

REV ART LESTER “Mystics Wanted: Apply Within”

UUFJ online service, Sunday, April 11, 2021

ART’S WORDS THROUGHOUT THE SERVICE

Opening Words: Come in now, and be comfortable. Join us here in cyberspace. Loosen the straps and buckles that hold you together all week, let go the striving and the shirking that drive us through the daily round of life. Sit back, put your feet well under this table of surprises. Arrive here now, and be among us, among friends, as we begin again that most mysterious and yet familiar search of all. Let it be meaningful, let it be fulfilling, and—oh yes—let it be fun as well.

Chalice Lighting: This lamp guides our footsteps when they falter.
This lamp shines in our windows, as a beacon.
This lamp warms the heart of our worship.
This lamp has shone always, but now is ours to tend.

Meditation and Prayer: Let us now do what our souls know we have come for. Let us attempt the impossible, and do it in good faith, fitting a renewing act of springtime. Let us peer fearlessly beneath the contours of our lives and find there something that will make us whole...

There are times when our logic fails us, when our distractions lose their power, when there is only one place to rest our hearts. Though we have tried so many times before, let us find new purpose for the search. Let us put aside the numbing negativity, the gnawing cynicism, the weight of doubt... Let us know, as we really have always known, that the source of being is not far from this moment, and that we can touch the ground of our being by the simple purification of our intentions...

Now, our bodies peaceful and relaxed, our minds clear and open, let us reach, not with straining hands on tiptoe, but with the assurance that what we seek is here is within our grasp, is always within our grasp. Let us find in this moment that we make sacred the truth we thirst for. Let us go together now, sure in our welcome, into the good silence...

SILENCE

That which we have heard and seen and understood, let us carry with us in good heart. That which we have missed, let us continue to wait for. That which we have been given, let us give. Eternal Spirit, close friend of our deepest selves, stay with us. So be it. Insh’Allah, shalom, AMEN

Sermon: Mystics Wanted- Apply Within

Should I say something about the pandemic? Maybe I should, since it's on everybody's mind. But—you know what? I'm sick of the pandemic. Not sick from Covid-19, thank God, but from a sort of heartsickness that comes from this year of separation from people I love, and the work I've chosen to do.

I was talking to a guy recently, a really intelligent man who knows all about film and things like that. When, inevitably, it came out that I'm a minister, I could feel the mood in the room change. It always happens that way. Nowadays, with a very few exceptions, intelligent people are not supposed to be religious.

I usually wait a while before telling people what I do. I want to give them a chance to weigh and measure me before the iron curtain of skepticism slams down on the conversation. I don't try to conceal it, mind you—I'm proud of what I do. When the time comes, I'll usually contribute a remark that blows my cover. I did that on Wednesday night.

That accounts for the look of puzzlement on his face. It also produced the same old response: "That's interesting." I suppose that it was interesting because until that moment he had assumed that I was also intelligent, and, therefore, way past the silly business of religion, God, the afterlife and all that.

After years of this, I'm tired of making excuses, saying things like "We're so liberal that the Council of Churches won't have us," or "Unitarians don't believe in all that stuff about heaven and hell either." Now I just let the fact settle into the relationship. Sometimes things go on uninterrupted, and sometimes I get the same sort of treatment a disabled person must sometimes experience: a careful avoidance of anything related to their little "problem". Some people are careful to avoid swear words, which is a pity, because they are sometimes very useful.

After thinking about it nearly all of my adult life, I think I understand why this particular form of secular disbelief is ruling OK. It has to do with out-of-date stories.

When most of the world's religions were born, things were different. The Earth was the centre of the universe, for one thing. The world wasn't yet even thought to be round. There was so much that people didn't understand that the world was full of spirits and terrifying forces with no explanations. That gave rise to stories.

Stories about God in our Western tradition started out with Him being a king. Very powerful, boss of the world. Not necessarily cruel, but jealous and a bit capricious, so that he

required a lot of flattery and sacrifices—sometimes human ones. He was the biggest, baddest god of the lot, and being one of his followers ensured victory, give or take a few setbacks. This made perfect sense to a people dominated by powerful figures and empires. Some of that way of thinking is still around today, if you listen to the Old Testament language used in military prayers.

But things went wrong when the Jews were subjugated and then scattered by the Romans and the Greeks. The young men of Israel were slaughtered during the Maccabean revolt. The temple at Jerusalem was burnt and then torn down. About that time, Jesus put new spin on religion: God wasn't a king; He was a loving father. If you suffered on Earth, that was ultimately OK, because heaven awaited you. This was the perfect story to give rise to a feudal epoch, where almost everybody experienced hard times and died young. You don't have to look very far to see the remains of that world view in what's left of mainstream Christianity.

We began to lose the thread of that story when science and technology made their appearance. Machines shredded the youth of both sides during the Great War. The fresh air of rural farming became the smog of overcrowded cities. People noticed that the Earth went around the Sun, not vice-versa. Darwin found fossils. The holy book began to lose its authority, despite the rear guard philosophising of the loyal believers.

A new story had emerged. That's the one we're in now. Science can explain everything—just give it time. Life is limited to the regeneration sequence of organs. Death has become a medical condition, not the subject of poetry and philosophical reflection. Lifespans are predictable. That means it's good to be young—near the beginning—and bad to be old—near the end. Forget the accumulation of wisdom that had always been attributed to elders; what was needed was information, available with a few touches on a flat screen.

And God? He took the last train for the Coast. We don't need Him any more.

