“Mystery Loves Company: Shall We Gather?”

A Response to the Berry Street Essay “Mystery Loves Company”
Given by the Rev. Kim Crawford Harvie at the 2024 Berry Street Conference
Rev. Lauren Smith, Respondent
June 19th, 2024

There is a river of grace running into and through our lives. We gather at the banks of that river for consolation, for inspiration, and to feel again our connection with something bigger than ourselves whose name we do not know.

I have been listening to Kim Crawford Harvie tell stories for more than 25 years. She has been my minister, my teacher, my colleague, my friend. Kim’s ministry and her stories have shaped and blessed my life. It is an honor beyond words to offer this response today. It’s an honor to be here virtually with all of you.

Kim writes about a near-death experience she had as a young woman. I can see her swinging out over that waterfall. I can imagine the green branch snapping and the subsequent tumble. It’s also easy to imagine her, shattered and jubilant, gobsmacked by beauty and grateful to be alive. I know that Kim is telling the truth when she says *“That feeling never left me.”* I know she is telling the truth, because that feeling was present in every sermon I have heard her give. There was always some moment—or more than one—of awe-inducing mysterious encounter. Goosebumps were often the tell, and a feeling of relief, whether the story being shared was poignant or hilarious. We in the congregation were met by that mystery. We experienced it together.

Mystery loves company.

The Rev. A. Powell Davies once said that arguing about the existence of God is like arguing about the existence of water in the presence of a waterfall. He said that instead of arguing, he would rather take a person for a walk near the falls and let them feel the spray.[1]

I don’t believe in God but I do *experienc*e God regularly. I listen for God’s voice in the world and try to attune my life to that voice. In truth, the word God often feels like inadequate shorthand, overly laden with millennia of associations. I prefer the chosen language of the poet Dylan Thomas, who wrote about “the force that through the green fuse drives the flower, [the force] drives my green age.” Mostly, though, I don’t worry about names. Mostly, I prefer to let the mystery be.

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[1] A. Powell Davies. I might have encountered this in *Faith of an Unrepentant Liberal*, Beacon Press, 1946.

During my first few years at Arlington Street, Kim often shared stories about her ministry in Provincetown. She told us about the week when a whole pew of beloved congregants disappeared from the sanctuary. She told us about officiating at yet another memorial service one weekend then retreating with the congregation to the beach at night to lay out on blankets and look at the stars. I remember she said that in those years, the world outside of Provincetown hardly felt real.

The circumstances about which Kim spoke were a horror. The suffering at the height of the AIDS crisis was unfathomable, but I appreciated hearing about days of ministry when the veil between the living and the dead felt translucent, diaphanous. I am fed by the kind of ministry that is forged at the meeting place between life and death, between grace and great suffering.

My paternal grandparent sometimes took my brother and me to church when I was little. They were pillars of a small Black United Methodist congregation about half a mile from their house. In worship services there, I could feel the spirit move. As I grew up, I discovered that the dogma didn't fit, but the theology expressed by the rhythms of worship fed my soul—the way the congregation participated in the sermon so that it became a collective experience, the way the hymns hushed or expanded. There is an aliveness, a presence, in some religious services that is spiritually necessary for a community under siege. The service says: *You are here. I am here. I am with you. You matter. You belong.*

There is a river of grace running into and through our lives. We gather at the banks of the river and receive blessing.

Theologian Paul Tillich writes:

> Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual .... Sometimes at [such a] moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying, 'You are accepted. *You are accepted*, accepted by that which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now, perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. *Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!*'

"If that happens to us," Tillich says, "we experience grace. After such an experience we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed."[2]

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[2] Paul Tillich, "You Are Accepted" in *Shaking the Foundations*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948.

Last month, I went to the Museum of African American Culture and History for the first time. I was there with my dear friend and colleague Vail Weller and members of the UUA's President's Council. Just before we left, we stopped in at the reflecting pool, which is breathtaking.

The reflecting pool is in a large square room with dark walls that extend through the upper stories of the museum. Each wall contains a quote in gold lettering: The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King is there, echoing the words of Amos: "We are determined to work and fight until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." Frances Ellen Watkins Harper is there: "I ask no monument proud and high, to arrest the gaze of passers-by. All that my yearning spirit craves, is bury me not in a land of slaves." Nelson Mandela graces a wall: "I cherish my own freedom dearly, but I care even more for your freedom." And Sam Cook gets the last word: "A change is gonna come."

There is a circular window at the top of the room that lets in light and from which a ring of water falls. The falling water sparkles in the air and smacks into the reflecting pool below. It is vibrant and loud. The falling water arrives continually and vociferously, a beautiful and unceasing benediction.

In that space, I feel again the blessings of those who have gone before me, who made a way for me. And the water just keeps coming, continually arriving to meet me just where I am from across the centuries, a powerful gift of the ancestors.

The ancestors who bless us with their aliveness through the veil that separates life and death.

