

“THE BEST CANNOT BE TOLD”
Olympic Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
March 15, 2026
Guest Speaker: Rev. Bruce A. Bode
Service Leader: Dianne Whitaker
Musicians: Harmony Rutter, LeRoy Davidson

Sermon Title & Description: “The Best Cannot Be Told” – The opening lines of *Tao Te Ching*, as rendered by Stephen Mitchell, read: “The tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.” These statements connect to one of scholar Joseph Campbell’s main themes, namely, his understanding that that “religious language” is necessarily symbolic.

Quotations for slides before service

The tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.

The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.

(Opening lines of the *Tao Te Ching*, translated by Stephen Mitchell)

The ultimate mystery of being is beyond all categories of thought. As Kant said, the thing in itself is no thing. It transcends thingness, it goes past anything that could be thought. The best things can’t be told because they transcend thought. The second best are misunderstood, because those are the thoughts that are supposed to refer to that which can’t be thought about. The third best are what we talk about.

(Joseph Campbell, interview with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, p. 49)

To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms – this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I belong to the ranks of devoutly religious men.

(Albert Einstein, “Strange is Our Situation Here on Earth,” *Modern Religious Thought*, Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., p. 204)

Lighting the Chalice

As we gather in this sacred space, we light our Unitarian Universalist chalice—a symbol itself, glowing with meaning shaped by our hearts and minds. In this gentle flame, we find the language of faith not as literal proclamation, but as poetic invitation—each word and gesture pointing beyond itself to deeper truths shared across our diverse beliefs.

Let this light remind us that the words we speak and the rituals we honor are vessels for our experiences, our hopes, and our questions. They are symbols, ever open to interpretation, drawing us together as we seek understanding and wisdom—in ourselves, in one another, and in the great mystery that binds us all.

May this chalice flame shine as a beacon for all who seek meaning, holding space for each unique journey, and illuminating the many ways we can name and celebrate what is sacred in our lives.

Greeting, Introduction of Theme & Responsive Reading

Greetings to all of you, both to those of you present here in the sanctuary and to those of you tuning in virtually.

On three occasions in this past program year, the services I've led here have been related to the work of Joseph Campbell, a contemporary scholar of our world's mythologies and religions.

Last fall, on October 19, shortly before Halloween, I spoke under the title "Masks of God."

Then, on November 16, I spoke under the title "Joyful Participation in the Sorrows of the World," a sermon, perhaps, I should re-visit *for myself* because I confess I'm having a hard time participating joyfully in life at present given the backdrop of our world's current situation and our nation's role in it. Each morning recently it's as if I have to crawl out of a dark, depressive pit to engage the day. I make this confession to you so that you know that though this morning I will not be addressing our current world situation in any direct way, I'm not oblivious or unaffected by these ongoing matters.

The third service I've led this past program year related to the work of Joseph Campbell was given two months ago on January 18 under the title "Follow Your Bliss."

And today's service will be a fourth and final service related to the work of Joseph Campbell. It's titled "The Best Cannot Told," which speaks to the inadequacy of language and concepts to directly get at what is of most value to us in terms of life-meaning and of anchoring us and of centering us in our life.

Let's begin with a Responsive Reading of statements of Joseph Campbell that I've pulled together about how mythological stories and images may help us find our way in life.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: What is the meaning of a tree, of a butterfly, of the birth of a child? What is the meaning of the song of the rushing stream, or of the universe itself?

CONGREGATION: Who can answer? Such wonders simply are. They precede meaning, though "meanings" can be read into them.

MINISTER: So, likewise, are the images of mythology. They open like flowers to the conscious mind's amazement and may then be searched to the root for meaning as well as arranged to serve practical ends.

CONGREGATION: The holy tales and images of mythology are messages to the conscious mind from quarters of the spirit unknown to normal daylight consciousness.

MINISTER: They speak not of outside events, but of themes of the imagination.

CONGREGATION: They refer not to any geographical scene, but to a landscape of the soul.

MINISTER: If read as referring to events in the field of time and space – whether of past, present, or future – they will have been misread, and their force deflected.

CONGREGATION: Myths tell us of matters fundamental to ourselves, enduring essential principles about which it would be good for us to know.

MINISTER: They tell us in picture language of powers of the psyche, permanent features of the human spirit to be recognized and integrated into our lives.

