



Soul Matters

What does it mean to be
a people of MYSTERY?

What Does It Mean To Be A People of Mystery?

Unitarian Universalists love puzzles. We proudly announce that we are the religion that loves questions and questioning. Or to put it another way, we love figuring out life's mysteries.

But what if mystery isn't just something to figure out? What if it's also something to be listened to? This is the lesser recognized call of our faith. Being a people of mystery isn't just about engaging life as a marvelous puzzle. It's also about allowing yourself to be spoken to by life's wonder. One of the most elegant articulations of this comes from the poet Mary Oliver, a much-loved poet of Unitarian Universalists. In her poem, [Wild Geese](#), she writes,

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
over and over announcing your place in the family of things.

Oliver's call to listen for life's announcements implies a letting go. Mystery is funny this way. You can't make it speak. Indeed the more you pursue the answers to life's mysteries; the more distant they become. If we want mystery to speak, it seems we have to be willing to be caught off guard. UU humanist minister and poet, David Breeden, captures this beautifully when he writes,

I dug and dug
Deeper into the earth
Looking for blue heaven
Choking always
On piles of dust rising
Then once
At midnight
I slipped
And fell into the sky

Slipping, and then falling into the sky. Is there a better way to describe our dance with mystery? Isn't this what all the great mystics have been trying to tell us from the start? That sitting at the heart of mystery is not the unknown, but unity. We fall into mystery and it falls into us. Its voice is one that whispers, "I am you and you are me." Mystery doesn't put up barriers; it dissolves them. Haven't all of us faced the wonder and mystery of a sunset, the stars, a baby's first cry or a lover's wet kiss and thought to ourselves, "Who I am does not end at the barrier of my skin"?

So friends, this month, let's let ourselves fall in and open up. So many opportunities to slip into the sky and let it slip into us. Let's put down all the puzzling and the figuring out. Just long enough to notice that life isn't simply trying to stump us. It's also trying to connect with us.

Our Spiritual Exercises

Option A:

Return to an Ordinary Moment of Deep Meaning

We've all experienced it: the mystery of an ordinary moment that suddenly unfolds and offers deep meaning. The everyday becomes luminous. This exercise invites you to remember some of those luminous moments and revisit the gift they gave. To do this, simply make some time to watch and meditate on the following video:

The Moment: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNVPaINZD_I

As you watch, think of moments you've experienced when life suddenly and mysteriously lit up and reminded you of the marvel and preciousness of being alive. And think about how that lit you up - move you from a feeling of "the same old, same old" to a feeling of dancing with the sacred. Go one from there to imagine images from your own life that you'd include if you were making your own video. Then keep watch during the following hours and days to see if this meditation changes the way you perceive or dance with your "ordinary" days.

Come to your group ready to share what the exercise opens up in you or the gift it gave.

Option B:

Connect with Mystery on a Clear Night

Since the beginning of our existence, star-gazing has been a primary way we humans contemplate mystery. For scientist and mystic alike, it is a central way we sort out our mysterious place in the universe and the mystery of who we are. As we connect with the universe we connect more deeply with ourselves. This exercise invites you to lean into this connection between the stars above and deep meaning within.

To do this, make room on a clear night to listen to the following podcast while you gaze at the open sky:

Space - RadioLab: <https://www.wnycstudios.org/story/91520-space>

The podcast tells the stories of numerous people's efforts to connect with and make meaning of the mystery that lies beyond. As you listen, treat each story as an invitation to see something new in the vastness overhead. Simply allow this visual and auditory meditation to soak over you. When the podcast ends, continue to sit or lay in the quiet stillness and listen for the new story that your own voice starts to tell. Come to your group ready to share what this clear night clarified for you.

Here's some additional inspiration:

- Stargazing In Yosemite National Park: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JuhNNmzHP-c>
- The Soul of the Night by Chet Raymo: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B009D16QVE/ref=dp-kindle-redirect?encoding=UTF8&btkr=1>
- A New View of the Moon: <https://vimeo.com/259818647>

Option C: Tell Your Mystical Tale

We UUs have had a mixed relationship to our mystical side. Sadly, we've tended to distance, deny or ignore it. But it's there. From the Transcendentalists to our love of earth-centered spirituality, from our first [UU Source](#) to those of us who describe themselves as "[freethinking mystics with hands](#)," stories of UU mysticism are woven fine throughout our history. This exercise invites you to add your own mystical experience to that narrative.

