

On the Edge of Dreaming
Luke 9:28-36

On the edge of dreaming.

That's how I envision the disciples in Luke's telling of this event we call the Transfiguration.

“Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep;

but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him”.

They were exhausted, having spent time with Jesus among the crowds,
and now taking this much-needed introvert time away in the mountains.

They were “weighed down” with sleep,

much like some of you who's Saturday night went a little longer than allows for a chipper Sunday morning.

They were *on the thin edge*.

There is something that can happen in that thin time,

that hazy space between dawn and dusk,

that perimeter between waking and sleeping.

This may be the only time when I encourage you to try to get in touch with that particular place during a sermon.

Try to melt into the pew, soften your eyelids and try to experience that perhaps familiar sense of in-between.

Relax. Know the disciples' feeling of being weighed down.

Listen, and actually give in to your body's sometime tendency to let go. Meet the edge.

Because I want to tell you stories;

to take you through time;

to lead you through this wonder and others.

I want you to try to suspend your disbelief and allow yourself to open to that perimeter of possibility.

I know many of us here live strongly in our metaphorical interpretations of the Bible,

and I do not want to contradict that.

I only want to take you – with Peter and John and James –

into the story, and to the edge of dreaming...

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*Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.*

*And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed,*

*and his clothes became dazzling white.*

*Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him.*

*They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.*

*Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep;*

*but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him.*

*Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus,*

*“Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”*

*—not knowing what he said.*

*While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them;*

*and they were terrified as they entered the cloud.*

*Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”*

*When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone.*

*And they kept silent*

*and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.*

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Mystical vision can be a frightening experience. Hearing voices, even more so.

It can make you think yourself a little crazy –

maybe that's how the disciples felt and why they “told no one of the things they had seen”.

And yet *mysticism* is by definition the direct apprehension of the Divine;
and a *mystic* one who experiences direct apprehensions of the divine by immediate intuition.¹
The disciples are having just such a direct apprehension.

What do we, 21st century rational Christians, know of mystics?
Evelyn Underhill, Upton Lecturer on the Philosophy of Religion at Manchester College, Oxford at the turn of the
20th century, once asked,
“What do we really mean by mysticism?...
A word which is impartially applied to the performance of mediums and the ecstasies of the saints, to...
sorcery, dreamy poetry and medieval art, to prayer and palmistry [sic]...
soon ceases to have any useful meaning”.²

It’s true. Being overused, having been applied to all such seeming “hooey” (to use a technical term), mystical
experience for some has lost its connection to the Holy Spirit and become easier for us to relegate to the false, to
“1-900-psychic”, or to professional mental care practitioners.

Need all such mysterious and awe-full encounters be viewed with disbelief?
Are there any we can allow ourselves to,
with half-closed eyes and bodies full of weight,
apprehend beyond the processes of our minds
and let seep into the wholeness of our spiritual beings?

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We Protestants have begun to reclaim the messages and insights of mystics:  
We read Paul (from the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD), formerly the skeptic Saul, whose blinding-light conversion on the  
Damascus road paved the way for the first writings of our New Testament;  
Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), a visionary whose sacred chants have re-emerged and which we’ve  
used as an invitation to silent prayer in worship;  
Meister Eckhart (1260-1372), theologian who divined concepts of metaphysics and spiritual  
psychology, and whose wisdom we now pass to others on greeting cards;  
Julian of Norwich (1343-about 1416), who saw visions of Divine Love and heard  
Christ offering the comfort “that all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all  
manner of thing shall be well”;  
St. John of the Cross (1542-1591), the poet and Carmelite friar whose Dark  
Night of the Soul has been a means of healing in both psychological and  
spiritual realms.

Encountering Holy Mystery: this was the disciples’ experience in Jesus’ transfiguration on that mountain.  
Encountering Holy Mystery was the experience of these mystics.  
Holy Mystery continued to be experienced and wondered at and claimed over hundreds of years.  
Can we still encounter it?

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In yet another time, in another age, our ancestors in faith on the Congregational side deepened in longing for a
sensual experience of God.

In the 1700’s the Great Awakening awakened people’s senses
to hear God still speaking to them,
to see God’s light emanating from the world around,
and to feel the Holy Spirit’s warmth within.

Jonathan Edwards remains one of the most well-known preachers of that period, and a major thrust of his sermons
reveals that he encouraged an overwhelming awareness of the divine.

He described his own conversion experience as a “sense of the glory of the Divine Being”.

In a sermon entitled “A Divine and Supernatural Light” –
which would equally fit the luminous description of Jesus in today’s reading of Luke – Edwards proposed

“There is a difference between having an opinion,
that God is holy and gracious,
and having a sense of the loveliness and beauty of that holiness and grace”.³

Yet to temper the Holy Spirit experience of conversion or sensual knowledge of God –
these visions and messages –

Edwards’ writings have shown that his “exaltation of the affections was never at the expense of reason”.⁴
He was quick to point out that not all raptures were divine, not all high emotions were holy.

So how do we discern?

How can we weigh the vision of infusing light and the sound of a call against the need for reason and the tempering of knowledge?

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I have one final time period to journey through with you.

This past week I was talking with a clergy colleague, and he began sharing, a bit timidly at first, about the Holy Spirit’s very real presence on the path to his current call.

He is minister of a large UCC church; but before coming there, he had been searching, seeking a place for ministry, and none had worked out. One didn’t choose to work with him, another he didn’t choose to work with; some just didn’t fit his gifts and others didn’t fit his goals.

But when interviewing for this one church, where he currently serves, he told how he’d visited and asked to sit in the sanctuary to pray for a little while.

As he prayed, he slowly began to feel a sense of being wrapped up,  
as if two arms had encircled his body and held him closely, strongly, lovingly.

And as he sat held, he heard a voice that affirmed:  
this was the place where he was to serve.

You might expect to hear such stories more openly told in Pentecostal churches rather than in the UCC;  
we tend not to speak of such mystery.

But if you ask, you will find many rational, thoughtful, intelligent people  
who have apprehended the mystery of the Holy Spirit –  
we just find it harder to talk about it.

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Acknowledging a Spirit, a Divine aspect to life –

claiming a God whose mystery is inherent to our lives as the unknown *how* and *why* –
this is a part of the journey we are on as Christians.

Sometimes we must allow for the mystery that *is* the Holy Spirit!

We must *be* in its presence,

 dwell with it a moment on the edge of dreaming
before jumping for answers and conclusions and actions –

 like Peter, just wanting to build, not knowing what to say.

Rather than jumping in,

 let us bask in the dazzling light coming from one we thought we knew –
 the Jesus standing before us on the mountaintop –

 who we respect in his gritty reality of justice-preaching and leper-touching,
 for his depth of awareness in story-telling and wisdom-teaching.

¹ *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*.

² From the Foreword by Ira Progoff in Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Preeminent Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*

³ Quoted in John Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism 1620-1957*, p. 187.

⁴ George M. Marsden, *John Edwards: A Life*, p. 282.