

Steve Jungkeit
 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Text: 2 Corinthians 12: 1-10
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Into the Mystic

William James once used the term “the More” to describe the mystery that lies beyond time and space. “The More” is the mystery from which we all emerge, and into which we all return, which surrounds us in our daily living whether we know it or not. I am a minister because, every now and again, I have sensed “the More” within and around me, and like a dream I cannot quite recall, but cannot quite dispense with, it has come to seem like one of the most important things in all the world. And you are here in church, rather than somewhere else, I suspect, because you too have sensed “the More,” and are trying to touch it, to embrace it. Sometimes, if we are lucky, we manage to stumble into it, or toward it, together on a Sunday morning.

One place in which “the More” is on display in the New Testament is in the remarkable passage we just heard from 2 Corinthians. There, Paul describes a mystical experience of transport, in which he was caught up into what he calls “the third heaven.” So powerful was the experience, he says, that he cannot even say whether it occurred to him as a vision, or if his body was actually caught up into some heavenly sphere.

What Paul means, exactly, by heaven, let alone the third heaven, is a mystery that readers of the Bible have puzzled over for centuries. It was, clearly, some kind of mystical, or out of body experience. Many medieval mystics, like St. Catherine of Siena, with whom we began our service, have appealed to it over the years in their own explorations of the inner life. It’s also a central passage for Dante, in his *Paradiso*, which imagines not three levels of heaven, but nine. Dante imagines himself on a journey into the beyond, into “the More,” much like the one Paul alludes to. I myself have no special insight into what Paul experienced, but I do think it’s a part of our tradition that is worthy of our attention, if only as a signpost of the mysteries that are all about us. As Hamlet remarks, “There is more in heaven and earth than is dreamed of in your philosophy, Horatio.” There is more...

If I may, I’d like to tell a story about my own experience of “the More” recently. I do so in hopes that it will create a small opening toward your own reflections on “the More,” however that might manifest for you. Here’s something of my story: This summer, my mom’s youngest brother, my uncle Dave, died quite suddenly. Now, when I’m sad, or shaken, I tend to turn toward music for solace, and I found myself listening to a lot of Van Morrison, who has an ear for the mystic chords of the human experience. I fastened upon an album called *No Guru, No Method, No Teacher*, and I listened to it over and over again, even letting it play while I went to sleep one night. But I also found myself returning to a song that will be familiar to many of you, “Into the Mystic,” from his 1970 album, *Moondance*. It’s a song about “the More,” and it gave me the courage in that moment to trust that there is a mystic something toward which we all travel, a mystic presence which at last gathers all of us into its embrace. It’s not scary, finally, but gentle. It’s not a moment of judgment, but one of grace. It’s not an experience of loss, but rather of reintegration. Morrison puts it this way:

“when that fog horn blows,

I wanna hear it,
I don't have to fear it...
magnificently we will float into the mystic.”

Perhaps the foghorn is something like Gabriel’s trumpet, the sound that calls us from this life into another. Or perhaps it is that deep and low sound that calls to us from within our lives, a sounding from afar, calling us toward the mystery, “the More,” that we all of us sense from time to time. I can only say that I found the song to be a profound source of comfort and solace in that moment, as I imagined the journey my uncle had made.

But then, do you know what? The song itself began to follow me, everywhere, like a shadow, like a friend. First, I saw that Bob Dylan had randomly included it in one of his sets on a night in Italy. And then, at a restaurant in the town of San Clemente, on the coast of Southern California, our family entered a restaurant. There was a bar just by the entryway, and a band was playing. As soon as we entered, they launched into a cover of “Into the Mystic.” It stopped me cold. I took off my hat, and placed it upon my heart as they played. Then, a week later, in Colorado, we were browsing through a vintage clothing store. I was only half interested. I had just that morning started another read through of Dante, and I felt drawn toward that spiritual vision. It was on my mind. And suddenly, the song was there again, playing over the store’s speakers. I’m telling you, it positively followed me, until I began to acknowledge it.

That’s not all. Soon after returning home from our summer travels, I began catching up with my friend David Good. David is our emeritus senior minister, and he has been a friend and a guide for me, and for many among us, for many years now. As many of you know, David has had some health struggles recently, which have kept him pretty well confined to his home, and often, to his bed. After our conversations, I began sending him songs that I hoped might speak to him in his convalescence. One of those songs was “Into the Mystic.”

Soon, David called with an idea. He told me how the song spoke to him not only of the Bible and the Christian imagination, but also to another sacred imaginary, that of Plato and Socrates. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates speaks of birth as another mystic moment, in which our souls somehow are constituted from out of the mystery, from out of “the More.” And life, according to Socrates, is a matter of recollecting, as best we can, what it is to belong to that mystery. Those recollections occur in flashes of insight and awareness, like when we encounter a place and know that somehow we belong there, or like when we encounter a tradition, or a philosophical perspective, or a shard of theology and something leaps within us. It’s like when we encounter a person, and immediately recognize something deep within them, though we’ve never met them before. It’s when we know for certain that this, whatever the “this” is - that this is for me. For Socrates and Plato, those are moments of recollection, recalling the mystery from which we have come. Death, then, according to Socrates, is a return into that mystery, about which we can say very little, save that we don’t have to fear it. As the Apostle Paul says in one of his letters, “We see through a glass darkly.” But in the Greek and Christian traditions alike, the mystery is not a nothing. It is a vast and wondrous and magnificent something.

David then sprung his idea. “I see that Van Morrison will be in Providence a few weeks from now,” he told me. “And I want to send you and your whole family to see him.” I was stunned by the offer, and yet more stunned when I learned what it would cost. But David insisted, and I accepted.

A few weeks later, our family drove to Providence (even the name of the city seems significant to the story) on a rainy night, and we filed into our seats. Before long the band started

to play, and the man himself, Van Morrison, small of stature and large of spirit and voice, made his way to the stage. To be in proximity to a voice that has provided such spiritual sustenance, was something wonderful. It was for us all. And then, of course, there was the song again. Toward the end of the set, those familiar chords kicked in, and we sailed “into the mystic” once again, as a family.

It was, and is, one of the most generous gifts I have ever received. And so in part, to share that gift with each of you, but also to offer gratitude to our friend David, Sabina and Rachael have worked up a version of “Into the Mystic.” I’ll let them take it from here.

(Sabina and Rachael, Into the Mystic)

Van Morrison’s song is a call toward openness regarding “the More.” It surrounds us. It is within us. It is among us. Like Paul getting swept up into the third heaven, and like Dante journeying through Paradise, we too are gently being ushered into and through the mystic. The mystic, in my understanding, doesn’t take us out of the world, but rather pushes us more deeply into existence, immersing us in the pain and struggle, but also the hopes and the dreams that we all share. That mystic has been calling to me, and I’m doing my best to figure out how to be attuned to those mystic chords. But I believe it calls to you as well. May we each strive to be open to it, however that foghorn manifests. I want to hear it. We don’t have to fear it. In the name of the God in whom we live, and move, and have our being...Amen.