

Are You a Mystic?

sermon by Vicki Lantz

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Are you a mystic? Does your understanding of God transcend what you've read in books, heard in religious services, or been told by others? Have you been overcome by an awareness of God's presence in moments of intense beauty, joy, or pain? Are there ways in which you know God has been present in your story? Perhaps you've even said some things like... "the seas were parted for me when I thought all hope was lost" or "I somehow knew I was supposed to call her and everything changed because I reached out" or "I was inexplicably filled with calm and a sense of knowing, when I should have been panicking". Or put even more simply, have you ever encountered a mysterious something that you don't understand, can't explain, and certainly could never quantify, but you know is unquestionably good and undeniably real.

If you answered yes to any of these questions, guess what. You're a mystic. Mysticism is, at its core, any experiential knowledge of God. And let me pause right here and say, if the word God isn't a good fit for you, okay. Use the word of your choice. Or no word at all. That's okay, too. And perhaps inserting the beautiful words from the UUA Covenant would be helpful here, which describe the Unitarian Universalist Living Tradition as drawing from many sources, including "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to renewal of the spirit and openness to the forces that create and uphold life." So regardless of the word choice used to describe that transcending mystery and wonder, which today I will call God, we can still have a conversation about what mysticism is and why it's something you may want to explore.

Today I'll share a bit of my story, illustrating how an intellectual, rational, engineering degreed Jewish girl and long time atheist found herself in a Divine romance and was completely transformed. I also talk about the mystic path, illustrating how world religions describe the process of growing into direct experience of God, and finally I'll introduce a brief period of meditation, inviting us into the Mystery through prayer and silence.

Most mystic journeys begin the same way. Something big happens. Not always comfortable and very commonly excruciating, the individual is thrown into an experience that challenges their understanding of the world and their existence in it. That something may be delightful, magical, and full of wonder. Or it can be an ego deflating, humiliating, despair filled breakdown that causes the individual to finally accept they've reached the end of themselves and reach out for help. Unfortunately, or fortunately, that's my story.

Approximately six years ago, I was desperate and out of ideas. In the throws of addiction, I reached my bottom when after years of trying to manage my life, I realized I couldn't do it anymore. I got on the internet and looked up information on a twelve step

recovery program and walked into my first meeting on a Sunday afternoon. Through the gift of desperation, I was teachable and willing to learn a new way of life. This way of life involved rigorous self-honesty, sharing my secrets with others, and letting go of control. As terrifying as that prospect was, I immediately felt at home in recovery communities and got busy doing the prescribed healing work.

After nine months or so of working the twelve steps, which is a spiritual but not religious program, I found myself daily talking to a God I didn't believe in. Whether in silent prayers, in my journaling, or in the occasional audible utterance, I had opened myself up to something that was clearly helping me, even if I didn't understand it. I had been relieved of my addiction, felt more free and more alive than I ever had, and was able to be of service to others in ways that baffled me.

Then one evening, I walked into a trailer behind a church, expecting a recovery meeting to take place. Having felt unsteady all day, I became fiercely angry when I realized no one was showing up for the meeting. I desperately needed help right then and along with anger, a hot fear enveloped me. I'd been dropped off to the church and had no way of leaving. I tried to do some reading while I waited, but my rage only intensified. Grabbing my journal, I began writing a letter of protest to that God I didn't believe in. How dare God do this to me! I let the expletives fly as I wrote, filling page after page with anger, fear, and blame.

All at once I was overcome by a warming sensation, as if hot oil had been poured over my head. I instinctively fell out of my chair and on to my knees, something I had never done before. As the warm feeling cascaded down my body, my heart was flooded with what I can only describe as gratitude intermingled with love, but those words don't begin to fully capture it. Instead of feeling fear, anger, and self-pity, I felt blessed, loved and peaceful. Everything in the room fell away and I knew I was not alone. I was under the care and protection of a loving God who wanted nothing more than to love me into wholeness and set me free. I could barely contain my joy! After the intensity of the experience subsided, I got up from my knees and returned to my chair. Picking up my journal, I wrote about my change of heart, falling into an intimate conversation with God, the time quickly passing until my husband picked me up.

