallucinations in the brain. He insists he was a scientist in good order. He says he thought Jesus was just a good man, and that although Something Somewhere may have gotten the universe going at the beginning, he certainly didn't think that Something Somewhere was a Being looking out for anyone of us personally like some cosmic nanny.

In the article in *Newsweek*, the author works very hard with his excellent writing skills so that no one will dismiss him like they do people who see Jesus in a scorched tortilla.

I personally noted that he never says he was brain dead in his article. He says simply that his cortex was barely operating, and that normally, people in comas do not dream or have riveting, crystal-clear, and transformative experiences. I suppose that's true. But does his experience offer us *proof* of heaven?

The author says he was raised in some Christian tradition (he doesn't say which one), but rejected its teachings. Now, since his trip to heaven, he enjoys going to church again because the stained

glass windows and the round wafer that symbolizes wholeness and joy remind him of the experience he had. And, I am happy to report that the heaven our neurosurgeon described was not a reward for good behavior, or for either ritually, or emotionally, "accepting Christ." No, instead he describes a most unorthodox after-life with an almost universalist welcome. He heard of nothing from the transparent winged creatures save love and acceptance. No hint of a hell, or of God's displeasure. Just beauty and love and wonder.

I'm happy for him. I am glad he enjoyed the experience, and that it has made him not afraid. But his vision is not a proof of anything for me, because I have had no such experience myself. He is misusing the word "proof," which is a word borrowed from geometry, and trying to convince me that his own personal experience has something important to say to me. I had an experience too – under the stars at Pt. Pelee, as I told you – but I don't see what that has to do with any of you. You didn't experience what I did, even if some of you, I have to imagine, have looked up in wonder and awe at the stars yourselves.

And I find myself wondering if a Buddhist neurosurgeon from Sri Lanka, or a neurosurgeon raised in a totally atheist family tradition in the Czech republic, or a neurosurgeon who was raised in a Sikh *gurdwara* in Punjab would see transparent beings and clouds if they had some experience in a coma? These images are part of some forms of populist Christian culture (and only, I want to keep on reminding you, from the 19th century, here in the States); Buddhists have no concept of a heavenly afterlife with angels, most atheists don't, certainly, and Sikhs teach that salvation consists of "merging with the divine" after a series of reincarnations. No images of clouds or birdlike beings for them.

And that's why I offered you Paul Rasor's theology this morning. He begins with a clear assertion which I share: *There is no such thing as raw or pure or un-interpreted experience. All of the perceptions, activities, thoughts, wonderings, pains, pleasures, and other events of our daily lives are always experienced in terms of the structures supplied by our cultures.*

In other words, a French peasant girl named Bernadette Soubirous may have an experience of seeing a beautiful woman at the town dump at Massabielle near Lourdes, a vision only later identified as of the virgin Mary – but that can only be because she has been raised with recognizable images of the Virgin at church. She could not have seen Krishna with blue skin in that grotto. But a man named Chandra on his deathbed in Delhi might indeed see Krishna coming for him as lies there dying, and such precise experiences have been recorded many times in India by nurses and doctors and students at universities. You can call them hallucinations or imaginative projections if you want, since you have no empirical evidence of such visions either in Lourdes or Delhi. Or you can join psychologist Carl Jung in saying that people throughout the world have always been looking for compelling symbols of wholeness and hope to help them slug through their fractured lives, maybe like the ancient Greeks finding comforting patterns called constellations in the huge random complexity of the sky. Jung would say that a peasant girl in France might see Mary, a man in India might see Krishna, and many people in the age of the machine and wheel might see "round things in the sky" as Jung controversially called the then (1958) popular unidentified flying objects all over the news. In Paul Rasor's words: *Experience is not first had and then interpreted; it is always already interpreted.*

In other words, as least as far as I am concerned, the only honest option for me is to admit that I can never see things as they are, but only, ultimately, as I am.

*This principle has obvious implications for religious claims, concludes Paul Razor. We could not understand a particular experience as being "of God" unless we first had available to us the linguistic symbol God (that is word "God"), as well as supporting concepts or images of God, to draw on – experience cannot be identified without reference to concepts, beliefs, grammatical rules, and practices supplied by our cultures and our languages.*

What this means to me religiously is that I have to locate both my belief and my unbelief, my faith and my doubt, in the locus of my own cultures. I don't want to be like the tourists in the Prado poet Ellen Bass writes of, who look at the Picasso on the wall and say "*I don't like it.*" "*I do.*" based upon their immediate gut experience without further reflection. (For me, all theological thinking is long reflection on experience, not a list of beliefs and unbeliefs.) And, I cannot pretend to know what others experience, only my own response *to their* experience, which response is also, as always, rooted in who I am.

The scientific method is one of the great tools we human beings have developed to help us focus on as much common communication about reality as is possible, despite our cultural and language differences around the world. But even then, a person using the scientific method cannot be excused from being scrupulous in examining his or her own life, and the prejudices and unexamined assumptions that have shaped it. Louis Agassiz was a great scientist from Switzerland, but after he immigrated here, he was also a white man in a country where white people were just *people*, but people with chocolate skin were *black people*, always with the adjective, as if white people didn't have color themselves. He insisted that science proved that *black people* were inferior to *people*, that is, white human beings. He made a fool out of himself, and tainted the scientific method, for refusing to take the time to reflect on his intimate connection to all other life around him, and on the prejudices which systematically distorted his own life. Trofim Lysenko in Soviet Russia was also a great scientist; but because he refused to question the assumptions with which he was raised, namely, that externals could force evolutionary changes, he ended up flying the scientific method he claimed to revere on a purely political flagpole, setting the scientific community in Russia back a whole decade.

So, yes, I am glad the Newsweek neurosurgeon had an experience that moved him and comforted him. I am even glad he shared it, although perhaps he too might not have been happy about the sensational cover.

I don't know about you, but I personally am not worried about what happens to me after death. I have absolutely no reason to think it's unsafe.

But I continue to find ways to stand under the stars when I can, even here in the bright city. Doing so always seems to get me to let my selfish concerns fade away for a while, as my soul becomes porous to the whole world.

Maybe for you it's not viewing the stars which invites that wonder in you: just a flash of sunlight reflecting off a pewter dish in your kitchen, like it was for Jacob Boehme of Reformation Germany; or the scents in a night herb garden, as it was for Juan de la Cruz of Counter-Reformation Spain, or the desire to sing love poetry about Krishna, as it was for Mirabai of medieval India; or a walk in the fields as it was for 19th century English non-theistic mystic Richard Jeffries; or even the oceanic feeling some runners have described to me after they have run a good long time past what they first imagined. Maybe the *unexpected glittering* of this autumn season might be your trigger, or even just the feel of bobbing a stone in your hand, one you just fancied and picked up off the path.

I admit that I'd like to think that my experience at Pt. Pelee under the whirling stars at least echoed some of the feelings of awe, wonder and the mysterious, which so anchored Dr. Einstein and Dr. Sagan.

But such experiences, if we have them at all, are neither evidence of our faith, nor proof of our doubt, but the fortunate crucible in which our fierce doubts and comforting beliefs can be refined, released, reformed, softened, or, best of all, grounded in humility instead of the arrogance of external authority.

## **Offering**

**Closing Riddle** by Muriel Rukeyser  
*from Out of Silence 1994*

A Little Stone in the Middle of the Road in Florida

My son as a child saying  
God  
is anything,  
even a stone in the middle of the road in Florida.  
Yesterday Nancy, my friend, after a long illness:  
You know what can lift me up, take me out of despair?  
No, what?  
Anything.