CONGREGATION: Through myths our conscious minds are kept in touch with our own most secret, motivating depths.

(“Messages of Myths,” statements from the writings of Joseph Campbell)

Opening Hymn #92: “Mysterious Presence, Source of All”

1. Mysterious Presence, source of all —
the world without, the soul within —
thou fount of life, O hear our call,
and pour thy living waters in.

2. Thou breathest in the rushing wind,
thy spirit stirs in leaf and flower;
nor wilt thou from the willing mind
withhold thy light and love and power.

3. Thy hand unseen to accents clear
awoke the psalmist’s trembling lyre,
and touched the lips of holy seer
with flame from thine own altar fire.

4. That touch divine again impart,
still give the prophet’s burning word;
and vocal in each waiting heart
let living psalms of praise be heard.

(Words: Seth Curtis Beach; music: William Knapp)

Introduction to Reading

Joseph Campbell, who lived from 1904 to 1987, was one of the most brilliant and creative modern scholars in the area of world mythology and religion. He achieved something of a national and international recognition, mostly after his death, through a six-part PBS interview series with Bill Moyers titled *The Power of Myth*, first shown in 1988, just a few months after Campbell's death on October 30, 1987.

This six-hour series is based on 24 hours of conversation that Moyers had with Campbell recorded during the summers of 1985 and 1986 when Campbell was in his early 80's. These interviews are available as DVDs and they were as well transcribed in the book *The Power of Myth*, which actually contains more than is on the videos.

Our reading this morning is about a six-minute excerpt from these interviews. As in the previous services, Flossie Bode will take the part of journalist Bill Moyers, and I will read Campbell's part. We pick up the interview with Campbell talking about the impossibility of capturing experience in words and with symbols.

Reading

CAMPBELL: The person who has had a mystical experience knows that all the symbolic expressions of it are faulty. The symbols don't render the experience, they suggest it. If you haven't had the experience, how can you know what it is? Try to explain the joy of skiing to somebody living in the tropics who has never even seen snow. There has to be an experience to catch the message, some clue – otherwise you're not hearing what is being said.

MOYERS: The person who has the experience has to project it in the best way he can with images. It seems to me that we have lost the art in our society of thinking in images.

CAMPBELL: Oh, we definitely have. Our thinking is largely discursive, verbal, linear. There is more reality in an image than in a word.

MOYERS: Do you ever think that it is this absence of the religious experience of ecstasy, of joy, this denial of transcendence in our society, that has turned so many young people to the use of drugs?

CAMPBELL: Absolutely. That is the way in.

MOYERS: The way in?

CAMPBELL: To an experience.

MOYERS: And religion can't do that for you, or art can't do it?

CAMPBELL: It could, but it is not doing it now. Religions are addressing social problems and ethics instead of the mystical experience.

MOYERS: So you think religion's great calling is the experience.

CAMPBELL: One of the wonderful things in the Catholic ritual is going to communion. There you are taught that this *is* the body and blood of the Savior. And you take it to you, and you turn inward, and there Christ is working within you. This is a way of inspiring meditation on experiencing the spirit in you. You see people coming back from communion, and they are inward-turned, they really are.

In India, I have seen a red ring put around a stone, and then the stone becomes regarded as an incarnation of the mystery. Usually you think of things in practical terms, but you could think of anything in terms of its mystery. For example, this is a watch, but it is also a thing in being. You could put it down, draw a ring around it, and regard it in that dimension. That is the point of what is called "consecration."

MOYERS: What do you mean? What can you make of the watch you're wearing? What kind of mystery does it reveal?

CAMPBELL: It is a thing, isn't it?

MOYERS: Yes.

CAMPBELL: Do you really know what a thing is? What supports it? It is something in time and space. Think how mysterious it is that anything should be. The watch becomes the center for a meditation, the center of the intelligible mystery of being, which is everywhere. This watch is now the center of the universe. It is the still point in the turning world.

MOYERS: Where does the meditation take you?

CAMPBELL: Oh, it depends on how talented you are.

MOYERS: You talk about the "transcendent." What is the transcendent? What happens to someone in the transcendent?

