

“Christian Nonduality”
with Rev. Marshall Davis
Sunday, October 25, 2020

Welcome and Lighting of Chalice/Candles – Worship Associate Margaret Rieser
with Dan Hodge and Corey Trask

Good morning and welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes – UUFES. While our meetinghouse is located in the heart of Tamworth village, UUFES the fellowship, which is all of us, is scattered around the country. It feels invigorating to stretch so far.

Today’s service is called Christian Nonduality. We welcome our neighbor, Reverend Dr. Marshall Davis, who lives in Sandwich with his wife, Jude. Reverend Davis is an ordained American Baptist pastor who has served churches in 5 states as a full-time pastor, including eighteen years at the Community Church of Sandwich. He has written several books, has a podcast called “The Tao of Christ” and also a YouTube channel entitled “Christian Nonduality.”

Welcome to this place.
Here we seek justice, truth and understanding.
Here we celebrate life and contemplate mystery.
Here, in the miraculous presence of each other, we seek healing and wholeness.
Welcome all.

This week, our congregation remembers our beloved friend, Willie Mork, who died Wednesday. Plans for a memorial service are underway. Willie was a bright light, her presence gracious and warm. Always upbeat, she had a great sense of fun and often wore magnificent hats to church. We will long remember the way Willie’s smile lit up the room.

Centering Music - “Let Freedom Span Both East and West”
(from an African American spiritual, adapted by Harry T. Burleigh)

*In Christ there is no East or West,
No North or South;
Only one great love
Inside and out.*

Shared Affirmation

*Love is the spirit of this Fellowship,
The quest for truth is its sacrament,
And service is its prayer.
This is our great covenant:
To dwell together in peace, to seek truth in love,
And to help one another.*

Hymn - Blessed Spirit of My Life

Time for All Ages - Alice Posner

Reflection Part 1 - Rev. Dr. Marshall Davis

Today I am going to talk about what I call Christian Nonduality. Nonduality may not be a term that is familiar to people. It means that all reality is one. You can call it unity or oneness with the Divine. Christianity has never been without this mystical dimension, although it has been overshadowed by more rationalistic, pietistic and institutional forms of Christianity.

It is the heart of all religions, although most clearly expressed in Buddhism and Hinduism and especially what is called Advaita Vedanta. Nonduality means the awareness of our essential unity with the Divine. It is not a theology. It is not a philosophy. It is experiential in nature. Because nonduality is experiential, it seems proper to share with you my experience. That is what I am going to do in this first segment this morning.

I have been drawn to the mystical path since I was a teenager. I was first exposed to it when I was a student at Tilton School. Every year they would have a group of young Franciscan friars come to the chapel service and share their view of the spiritual life.

Even though I was nominally a Congregationalist and not a Catholic, their vision of the communal spiritual life was appealing. In college I started taking religion courses, and was attracted to a study of the World's Religions and became a religion major. It was near the end of my college time that I had an evangelical Christian conversion experience, which established me in the Christian path. From that time on I have identified myself as a follower of Jesus Christ. I continued my interest in the mystical tradition of Christianity in college. For example in my junior year I did an independent study on the German mystic Meister Eckhart, probably the most nondualistic of Christian thinkers.

It was only a few months after my conversion and baptism that I had a powerful nondual awareness of the divine. I was outside my dorm room at night standing with my girlfriend, who would become my wife. I had the unmistakable awareness of the Holy. At the time I identified it with what Rudolf Otto called the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, which means a mystery that scares the hell out of you – causes you to tremble in awe - but also draws you to it - fascinates you. For those moments I ceased to be as a separate entity and I was united with the Divine essence of the universe. And there was no LSD involved, even though it was the early 1970's. That experience became the spiritual touchstone of my life.

Twenty years later, after seminary and pastoring in Illinois, I was a pastor in Sandwich and had moved from evangelicalism to a more progressive form of Christianity. I had been again exploring the mystical path. I had been studying with the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation in Washington DC, taking their year-long program for spiritual directors. For several years I was leading a meditation group in the Sandwich church. In

1992 I went down to Washington for a three-day silent retreat. During one of the sessions, I re-experienced what had happened twenty years before, only much more powerfully. I can only call it a dissolution of the self. It was like I had ceased to exist. Once again there was fear involved. I was physically trembling. The leaders of the retreat did not know what was happening to me. Looking back on it they should have known. It is well-documented as I found out later as part of the Dark Night of the Soul, but they didn't recognize that. I returned to NH and met with my own spiritual director, who did the best she could to see me through it.