I love the late essayist June Jordan. She's one of my favorite thinkers—insightful, down-to-earth, and wickedly intelligent. Many years ago, I encountered an essay of hers called, "The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America." It was about Phillis Wheatley, the first published African-American poet, and it took up the dilemma raised by the psalmist over two millennia ago: The wicked have carried us away to captivity and required of us a song. How can we sing our holy song in a strange land?

The essay begins:

> It was not natural. And she was the first. Come from a country of many tongues torn by rupture, by theft, by travel like mismatched clothing packed down into the cargo of evil ships sailing, irreversible, into slavery. Come to a country to be docile and dumb, to be big and breeding, to be turkey/horse/cow, to be cook/carpenter/plow… to live forcibly illiterate, forcibly itinerant: … to be three fifths of a human being at best: to be this valuable/this hated thing among strangers who purchased your life and then

> cursed it unceasingly: to be a slave: to be a slave. Come to this country to be a slave and how should you sing?
>
> … How could you, belonging to no one but property to those despising the smiles of your soul, how could you dare to create yourself: a poet?

The girl who would become Phillis Wheatley was brought to the United States from the shores of Africa, and put up for auction at the tender age of seven. She was purchased by Suzannah and John Wheatley, and her first poem, which she wrote at the age of fourteen was published in 1768. Phillis was dropped, as a child, into a social structure systematically designed to annihilate black personhood— stripped of her name, her family, her language, and so much more—and yet she emerged an artist. This is the difficult miracle of her existence. [3]

I have been captivated by this miracle and mystery for much of my life—the mystery of what writer Zora Neale Hurston called the secret of black song and laughter.[4] Song and laughter that seem to emerge out of the vibrant, whole, unbroken soul of black people. Against all odds, century after difficult century.

This mystery, this "difficult miracle" is the heart of my faith. It animates my practice of Unitarian Universalism and Zen Buddhism, and my deep appreciation for liberal Christianity. Each of these traditions teaches, in different ways, that there is a wholeness and freedom singing at the heart of everything, to which each of us is heir.

I choose not to worry that mystery or over-analyze it. Singer Billy Bragg once wrote: "the temptation to take the precious things in life apart to see how they work must be resisted for they never fit together again."[5] There *is* a part of me that's like Thomas in the famous painting by Caravaggio, tempted to poke a finger into the wound of a patient Christ. More often, though, I can accept Albert Einstein's exhortation to, as Kim put it, "embrace the unknown and cherish a childlike sense of wonder and awe."

"The most beautiful thing we can experience, Kim wrote, quoting Einstein, "is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science."

The mysterious may well be a source of courage, too, and the will to live whole, alive, and free.

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[3] June Jordan, "The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America or Something Like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley," from *Some of Us Did Not Die,* 2002.

[4] Zora Neale Hurston. This phrase from Zora Neale Hurston has been with me for twenty years. I'm pretty sure I encountered it first in *The Sanctified Church*, Da Capo Press, 1988.

[5] Billy Bragg, "Must I Paint You a Picture," from *Workers Playtime*, 1988.

Kim said,
"Setting a place at the table for mystery
is good for our souls
and good for our faith tradition."

I say:
Setting a place at the table for mystery is also good for the world.
Openness to the unknown is a pathway
to liberation and wholeness
for all people.
The mystery speaks to us of freedom.

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I think of my great great grandparents and their families. They were black men and women living in North Carolina in the waning days of slavery, the pressure cooker years before the start of the Civil War. They were free black people, but their freedom was circumscribed by law and circumstance. Their relative freedom depended on the passes they carried and the whims of the white people among whom they lived. They could be re-enslaved for modest infractions, real or manufactured. They lived on a knife's edge. And this was the only reality they had ever known, the only place they had ever lived. The world beyond Wilmington must have felt like a great dark void, like the edge of the earth on world maps drawn before people discovered that the earth was round.

And yet, despite all this, they opened to the possibility of a different future. They packed up, picked up, and moved on. They made the treacherous journey north to Oberlin, Ohio then east to New England. They set out for freedom, for a new life unlike any they had ever known. It was not perfect. Moving north of the Mason-Dixon line didn't mean full access to citizenship, but it did open new doors of opportunity and they chose to move through those doors. I am the beneficiary of my ancestors' imagination. Their courage blesses my life.

We who love religious community know something about facing the unknown. This is a perilous time for progressive faith communities, also pregnant with possibility. The religious landscape is changing. As we collectively grapple with this moment in Unitarian Universalism, I wish courage and imagination for us all, and a faith that allows us to move out from the known world into something new. This moment will require us to lean on and support one another, as my forbears did on the road north. I work at your Unitarian Universalist Association. Know that we are here to help map a way forward together. Mystery loves company. And so much possible blessing lies ahead.

Consider the courage of Fannie Lou Hamer, one of my most beloved heroes.

Hamer was born into a sharecropping family in Mississippi in 1917. Sharecropping was slavery lite, in many ways. Sharecroppers were not allowed to leave the plantations on which they worked without permission of the owners. There was an elaborate system of finance that bound families to the plantations through debt and being forced to purchase food and supplies from owners at inflated prices. And while black people technically enjoyed the rights of citizenship, there was a cultural prohibition against exercising those rights backed up by the threat of violence.

