

A FORMATIVE PERSONAL MYSTICAL OR RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE
Fred Gillis, Greenfield Group Fall Convocation
November 28, 2005

When I was about 16 I discovered on the shelves in our home a book called The Story of Philosophy by Will Durant. As I began to read in it I was most intrigued with the ideas of a 17th century Sephardic Jew named Baruch Spinoza. I discovered that this outlook had a name -- pantheism--made perfect sense to me in declaring that the universe could be divine, that the physical world could be the body of God. I shared my excitement over my findings with the young student minister of our little Unitarian church in Dorchester, This minister encouraged me to explore further. His name was Victor Carpenter. This began an understanding of the world that was mystical in nature. It wasn't a set of feelings however as much as it was a rational way of making sense out of the world.

At the same time I explored Hinduism and was excited that I was in some sense God. Meanwhile I came across Emerson's essays in high school English class, and though I was excited about the concept of an Oversoul which united all human souls. I didn't say much about it to my strongly Catholic English teacher. Not long afterwards, I came across excerpts from Martin Buber's I and Thou in a wonderful anthology called, I believe, Three Existential Theologians I didn't claim to understand Buber but certain paragraphs jumped off the pages as profoundly true. The same book introduced me to another theologian, Paul Tillich, whose concept of God as the "ground of being" got me wrestling with my earlier pantheism.(The third section in the anthology was the Eastern Orthodox theologian Nicholas Berdyaev, who didn't turn me on at all!)

As I read more of Buber I found more depth in the paradox of a God who could be both wholly Other than this world and wholly Same as this world. And then I discovered Walt Whitman's poetry that called up my earlier pantheistic structure of reality -- "I find letters from God drop'd in the street and every one is signed by God's own name..;

I was always a once-born person. My theological outlooks changed gradually rather than precipitously. One of the major things I valued in growing up in a Unitarian Church was not having to undo my thinking when something intellectually intriguing came along. So changes came about slowly and easily. Theology was my continuous attempt to make rational sense of my religious beliefs. But it was only marginally "mystical" though I did think of Emerson, Buber, and Whitman as "worldly mystics." To me their outlooks were clearly rational, not based on feelings or emotions, Only rarely did something come along that I could label as mystical or at least a "peak experience" (Maslow). Most of these were experiences in nature, One was evoked by a Shakespeare play.

Most of the time now I am like William James as quoted by Leigh Eric Schmidt.

"I have no living sense of commerce with a god...I envy those who have for I know that the addition of such a sense would help me greatly."

I keep returning to what I already know rationally, though I know that reason is not enough. But the mystical sense of the oneness of all arouses me from time to time. Am I a mystic who insists on rationalizing my feelings or am I a rationalist who tries to accomodate my mystical moments into a rational world-view?