CAMPBELL: "Transcendent" is a technical, philosophical term, translated in two different ways. In Christian theology, it refers to God as being beyond or outside the field of nature. That is a materialistic way of talking about the transcendent, because God is thought of as a kind of "spiritual fact" existing somewhere out there. It was Hegel who spoke of our anthropomorphic god as the "gaseous vertebrate" Or he is thought of as a bearded old man with a not very pleasant temperament. But "transcendent" properly means that which is beyond all concepts. [Immanuel] Kant tells us that all of our experiences are bounded by time and space. They take place within space, and they take place in the course of time.

Time and space form the sensibilities that bound our experiences. Our senses are enclosed in the field of time and space, and our minds are enclosed in a frame of the

categories of thought. But the ultimate thing (which is no thing) that we are trying to get in touch with is not so enclosed. We enclose it as we try to think of it.

The transcendent transcends all of these categories of thinking. Being and non-being – those are categories. The word “God” properly refers to what transcends all thinking, but the word “God” itself is something thought about.

Now you can personify God in many, many ways. Is there one god? Are there many gods? Those are merely categories of thought. What you are talking about and trying to think about *transcends* all that....

MOYERS: You are saying that God can't be known.

CAMPBELL: I mean that whatever is ultimate is beyond the categories of being and nonbeing. Is it or is it not? As the Buddha is reported to have said: “It both is and is not; neither is, nor is not.” God as the ultimate mystery of being is beyond thinking.

(Excerpted from *The Power of Myth*, pp. 61-62)

Sermon: “THE BEST CANNOT BE TOLD”

Part I: “Re-reading Religious Texts”

Introduction

As I've mentioned in previous services, I had the personal good fortune of organizing lectures for Joseph Campbell during three consecutive years, 1980 to 1982, at the Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where I served as an Associate Minister for 22 years from 1978-2001.

At the time when I first met Campbell, I was 33 years-old and he was 76 years-old, but our difference in age did not hold him back from engagement in many conversations during those years when he lectured at the Fountain Street Church, nor afterwards in correspondence by letter with him up until near his death.

Tus, both Campbell's work and his person have been hugely important in my life, as he basically gave me (and many others as well at that time) a whole different way of reading religion and the stories associated with religion: namely, to read them, not first of all factually, literally, historically, or scientifically; but rather symbolically, psychologically, spiritually, metaphorically, mythologically, poetically, figuratively, artistically – all these terms come to pretty much the same thing for me.

The stories of religion from my Protestant Christian heritage that in my teens and twenties troubled me most from a literal and scientific point of view; these stories, now, under Campbell's tutelage, often proved to be the very stories that were most meaningful and interesting to me.

Returning to the Garden of Eden story

Take, for example, the biblical story near the beginning of the book of Genesis of the Garden of Eden, which earlier in my life I had simply dumped into my mental garbage bin ... because, you know, snakes don't talk and gods don't walk in gardens.

But look *once again* at this primitive story, says Campbell – and look this time from a psychological perspective. Observe those two trees there in the center of that “Garden of Paradise.” And observe the picking of the fruit from that Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil by our first parents, and their subsequent experience of duality, which means expulsion from that “Garden of Innocence.”

And notice also a second tree in that Garden, the Tree of Eternal Life. Is there any way to pick from that Tree and so to find “the Eternal” – that is to say, is there any way to recover and to re-connect with that original psychological innocence and unity in the midst of the duality we now experience?

As Campbell says, the Garden of Eden has nothing to do with a “piece of real estate,” for, historically, there never was such a place.

And yet, historically, there was a time in the evolution of our species when we humans awoke to self-conscious awareness.

And, historically, there was a time when we began to make choices and *knew* we were making choices.

And, historically, there was a time when we separated from the animals and the nature-world around us, and felt the loss of immediate connection and participation with that world, and wondered whether there was a way to re-connect with that original unity ... or, are we forever and only in exile?

So this is a story about all of that and more, which you can play with endlessly, as our literature still does.

Returning to the Garden of Gethsemane

And the same thing, then, with the drama of the crucifixion and resurrection of the Christ in the Christian scriptures ... which earlier in my life, like the Garden of Eden story, I had simply dumped, hitting, as it were, the delete button ... because, again, you know, bodies don't resurrect and ascend into a house somewhere above the dome of heaven.

