

READING FOR THE NEXT SESSION

In his book *Religions, Values and Peak Experiences*, Abraham Maslow coined the term “peak experiences” to indicate that religious experiences are accessible to all persons, be they identified with a traditional religion/theology or not. Maslow points to the ecstatic experience as being religious, a time when we celebrate being part of something greater than we are: the cosmos, beauty, a cause (for example, Isaiah’s experience in the temple, Paul’s conversion).

However, plateau and valley experiences are also religious. Plateau experiences are not marked by the intensity of the ecstatic experience. Rather, they are characterized by a kind of serendipity, an oceanic feeling à la Freud, a sense of total well-being. A plateau experience is doubtlessly one that has been most sustaining for many of us: the glimpse of a sleeping child so serene and peaceful now, but who was our nemesis not an hour before; the restful pause after a meaningful effort; the satisfaction that breaks through the routine between two people deeply in love; the joy of pure solitude when there is nothing to distract.

Then there is the valley experience, the inevitable moment of suffering, meaninglessness, or tragedy that probes our very depths as human beings. Far removed from the ecstasy of the mountaintop, or even from the heights of the plateau, valley experiences take us down to the agonies of the spirit. They are nonetheless religious. They grasp us totally and will not let us go.

The following excerpts are a collection of religious experiences that illustrate peak, plateau, and valley experiences. The “Peach Seed Monkey” is a story of a plateau experience. j. j. clark’s “for a mongoloid child, dead at age twelve” is an example of a valley experience.

How would you characterize each of these narratives in terms of peak, plateau, and valley? Are they religious experiences? Why or why not?

I Dare Not Kneel

The monks knelt and rose and bowed, the bodies bent forward from the waist, torsos

almost horizontal. But I could not move. I was brought up in this church where no one kneels and no one bows. And when has it ever been suggested that I might kneel, even figuratively kneel, before or to Something? I wanted to kneel, that’s the important thing. But I could not. To kneel and to mean it would be frightening because there is a darkness in the kneeling and a darkness in us that we cannot reason about. You teach the fear of the form without meaning, and that is right, but having avoided the forms, you have sometimes avoided the darkness, and it is from the darkness that real questions arise.

—a Midwestern Unitarian Universalist,
reported by Carl Scovel in
“I Dare Not Kneel”

Diving Deep and Surfacing

As a young girl I spent long summer days at the beach, blissfully curling my toes in the sand, licking salt from my lips, attuning my body to the rhythms and currents of the waves, refusing to come out of the water even when my knees turned blue. As a teenager floating on my back out beyond the breakers, I remember thinking I was perfectly happy and could die at that moment without regret. Once when I was eighteen my eight-year-old brother and I were playing in the heavy surf on a deserted beach in early September. Unaware of a swift undertow, we were pulled out over our heads. Unable to gain a footing, I scooped my little brother into my arms, threw him with all my power toward shore, and a wave carried him in. As I fought to swim to shore the waves crashed faster and faster over my head; there wasn’t time between breakers to catch my breath. Thinking I would die, I said a last prayer, stopped struggling, and felt my body carried to shore. I cannot remember a time when I have not known in my bones that the sea is a great power. And though now I am more cautious, I still feel a sense of elation and peace at the beach.

—the Preface of *Diving Deep and Surfacing* by Carol Christ

**(for a mongoloid child,
dead at age twelve)**

when he was eight he tried
to say my name; he planned
it as a birthday treat
for me, his eyes
grew wild and terrified that he would not
remember it, then suddenly
his thickened tongue came creeping
forth to mash against his lips
and frightened eyes blinked endlessly. each
time
he moved a new and wondrous vista came
to him like oldtime nickelodeons where
every time you put a nickel in the slot
the song was changed: he whispered sounds
to me and to the fading afternoon
that were not like my name at all,
but i could see behind the slipping veil,
a love that tried to smooth and move his lips
and wrinkle them
and say my name—and so he did (or some-
thing close
enough that now, remembering it, my name
hung
crystal in the dimming afternoon: a perfect
word). my wife ran moaning from his room,
i stayed
behind and watched his sausage fingers
opening
and closing uselessly, the drooling
smile that changed his face
into an open wound, the vein
that throbbed behind his ear
like music swelling
to a deep and constant theme,
the widening stain upon the mattress
where the bladder of his effort and his love
had overflowed: the clothes, the toys, the
furniture
my wife will tie in bundles for the poor. in
parts