Throughout the month of December on our Soul Matters Facebook page, we will invite Soul Matters participants to share short versions of their mystical experiences on the Facebook page and in our Soul Matters [google folder](#). It's an effort to collect, affirm and articulate the first of our UU Sources: "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."

All you have to do is make some time this month to reflect on and condense your mystical experience into a paragraph or two. Or if you have the heart of a poet, maybe even into 8 or 12 lines. When you are done, copy and paste it into our [UU Mystics document](#) (or post it on Facebook when we solicit stories).

To help you on your way, visit our [UU Mystics document](#) where some stories of UU mystics already are.

As you write your story, think about the phrasing of our first UU Source and ask yourself how your story continues to "move you to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life."

Option D: Find Mystery in Our Recommended Resources

Our recommended resources are full of wisdom about what it means to be a people of and a person of mystery. Engaging these resources and finding the one that especially speaks to you is a spiritual practice in and of itself.

So, if none of the above exercises call to you, engage the recommended resources section of this packet as your spiritual exercise for the month.

Set aside some regular time throughout a week to go through them and meditate on them until you find the one that most expands, articulates or deepens your understanding of mystery. After you've found it, consider printing it out and carrying it with you or pinning it up so you can continue to reflect on it throughout the weeks leading up to your group meeting. Come to your group ready to share where the journey led you.

Your Question

As always, don't treat these questions like "homework" or a list to covering its entirety. Instead, simply pick the one question that speaks to you most and let it lead you where you need to go. They are here to help you figure out what being a person of mystery means for you and your daily living. So, which question is calling to you? Which one contains "your work"? Where is it trying to lead you?

1. What was the first mystery to capture your imagination? How does that still shape you today?
2. Who has taught you the most about "living with and loving the mystery"?
3. What's the most unprovable thing you place your faith in?
4. What mysterious experience still nags at your disbelief?
5. Do sunsets and sunrises whisper to you?
6. Have you ever heard silence speak?
7. If you had to name one "holiday miracle" you believe in, what would it be?
8. Has mysterious "meaningful coincidence" ([synchronicity](#)) ever pointed you in the direction you needed to go, right when you were not sure of your way?
9. Pico Iyer says that "The opposite of knowledge isn't always ignorance. It can be wonder. Or mystery. Possibility. And in my life, I've found it's the things I don't know that have lifted me up and pushed me forwards, much more than the things I do know." When has "what you don't know" pushed you forward into new possibilities and greater knowing?
10. In your experience, has love been a mystery or a choice? Has it been an accomplishment you created and choose or a mysterious "other presence" that choose and created you?
11. Do you spend more time treating life like a problem to be solved, a game to be won, a struggle to be survived or a mystery to be lived?
12. It's said that we will never experience the fullness of our being until we get in touch with the mysterious "[divine that dwells within us](#)." Has this been true for you? Maybe more importantly, what if it's true?
13. It's said that we stop struggling to feel at peace once we experience the mysterious and transcendent "love that will not let us go." Has this been true for you? Maybe more importantly, what if it's true?
14. **What's your question?** Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to hear it.

Companion Pieces

Recommended Resources for Personal Exploration & Reflection

The following resources are not required reading. We will not analyze these pieces in our group. Instead they are here to companion you on your journey this month, get your thinking started and open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to be part of a people of Mystery.

Word Roots

The roots of mystery point beyond the idea of a secret, hidden truth to an experience that renders us speechless. It comes from the Latin root *muo* - literally translated as "shut the mouth" or "to be rendered silent or dumbfounded" and is also the root for our English word "mute."

The practice of mysticism has two essential elements that correspond to two meanings of the Greek word *mystikos*: to "shut one's senses" and to "enter the mysteries." The rhythm in all mysticism springs from the fact that these two meanings are related. To be more fully open to the mysteries requires the purification or shutting down of one's senses -- pulling the plug on the television, going out into the woods, or calling a halt to marathon reading. The mystic shuts down the senses not because they are evil, but because they are such blessings that they deserve a periodic rest and cleaning to be renewed and restored.