The whole experience was so overwhelming and disorienting that I abandoned the contemplative life and retreated back into evangelicalism that I had known earlier, which felt safe. I left Sandwich and pastored two conservative churches in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania. Long story short, twenty years later I was back in NH, again having returned to the Sandwich Church as pastor in 2011.

In the summer of 2012 this same awareness of the divine happened a third time. Each 20 years apart. This time it was in conjunction with a diagnosis that a doctor had given me in the form of pancreatic cancer, telling me I did not have long to live. Nothing concentrates the mind like a death sentence!

Tests later showed that he had misdiagnosed me, but for a week I believed I was dying. That prompted a spiritual awakening that was both a repetition and resolution of the previous two experiences. I saw clearly that I was not an individual separate entity that was going to die. I experienced my self as no-Self as the Buddhists say. The ego was seen as not what I really was. I was one with the Divine Essence of the Universe.

That was the turning point which has been unfolding in understanding and articulation in the years since then. From then on I began to express this awareness using the term Christian Nonduality. In 2013 I wrote a book entitled *Experiencing God Directly: The Way of Christian Nonduality*. Within the last year or so I have started a YouTube Channel entitled Christian Nonduality and a podcast entitled The Tao of Christ, in which I share what I call unitive awareness.

Joys and Sorrows “Doctor Gradus Ad Parnassum” from The Children’s Corner Suite by Claude Debussy, played by Eve Goss

“Spirit of Life”

Meditation and Prayer - Margaret Rieser

Reading - From *Experiencing God Directly: the Way of Christian Nonduality* by Marshall Davis (2013, KDP, pp. 6-8, read by Barbara Lubin and Margaret Rieser)

C.S. Lewis describes an experience from his childhood. He calls it being “surprised by joy” in his book by the same name. He writes:

The first is itself the memory of memory. As I stood beside a flowering currant bush on a summer day there suddenly arose in me without warning, as if from a depth not of years but of centuries, the memory of that earlier morning at the Old House when my brother had brought his toy garden into the nursery. It is difficult to find words strong enough for the sensation which came over me; Milton's 'enormous bliss' of Eden (giving the full, ancient meaning to enormous) comes somewhere near it. It was a sensation, of course, of desire; but of desire for what? Not, certainly, for a biscuit tin filled with moss, nor even (though that came into it) for my own past - and before I knew what I desired, the desire itself was gone, the whole glimpse withdrawn, the world turned commonplace again, or only stirred by a longing for the longing which had just ceased. It had taken only a moment of time; and in a certain sense everything else that had ever happened to me was insignificant in comparison. (Lewis, C.S., *Surprised By Joy* , pp. 22-23)

Such glimpses of nondual awareness are not uncommon. They are a common part of childhood. They are experienced by nearly everyone, although most people dismiss them as unimportant and quickly forget them. They do not realize that such experiences are an invitation from Eternity. This is a book about this direct awareness of Oneness.

Blaise Pascal knew this Oneness, as evidenced in his “Memorial,” a scrap of paper found in the lining of his coat after his death. He carried this reminder of his experience with him always. It records Pascal's experience on one unforgettable night in 1654. The opening words of this intimate document reads:

Monday, 23 November, feast of St. Clement, pope and martyr, and others in the martyrology.

Vigil of St. Chrysogonus, martyr, and others. From about half past ten at night until about half past midnight, FIRE. GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob

not of the philosophers and of the learned.

Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace.

GOD of Jesus Christ.

My God and your God.

Your GOD will be my God.

Forgetfulness of the world and of everything, except GOD.

In Christian spirituality this experience of Oneness is usually called “union with God” or “communion with God.” (Communion literally means “union with.”) In her 1911 classic work “Mysticism: A Study of the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual

Consciousness,” the great Christian writer Evelyn Underhill called it the Unitive Life. I use a variety of terms, but most often Awareness, the Kingdom of God, or Presence. This book is an exploration of this nondual Christian consciousness.