This is how Fannie Lou Hamer grew up. It's all she knew. But from very early in her life, she was determined to get away. One day in 1962, she attended a mass meeting sponsored by SNCC, the Southern Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. SNCC organizers were encouraging black people to register and vote. Mrs. Hamer says she never knew until that time that black people could vote. 72% of the people in her area were black, which meant that if black people voted in large numbers, they could upend local power dynamics. When organizers asked who would go down to the courthouse to register, Mrs. Hamer volunteered. She went by bus with a group of people down to the courthouse and made her wishes known.

Days later, she had to flee from her home with her family to the house of a friend. An attempt was made on her life there. She fled to a third location, but somehow an organizer tracked her down in a plantation shack. He walked in the door and found her sitting in a chair next to a wood stove. He said, "I'm looking for Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer." She rose from her chair. Not yet knowing who he was, not knowing whether he was friend or foe, she stood up and said, "I'm Fannie Lou Hamer."[6]

In later years, she would endure threats and a brutal beating at the hands of police officers in Winona, Mississippi, that caused permanent damage to her internal organs. But after all that, she said, "From the time I began working, I never had a mind to stop. ...After that happened to me in Winona, I knew there wouldn't be anything to stop me other than death."

I heard her say those words in an old recorded interview. When Mrs. Hamer said, "...After that happened to me in Winona," I expected the sentence to end the way I would have ended it. I expected her to say, "I lost my faith," or "I had to retreat for a while," or "I didn't know if I could go on." But she said, "I knew there wouldn't be anything to stop me other than death." It's hard to fathom moral courage like that, or a will to live free that runs that deep. To me, it is a miracle. I live in the fruits of that miracle, blessed daily by her courage. You live in the fruits of that miracle.

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[6] Mississippi Public Broadasting, *Fannie Lou Hamer: Stand Up,* originally broadcast October 15, 2017.

There is a river of grace running into and through our lives. We gather on the banks of the river in gratitude.

Paul Tillich counsels those of us struck by grace:

"Do not try to do anything now. Perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; Do not perform anything; Do not intend anything. *Simply accept.*"

Such counsel feels dangerous in these days. We are living in a genocidal time, in a society systematically crafted to annihilate the personhood of many of our human siblings—trans and non-binary people, the people of Gaza, the list goes on. And the planet strains under the impact of human consumption. How can we possibly be still?

We don't have to be still forever—we can't be still forever—but we do have to be still for a little while, receiving, replenishing, accepting with gratitude the gifts we have been given. The mystery is there, in those powerful waters, the spiritual nourishment that allows us to move into the unknown, to act with generosity and courage for the liberation of all.

There is a river of grace running into and through our lives.

We gather at the banks of the river to feel alive. We gather to feel again our place in the web of life.

I walked a stretch of the Camino de Santiago earlier this month with the Rev. Rob Hardies and a band of 22 Unitarian Universalists. We walked from the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela to Finisterre, the westernmost point in Spain, along the Costa de Morte, the Coast of Death.

Finisterre was considered the end of the world by the ancients, the Celtic pagans and the early Christians who lived in the region. It is wild and beautiful—with sheer rocky cliffs, dangerous rocks, roiling waters, and great clots of wildflowers buffeted by strong winds. A few of us walked out to the end of the point one evening to watch the sun set. In the quiet, Rob said, I wonder what it was like for people hundreds of years ago who journeyed all the way here to the end of the world and discovered it was beautiful.

His words echo Kim's, as she somersaulted over a waterfall in her young adulthood, when she thought she was going to die. "My last glimpse of earth: so beautiful." I don't wish for any of us that pain, but I do wish for each of us the experience of being gobsmacked, streaming with gratitude, drunk with awe at the vivid pulsing beauty of the world, delirious with joy for another chance to wake up on this beautiful earth.

The service at Arlington Street always ends the same way, with a benediction. Kim invites the congregation to put their hands in namaste: The divine in me bows to the divine in you. She offers some chosen words, then says: Let us keep this faith, beloveds, and pass it on. The service begins when the service ends. Bless your heart. I love you. Amen.

And then the band and congregation launch into "Where you go, I will go"

Where you go, I will go, beloved,
Where you go, I will go.
For your people are my people
Your people are mine.
Your people are my people,
Your divine, my divine.[7]

It's pure joy to launch us into the world, healed and restored.

Dear teacher, I bow to the divine in you.
Thank you for your teaching.
Thank you for countless experiences that left me gobsmacked, awestruck, alive and grateful.

Where you go next, I won't follow.
We who love you release you to the mystery of what's next.
But where I go, *you* will go, beloved.
I will keep this faith and pass it on.
The service ends. The service continues.
Bless your heart.
I love you.

Amen.

[7] Shoshana Jedwab, "Where You Go (I Will Go), 2018.