<https://www.religion-online.org/article/the-thoroughly-modern-mysticism-of-matthew-fox/>

Wise Words

What if life is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be lived?

Professor Emil Homerin, University of Rochester

Let mystery have its place in you; do not be always turning up your whole soil with the plowshare of self-examination, but leave a little fallow corner in your heart ready for any seed the winds may bring, and reserve a nook of shadow for the passing bird; keep a place in your heart for the unexpected guests, an altar for an unknown God.

Henri-Frederic Ariel

We imagine the Divine as distant and inaccessible, whereas in fact we live steeped in its burning layers.
Teilhard de Chardin

When you cross over from the invisible into this physical world, you bring with you a sense of belonging to the invisible that you can never lose or finally cancel... Because the invisible cannot be seen or glimpsed with the human eye, it belongs largely to the unknown. Still there are occasional moments when the invisible seems to become faintly perceptible... This is precisely what kindles and rekindles all your longing and your hunger to belong. You are both artist and pilgrim of the threshold.

John O'Donohue, from Eternal Echoes

Look how big the sky is,
the deep distances between stars.
Little speck, that's you;
laughable speck, that's me.
How could we contain The Truth,
all that overwhelming light?
Our truth is just a pinprick
in mystery's velvet curtain.

[*Janet Hutchinson*](#)

I have a friend who speaks of knowledge as an island in a sea of mystery. Let this then, be the ground of my faith: All that we know, now and forever, all scientific knowledge that we have of this world, or ever will have, is as an island in the sea. Still the mystery surrounds us.

[*Chet Raymo*](#)

Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away.

[*Philip K. Dick*](#)

Learning more about the world doesn't lead to a point closer to a final destination — whose existence is nothing but a hopeful assumption anyway — but to more questions and mysteries. The more we know, the more exposed we are to our ignorance, and the more we know to ask.

[Maria Popova](#)

The opposite of knowledge, in other words, isn't always ignorance. It can be wonder. Or mystery. Possibility. And in my life, I've found it's the things I don't know that have lifted me up and pushed me forwards, much more than the things I do know.

Pico Iyer

Utterance of the Timeless Word

Angela Herrera

Full reading found at

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/poetry/utterance-timeless-word>

You bring yourself before the sacred,
before the holy,
before what is ultimate and bigger than your lone life...

You stand at the edge of mystery,
at the edge of the deep...

Meanwhile, the armful of worries you brought to
the edge of mystery
have fluttered to your feet...

Many mystics speak of the God-experience as simultaneously falling into an abyss and being grounded. This sounds like a contradiction, but in fact, when you allow yourself to fall into the abyss—into hiddenness, limitlessness, unknowability, a void without boundaries—you discover it's somehow a rich, supportive, embracing spaciousness where you don't have to ask (or answer) the questions of whether you're right or wrong. You're being held and so you do not need to try to "hold" yourself together."

Richard Rohr

[The mystery of] synchronicity can not only teach us, but comfort us, providing reassurance of feelings or ideas we felt to be true, or pointing us in the direction we need to go, when we may not have been sure of the way.

[Deborah Ward](#)

A mystic is anyone who has the gnawing suspicion that the apparent discord, brokenness, contradictions, and discontinuities that assault us every day might conceal a hidden unity.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner

On the way to the play we stopped to look at the stars. And as usual I felt in awe. And then I felt even deeper in awe at this capacity we have to be in awe about something. Then I became even more awestruck at the thought that I was, in some small way, a part of that which I was in awe about. And this feeling went on and on. My space chums got a word for it: 'awe infinitum.' 'Cause at the moment you are most in awe of all you don't understand, you're closer to understanding it all than at any other time. And I felt so good inside, my heart felt so full, I decided to set time aside each day to do 'awe-robics'."