of this grey city there are those who
live on things that others throw away, who
clothe
themselves in rags: in years to come my
wife will smile to know that david's clothes
are worn
and used and washed and laid to dry

by children who have been without so long
that
something old is often something very fine
to them. a pair of sneakers with a running
boy inside them is a total living thing; the
insteps
mold and change to fit the feet; they fuse,
the rubber and the flesh, until the act
of shedding them at night is like
an act of mutilation. on a winter's

night, a million years ago, my david
woke and touched along the darkened
hall into our room and stood
there blinking blinking
pointing to his feet as though he had just
found them for the first time with his fingers
in the dark.

he stood there moaning moaning
and the winter wind went moaning moaning
through the night outside. i walked him back
through the dark and darkness
held his fingers in the blackness
hand in hand like quiet lovers
till the wind outside would let him sleep.

i stand beside his crib tonight: his animals are
stored away, his clothes are starched and
boxed
and it is wintertime again: the darkness taps
outside for david on the windowpane: that
darkness
where strange people did not need
to look at him; that darkness where
his fingers wormed like snakes along
the edges of his crib and found
each night a thousand cracks and crevasses
to learn. and yet for him
to see me standing here in pain like this

would make him think somehow that he had
done
some terrible wrong thing, and he
would turn his great and lolling head from me
a moment
then turn back;
then he would smile at me, for all the terrors
and the crimson longings in his mind would
be forgotten
and his memories would then be fresh and
new

and he would not remember sadness
any more than he remembered pain
or loneliness. we crate

our sadness and our sorrows up, and bind
them in forgetfulness
and stack them high, like autumn leaves,

for later, leisurely destruction.

—“for a mongoloid child, dead
at age twelve” by j. j. clark

Discovery of the Reverence for Life Principle

Slowly we crept upstream, laboriously feeling—it was the dry season—for the channels between the sandbanks. Lost in thought, I sat on the deck of the barge, struggling to find the elementary and universal conception of the ethical which I had not discovered in any philosophy. Sheet after sheet I covered with disconnected sentences, merely to keep myself concentrated on the problem. Late on the third day, at the very moment when, at sunset, we were making our way through a herd of hippopotamuses, there flashed upon my mind, unforeseen and unsought, the phrase, “Reverence for Life.” The iron door had yielded: the path in the thicket had become visible. Now I had found my way to the idea in which affirmation of the world and ethics are contained side by side. Now I knew that the ethical acceptance of the world and of life, together with the ideals of civilization contained in this concept, had a foundation in thought.

—“Discovery of the Reverence for Life
Principle” in *Out of My Life and
Thought* by Albert Schweitzer

Renewal

I stood on the deck of a boat and looked out over the water, where the wheeling gulls came crying in, were caught by the air and swung up again sailing high and away—then dropped suddenly to the churning wake below, or gliding back, joined the other gulls following behind the mainstream of our boat. One can stand a long time at the rail of a boat, playing

with the water’s motion, or resting one’s eyes wherever the cloud formations call his attention. Something about the sea brings its own long, deep look into one’s imagination and stirs there the timelessness of [our] days on earth. I meant to be worthy of the sea’s enduring message as I stood there—and I thought how all [people] mean to honor their humanity; at least they begin that way, reaching out, to know and understand, opening mouths and eyes and hands to the wonder of discovering, trying to repeat in word and gesture what they have found. I was reminded once again, that unless one goes where the wind is blowing and where the tide is racing for the shore, unless one renews experience, [he/she] is capable of forgetting the nature of the wind, and even what [he/she] once had figured out about the pleasure and danger of its force.

—“Renewal” by Eileen Day Magill
(Brennen) in *73 Voices*

The Experience of Worship

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

Then flew one of the seraphim to me, having in his hand a burning coal which he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth, and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven.” And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here am I! Send me.”

—Isaiah 6:1–8

This interpretation of Isaiah 6:1–8 (a classic religious experience on which much of Prote-

stant worship is built) is from Sage Chapel, Cornell University. Isaiah is confronted by Ultimate Reality, acknowledges this Reality beyond existence, confesses his sin (that is, his refusal of life), hears the word of acceptance (that is, assurance of pardon or forgiveness), is then open to the word addressed to him in the present moment, and responds affirmatively to live responsibly in and for the world as he moves into an unknown future (that is, he accepts the invitation to life) with his ringing "Here am I, send me!"