Later, reflecting on what happened, I returned to some wise words that had been spoken to me previously. "Judge all spiritual things by their fruits" my friend had told me. There was no way I was going to tell anyone what happened, but I couldn't argue with the results. Something changed in me that night and I vowed to myself I would keep an open mind and heart no matter what lay ahead.

As time went on, I continued having strange experiences that I couldn't explain, getting progressively weirder as time went on, especially as I developed a regular meditation practice. Almost daily, I would sit in silence, either by myself or with others, attempting to still my mind and consenting to whatever happened. But in the middle of all that ethereal mystery, very concrete and practical good things were happening. Everything within me and around me was being transformed into

wholeness. My work, my relationships, my physical, mental, and emotional well being, every piece of me and my surroundings was being restored to health. Things were good. Of course there were moments of pain and suffering, but overall, I felt I had stumbled onto this amazing way of life - self examination combined with prayer and meditation - that was the answer to everything. I would never struggle again. But of course life happens. The illness and death of a loved one, an unexpected injury to my husband, a loss of interest in my work, several friendships falling apart, and a sudden, cross country move threw me into a place of constant fear, which resulted in throwing me into more meditation and other contemplative practices, just to stay afloat.

And that's when things started getting really weird. I began having experiences with God that quite frankly, freaked me the heck out. I reached the point where I was sure I was losing my mind, but again, I couldn't argue with the fruits. I did become isolated because I felt I couldn't talk to anyone about what was happening to me, lest they actually confirm I was losing my mind. And it would have been a horrible time for that, because by God, we had sold our house and had to be out in 5 weeks! This was no time for any kind of breakdown!

Two days before I was leaving town, I found myself talking with a new friend after a chance conversation had taken place. I figured I was leaving town anyway, so what did I have to lose and I told him my entire story. Everything that I had been experiencing and all my thoughts and feelings connected with it. After I finished talking, he asked me a question I will never forget.

"Have you heard of mysticism?" he asked.

I replied by telling him I'd heard the word and had run across a few quotes or poems from mystics over the years, but I didn't really know what it was. After my response, he told me I was not alone, that what was I was experiencing was actually a well worn path, with numerous books written about the mystic journey in all of the world's religions. He suggested I do some reading and also referred me to a spiritual director.

Once I began reading about mysticism, I was stunned. From the very first book I opened, it was as though I was reading my own story. Even though I'd never been given a map, I had unknowingly been following a clearly prescribed and studied path toward union with God. If mysticism is, as I said earlier, any direct experience of God, then the mystic path can be described as the pursuit and enjoyment of union with God.

So how does one go about pursuing and enjoying union with the Divine? Each of the world's religions offers a slightly different take on this and often there are numerous examples within each tradition. Some religions have been more embracing of mysticism than others and even within one religion, approaches to mysticism have varied with location, timing, and leadership. Most of the language I'll use today originates in the Christian mystic tradition, but with a few word replacements, can be applied to any religious tradition or no religious tradition at all.

Christian mystic tradition describes four stages for growing the soul into God. These stages are first - shedding illusory identities, second - deepening prayer, third - seeing God in all things, and finally, acting as God manifested in the world. Although the stages do typically proceed in order, they are more often than not cyclical in nature, not linear. Instead of reaching the end of a road, the mystic's spiritual journey is more of a circle moved around over and over again, deepening as the mystic grows.

The first stage, shedding illusory identities, is often called Awakening, Invitation, or Via Positiva. No two awakening experiences are the same. Perhaps, like me, your awakening occurred while you were alone, in a moment of intense fear, and was accompanied by a physical sensation. Or perhaps it was a moment when you were overwhelmed by intense beauty, everything seemingly radiating divinity. Or perhaps it was a moment when in the presence of another's suffering you felt as though your heart would burst. Or perhaps a candlelit, ancient religious ritual filled you with a sense of transcendent oneness and peace. Or perhaps your moment happened in nature, as Quaker mystic Rufus Jones describes:

"I was walking alone in a forest, trying to map out my plan of life and confronted with issues which seemed too complex and difficult for my hand to solve. Suddenly I felt the walls between the visible and the invisible grow thin and the Eternal seemed to break through into the world where I was. I saw no flood of light, I hear no voice, but I felt as though I were face to face with a higher order of reality than that of the trees and mountains. I went down on my knees there in the woods with that same feeling of awe which compelled men in earlier times to take off the shoes from their feet. A sense of mission broke in on me and I felt that I was being called to a well-defined task of like to which I then and there dedicated myself."

