



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“Love Songs from God,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on February 22, 2015

I wonder how you're holding up in this hard winter we're having. Anyone feeling tired, worn down, annoyed, perhaps? Anyone need a little solace, some comfort, a bit of blessing? If so, you're in good company. May this time for worship and may this community of souls hold us, nourish us, bless and sustain us, for the living of these days. Amen.

A generation ago, the Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner said, “the time is fast approaching when one will either be a mystic or an unbeliever.” He was observing that neither the culture nor the institutional church was able, any longer, to hold and sustain religious faith for people in the way it had for previous generations. We are living in a time when you need to have your own experience of that mystery, if you're going to be a person of faith; you need to be able to access that holy Spirit.

This understanding is clearly articulated in the first of the six sources of our UU faith: “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.” This is what I was talking about when, one day, I told my spiritual director, “I've learned how to drop down into God.”

A mystic is someone who seeks and finds that direct experience of the holy, of that transcending mystery and wonder. Today I want to introduce you to two mystics, and to their experiences, which I expect may surprise you. Because the mystics are often earthier, more passionate, more sensual than we have been led to think that religious folk can be.

In this month when our theme is love, isn't it a good time to remember and affirm that passion and romance are part of who we are as human beings, and so ought to be part of a healthy and lively spirituality too? Especially this winter, don't we need a little spice, in life and in church, to keep us going?

Daniel Ladinsky, whose work interpreting mystics from both East and West is found in the book, *Love Poems From God*, says that since the beginning of time, people have known that we are capable of a sublime, divine experience of union with God. “Just as every river is winding its way to the sea,” he writes, “so every soul is returning to a glorious reunion with our source, God. Faith in the Ocean may be difficult at times and union may seem a fantasy, but I think the real fantasy is separateness from That which is Everywhere... As soon as we limit God's ability to communicate

with us, are we not then just reinforcing some unhealthy religious prejudice, superstition, neurosis, and fear that fragment society and the individual, and undermine and divide us rather than empower and unite?"<sup>1</sup>

Rabia of Basra, the author of our first reading today, was born in the year 717 to impoverished parents in the city of Basra in what is now Iraq. As a girl, Rabia was stolen and sold into slavery, and until she was granted freedom at middle age, she suffered at the hands of men. But these trials in life seemed to only open her to the love of the Divine. The rest of her life was devoted to meditation and prayer. She became a spiritual advisor and one of the best known female saints and poets.

Daniel Ladinsky says "the sensuousness of Rabia's poetry may be a bit shocking to some, though it was probably more so in its original." How does it change things to imagine God, as Rabia does, as one who "must get hungry for us... a lover who wants His lovers near"? Did anyone ever offer you that image in Sunday school? No, if you're like me, you grew up with images of God as an angry old man or a punishing judge, throwing thunderbolts and smiting people. Can you see now, as Ladinsky says, that these are adolescent, even childish, ways of imagining that Source from which we came, and to which we will return? Isn't it time to see God in new and more life-giving ways?

Today I invite you to try on a new way of imagining God. As your friend. As your companion. Even as your beloved. As one singing love songs just for you. How would that change things? Feel free to play with the gender identity of the Divine, if that helps you to enter into the relationship.

Because patriarchal cultures have so often imagined God as masculine, I changed some of the pronouns in our reading today, to make them more accessible. But you can change them to whatever works for you! Listen to Teresa of Avila again:

She desired me so I came close.

No one can near God unless She has  
prepared a bed for  
you.

A thousand souls hear her call every second,  
but most every one of them looks into their life's mirror and  
says, "I am not worthy to leave this  
sadness."

When I first heard Her courting song, I too  
looked at all I had done in my life  
and said,

"How can I gaze into Her omnipresent eyes?"

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Ladinsky, *Love Poem From God: Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West* (New York: Penguin Compass, 2002), xi.

I spoke these words with all  
my heart,

but then She sang again, a song even sweeter,  
and when I tried to shame myself once more from Her presence  
God showed me Her compassion and spoke a divine truth,

“I made you, dear, and all I make is perfect.  
Please come close, for I  
desire  
you.”

“I made you, dear, and all I make is perfect.” Who among us doesn’t need to be reminded of that? If you have ever held a newborn baby, don’t you know that this is true? “I made you... please come close, for I desire you.”

I desire you the way a parent longs for her child to come home. I wait for you the way the watchman waits for the morning (Psalm 130:6). I long for you the way a lover desires her beloved to return to her embrace.

Don’t we celebrate Valentine’s Day, don’t we listen to love songs and read novels and watch movies about love because, no matter our current relationship status, we long for the deep kind of connection that lovers are supposed to have? Don’t we each want and deserve a soul mate—someone who understands us and loves us unconditionally, just as we are?

In an essay on mysticism, Ron Rolheiser cites the British novelist Anita Brookner who says “in one of her novels that the great tragedy in most marriages is that the (two people) cannot, in the end, console each other and that what each really needs from the other, but generally never gets, is a good confessor, someone to whom each can reveal all the secrets of his or her life so as to let go of the tension and finally just be himself or herself without pretense and effort.”

Rolheiser says, “Ultimately, that is what each of us needs from God – someone who can console us and someone to be for us that trusted confessor, that person before whom no secret need to be hidden.”<sup>2</sup>

How would that change things in your spiritual life, if you started to have that kind of intimate relationship with God? If you could imagine God saying to you, “Please come close. You can trust me with anything.” How would it change things if you could trust that God only calls you to be truly and deeply who you are?

I think of these lines from Mary Oliver:

You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees

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<sup>2</sup> Ronald Rolheiser, “Faith Through Mysticism,” available online at [http://ronrolheiser.com/faith-through-mysticism/#.VOKodLDF\\_jK](http://ronrolheiser.com/faith-through-mysticism/#.VOKodLDF_jK)

for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.<sup>3</sup>

We're now in the season of Lent, the time of penitence and fasting Christians observe in the forty days that lead to Easter. But Marcus Borg reminds us that repentance is not primarily about feeling guilty or doing acts of penance, like giving up things for Lent. No, he says repentance "means to 'return' to God, to 'reconnect' with God; and "it means 'to go beyond the mind that we have'" to imagine a new way, a new kind of relationship than we have known before.<sup>4</sup>

Is it time for us, in this congregation, to step into deeper ways of being with one another? In the past couple of months, I've found myself, sometimes to my own surprise, saying to people, "I love you." I hope this isn't making anyone uncomfortable. I just want to speak the truth, while I'm here. I don't want to miss the chance. And I don't imagine you do either.

As James Taylor sings, "Shower the people you love with love, show them the way that your feel. Things are going to be much better if you only will."

Is it time for us to step into deeper ways of being in relationship with God? What would happen if, in this season, you trusted what Teresa of Avila knew to be true? If you could hear God speaking to you like a lover: "I made you, dear, and all I make is perfect. Please come close, for I desire you."

What if you believed this: that you are already good enough, that you already have what you need, that you are loved just as you are? Wouldn't you carry yourself with more dignity, and move through the day with more purpose and more joy?

What if you made a practice of listening for the love songs that are being sung to you? Can you hear them? "I made you dear, and all I make is perfect. I made you so you can make manifest my love in this world."

The song says, "I love you, and I am with you, always." You've got to remember that. You've got to carry it in your heart and bind it to your being. And then take that big and awesome and transformative Love that is in you out into the world. Spread it around and see what happens. See how love in action changes things. Be a mystic for these days; in touch with the power of the Spirit, hearing your own love songs and singing them, singing them, while you're here.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Oliver, "Wild Geese."

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/marcusborg/2014/03/ash-wednesday-death-and-repentance/>