Divinity School Address

I once heard a preacher who sorely tempted me to say I would go to church no more. Men go, thought I, where they are wont to go, else had no soul entered the temple in the afternoon. A snowstorm was falling around us. The snowstorm was real; the preacher merely spectral; and the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, into the beautiful meteor of the snow. He had lived in vain. He had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it. The capital secret of his profession, namely to convert life into truth, he had not learned. Not one fact in all his experience, had he yet imported into his doctrine. This man had ploughed, and planted, and talked, and bought, and sold; he had read books; he had eaten and drunken; his head aches; his heart throbs; he smiles and suffers; yet was there not a surmise, a hint in all the discourse, that he had ever lived at all. Not a line did he draw out of real history. The true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life—life passed through the fire of thought. But of the bad preacher, it could not be told from his sermon, what age of the world he fell in; whether he had a father or a child; whether he was a freeholder or a pauper; whether he was a citizen or a countryman; or any other fact of his biography. It seemed strange that the people should come to church. It seemed as if their houses were very unentertaining, that they should prefer this thoughtless clamor. It shows that there is

a commanding attraction in the moral sentiment, that can lend a faint tint of light to dullness and ignorance, coming in its name and place. The good hearer is sure he has been touched sometimes; is sure there is somewhat to be reached, and some word that can reach it. When he listens to these vain words, he comforts himself by their relation to his remembrance of better hours, and so they clatter and echo unchallenged.

—"The Divinity School Address" by
Ralph Waldo Emerson in
Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism:
Channing, Emerson, Parker

Walden Pond

We walked this afternoon to Edmund Hosmer's and Walden Pond. The south wind blew and filled with bland and warm light the dry and sunny woods. The last year's leaves blew like birds through the air. As I sat on the bank of the Drop, or God's Pond, and saw the amplitude of the little water, what space, what verge, the little scudding fleets of ripples found to scatter and spread from side to side and take so much time to cross the pond, and saw how the water seemed made for the wind and the wind for the water, dear playfellows for each other, I said to my companion, I declare this world is so beautiful I can hardly believe it exists.

—the *Journals* of Ralph
Waldo Emerson

The Peach Seed Monkey

One endless summer afternoon my father sat in the eternal shade of a peach tree, carving on a seed he had picked up. Finally he had fashioned a small monkey out of the seed. The boy Sam asked for it when it was finished (on the sixth day of creation).

His father replied, "This one is for your mother, but I will carve you one someday." Days and years passed and the someday on which he was to receive the monkey did not arrive. In truth I forgot all about the peach seed monkey. Life in the ambiance of my father was exciting, secure, and colorful. He

did all of those things for his children a father can do, not the least of which was merely delighting in their existence. One of the lasting tokens I retained of the measure of his dignity and courage was the manner in which, with emphysema sapping his energy and eroding his future, he continued to wonder, to struggle, and to grow.

In the pure air and the heat of an Arizona afternoon on the summer before the death of God my father and I sat under a juniper tree. I listened as he wrestled with the task of taking the measure of his success and failure in life. There came a moment of silence that cried out for testimony. Suddenly I remembered the peach seed monkey, and I heard the right words coming from myself to fill the silence: "In all that is important you have never failed me. With one exception, you kept the promises you made to me—you never carved me that peach seed monkey."

Not long after this conversation I received a small package in the mail. In it was a peach seed monkey and a note which said: "Here is the monkey I promised you. You will notice that I broke one leg and had to repair it with glue. I am sorry I didn't have time to carve a perfect one." Two weeks later my father died. He died only at the end of his life.

For me, a peach seed monkey has become a symbol of all the promises which were made to me and the energy and care which nourished and created me as a human being. And even more fundamentally, it is a symbol of that which is the foundation of all human personality and dignity. Each of us is redeemed from shallow and hostile life only by the sacrificial love and civility which we have gratuitously received. As Nietzsche so aptly put the matter . . . "man is the animal who makes promises."

