

A Sense Sublime

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I have always loved that piece by Walt Whitman, not just for its call to adventure and looking at the world a new way – but more recently for that phrase “To know the universe itself as a road – As many roads – As roads for traveling souls.” That phrase really resonates for me; we are all traveling souls, and there are many roads for us to choose.

Many of you will remember my Unitarian Universalist background, and that I often use the word Universe where others might say God. What happens if we paraphrase Walt in that vein? “To know God itself as a road – As many roads – As many roads for traveling souls.” To know God as a road – not necessarily a being who is watching everything we do, but a journey that we interact with along the way.

A few years ago when we had one of the book discussion groups, we had a conversation about knowing God. Someone described the concept of the ‘thin places’ – times in our lives when the veil between our everyday world and the divine is very thin. Times where we have felt the presence of God, so to speak. I am fascinated by this idea, because there have been times in my life when I have felt overcome by something I didn’t have words for, and this helped me understand those moments.

Think of your own life. When have you felt the manifestation of the Universe? When have you felt a closer connection with the Spirit? I want to tell you about a few of these experiences in my own life.

Most of you know that I lived several years in Nepal. My first summer there was a little rough; I was homesick, I was just learning the language so it was hard to communicate, I was new in my community and hadn’t found my niche yet, and in the monsoon season it rains so much your brain feels wet. I was struggling with

what I was even supposed to be doing there. One day I took a walk. I didn't know my way around very well yet, and this was hampered by the fact that I lived on a mountain ridge that in monsoon was perpetually covered in fog or clouds. As I trudged up this foggy mountainside, I couldn't see anything, and this felt like an apt metaphor for my life. I was lost in a cloud of confusion. The road was not clear. But at one point I felt a tangible change in the atmosphere, almost like a breeze. I looked up from my feet and in the next few steps prayer flags came into view. I found myself at a local *mondir*, or temple; a small octagonal or round building surrounded by flagpoles with giant prayer flags, faded but still colorful. No one else was there at the time, so I sat on a rock in the courtyard. I could not explain it, but even though it was foggy and cold, I felt a sense come over me that warmed me: I felt loved. It was like a spiritual hug. I felt calm and reassured, as if someone was telling me I was doing the right thing and everything would be ok. I remember being surprised at the tears falling down my face; there were no words, just feelings. I felt a sense of comfort that my rational brain could not explain, but I decided I didn't need to.

Now, I can't tell you that that experience cleared everything up for me and all of a sudden I knew what I had to do – but I felt confident I would figure it out eventually. And I did. There were many challenges on that road – but I stayed. The road chose me and I chose the road.

I have found that recording the moment in some manner helps me to retain the feelings of comfort and connectedness: writing it down in a journal, taking or drawing a picture, finding a memento like a feather or a stone worn smooth by the water. I use these pieces as a



touchstone to recall that moment of clarity and all the feelings that went with it. There are times I feel I almost re-create the moment by showing someone else the reminder and telling them the story.

Many of the times I have felt especially connected to the Universe have happened to me in nature – out on a trail somewhere in the woods, or on the shores of Lake Michigan, or viewing a breathtaking vista of mountains and trees. Once when I was running in the high desert in California, a hawk flew over me and dropped a feather right in front of me. I kept that feather in the visor of my car for a long time, reminding myself of that moment of clarity and vision.

Other times I have experienced the ‘thin place’ between our world and the divine have been in community with others. (Many times with you guys!) When our dear friend Candy was near the end of her battle with cancer, and many of us gathered in her backyard to serenade her and reflect back to her the love she had shown for this community, I felt the very air was alive. The outpouring of love and gratitude that day was nothing short of divine, and it made me tingly as I walked home that night. I believe that very often the divine works through us, as we interact with members of our community.

In the UU tradition, we like to discuss the theological messages. So now I’d like to give you all a chance to reflect on these moments in your own life when you have felt the presence of God, a time when you felt a particular spiritual connection.

Congregation response

I want to end with one more story. Recently I took a group of Michigan teenagers to a National 4-H program in Washington, D.C. While we are there we spend one day on Capitol Hill, meeting with our senators and representatives from Michigan. This year the day we were scheduled to be on Capitol Hill was Wednesday, June 26th. This just happened to be the day that the Supreme Court announced their decision about striking down the Defense of Marriage Act and California’s

Proposition 8. In between appointments with legislators, we were able to walk by the steps of the Supreme Court about a ½ hour before the decision came out, to see the crowd and feel the energy in the air. About 2 hours later, after the decision had come out, we were walking into the Capitol building, right across the street, and I heard a choir singing. It was so beautiful, and pure. They could not have been more amazing if they had been angels singing from the heavens. The sense of relief was palpable in the air – but more than that was an overwhelming sense of joy. Just pure joy – to have the freedom to love, and be loved. It was incredible to be there that day. I know we still have a ways to go to achieve true marriage equality, but the sense of reassurance and inspiration I felt that day in Washington gives me confidence and energy to continue down this road.

That's what I think is the take-away from these moments of divinity, these 'thin places' in our life – we gain sustenance from those moments of clarity that help us through the rest of the times in our life. We don't always feel so connected with the Universe, but we can remember what it feels like when we do, and we can use that knowledge to give us confidence in times of challenge.

Amen.

Excerpts from **Song of the Open Road**

By Walt Whitman

Afoot and light-hearted, I take to the open road,
healthy, free, the world before me.

Henceforth I ask not good fortune – I myself am good fortune;
strong and content,
I travel the open road.

I inhale great draughts of space;
the east and west are mine,
and the north and the south are mine.

All seems beautiful to me;
I can repeat over to men and women,
You have done such good to me,
I would do the same to you.

Whoever you are, come travel with me!
However sweet these laid-up stores – however convenient this dwelling, we cannot remain here;
However sheltered this port, and however calm these waters, we must not anchor here;

Together! the inducements shall be greater;
We will sail pathless and wild seas;

We will go where winds blow, waves dash, and the Yankee clipper speeds by under full sail.

Forward! after the great Companions!
and to belong to them!
They too are the road!

Onward! To that which is endless,
as it was beginningless,
to undergo much, tramps of days, rests of nights,

To see nothing anywhere but what you may reach it and pass it.
To look up or down no road but it stretches and waits for you –

To know the universe itself as a road –
As many roads –
As roads for traveling souls.