[Lilly Tomlin](#) as "Trudy the Bag Lady"

When I look at the rainbow I find myself the center of its arch. But so are you; and so is the one who sees it a mile from both of us.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

In a true encounter with another human being, we come face to face with the mystery of life. In some way, every other person, no matter how well we know them, will remain as mysterious to us as a country across the ocean we only read about in books... whenever we encounter another human being with respect for this essential unknown, we create the possibility for something genuinely new to emerge. In every interaction, whether it is with a stranger or our longtime partner, we can be surprised by what we have not yet seen or even imagined.

[David Rynick](#)

Falling into the Sky (Based on a Poem by Zen Monk Muso Soseki)

Rev. David Breeden (UU Humanist Minister)

<http://bluelyrareview.com/tag/falling-into-the-sky/>

Years end ways
I dug and dug
Deeper into the earth
Looking for blue heaven
Choking always
On piles of dust rising
Then once
At midnight
I slipped
And fell into the sky

I believe God is everything ... Everything that is or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found it... My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it came to me: that feeling of being part of everything not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed, and I cried, and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happens, you can't miss it.

Alice Walker's description of her enlightenment in the Color Purple

In the woods . . . standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Sometimes, when a bird cries out,
Or the wind sweeps through a tree,
Or a dog howls in a far-off farm,
I hold still and listen a long time.
My soul turns and goes back to the place
Where, a thousand forgotten years ago,
The bird and the blowing wind
Were like me, were my brothers and sisters.
My soul turns into a tree...

Herman Hesse

I remember once I stood near a pear orchard late at night. I had been taking a walk by myself at midnight. The blue-black shapes of the trees gathered in rows beckoned to me. The air was damp but warm and laden with the scents of nocturnal herbs I could not name. Crickets soothed me. The stars were in their full glory over the orchard which was set away from the orange glare of the streetlamps. For some moments I stood there, when suddenly I was "struck" as if I were a temple bowl-gong. I shivered in the warm air, overcome with the "that-ness" of everything, knowing my "me-ness" was not an isolation but a continuity with the stars which appeared to me as fragrant pears ripe for the picking. I no longer knew where I left off and "everything else" began. I was filled with such a sense of joy, joy that "I" was alive to experience that moment at all, that I no longer felt myself to be the son of Elisa and Louis of Detroit, but the co-equal companion of them, and all women and men and children, and each tree and every dear star, and the vast processes of life and death and, yes, "God."

Rev. Mark Belletini (UU minister)

The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible. *Oscar Wilde*

The final mystery is oneself. *Oscar Wilde*

Songs and Music

Mysterious Ways

U2

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxcDTUMLQJI>

Snow Patrol cover:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70i08c3jGE4>

Let The Mystery Be

Iris DeMent

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nlaoR5m4L80>

Fall Down As The Rain

Joe Crookston

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KrdlyftMn94>

More "mystery songs" are found on our December Soul Matters Spotify playlist. Click [here](#) to check them out! You can also explore the playlists from other months [here](#).

Videos & Online

The Beauty of What We Will Never Know - TED Talk

Pico Iyer

https://www.ted.com/talks/pico_ayer_the_beauty_of_what_we_ll_never_know#t-308328

“The opposite of knowledge, in other words, isn't always ignorance. It can be wonder. Or mystery. Possibility. And in my life, I've found it's the things I don't know that have lifted me up and pushed me forwards, much more than the things I do know....”

The Mystery and Miracle of a Moment

A video meditation to help open us to the mystery and miraculous of ordinary moments...

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNVPaINZD_I

The Amazing Mystery Within and Around us

A video meditation on the size of the universe

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaGEjrADGPA&list=PLjTi_2sPB4uYFnL8SpKFy_ey8OMrUZmc4&index=9

The Madness and Mystery of Love - Shots of Awe

<https://www.facebook.com/jasonlsilva/videos/1684768068454138/>

The Mystery of the Rosary

Did you know that the catholic rosary beads represent the many mysteries of the Christian faith and that saying the rosary is a meditation on those mysteries? Learn more:

<https://www.loyolapress.com/our-catholic-faith/prayer/traditional-catholic-prayers/prayers-honoring-mary/mysteries-of-the-rosary>

<https://bustedhalo.com/video/the-rosary-in-two-minutes>

<https://bustedhalo.com/podcasts/mysteries-of-the-rosary>

The Meaning & Mystery of the Incarnation - Brené Brown

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/travis-reed/brene-brown-love-made-fle_b_8090422.html