—"The Peach Seed Monkey" in
To a Dancing God by Sam Keen

The Bird and the Machine

The author had been reading his newspaper at breakfast, and had come upon an article about the amazing machines man had built. As he thought about these machines and their

likeness to man, he remembered something which had happened to him when he was a young man. He had been sent to a deserted cabin to capture whatever he could find for his museum. With great difficulty he had boxed one bird. . . . He was a sparrow hawk and a fine young male in the prime of life. I was sorry not to catch the pair of them, but as I dripped blood from my wounded thumb, and folded his wings back carefully, I had to admit the two of them might have been more than I could have handled. The little fellow had saved his mate by diverting me, and that was that. He was born to it, and made no outcry now, resting in my hand hopelessly, but peering toward me with a fierce, almost indifferent glance. He neither gave nor expected mercy. In the morning . . . I was up early and brought the box in which the little hawk was imprisoned out onto the grass, where I was building a cage. A wind as cool as a mountain spring ran over the grass and stirred my hair. It was a fine day to be alive. I looked up and all around and at the hole in the roof out of which the other little hawk had fled. There was no sign of her anywhere that I could see. Probably in the next country by now, I thought cynically, but I decided I'd have a look at my last night's capture.

Secretively . . . I opened the box. . . . I got him out . . . with his wings folded properly. . . . I saw him look a last look away beyond me into a sky so full of light I could not follow his gaze. . . . I suppose then I must have had an idea of what I was going to do, but I never let it come into my consciousness. . . . I just reached out and I laid the hawk on the grass. . . . He lay there a long minute without hope. . . . He just lay with his breast against the grass. In the next second after that long minute, he was gone. . . . Like a flicker of light, he had vanished with my eyes full on him. . . . He was gone, straight into that towering emptiness of light and crystal that my eyes could scarcely bear to penetrate. For another long minute there was silence. I could not see him. The light was too intense. Then far up somewhere, a cry came ringing down.

I was young then and had seen little of the world, but when I heard that cry, my heart turned over. It was not the cry of the hawk I

had captured, for by shifting my position against the sun, I was now seeing further up. Straight out of the sun's eye, where she must have been soaring restlessly above us for untold hours, hurtled his mate. And from far up, rising from peak to peak of the summits over us, came a cry of such unutterable and ecstatic joy that it sounds down across the years and tingles among the cups on my quiet breakfast table. . . . I saw them both now. He was rising fast to meet her. They met in a great soaring gyre that turned to a whirling circle and a dance of wings. Once more, just once, their two voices joined in a harsh wild medley of question and response, struck and echoed against the pinnacles of the valley. Then they were gone forever somewhere into those upper regions beyond the eyes of men. . . .

"What next in the attributes of machines?" my morning headline runs. "It might be the power to reproduce themselves. . . . It does not seem that there is anything in the behavior of the human being which is essentially impossible for science to duplicate and synthesize. On the other hand. . . ." On the other hand. . . . Ah, my mind takes up, on the other hand the machine does not bleed, ache, hang for hours in the empty sky in a torment of hope to learn the fate of another machine, nor does it cry out for joy, nor dance in the air with the fierce passion of a bird. Far off, over a distance greater than space, that remote cry from the heart of heaven makes a faint buzzing among my breakfast dishes and passes on and away.

—"The Bird and the Machine"
in *The Immense Journey*
by Loren Eiseley

Cosmic Consciousness

I felt myself going, losing myself. Then I was terrified but with a sweet terror. . . . Now came a period of rapture, so intense that the universe stood still. . . . And with the rapture came the insight. In that same wonderful moment of what might be called supernal bliss, came illumination. I saw with intense inward vision the atoms or molecules, of which seemingly the

universe is composed—I know not whether material or spiritual—rearranging themselves as the cosmos (in its continuous everlasting life) passes from order to order. What joy when I saw there was no break in the chain—not a link left out. . . . Worlds, systems, all blended in one harmonious whole. Universal life, synonymous with universal love!

How long that period of intense rapture lasted I do not know—it seemed an eternity—it might have been but a few moments. . . . On several occasions, weeks after the illumination described, I distinctly felt electric sparks shoot from my eyes. . . . What astonished me beyond all else was, as the months went on, a deepening sense of a Holy Presence. There was a hush on everything, as if nature were holding her breath in adoration. There were times when the feeling came over me with such force as to become oppressive, almost painful. . . . The rent veil, the holy of holies, the cherubim with folded wings, tabernacles, and temples—I saw that they were symbols—the attempts of man to give expression to an inward experience.