Reflection Part 2 - Rev. Dr. Marshall Davis

In response to my podcast, every week I hear from people from all over the world who have abandoned Christianity or come out of fundamentalist or evangelical Christianity and are looking for something more. Many have experienced this same nondual awareness but have not been able to reconcile it with their Christian heritage. That is what I try to do. I call my approach Christian Nonduality because I use Christian terminology and biblical examples to express this nondual reality.

I see this nondual awareness as the heart of all spiritual traditions. It is what Aldous Huxley called the Perennial Philosophy. It is found in the mystical traditions of all religions. It is probably most clearly articulated in the Upanishads and systematized by the Indian philosopher Shankara in the 8th century.

It is also the message of Jesus. It is what he called the Kingdom of God, probably better translated the Divine Realm. It is what Jesus really meant by being born again, not the cheap imitation hawked by televangelists. The Gospel of John is filled with this awareness, as is the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas and gnostic gospels that were excluded from the Christian canon.

It is what Jesus meant when he said that “I and the Father are One.” He was not making a Christological statement for theologians of later centuries to unpack in church councils and creeds. Jesus was describing his awareness of the Divine. It is found in the Islamic tradition in Sufism, most beautifully in Rumi. It is found in Jewish tradition in the Kabbalah. It is the meaning behind the Shema of Israel, “Hear O Israel, the Lord thy God, the Lord is One.” It is the Buddha’s experience of Nirvana and Hindu moksha. It is the unity of the universe found in indigenous spirituality around the world.

Though it is tempting to call this a mystical experience, nondual awareness is deeper than experience. Experiences come and go. This does not come and go. This is the substratum of all experiences. This is the divine space in which experiences appear, in which the universe appears. This unitive awareness is self-authenticating.

I call my approach Christian nonduality because I am a follower of Christ. Not just the historical personage known as Jesus of Nazareth, but the Universal Christ. “Before Abraham was I am,” he said. Nondualism, as I use the term, is consistent with being a Christian. In fact I would say it is essential to being a true Christian.

Nonduality is not about theology or doctrine – Christian or otherwise - and therefore it is a unifying and not a dividing reality. Doctrines, as I see them, are signposts to truth, not Truth in themselves. Theology cannot spiritually satisfy us any more than a menu can feed a hungry person. Doctrines are imperfect descriptions of Truth. When doctrines

come to the forefront of religion, then they can be harmful to the spiritual life. They become substitutes for God.

Words and thoughts and doctrines are by nature dualistic. They separate us from what we are talking about. They push Reality away so we can examine it at a distance and dissect it. In this way theology, doctrines, and dogma by their nature separate us from God. Instead I see them as tools meant to bring a person into union with God.

Nonduality is union with God. For a Christian that is described as union with Christ, who is in union with God. It is union with God's Creation, which is the Word of God, according to Genesis 1. It is the dissolution of our self in God. As the apostle Paul says, "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me." That is my favorite verse and expresses the core of the Christian gospel.

It is the death of self. As Jesus said, "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for My sake will find it." It is what it means to be crucified with Christ, to die to self and live to God. "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Nonduality is seeing that we are not separate entities alienated from God. We can be aware of our essential nature as one with God. This is a birthright for everyone as children of God. Unfortunately traditional Christianity seems to reinforce a sense of separateness and duality when it should be proclaiming the good news that the Kingdom of God is at hand. That was Jesus' message.

So this message of nonduality is Jesus' original teaching, which is in harmony with the teaching that is at the heart of all the great spiritual traditions of the world. I present it using Christian language and terminology. That is why I call it Christian nonduality.

The Morning Offering – "God Be In My Head"

Community Response - I have been asked to suggest a couple of questions for reflection that people might be willing to comment on during the Community Response.

1. Have you had any experience of union with the Divine that sounds similar to what I am talking about? And would you be willing to share it briefly?
2. Do you see such unitive experiences as being present in all religious traditions? If so, what is their role in the development of religious traditions?

Hymn - "Gather the Spirit"

Chalice Extinguishing

*We extinguish this flame, but not the light of truth,
The warmth of community or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts.*

Benediction

Postlude “Over My Head There is Music in the Air,” African American spiritual

A partial recording of this service can be viewed up until January 25, 2021 at:

https://uuma.zoom.us/rec/share/Z6PUnmYPwCNLPA_eg8f517cN4pigc4I0kDQoD1R-bTvYfSG6eFspWxqr8jLKfqAF.IHNR_o4bVvCiAIXE

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