Whatever the awakening experience, it is ultimately an invitation. An invitation to radically change in the way one perceives and engages in the world. Many will return to business-as-usual, but for some, they have been given a taste of God, a glimpse of a new reality, and they want more. These are the mystics.

The second stage, deepening prayer, is often called Purgation, Discernment, or Via Negativa. While the first stage, Awakening, is something passively experienced, Purgation is action intentionally taken and involves consenting to a house cleaning, of sorts. Before awakening, the mystic's longings were primarily for things that did not satisfy and left emptiness behind. With the new desire for more of God and more reality with a capital R, all unreal things must go. And what are these unreal things? On the mystic path, anything that creates separation from God needs to be let go of. This is where discernment comes in, because those barriers to God are different for everyone. Following the mystic path does not necessarily mean giving up all of your possessions, taking a vow of poverty, and living in a monastery. No, any potential mystic can discover what is keeping them from intimacy with God in a surprisingly simple way. By getting quiet. sitting in silence through meditation, the answers come, and without any direct effort. The effort is actually passive, in a way, in that all that is required showing up to

meditate regularly. The type of meditation doesn't seem to matter, each mystic finds the style that most meets their temperament, and in the passive sort of effort or consenting, truths begin to be revealed. Without fail, every aspiring mystic discovers in the stillness that nothing is lacking and there is nothing to be concerned about. In reality, every need and every desire is met in God. And wow, does this shake things up. It certainly did for me and from this place, purgation, or what I prefer to think of as a shedding, happens automatically.

For me, purgation was a slow and gentle process, an organic unfolding that I only saw clearly in retrospect. One day I opened my closet and was uncomfortable with the amount of clothes I owned. After a few weeks of this happening every time I went to pick out something to wear, I gave in and donated the majority of my clothes, feeling relieved and lighter as a result. Some time later, the same situation happened every time I walked into my basement. Eventually, I gave away or sold everything in my basement that I hadn't touched in a year, again feeling lighter as a result. As time went on, I found myself simplifying every part of my life. including the size of my home, where I lived, my job, my process for inner work, and even my relationships. Each decision felt natural and intuitive, and as I said earlier, not until much later was I able to look back and understand what had been happening. I had been walking through the Purgation season of the mystic path and everything that had been creating separation between me and God fell away, often without my knowledge. But in the end, I had placed myself in a position of readiness and openness, prepared to be responsive to God's whispers on my heart, whatever that would look like.

The third stage, seeing God in all things, is often called Illumination, Enjoyment, or Via Creativa. After first the Awakening experience and second Purgation, the mystic now experiences longer and more frequent glimpses of the world as it really is, where everything glows with Divinity, bathed in God's love. The line between us and them, you and me, matter and spirit, falls away, revealing all of creation as one and intimately connected. A feeling of overflowing love pours through and out of the mystic, revealing all matter to be wildly in love with God and passionately loved by God in return. God is present in all things, at all times, in every person, in every place, and at every moment. This realization catapults the mystic into an entirely new way of being. Instead of seeing life as a meaningless disconnected existence, this new awareness begins transformation on a deep level and often draws the mystic into a season of quiet. With the presence of God now permeating all things, the mystic craves silence and the space to hear that small, still voice whispering, "I'm here. You're loved. All is well." God's undeniable presence in the silence is in many ways a healing balm to the mystic and becomes enjoyable, and something the mystic seeks out for comfort, solace, inspiration, and support. And from this place, things tend to get interesting.