—*Cosmic Consciousness*
by Richard Bucke

The Conversion of Saul

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul! why do you persecute me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting; but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul arose from the ground; and when his eyes were opened, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and

brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

—Acts 9:1–9

The Experience of the Black Preacher

Even though blacks have believed what whites told them, that which was uniquely black within them refused to be stilled. The black preacher tried to preach a logical sermon, going deliberately from point to point, but he just couldn't do it. He had to shout and get happy. He had to throw his arms in the air and move around; jump up and down and 'round about. He had to do what the spirit said, do it like the spirit told him to.

The uniqueness of black culture can be explained in that it is a culture whose emphasis is on the nonverbal, i.e., the nonconceptual. The lives of blacks are rooted in the concrete daily experience. When the black preacher shouts, "God is a living God!" don't argue. Get ready to shake hands with the Lord Almighty. "I talked to God this morning and I said, now listen here, Lord, you got to do something about these white folks down here. Lord, they giving us a hard time. You got to do something."

God is like a personal friend, an old buddy, whom you talk to man-to-man. The black church congregation doesn't want to be told about God: it wants to feel him, see him, and touch him. It is the preacher's responsibility to see that they do.

—"The Experience of the Black Preacher" in *Look Out Whitey! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama!*
by Julius Lester

The Still, Small Voice

The 19th-century Unitarian preacher Theodore Parker reports about a childhood incident. Walking home one day, he saw a lovely pond with rare flowers in bloom nearby. He stopped to enjoy it and saw basking in the sun a spotted tortoise. Parker wrote: "I lifted the stick I had in my hand to strike the harmless reptile; for,

though I had never killed any creature, yet I had seen other boys out of sport destroy birds, squirrels, and the like, and I felt a disposition to follow their wicked example. But all at once something checked my little arm, and a voice within me said, clear and loud, 'It is wrong!' I held my uplifted stick in wonder at the new emotion. I hastened home and told the tale to my mother, and asked what was it that told me it was wrong? She wiped a tear from her eye with her apron, and taking me in her arms, said, 'Some . . . call it conscience, but I prefer to call it the voice of God in the soul. If you listen and obey it, then it will speak clearer and clearer, and always guide you right; but if you turn a deaf ear or disobey, then it will fade out little by little, and leave you . . . without a guide. Your life depends on heeding this little voice. . . .' I am sure no event in my life has made so deep and lasting an impression on me."

—"The Still, Small Voice" by Theodore Parker, as quoted in *Anthology* by Henry Steele Commager

With My Father

When I was quite young . . . I was taken by my father in a chaise to a meeting, to which he went to hear a famous preacher of the revival kind. My father, I think, took me rather to give me the drive, and relieve my mother of the care of me, than with any expectation of my attending to the sermon. But I could not choose but attend, for the preacher made such a terrific picture of the lost condition of the human race rushing into hell . . . that it filled my imagination with horror. I wondered that the congregation could then stand and sing praises to such a god as would send their souls to hell. When my father and I climbed back into the chaise, my father said to a friend, "Sound doctrine that! Leaves no rag of self-righteousness to wrap the sinner in."

Imagine, then, my surprise when my father, in the face of explicit instructions to flee "the divine wrath to come" began whistling. When we arrived home he ate a hearty dinner and settled down to read the newspaper as if nothing had happened, as if

nothing was wrong. It was a memory that lingered.

—William Ellery Channing and his father as quoted in *Channing: The Reluctant Radical* by Jack Mendelsohn

On Human Nature

While a student at Harvard College, Channing had a moment of insight while studying under the willows along the banks of the Charles River. Reflecting upon the derogatory views of human nature then dominant in theology, of the French sceptics and the Calvinist doctrine of the utter depravity of man, of the accepted concept of the moral weakness of mankind, he knew the same gloom and despondent outlook that brought depression to John Murray. On this spring day in 1796, however, as pensively he kept going back to the affirmative concepts of the Roman Stoics and the enlightened views of the Age of Reason, light broke through for him.

It seemed to him in retrospect that he had passed through a second birth at this moment and an insight bringing inward peace enlightening his mind. The insight was the sublime idea of man's natural and moral freedom, his heritage of divine powers, his infinite spiritual perfectibility. From this day hence he possessed a counter argument to the dark and gloomy forebodings of Calvinism, which attempted to scare people into the churches and into heaven. From this day hence both Calvinism "and the Lucretian materialism of the foes of the Infamy in France" were to Channing the true blasphemy.