That's why, if people suspect you're religious, they think you're mad or retarded. It's as if you've not been paying attention. It's only natural for the non-religious to think that you're still stuck in one of those vanished stories, where God is a king who lives in heaven, or a loving father who somehow, inexplicably, allows things like cancer and infant suicide.

All too often, I hear the same remark from people trying to reconcile my status as a religious person to what seems to be an intelligent mind: "I'm all for religion, if the faith gives people comfort." This isn't meant to be condescending, but it is. They might as well be saying, "I'm all for drugs, if they take the pain away." Like marijuana being all right to treat glaucoma, but not for fun.

It seems that the story we now inhabit demands a scientific and logical approach to everything. Which would be fine if people just used one part of their brains, weren't troubled with dreams and fantasies, intuitions and hunches, deep emotions and great fears. In other words, if we were a kind of organic machine, which—I hate to break this to you—the prevailing world view says that we are.

Alongside the stories we have lived in, both ancient and modern, there has always existed another train of thought. This is most often referred to as mystical or esoteric thought. It has had voices in literally every culture throughout history: Christian, Jewish, Muslim and all the Eastern religions.

Mystical thought has very little to do with theology—opinions about God. Instead of interpreting life in terms of the prevailing stories, it relies on experiences and then tries to express those experiences in words. And art. And music.

Mystical experience is a shortcut to truth. It leaves behind theory and doctrine and dogma and cuts to the chase. That's probably why the deep thinkers from every religious tradition wind up sounding remarkably alike, despite distance from each other in time and space. Mystics live within their own times, of course, and so sometimes fall afoul of local traditions and laws. One of my favourite sayings is by Hafiz, a Sufi Muslim venerated by Hindus, who said, "Before setting foot on the path of truth, it may be necessary to be chased out of town as a madman."

I'm not a madman. Neither are you. But now I'm going to tell you something shocking. Get ready: you're all mystics.

Yes, that's what I said. If you don't believe me, listen to this definition of mysticism from the unimpeachable Wikipedia:

"...the pursuit of communion with, identity with, or conscious awareness of an ultimate reality, divinity, spiritual truth, or God through direct experience, intuition, instinct or insight. Mysticism usually centers on practices intended to nurture those experiences."

You're mystics, because you come here and open your ears and your hearts, even though you know all too well that I can't give you the one and only truth. You're here knowing that the holy books—take your pick—can't do that either. If I had to name a single reason why you're sitting out there today, I would say that you're operating on a hunch. Something that defies ordinary logic. Something that flies in the face of convention, because you're in the four per cent of British people who go to church. Something that reaches you on a level either above or below mere logic.

And if you ever wonder why new people will appear here for a while, sit among you and share chat and coffee with you afterwards and then disappear for good, then I can tell you. It's because they didn't share your hunch. Maybe they wanted us to pass out certainty along with the biscuits, or unlock some secret formula for happiness, long life and healing. Instead what they got was an invitation to open their ears and minds, to peer hopefully into the unknowable mystery we call life, and to follow their own unique paths. In other words, to become mystics. As to why we can't fill this place every Sunday like the fundamentalists can, the answer is simple: weirdos like us have always been in short supply.

As mystics, you're not bothered by the claims that religion is a form of delusory comfort-seeking. The barely restrained sneers of the new atheists, who claim that they only want humanity to grow up, have no more effect than the foolish repeating of the old Christian myths. That speaks of a tendency toward balance, treading a line between the opposites. Meher Baba said that "spirituality is poise". I take that to mean that neither the steely logic of the rationalist nor the hyper-emotional states of the "born again" attract us enough to tip us over. I think it also means that truth, hard enough to find in any case, cannot be expressed in formulae or creeds.

The second part of the definition of mysticism I just gave you is interesting. The bit about "centring on practices intended to nurture those experiences."

People often ask me what we do in our services. For years now, I've had to answer, a bit lamely, that we sing and pray and endure sermons. Aware that I'm making it sound just like any Methodist or Anglican service, I haven't been able to say what the differences are. Then I began to realise that things I've noticed over the years tell the story. People hear things in my sermons that I didn't say, things I'm not wise enough to say. People ask me after the service for a copy of a reading I did, then look puzzled when they have it, because the reading they heard came from somewhere else, somewhere inside themselves. And I've noticed that a stray word picked up over coffee seems to have conveyed a meaning and significance that trumped the sermon, anyway.

It's as if we come already tuned to another channel. And that channel is a special wave length broadcast exclusively for the solitary listener. If your reception is good, the message is clear. All that noise about whether God exists or not, and in what form, and known by what name, is nothing but a distraction. What I know, maybe all I know, is that the signal is always there, waiting for me to tune in.

If I was God, planning a universe, here's what I'd do. I'd fill up history with amazing stories and astonishing facts. I'd pop up here and there with a bit of world-changing revelation and allow religions and kingdoms to come and go. I'd let myself be called King, Dad and then Science. I'd let people confuse information with wisdom and dogma with truth

and sit back and wait and watch the story unfold. But because I loved everything about my creation— the great dream from which I drew my existence-- I'd do something lovely for every creature in it. I'd whisper to them constantly, and wait for them to clear their ears of distractions and learn to listen.

And I'd keep places like ours open, so that weirdos like us have someplace to go.

AMEN

FINAL WORDS

Now we turn to go, back to the door we came in. Whether we have been comforted or troubled, or shaken or stirred, made lost or feel found, let us turn from this hour with minds more open and hearts more tender and with hands more willing.

Let us go out into a world transformed by our seeing and made more just and decent by our deeds.

And for this, let us look after one another because we know we can. Until we meet again.
Amen.