Articles

Living with Uncertainty in a Certainty-Obsessed Culture

Maria Popova

Full article at

<http://www.dailygood.org/2015/03/16/living-with-mystery-in-a-certainty-obsessed-culture/>

Excerpt: “Our human definition of ‘everything’ gives us, at best, a tiny penlight to help us with our wanderings,”... Carl Sagan captured this idea in his masterwork *Varieties of Scientific Experience*, where he asserted: “If we ever reach the point where we think we thoroughly understand who we are and where we came from, we will have failed.” This must be what Rilke, too, had at heart when he exhorted us to live the questions. And yet if there is one common denominator across the entire history of human culture, it is the insatiable hunger to know the unknowable — that is, to know everything, and to know it with certainty, which is itself the enemy of the human spirit...”

The Mystical Core of Organized Religion

David Steindl-Rast

Full article found at

<https://gratefulness.org/resource/dsr-mystical-core-religion/>

Excerpt: “We’ve come to understand mysticism as the experience of communion with Ultimate Reality... The question we need to tackle is this: How does one get from mystic experience to an established religion? My one-word answer is: inevitably... One of the great surprises is that the fire of mysticism can melt even the rigor mortis of dogmatism, legalism, and ritualism. By the glance or the touch of those whose hearts are burning, doctrine, ethics, and ritual come aglow with the truth, goodness, and beauty of the original fire. The dead letter comes alive, breathing freedom...”

What do you make of mysterious and “meaningful coincidences” (synchronicity)?

- <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/sense-and-sensitivity/201112/the-art-meaningful-coincidence>
- <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2016/02/the-true-meaning-of-coincidences/463164/>
- For Fun: https://www.ted.com/talks/rives_on_4_a_m#t-80825

Books

Freethinking mystics with hands: Exploring the heart of Unitarian Universalism

Rev. Tom Owen-Towle

<https://www.amazon.com/Freethinking-mystics-hands-Exploring-Universalism/dp/1558963677>

Earthy Mysticism: Spirituality for Unspiritual People

Tex Sample

https://www.amazon.com/Earthy-Mysticism-Spirituality-Unspiritual-People-ebook/dp/B00AKJYPZC/ref=sr_1_7?s=digital-text&ie=UTF8&qid=1537654076&sr=1-7&keywords=mysticism+and+spirituality

When God is Gone Everything is Holy (offers a religious naturalist perspective on mystery)

Chet Raymo

https://www.amazon.com/When-God-Gone-Everything-Holy/dp/1933495138/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1531336800&sr=8-1&keywords=when+god+is+gone

Rational Mysticism: Spirituality Meets Science in the Search for Enlightenment

John Horgan

https://www.amazon.com/Rational-Mysticism-Spirituality-Science-Enlightenment-ebook/dp/B003WJQ6ZE/ref=sr_1_1?s=digital-text&ie=UTF8&qid=1537654076&sr=1-1&keywords=mysticism+and+spirituality

“Chronicles the most advanced research into such experiences as prayer, fasting, and trances in this “great read” (The Washington Post).

Movies

The Diving Bell and The Butterfly

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_diving_bell_and_the_butterfly_2007

An immeasurably moving film about the mystery and miracle of inner life.

The Tree of Life

https://www.stltoday.com/entertainment/movies/reviews/article_0753e1aa-1f34-55b1-82dc-c2f6e9abe9e6.html

“Ideally, you would bathe in a film like this without striving to decipher it. As it's a film about what we can't get our heads around, we are probably not meant to get our heads round it.” - reviews

Awakenings

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1032970_awakenings?

The much-loved Robin Williams film that wakes us up to the mystery, miracle and preciousness of human awareness and connection.

Samsara

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/samsara_2012

An exploration of the mysterious forms of interconnection that run through our lives.

Waking Life

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/waking_life

“If there was ever a film that made ontological exploration fun, this is it.” - review

Get daily inspiration
on the monthly theme by liking our
Soul Matters Facebook inspiration page:
<https://www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle/>

Find musical inspiration
on each theme by following our monthly
Spotify lists:
<https://www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com/spotify-lists.html>



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