—*Challenge of a Liberal Faith*
by George N. Marshall

I Am a Part of the Great Living System

On July 1, 1979, I experienced . . . cosmic identification in a way that can only be described as mystical. In a moment of time I felt myself to be a part of "The Great Living System" in which we live, and move, and have our beings. I felt the presence of an Ultimate Environment that is inclusive of all being.

This awareness now informs much that I do. So, when I decided to drive from coast to coast in the summer of 1980, I was especially anxious to visit the Sequoia National Forest in the High Sierra. I wanted to pay homage to the General Sherman Tree. This tree is at least 2,500 years old, perhaps the oldest living organism on the earth. Two thousand, five hundred years! It boggles the mind! Five hundred years before the time of Jesus! Two thousand years before the time of Columbus! Two thousand, four hundred and twenty-three years before the time of Deane Starr!

I sit in the presence of this majestic tree. I bathe myself in its grandeur. I seek to inhale a bit of its aura, to allow its endurance, its courage, its optimism, to permeate my being. The tree is 272 feet tall, shorter than some of its siblings, but far thicker, about 25 feet in girth at the base. The trunk is scarred and blackened, the brands of countless forest fires that it has endured and survived. It is almost perpendicular to the earth, and all the way to the top, it is a mass of scars. Great branches, easily four feet in diameter, have been broken off, leaving jagged and painful edges, stumps of limbs without prostheses. Deep, deep ridges run from top to bottom of the trunk, ridges that have been grooved and washed by many waters, chilled and frozen by much ice, excavated and nested by millions of life forms. Here and there as the tree lifts to the sky, tender new shoots of branches and leaves, thirsting and throbbing with green life, cling to the giant trunk, while straining toward the light.

I sit a distance from the tree so that I can see its full height and girth. I try to imagine what it must be like to be 2,500 years of age. I am (at that time) 56, and I have the nerve to sing, "Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come." My God! What has this tree known of fire and flood? Of hail and storm? Of sunshine and moonglow? Of gentle breezes and soft warm rains? And it has survived! It has grown with joy! When ancient limbs have been wrenched off, it has sent out new shoots in an ecstasy of expectation.

I am in communion with this tree. It does not speak English, and I do not speak Sequoia. But no matter. Our communion is

not a communion of common language, nor of common experience, nor of common consciousness. It is much deeper than these. It is a communion of common being, of common participation in Life, of the infusion of eternal energy into eternal matter, an infusion that has formed two separate discrete organisms which are still, in their essences, one. The tree and I are not only infused with this common Life: we are this common Life, the Life that was, and is, and is to be, world without end!

—"I Am a Part of the
Great Living System"
by Deane Starr

Mountain Summit

[On his reaching the summit of Saddleback Mountain, Henry David Thoreau wrote,] There was not a crevice left through which the trivial places we name Massachusetts or Vermont or New York could be seen while I still inhaled the clear atmosphere of a July morning, if it were July there. All around beneath me was spread for a hundred miles on every side, as far as the eye could reach, an undulating country of clouds, answering in the varied swell of its surface to the terrestrial world it veiled. It was such a country as we might see in dreams, with all the delights of paradise. . . . It was a favor for which to be forever silent to be shown this vision. . . . But when its own sun began to rise on this pure world, I found myself a dweller in the dazzling halls of Aurora . . . and near at hand the far-darting glances of the god.

[A childhood anecdote suggests something of the mystic mind that grew in him. When she found him still awake one evening, his mother asked,] "Why, Henry dear, why don't you go to sleep?" "Mother," [said he,] "I have been looking through the stars to see if I couldn't see God behind them."

[Later in his *Journal*, Thoreau wrote:] Walked to Walden last night (moon not quite full). . . . As I climbed the hill again toward my old beanfield, I listened to the ancient, familiar, immortal, dear cricket sound under all others, hearing at first some distinct chirps; but when these ceased I was aware of the

general earth-song, which my hearing had not heard, amid which these were only taller flowers in a bed, and I wondered if behind or beneath this there was not some other chant yet more universal.

—the *Journal* of
Henry David Thoreau

Thanksgiving Day 1831

I felt within myself great power, and generosity, and tenderness; but it seemed to me as if they were all unrecognized, and as if it was impossible that they should be used in life. I was only one-and twenty; the past was worthless, the future hopeless, yet I could not remember ever voluntarily to have done a wrong thing, and my aspiration seemed very high.

