

Transcendence

The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries, and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community.

When I consider how best and briefly to describe our times, the word that keeps returning to my page is “heavy.” There’s the weighty matter of mortality in the pandemic and its attendant losses. There’s the hefty and horrifying legacy of racial oppression hoisted into the public square by repeated state-sanctioned racialized violence. And there’s the freight of grief we carry from both of these, and also from personal losses and so much more.

Where, given the drag of reality’s millstone, is transcendence today?

By definition, transcendence is not contained within the bounds of reality. The dictionary tells us it resides beyond the normal or the physical. Theologically, it often refers to the holy as being beyond our human experience, senses, comprehension and language (thus the challenge of this reflection). But does this mean the transcendent is not embedded here, within, among and all around us, possibly even in some way tucked into a few inadequate words intended to point toward it?

Thanks to our Transcendentalist forebearers, the theological root system of Unitarian Universalism insists that transcendence is not an otherworldly phenomenon but one that prevails within this world and our encounters with it. In listing the wisdom sources from which our faith draws, the first one named is the “Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder... which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.” It’s what Ralph Waldo Emerson called “an original relation to the universe.”

Perhaps you’ve known something like that — experiencing the knee-buckling sound of the choir’s last

note followed by silence; or the jaw-dropping sight of the northern lights on a clear autumn night; or the breathtaking turn of a poem from the particular to the universal; or the heartwarming gratitude an act of kindness can bring. Each of these is an embodied reaction to being lifted toward something beyond our selves. Each is an invitation to let go of self-consciousness and ego, to encounter the “something more” that mystery and faith both point toward and to open our awareness to possibilities not yet conceived much less apprehended.

This is not as abstract as it seems. Like the poets, whose work is said to begin with describing the material world with attentive care and then, at a certain point in the poem, to lift the eyes to a wider horizon, we are all invited to notice the world around us. To witness its beauty *and* its brokenness, its generosity *and* its losses, its pain *and* tenderness *and* resilience. Then, like the poets, we lift our eyes to a wider horizon, a greater wholeness, a more dimensional truth with possibilities for healing. This is transcendence I have noticed even now, in such a time as this, with all its heaviness and suffering.

Recently, I heard theologian and activist Ruby Sales, speaking in the Healing Our City Interfaith Prayer Tent, say “The ritualization of truth is the only pathway to healing.” Referring to the repeated instances of institutionalized racial violence across the nation, she said, “We must use this time we are in together as an opportunity to speak the truth to look at life for what it is, always believe the possibility of redemption, the possibility to make a new story for ourselves and others.” It is, she noted, what sustained her own African American ancestors through the terrors of slavery and the

systemic racism that has followed it. It is, she said, the power of the inner spirit, which has survived and been passed down through generations of oppression. It is, she said, what will keep us all going today as we stand up and work for change.

As I heard Ruby Sales’ words, they moved through the heaviness of this time, lifting the eyes of my heart to a wider horizon and a longer arc; opening the ears of my heart to the spirit’s call to keep journeying toward justice; pointing beyond reach of my experience, comprehension, and language, toward the Beloved Community, both shimmering and real.

This is the gift of transcendence. Whether it takes us up to the sky, down to the earth, or open to all people and all beings around us — or to all of these at once — it releases us from the weight of ego and the alienation of pride and cynicism. Awakening us to the realities of our day — harsh and beautiful as reality always is — it unlocks our hearts to the wholeness and holiness of life itself. Surely, *now* is a time to welcome the power of transcendence and the promise and possibilities that spring from it.

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Transcendence Theme Resources

For further reflection on this theme, a variety of resources are listed in this month’s Chalice Circle packet available at www.unityunitarian.org/chalice-circles.html and by request from karen@unityunitarian.org.