For me, Illumination was a filling of the void Purgation revealed. After the unreal was shed, I needed something to do with my life. One can only spend so much time in meditation. My work and leisure of years past no longer fulfilled me or was even the least bit enjoyable. And that created a lot of empty space, which for me was surprisingly filled with overflowing creative energies. Not previously considering myself a creative

person, I was suddenly writing poetry, creating art, telling stories, writing songs, and more. I felt compelled to bring to life my experience of God in a variety of different art forms. While the work of creating was hard work, it was fulfilling on a level I had never experienced before and instead of draining me, filled me with energy. I had never felt as alive as I did when I was creating. It was as if I had finally found what I was made to do and I wanted nothing more than to fully lean into that. And I did. This past year has been a joy-filled whirlwind of writing, speaking, listening, creating, and other form of artistic expression where I bring beautiful things to life through co-creation with God.

The fourth stage, acting as God manifested in the world, is often called Union, Commitment, or Via Transformativa. In this phase of the journey, the mystic experiences a blissful state that is virtually impossible to describe in words. And those mystics that reach this point are in such a state of rapture that any interest in commonplace activities such as writing disappear. The metaphor of Divine Marriage is often used to describe union, a helpful term in illustrating the intimacy between the Divine and the human soul. The marriage metaphor is not only used in Christian mysticism, but also in Hindu, Sufi, and Jewish mystic writings. Pick up any book of beautiful mystic poetry and read some of the most passionate, romantic, and grandiose prose ever written.

And this loving union ultimately moves the mystic to action, through acting as God manifested in the world. Not easy work, but a very different kind of work. This labor is the kind of life-giving pursuit that the mystic wants to do and in many ways can't help but do. It's selfless action on the behalf of others, grounded in the desire to align every action with the will of God, or more simply put, action where every step is grounded in love and compassion for others, free of fear, self will, and ego driven motivations. That's a tall order, but ultimately this is the end goal of mysticism, and I would say of all authentic religion and spirituality. Not bliss and euphoria in meditation, but a desire to act as God manifested in the world where we reach out to others in love, offering help, comfort, and healing.

And I think every single person sitting here today would agree with me when I say that our world could use some help, comfort, and healing right now.

What would our world be like if we were all were plugged into a taproot of love and compassion, seeing all things as interconnected and glowing with divinity? What would our country be like? What would our communities be like? What would our relationships be like? What would you be like?

I believe transforming our relationship with God can heal the world. Why? Because transforming my relationship with God healed me.

Are you a mystic? Only you can answer that question, but if any of what I shared today sparked a fire in your heart, my wish is that you'll lean into that holy flame, wherever it takes you. I can guarantee, that the transcending mystery and wonder, which some of us call God, will meet you right there.

In closing, I'd like to thank the All Faiths community not only for the opportunity to share with you today, but also for the warm welcome both my husband and I have received since we began attending services here. And finally, I'll end with a prayer, a meditation followed by silence, as we leave this place and go forth out into the world.

Transcending mystery and wonder, open our eyes to your sacred invitations. Fill us with fervent desire to experience more of your presence. Give us strength to tear down the walls guarding our tender, wounded hearts. Help us let go of all things that block us from your love and compassion, knowing that this surrender will transform us into radiant mirrors, reflecting your light onto a broken and suffering world. Amen.

About Victoria Lantz

Victoria Lantz is a creative with a desperate need to bring things to life. Whether through storytelling, poems, podcasts, songs, art, or gatherings, she has discovered one of her connections to the Divine is found within the creative process. She is the author of [God Is: An Accidental Mystic Discovers the Nature of God](#), [Longing: Poems from a Mystic Heart](#), and [Union: Mystic Musings and Stories](#). She also hosts the [God Is Podcast](#) available on iTunes and the [You Have Been Invited Meditation Series](#) available on Insight Timer. Additionally, she helps others embrace their spiritual journeys through her [Let's Get Real! gatherings](#) and in one-on-one [listening sessions](#). Currently living on Sanibel Island off the coast of southwest Florida, Victoria can typically be found strolling the beach or playing her pineapple ukulele. Visit her website at VictoriaLantz.com.