But reading that drama symbolically and psychologically, and leaving behind the questions of history, let this story enter the mythological realm where it has the potential to speak of the deep mystery and interior connection of death and life, of sacrifice and bliss; and of transformations of consciousness that might be possible for us – a story providing clues to the dynamics of such transformative possibilities in us – psychological and spiritual deaths and resurrections in our own lives.

Mythological play in our modern world

Our modern, rational, technological, and scientifically-oriented Western world has largely lost the mythological capacity. We have trouble holding the scientific and the spiritual worlds together ... though there are times when we do still hold these two worlds together, the Christmas season being such a time.

At Christmas, large parts of our Western culture are still willing to enter into mythological play through the images of Santa Claus and the Holy Child of Bethlehem.

Both of these figures function as mythological images: Santa Claus being more for children – a great, loving embrace of a figure for them; and the Child of Bethlehem being more for adults – an image of the freshness, potentiality, holiness, and divinity of nearly-born human life.

But to make these images work and to keep the play going, there's a little speed bump that has to be negotiated. And, indeed, many of us, no doubt, recall the time as children when Santa Claus moved from what we thought was "historical time" to "mythological time." And the initial suspicion that we had been lied to ... that Santa Claus doesn't exist; that Santa Claus is not real; that Santa Claus is not a literal being.

Most of us were able to get over that little shock – I think – and then as adults take our part in the play, keeping alive that beautiful and life-revivifying figure for the wee ones of a new generation.

So, too, many of us as adults – perhaps some of you here – have memories of the time when the Holy Child of Bethlehem moved from what we thought was "historical time" to "mythological time." And, again, the suspicion that we had been lied to and deceived upon discovering that the story of that Birth in Bethlehem belongs, not to factual history, but to legend; and that the Holy Child of Bethlehem has as little to do with the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth as Santa Claus has to do with St. Nicholas.

Indeed, this is a speed bump that causes many an accident, a speed bump that many churches have built up into a wall so high that sometimes it's difficult to make the transition into mythological time and psychological experience.

Metaphors and lies

One of Joseph Campbell's favorite stories was of an event that occurred late in his life: an interview with a young radio host who insisted that metaphorical images and stories were flat-out lies.

Near the end of this radio interview, it dawned on Campbell that his host didn't know what a metaphor was. And so Campbell, being a former teacher, put on his teacher's uniform and demanded that his host, now his student, give him an example of a metaphor. After

fussing about for a time, the interviewer finally came forward with this example. He said: “So and so runs very fast; we say he runs like a deer.”

“No,” said Campbell, “that’s not the metaphor. The metaphor is: so and so *is* a deer.”

“But that’s a lie,” cried the interviewer.

“That’s a metaphor,” insisted Campbell ... but the time for the interview was up and that’s where the issue was left.

But it got Campbell to thinking: Half the world thinks of “God” as a fact – a real being; these are the theists. And the other half of the world denies that “God” is such a fact – there is no such being; these are the atheists.

But neither half seems to know how to approach things metaphorically and mythologically ... which would be to understand that God and the gods and goddesses are human images, symbols, and metaphors through which and by which we attempt to address the deep realities of our existence, both within and without.

Such metaphorical or mythological images are, says Campbell, “the secret openings through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation.” (*Power of Myth*, p. 1)

Thus, Campbell saw his role as scholar and teacher as being that of gathering together the world’s images or “masks of God,” as he named them in a four-volume study titled *The Masks of God*, and revealing in them both their archetypal similarities and their local differences, and teaching people how to read them as metaphors rather than as scientific facts. “It is,” quips Campbell, “a purely literary problem.”

Or, as he has written in one of the last books – this one titled *The Outer Reaches of Inner Space: Metaphor as Myth and as Religion*:

The first step to mystical realization is the leaving of such a defined god for an experience of transcendence, disengaging the ethnic [the local] from the elementary idea [the universal], *for any god who is not transparent to transcendence is an idol, and its worship is idolatry.* (p. 44)

Musical Interlude: “A Core of Silence” (#286)

Let’s take a musical break before I conclude my four sermons on the work of Joseph Campbell. And I’ve asked Harmony to sing a rather unusual hymn in our hymnal titled “A Core of Silence,” #286 in our hymnals, which she also sang here in a service about four years ago.

This hymn “A Core of Silence” was composed by musician and lyricist Jim Reilly, born in 1943, the hymn being published in 1986.