Suddenly the sun shone out with that transparent sweetness like the last smile of a dying lover, which it will use when it has been unkind all of a cold autumn day. I saw there was no self; that selfishness was all folly, and the result of circumstance; that it was only because I thought self real that I suffered; that I had only to live in the idea of the All, and all was mine. This truth came to me, and I received it unhesitatingly; so that I was for that hour taken up into God.

I have never wept so for grief of my own, as now for yours. No child, except little Waldo Emerson, had I ever so loved. . . . The conditions of this planet are not propitious to the lovely, the just, the pure; it is these that go away; it is the unjust that triumph.

It is vain by prudence to seek to evade the stern assaults of Destiny. I submit. . . . Say to those I leave behind that I was willing to die. I have suffered in life far more than I enjoyed, and I think quite out of proportion with the use of my living here . . . to others. I have wished to be natural and true, but the world was not in harmony with me—nothing came right for me. I think the spirit that governs the Universe must have in reserve for me a sphere where I can develop more freely, and be happier—on earth circumstances do not promise this before my forces shall be too much lavished to make a better path truly avail me. Say to all that should

any accident possible to these troubled times transfer me to another scene of existence, they need not regret it. There must be better worlds than this,—where innocent blood is not ruthlessly shed, where treason does not so easily triumph, where the greatest and the best are not crucified.

—letter written on
Thanksgiving Day 1831,
by Margaret Fuller

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

I walked home in a shivering daze, up hill and down. Later I lay open-mouthed in bed, my arms flung wide at my sides to steady the whirling darkness. At this latitude I'm spinning 836 miles an hour round the earth's axis; I often fancy I feel my sweeping fall as a breakneck arc like the dive of dolphins, and the hollow rushing of wind raises hair on my neck and the side of my face. In orbit around the sun I'm moving 64,800 miles an hour. The solar system as a whole, like a merry-go-round unhinged, spins, bobs and blinks at the speed of 43,200 miles an hour along a course set east of Hercules. Someone has piped, and we are dancing a tarantella until the sweat pours. I open my eyes and I see dark, muscled forms curl out of water, with flapping gills and flattened eyes. I close my eyes and I see stars, deep stars giving way to deeper stars, deeper stars bowing to deepest stars at the crown of an infinite cone.

—*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*
by Annie Dillard

Holy the Firm

There is one church here, so I go to it. . . . The members are of mixed denominations; the minister is a Congregationalist, and wears a white shirt. The man knows God. Once, in the middle of the long pastoral prayer of intercession for the whole world . . . in the middle of this he stopped, and burst out, "Lord, we bring these same petitions every week." After a shocked pause, he continued reading the prayer. Because of this, I like him very much. . . . We had a wretched singer once, a guest from a

Canadian congregation, a hulking blond girl with chopped hair and big shoulders, who wore tinted spectacles and a long lacy dress, and sang, grinning, to faltering accompaniment, an entirely secular song about mountains. Nothing could have been more apparent that that God loved this girl; nothing could more surely convince me of God's unending mercy than the continued existence on earth of the church.

—*Holy the Firm* by Annie Dillard

The Color Purple

Here's the thing, say Shug. The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. . . .

It? I ast.

Yeah, It. God ain't a he or a she, but a It.

But what do it look like? I ast.

Don't look like nothing, she say. It ain't a picture show. It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found it. . . .

[O]ne day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and cried and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it. It sort of like you know what, she say, grinning and rubbing high up on my thigh.

Shug! I say.

Oh, she say. God love all them feelings. That's some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves 'em you enjoys 'em a lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that's going, and praise God by liking what you like.

God don't think it dirty? I ast.

Naw, she say. God made it. Listen, God love everything you love—and a mess of stuff you don't. But more than anything else, God love admiration.

You saying God vain? I ast.

Naw, she say. Not vain, just wanting to share a good thing. I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it.

—*The Color Purple* by Alice Walker

Facing Grief

Religious experience for me combines the aesthetic and the supernatural. The deepest feeling of this sense comes when I look at the stars. I realized this last summer when our family camped on Wellesley Island. Because my father was in the hospital, I was in daily contact with my mother, 300 miles away in New Jersey. At the point we left on our trip the doctors seemed unable to find a medication that was effective. My father's condition was worsening, but my mother did not want me to come.

