

## What is Transcendence and Why Does it Matter?

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For many of us who left a more mainstream faith community behind and along with it, outmoded beliefs about an “all-knowing” deity, the idea of relating to the transcendent might seem off-putting or irrelevant. The same could be said for those who grew up without a religious orientation or belief. However, we humans, and other sentient beings, are biologically wired to experience awe, wonder, ecstasy, delight, or whatever word you like to describe transcendence. Since that state of consciousness is universal, we can conclude it must have survival value. The biological evidence appears to be that such states induce us to become more generous, caring, and more community oriented. For many, and perhaps especially for those who do not believe in a traditional God, this state of transcendence can enhance a sense of meaning and connection. The word transcendence comes from two Latin words, “*trans*,” meaning “beyond,” and “*scandare*,” meaning, “to climb.” When we transcend, we climb beyond our ordinary consciousness.

The Positive Psychologist Abraham Maslow hypothesized that what he called “peak experiences,” just another name for transcendence, is the foundation from which religions came to be. Maslow said,

Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos.

To relate to people and nature as an “end” implies we don’t use but instead appreciate. You may be familiar with mystic Martin Buber’s terms of “I-Thou” and “I-it.” When we relate to others in “I-Thou” mode we are relating as an end in itself, relating just for the sake of relating. Maslow believed that religions exist to promote the experience of transcendence among their followers. Along with others including Emerson, Maslow opined religions often veered away from this basic purpose only to get caught up too often in dogma and meaningless rules and rituals. Emerson left the Unitarian faith and founded the Transcendentalist movement because he could not bring himself to perform communion, to him a meaningless ritual. He believed that institutional religions and their rituals were in fact a barrier to the experience of the transcendent. He felt that spiritual experiences happened in nature and not in churches. Emerson devoted most of his life to delivering this message through the Transcendentalist movement.

UU minister Kendyl Gibbons said the transcendent experience, “precedes theology of any variety,” meaning that you do not need to follow any religion to have it. She also assures us that these experiences are entirely natural. In an article she wrote for the UU World several years ago she encouraged us to seek out what she called “moments of primal reverence,” and then share those experiences with others. Sharing with others she said, helps to deepen the sense of meaning that can be derived. Gibbons tells us that each of us is responsible to determine how we use the experiences, but other people can help us make sense of what we experienced.

UU's have not lost sight of Emerson's concern that religions can work in opposition to awe and wonder. The alternative to religion that Emerson founded, Transcendentalism, influenced the selection of the first UU Source. The first of the Six Sources that UU's have regarded as part of our living tradition states as follows:

Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.

For me this statement shows transcendent experiences can function to assist, "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning," our current Fourth Principle. I also see transcendence as closely tied to our current Seventh Principle concerning "the independent web of existence of which we are a part." These ideas form the core of my personal spirituality and ethics. I am a self-confessed mystic along with Emerson and Kendyl Gibbons. Incidentally, a mystic is simply a person who values and seeks transcendent experiences.

Here is a quote from Emerson's famous essay, "The Over-Soul" in which he expresses the transcendent as a cosmic unity:

...that Unity, that Over-soul, within which every [person's] particular being is contained and made one with all other; that common heart, of which all sincere conversation is the worship, to which all right action is submission; that overpowering reality which [allows us to] become wisdom, and virtue, and power, and beauty. We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. [However, within us] ... is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul.

The astonishing conclusion here is that there is only one soul, the Oversoul, and everything is contained in it. Emerson's transcendent experiences helped inform his spiritual life and animated the message he shared with the world. Emerson was much influenced by Eastern religions. And in a strange way Emerson and by extension many UU's, share with "born again Christians," that direct experience is essential to a spiritual life. Of course, we differ in how we interpret our transcendent experiences!

UU's also share much in common with the Buddhists. Experiencing unity rather than division into subject and object, is the core intension of Buddhist meditation. Buddhists refer to this state of transcendence as our "Buddha nature" on nirvana, a capacity that all of us are born with and all can access.

Of course, other religions promote transcendence and rely upon prayer, fasting, rituals, chanting and other methods to achieve this state. Additional ways of achieving transcendence include

music, being in a beautiful natural setting, falling in love, witnessing the birth of a child, and other experiences. Where and how do you experience transcendence? Psychedelic drugs promote transcendence too but with potential risks as I see it.

The early twentieth century psychologist and philosopher William James conducted a study of this state among people of various religious backgrounds. He published the results in a book called, The Varieties of Religious Experience. That a person doesn't have to be a follower of a particular religion to have a mystical or transcendent experience, was one of his core findings. This helps explain the fact that Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Native Americans and Muslims who have mystical experiences find they are compatible with their existing belief systems. Since James, researchers who have collected and studied such experiences across religions and cultures have noted several common aspects. I want to share this list with you in the hope you will find it interesting and useful. The source for my list comes from a book by Ullman and Ullman called, Moments of Enlightenment. I have added first person accounts to provide examples of each common aspect:

- **Interconnectedness and Ego Transcendence.** People describe a loss of personal identity and union with the infinite. There is a kind of merging, like feeling engulfed by an ocean. Maslow says about this that “the whole universe is perceived as a unified whole.” You will recall that Emerson’s “Oversoul” expresses this unity as well. Such experiences can have profound consequences and can alter a person’s life dramatically. Here is a self-report from Humanist Rev. Kendyl Gibbons whom I also quoted earlier:

You stand at the shore, with the waves beating out their rhythmic crash, and the water rushing almost to your feet, seeing nothing but the thin line of the horizon, where sea and sky meet. The distances suggest infinity, the ocean’s unfathomable depth and power, its ceaseless primordial force and mystery. The air too, moves in a huge current, and the soaring gulls catch light on the backs of their wings. Something within us unleashes and expands in that immensity, catching some hint of our finitude. The oneness of all life emerging from the sea’s embrace eons ago, the sovereign beauty and freedom of so much overwhelming space and light and sound.
- **Timelessness and Spaciousness.** Another common aspect. “There is a realization of the present moment as all there is and a sense of fluidity that pervades all of life.” Subjectively, time ceases to exist, and one merges with eternity. While hours might have passed on the clock, to the perceiver time seems to stop. Here is a quote from spiritual teacher, A. H. Almaas:

Essence is timelessness. I see time as the movement of timelessness within me. All of the time, the time of the body, and of all of physical existence, is a small process within me. I am beyond time....

Maslow says a day might pass as if were a few minutes and alternatively a few minutes passing might seem very much longer.

- **Acceptance.** One feels a sense of detachment from “personal desires, thoughts and feelings.” One surrenders to a sense “that all is transpiring according to a plan or randomness, that surpasses the individual will.” In the process of letting go, many describe a sense of peace and meaning in entering a larger frame of reality, other than oneself at the center. There is a sense of being comfortable in the world, a sense that lingers beyond the transcendent experience itself. “The world is accepted.”

Here is a quote from Robert Adams:

Everything was right just the way it was...People dying of cancer were in their right place, and nobody dies, and there is no cancer. Wars, man’s inhumanity to man was all part of it. There cannot be a creation if there is not an opposite to good.... I was able to understand these things.

- **Beyond Pleasure and Pain.** People who experienced transcendence describe, “rapture, ecstasy, love, or simply contentment” that overcomes suffering. For some there is a period of fear and or confusion that precedes this experience of peace. “Suffering exists but identifying with it does not.” One of the best examples of this comes from Eckhart Tolle, from the book, The Power of Now. Tolle says before finding transcendence he was living in a persistent and deep depression and frequently contemplated suicide. He found release from his emotional pain by letting go of “psychological time” and living in the present moment. As he described it, he was just at the point when he thought he could not stand to live any longer. In Tolle’s words, “I could feel myself being sucked into a void. It felt as if the void was inside myself rather than outside. Suddenly there was no more fear and I let myself fall into that void.”

- **Clarity.** “The enlightened mind is spontaneous, immediate, and flexible. Thoughts are clear and unencumbered...” Bernadette Roberts searched for spiritual truth first as a Christian nun, and later through Buddhist and Hindu literature. Finally, she found meaning in a series of transcendent experiences over a number of years. Here is part of what she said about what she found:

After a long passage, the mind came to understand and rest, and rejoice in its own understanding. Now [the mind] was ready, prepared, to take its rightful place in the immediacy and practicality of the [present] moment. No more searching, looking, retaining: no need to know that which it understands it can never know.

I take Roberts to mean that she was clear about what she or any of us can never know. And that alone was enormously reassuring to her and brought an end to her search.

- **Shattering of Preconceived Notions.** Rigidly held thoughts and narrow ideas give way to a broader, more open perspective. There is also for some, “a profound realization of emptiness, vastness, or nothingness.” William Blake said,

If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to [us] as it is, Infinite. For [we] closed [ourselves] up, till [we saw] all things through narrow chinks of [our] cavern.

I am thinking here of Plato's "allegory of the cave." Lynn-Claire Dennis talked about the powerful change that she underwent through a transcendent experience:

After learning that I was in essence a Being of Light, I had to come back into this world and reenter a dense, physical body. Furthermore, almost every belief I had embraced only hours before—that I was a physical being, that love was outside of me, that God was some patriarchal monarch sitting on a marble throne somewhere in the sky, that death was something to fear, that I was doomed by my past, that religion and spirituality were the same, that spirituality and science were different—was no longer true to my experience. Virtually every picture of reality I had used to define my existence—not to be confused with my life—had been cremated. The ashes of the woman I thought I was, were scattered on the wind.

In the Power of Myth conversations between journalist Bill Moyers and mythologist Joseph Campbell, Moyers asks Campbell if what all of us are seeking is the meaning of life. Here is Campbell's reply.

People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances with our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.

I take this to mean that Campbell believed that the deepest experiences we can have, the transcendent ones, are what lead us to a sense of meaning and purpose. Transcendent experience precedes meaning and it is up to us to determine for ourselves what such experiences mean.

I hope you can relate to this list of qualities of transcendent experiences. An important question to ask yourself about your experiences is, what meaning have you attached to them? Do you find there a lesson on how to pursue your life?

Some of you will remember a talk Shannon gave to us last month on the theme of "delight." She described in vivid detail the beauty of a spring morning with an abundance of flowers to look at and smell, and the sound of birds singing. Shannon is the lawyer working for the Powder River Basin Resource Council. She has devoted her life to using her knowledge and skills to fight for environmental causes. I suspect it is Shannon's delightful and transcendent connection to natural beauty that animates and informs her work.

I trust I have shown that transcendence is a valuable tool to any person seeking to deepen an experience of life and to find greater meaning and purpose. We will have 3 more presentations this month on transcendence. Since July has 5 Sundays, I thought it would be enriching if we could devote that last Sunday to sharing transcendent experiences with each other in lieu of a fifth presentation. I invite you to remember and perhaps to have more transcendent experiences during this month that we can share on our fifth Sunday. I hope that will be enriching for all of us.