And like the message of Joseph Campbell this hymn speaks to the necessary limitation of language in addressing the deepest questions of heart and mind ... and how the word “God” may relate to this quest.

There’s been some discussion of this hymn in emails going back to 2017 in which some Unitarian Universalists have been offended by the third verse of this hymn. No problem with the first verse:

1. A core of silence breathes beyond all words,
or else the words have little worth;
to “Heart” or “Soul” or “Spirit” it comes forth
(the words we name them matter not).

Nor any problem with the second verse:

2. And half the music lies within the pause
between the arches of the heart;
the print upon the page means less than ink
unless the white and black both speak.

But then the third verse has set the teeth of some folks on edge.

3. The “True Religion” gathers up its text:
“In the beginning was the Word.”
But I seek quietness behind that start
and name it nothing, much less “God.”

One person in the email thread wrote,

“This is the most offensive thing in the hymnal. In my personal copy, I’ve got a big ‘X’ in marker over this one. Nope. No way. Not ever. Nope.” ([August 8, 2017, 2:50 pm](#))

I doubt that the person who wrote this email expected the composer Jim Reilly to respond, but he did about five weeks later, humorously quipping, and I quote:

“To write the ‘most offensive thing’ in a U-U hymnal is quite an achievement, even if I wasn’t trying, and even if I think the interpretation above is mistaken – i.e., the hymn is not concerned with atheism, or a belief or lack of belief in ‘God’ – it [the hymn] has to do with my feeling that some kinds of “spiritual experience” [...] are independent of language and the limitations it imposes – I do have a kind of disdain for language, necessary as it is and as much as I have devoted part of my life to it – but then it was the language bias of so many U-U experiences that drove me to write the hymn – it’s not much of surprise that some U-U folk wouldn’t like it.”

(Jim Reilly, [September 18, 2017 at 9:51 pm](#))

And then, about a year and a half later, Jim Reilly, the composer, jumps on this email thread again, having found a sermon on this hymn by the Rev. Frances Dearman, a Canadian Unitarian minister and a ministerial colleague of mine, a sermon he appreciated. This time Jim Reilly wrote:

“I am much indebted to Frances Dearman for the “close reading” of my hymn Dearman understands what I tried to communicate and how the text and music work together, including the lack of meter in the tune.” ([February 9, 2019 at 12:25 pm](#))

So, I looked up Frances Dearman’s sermon on-line, and here’s a part of it in which she summarizes the message of the hymn saying:

“This is poetry; the words are more tightly woven than their simplicity at first suggests. Let’s try a paraphrase first, to try and get at the literal meaning: Reilly tells us that he senses a noiseless centre to the universe, something that seems alive; this centre communicates in silence – words do not bear the meaning; we call to this centre with certain names, and it responds, but the names don’t really matter. The meaning it offers us depends as much on what is unsaid, as on what is said. Some proclaimed authority relies on word. But the poet looks behind the words to the quiet centre; the poet feels no need to name the holy.” (Link to sermon by the Rev. Frances Dearman: <http://uuolinda.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Core-of-Silence-11Feb2018.pdf>)

And now, finally, here is the hymn sung acapella by Harmony Rutter.

**Sermon: “THE BEST CANNOT BE TOLD”
Part II: “Four Functions of Myths”**

I’d like to conclude my series of four sermons on the work of Joseph Campbell by briefly talking how he approached the subject of myth and how he saw myths functioning in our present world.

Mythological systems in our modern world

A mythology is a religion’s or a society’s overall story of how to enter life, what this play of life is about, and what roles are available to us in this cosmic drama, and how we should play out these roles.

Campbell defines mythology as an interlocking system of stories, images, metaphors, and individual myths that provide a context in which we might live our lives with vitality, meaning, and human decency.

But we live in a time, says Campbell, in which the mythologies that built whole civilizations have largely broken apart. Change has come so quickly, technology has moved so fast, and previously separated cultures have all been thrown together, so that the mythological systems simply can’t keep up.

Thus, we live, Campbell says, in a time of the “terminal moraine” of mythologies – mythological fragments from smashed systems lie scattered all about us.

The various fundamentalisms of our world can be seen as desperate attempts to hang on to mythological systems that have broken apart – or need to break apart.

And the desire for a new mythology can be seen perhaps in the wild interest, for example, in the Harry Potter series, which many persons, including our 10-year-old grand-daughter, are immersed in with what might be described as “religious fervor.”