Every night around 10:00 p.m., I would drive to the public phone in the camp parking lot. By that time of night, the lights were off and the area deserted. As I stood talking on the pay phone, I looked up at the stars which were bright and undiminished by clouds or city lights. When I had finished the conversation, I studied them. I suddenly felt connected to life, and to space. I thought, "If Dad dies, the stars will still be there. He has seen them, and I have, and ancient peoples did and my children will when they are old. If he could look out now, these same stars and the same sky would be above him." I felt powerful in this discovery and comforted, and at the same time small and awed. Part of it was the beauty of the night and the darkness combined with the oddness of telephoning my mother from the middle of it. Part of it was the worry about death and separation, but I retained the sense of peace, wonder, and reassurance at being simultaneously connected to life and to death. My father recovered, but I believe that when I face grief, I will use the memory of that night to help deal with it. Unitarian [Universalism] helps all reflective experience to become religious experience.

—"Facing Grief" by a class member

Two Valley Experiences

I have had a number of interesting revelations in relation to nature and science and just fell off a unique 10 month plateau of delight, but my strongest experiences were way down in the valley: In the early '60's, Bill [her late husband] and I went to the first performance of Benjamin Britton's *War Requiem* in Lincoln Center with nothing but trivial concerns on our minds. Bill's annoyance at our last row seats turned to relief. Too far to see the performers or hear their words, I realized immediately from the music, which alternated between religious and secular sections, how deeply detached ritualized religion was from the dirt and despair of real men in a real war. As the music poured in, tears of hopelessness and sorrow poured out. All I had in my pocket was a white sock from the day's laundry to mop them up. Soon after that, organized religion sprouted strong and effective peace movements.

In the 1970's, witnessing a small church service in the Andes unleashed a similar sorrow. The poorly dressed parishioners were in a daze from chewing coca leaves. The priest, resplendent in white and gold, tinsel bells and twirled incense before them. After the mass, the people scattered rose petals at his feet as he came down the aisle. He didn't respond to them in any way. His face was cold and his vestments dirty. He disappeared behind a door as the people shuffled out, each in his private cloud. That experience couldn't have been worth more than a credit or two in the next world for them. For me, it meant buckets of sorrowful tears for this universal tragedy. Here again in a few years I began to hear of liberation theology in the South American Catholic church.

—"Two Valley Experiences"
by a class member

Grace and Insight

Do Unitarian Universalists have religious experiences? We sure do. Many must have, as I do, spells of *grace*, i.e., all of a sudden, for no apparent reason, everything seems to be OK—worries fade in importance. Calm arrives. Similar moments are of *insight*, i.e., all of a

sudden an explanation for some trouble or joy seems clear. Aha! That's the way that works!

I sat in this church one Sunday twenty or so years ago and had a profound sense of *it is*. This is the way things are—beautiful and ugly and I am those things too. This was followed a year or so later by a jolting thought. *What is?* and I began to examine the details of my [God's] world—nature in all its variety. It took me longer to fit people into my growing understanding than it did to reflect on non-human nature.

I sometimes feel that the understanding which is growing in my soul, which joins all the big outside world view and mystical considerations with the simple here and now, is like a lens which I am gradually bringing into focus (I hope I haven't wrecked my spiritual work by trying to enunciate it).

—"Grace and Insight" by a class member

Over the Long, High Wall

There is another and slightly different kind of experience that I have had, though rarely and even then only in later life. I may have been deceiving myself, but here it is, for what it is worth. Unlike the others on these occasions I have been recalling a person or a scene as clearly and as sharply as I could, and then there has been, so to speak, a little click, a slight change of focus, and for a brief moment I have felt as if the person or scene were not being remembered but were really there still existing, that nobody, nothing, had gone. I can't make this happen; either it happens or it doesn't, and usually it doesn't. And, I repeat, on the very rare occasions when apparently it did happen, I could have been deceiving myself: I am now wide open to the charge. Even so, if you think that what I have related is worth nothing, then I am more fortunate than you are—I live a richer life in a more rewarding universe.

—"Over the Long, High Wall"
by J. B. Priestley

Moses and the Burning Bush

While Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, he

led the flock to the western side of the desert, and came to the mountain of God, Horeb. Then the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire, rising out of a bush. He looked, and there was the bush burning with fire without being consumed! So Moses said, "I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to look at it, God called to him out of the bush. "Moses, Moses!" he said. "Here I am!" said he. "Do not come near here," he said, "take your sandals off your feet; for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. I am the God of your father," he said, "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Then Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look at God.

—Exodus 3:1–12

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