

The Mystical Nature of Ordinary Consciousness

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In 1985, some two years after discovering Unitarian Universalism at First Parish in Canton, Massachusetts, in the summer before my husband's father died unexpectedly, two years before my husband's business burnt to the ground, and three years before I was diagnosed with cervical cancer, my minister, Rev. Anita Farber-Robertson recommended that I attend *New England Leadership School*. My only child was a boy of ten. In my work life I was transitioning from thirteen years of consulting to parents of newborns to becoming a therapist to whole families. I was feeling undone and lost professionally and new-found and newborn in my church. As a “wet behind the ears” UU and new chair of the Membership Committee I came to *NELS* anticipating becoming a more effective leader with a tool-kit of skills.

I arrived for that week at a former Shaker community in Enfield, NH bringing favorite poetry, music, and the *Portable Jung* I was reading at the time. On the first evening, after the usual introductions, Rev. Carl Scovel directed a spiritual autobiography program. He instructed us to draw pictures of God as we conceived God over our lifespan. I don't remember exactly what I drew, but I do remember being happy to begin with a playful, internal task. In the second evening, after a full day of listening and talking, Carl invited us to “let an altar build itself” somewhere on the grounds. Influenced by the Jung I was reading and at the same time willing to be obedient to the instruction, I was intrigued to listen to the rocks, trees, and water and awaited *their* leadership. In this energy of surrender, an inner voice revealed itself—the voice of a younger self, a self still familiar from long-ago days on the beach or in a playroom.

From the point of view of this child-like self, the as yet un-built altar knew what it needed. I found myself in a stream, well away from the sight or sound of any of the other participants. The stream was full of very smooth stones. A freshly broken rectangular rock stood out and asked to be the center of the altar. I moved it to the center of the rushing stream and placed a delicate fern on its flat surface. I heard my inner voice playfully suggest that this fern stood for the “seed of life.” I imagined that this was some celebration of a primal human arrangement in symbol—the rock newly separate and the fern frond so delicate and full of possibility. As I dabbled in meanings, the stream's rushing water lifted and carried away the green fern. I placed a piece of smoky white quartz atop the fern in hopes that it would hold it safely. I noticed as the small stone stood upon the delicate and bright green fronds that they were both washed and nourished by the rushing, dappled water.

In that moment of intentional placement and attention to beauty, I discovered that the altar appreciated being delightful as well as stable. Still, despite this beauty of rock and fern under glittering water, the force of the stream was determined to carry the fern away from the altar. Now with a sense of purpose, I found myself gathering the large smooth stones from the stream bed and encircling the fragile and delightful altar. As I placed them I heard my childlike-self saying, “each stone stands for an ancestor's learning, learning that protected your life-energy from forces in reality that might carry you off into chaos.” Finally, a quiet pool of gently flowing water washed the fern as it sat upon the altar. The fern was safe. Potential was protected.

I innocently asked, in the space of that satisfaction, “I wonder what I am so afraid of?” Before the question was fully formed I was overcome with enormous terror. I felt absolutely unglued—in free fall in a bottomless world with my skin on fire. Every cell of my body screamed as if the world were about to end. I was totally blind and deaf in a tumult of panic that threatened to have no end. As quickly as the terror began, a sense of calm astonishment returned. The stream, the rocks, the altar came back into focus and I felt my feet under me as they were washed by the cold stream's water. I returned to a state of coherent consciousness—ordinary reality. I smiled, then laughed aloud as I realized that this state of coherent, so-called “ordinary” consciousness, is fragile and *not created by my will alone*.

This encounter with knowing that I am being organized by something other than the small self that I thought ran the show came into me like the best joke I'd ever heard. I felt like Scrooge on Christmas morning. I wanted, like Scrooge to do somersaults and stand on my head singing, "I don't know anything, I never did know anything, but now I know that I don't know, all on a Christmas morning." After being undone by laughter, gratitude followed right behind. Then came awe.

I enjoyed the rest of *NELS* without sharing this experience with any of the other participants or leaders. At the end of a full week, I drove south toward home and heard *another* inner voice—the voice of an inner elder, suggesting that I could be a Unitarian Universalist minister. I kept that whispered possibility to myself for several years. When I returned to my normal routine at home, I told my therapist about the experience in the stream. I felt shame in the week after that session. I felt as if I'd broken some “mental health rule” or might be ridiculed for taking myself so seriously or imagining that I could name this as a *religious experience*. I appreciate that she never laughed at or trivialized or explained or medicated the experience. Experiencing her neutral respect gave me the opportunity to return to the memory of building that altar again and again.

In the course of those returns, I re-membered the truth of my utter dependence on something beyond my control. As the years piled on loss after loss—the destruction of my husband's business by a fire, the first death of a parent, living with the diagnosis and treatment of cancer, I learned how to return to that mental altar. No matter how much turmoil, I could, in a moment, be grasped by the sun's glimmer on a puddle. I could remember and trust that my attention was being shaped by a force beyond the difficulties of the immediate arising conditions. Now with years of practice, I know that coherence is fragile and temporary. I know that attention to beauty in the company of my ancestors restores my soul. I know that experiencing coherent and “ordinary” reality is a mystical experience.