“But can we live in such a situation,” asked Bill Moyers of Joseph Campbell, “a situation in which we have no clearly operating overall mythology?”

“Well,” says Campbell, “we’re doing it.

But I don’t think he thought we were doing it all that well.

And he also thought that the study of the myths and the stories of religion could be *individually* helpful, even, or perhaps especially, when there is no grand mythology meeting the needs of our modern world, and where, as he sees it, we should not expect one in the foreseeable future.

Four functions of myth

Campbell saw four basic ways that mythologies function, and with knowledge of these functions we might be aided in finding our way.

1) The first function, first in priority, not necessarily in time or personal development, but the function that is most basic, Campbell names the “mystical” or “metaphysical” function. And this has to do with awakening and maintaining in the individual a sense of the wonder of life and being ... and an *experience* of spiritual connection so that one is not just sleep-walking one’s way through life, but one is truly *alive* to it, seized by the *rapture* of being alive, aware of its mystery, and identified with a larger unity and an interior depth of being.

2) A second function of mythology, Campbell calls the “cosmological” function. This has to do with the science of the day and a culture’s current picture of the cosmos ... the function of mythology, then, being that of using this picture for rendering its spiritual message, showing how the mysterious depth of being from the first function shines through one’s current picture of the cosmos.

A lot of religion’s current problems, particularly in the West, maintains Campbell, are that our mythologies simply haven’t adjusted to the new scientific picture that we have of the universe. Rather, our religions still try to operate with a cosmology from 4000 years ago, forgetting and resisting Copernicus, Galileo, Darwin, Einstein, and the Hubble telescope. Thus, there’s a disconnect; the spiritual message can’t get through because there is, as it were, this “cosmological roadblock.” Says Campbell:

The heliocentric universe has never been translated into a mythology. Science and religion have therewith gone apart. And that is the case to the present, with the problem even compounded by our present recognition of the inconceivable magnitude of this galaxy of stars, of which our life-giving sun is a peripheral member, circling with its satellites in this single galaxy among millions within a space of incredible distances, having no fixed form or end. (*The Inner Reaches of Outer Space: Metaphor as Myth and as Religion*, p. 43)

But, of course, there's no necessary conflict between science and religion ... as we see, for example, in an Einstein for whom the lens of science is simply an opening into the impenetrable mystery and beauty of Being, as in his quote at the top of today's Order of Service.

3) The third function of myth that Campbell identifies is a "sociological" one. This has to do with one's society and with validating and maintaining the social and moral order of your society by connecting it with the depths of being, and showing how that depth plays in and through your society.

And the only mythology that will work for our future, says Campbell, is one that takes the planet as its in-group ... because now, truly, we have become a planetary society, as our current conflict in the Middle East illustrates.

4) And, fourthly, there is, what Campbell calls, the "pedagogical" or "psychological" function of myth and religion, which is a teaching function:

- * teaching and conducting the individual through the various passages of a human life;
- * helping the individual to meet and cross the various thresholds of life in a decent and harmonious way;
- * and so also to recognize the beauties of life as you make your way through its various stages.

Those stages, according to Campbell, are essentially three in number: 1), the dependence of youth; 2), the independence and self-responsibility of adulthood; and, then, thirdly, disengagement from this particular vehicle of life and the return to the mysterious sourceland from which we all come.

The grid of perception

Let me, in conclusion, return to the first function of mythology, for it's in this context that my sermon title, "The Best Cannot Be Told," is to be understood.

The first function of myth and religion, as I indicated, is to assist the individual in making a direct, experiential connection with the unity, depth, and mystery of Being.

The idea here is that "beyond" or "beneath" or "above" or "in the midst of" our time-and-space world there is another dimension of reality that we can only *point to* – a larger and different reality, a "reality" that, as Campbell said in our earlier reading, "transcends" our time-and-space-bound reality and all our categories of thought.

And why can we only point to this “reality” and not grasp it directly? Because our thinking-system, which is made possible by the miraculous evolutionary development of the neo-cortex of our brain, is a system that works through splitting into parts, through dividing reality into yes and no, good and evil, yin and yang – that’s the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil from which we have eaten.

Our thinking-system operates – and must operate – in such a fashion. That’s its nature; that’s the grid, as it were, that organizes all perception and sensation as it comes to us. This is no knock on the thinking-system – none at all – but it does point to its limits and its uses.

And the idea that grounds this first function of mythology is that Reality is larger than, or other than, or different than, or more than our thinking-system can take into itself; and that there is a unity of being and a depth and breadth of being that is prior to and beyond the dualities of life that the ego-mind beholds and creates.

That “unity of Being” cannot be directly grasped by the conceptualizing mind. The conceptualizing mind would like to grasp it directly but in the very act of grasping it, it splits apart the reality it would grasp.

It is perhaps similar to our connection to the electromagnetic spectrum ... that just as our eyes make use of only a small band of the wave lengths in the entire electromagnetic spectrum, thus making reality “visible” to us – but imagine if our “eyes” made use of x-ray’s waves instead of the waves they do, how differently we would perceive reality – so, too, the conceptualizing capacity of our brains grasps reality only in certain limited ways.

The “more” to which religion points

Yet, says religion, there is more to reality. Before we humans split reality up into “pairs of opposites” with our conceptualizing brains, there is a “unity” to reality. And this “unity of reality” that is beyond or in the midst of these “pairs of opposites,” says religion, is the ground of our being and our truest home.

This “unity,” says Campbell, is a “metaphysical truth.” The law of survival, he says, is the second law of life, not the first. The first law is the metaphysical realization of “our identity and unity with all life.” (*The Power of Myth*, p. 110)

Or, mythologically speaking, there *is* a Tree of Eternal Life, a place that is no place, beyond all division. And you can experience that “place” *in time*; you can pick from that Tree of Eternal Life here and now and in this incarnation of being.

It’s the first function of religion to help you with that, to point the way to that Tree of Eternal Life ... which is the “reality” that transcends all thinking ... and which is the best there is.

But that best cannot be told directly; it cannot be directly grasped by the intellect. The intellect can only point to, can only symbolize, can only tell stories about, can only produce images and metaphors of that which is the ground of its own capacity.

And these images, stories, metaphors, and symbols, then, are the second best ... because they direct us to the best.

But, as Campbell says, following his teacher Heinrich Zimmer, these symbols and stories are often – or even usually – misunderstood. They are hardened into scientific facts; they are made literal and concrete, and, in the process, become walls rather than windows.

Over 2500 years ago, Lao-tzu, that wisest of the wise in Chinese philosophy, understood the point of all this. Thus, he opened that beautiful, thin little volume, the *Tao Te Ching*, with these marvelous words:

The tao that can be told
is not the eternal Tao
The name that can be named
is not the eternal Name.

The unnamable is the eternally real.
Naming is the origin
of all particular things.

Free from desire, you realize the mystery.
Caught in desire, you see only the manifestations.

Yet mystery and manifestations
arise from the same source.
This source is called darkness.

Darkness within darkness.
The gateway to all understanding.
(*Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu, version by Stephen Mitchell)

Closing Hymn #123 – “Spirit of Life”

Spirit of Life, come unto me.
Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea;
move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.
Roots hold me close; wings set me free;
Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.
(Carolyn McDade, words & music)

Closing Words

Now may peace be in our hearts,
and understanding in our minds,
may courage steel our wills,
and the love of truth forever guide us. Amen.

Extinguishing the Chalice

We extinguish this flame,
But not the Light of Truth,
The Warmth of Community,
The Fire of Commitment,
Or the Power of Transformation;
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a companion sermon to three previous sermons given in the past year on themes of Joseph Campbell: “Masks of God” (October 19), “Joyful Participation in the Sorrows of the World” (November 16), and “Follow Your Bliss” (January 18). Print versions of these sermons are available on the OUUF website at: [https://olympicuuf.com/religious-services/sermons/.](https://olympicuuf.com/religious-services/sermons/))

Biographical Data on Guest Speaker

Bruce A. Bode is Minister Emeritus at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship (QUUF) in Port Townsend, Washington, from which he retired in 2018 as the Senior Minister after serving the congregation for fourteen years (2004-2018).

Before coming to Port Townsend, Rev. Bode was the Interim Minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Houston, Texas (2002-2004) and the Hope Unitarian Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma (2001-2002). Prior to that, he served for twenty-two years (1978-2001) as an Associate Minister at the Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a large, independent, religiously liberal congregation.