

"A Thinking Mystic"  
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A week of rain has changed forever the strip of green on the south side of my house. Under the brown stalks of last year's mums, a carpet of new growth is emerging, and I bend down to break off what I might have cleared away last fall. Between the evergreens not trimmed but left to grow as they will, blue salvia is awakening, too; stronger each year, eager to complement the red annuals that will be planted in another month, just like my grandma Ingeborg planted each year, south side of the house, steps from the kitchen door.

Behind me, I have been noticed; the dogs next door bark through the stockade fence as I walk by. I open the trunk of the Buick and find my ten-pound box of Milkbones; break them in two (the biscuits, not the dogs); reach over the fence as I can and toss the pieces to the brown dog who thinks he's the boss, and the white and black who is my favorite.

Through the gate of the picket fence, leaning more than it did last fall, now dried out in the unexpected, hot sunshine, wanting so to stand upright. Then I walk in paths yet in the shade of the garage, dark and soggy, mud collecting on the bottoms of my father's clogs. Step by step I pass; three irregular stairs that I always want to make uniform, the tomato frames cleaned and at the side of the garden, two tiered boxes of garden soil and humus, prepared for spring; the pile of limbs cleared and collected last fall, waiting to be turned into mulch. Just a few dozens of yards from the back door, I am in another world.

Hands in earth, breath drawn deep, greening earth, blue sky. Weeds erased, the spaces between my yard and the new neighbors' are open, more porous than I remember; and, thankfully, the mountain of trash that had grown before they bought their house—I hadn't remembered its removal. The ivy that they gave me is planted, transplanted now to my side of the fence, to the dark spot where no longer grows grass, but maybe friendly vines.

Overgrown and irregular cedars wait to be removed; and the arbor gate that I will build in the basement and install in the yard exists only in my mind. But the forsythia I bought at the conservation district plant sale last year are there, tiny amid the lanky cedar. They bud and swell, yellow just beginning to emerge. I sense their success in making it through their first winter in their forever home.

Oh, matter. Oh earth. Oh air and sun, oh cold and melting. This material world, how varied and beautiful; my experience of it, this tiny plot I pretend to possess and yet which, in this moment, so possesses me. How joyful I can be, coming out of three days in and out of bed, three days out of a Michigan flu; this material life is so full.

My brain is so full; so conscious at this moment that we are matter; that we *are* matter and that we *do* matter. We are the consciousness of the earth, of the Universe; we are the product of a million of millions-upon-millions of accidents of matter.

Bang! It began,  
and energy-matter was and is,  
and time became, and space expanded;

Bang! We matter-women and matter-men arose  
from our feeblest cousins,  
the stuff of stars colliding  
in billions upon billions of accidents;  
our neighborhood this galaxy  
arising;

undifferentiated soup of possibilities  
whirling, growing of itself differences,  
stars collected to fire,  
light from darkness made distinct;

earth collecting  
and water separating;

undifferentiated sea of possibilities  
leading to life, growing in sea,  
creeping toward earth,  
rising into sky and overcoming it all;

life permeating earth, matter;  
material life rising from energy-matter;  
*Eubacteria, Archaeobacteria, Protista, Fungi, Plantae, Animalia;*

life organizing itself,  
matter-energy organizing itself;  
nature organizing herself;  
our cousins, all of us the stuff of stars;

all of us matter,  
consciousness rising  
in our mammalian siblings,  
in our primate kin;

our language arising  
in our social development;

big brains we grow  
and the material world we experience  
and language we find

and we tell our story  
which is the story of the stars,  
of matter, of consciousness  
arising from matter.

The world is, and it speaks, we speak; all that is speaks the word, and God is created.

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It just seemed to be the most sensible way to look at things, this materialistic view of all that is. It was for me the rational, reasonable, common-sensical way of understanding how everything came to be. Yes, I know; I grew up in the Christian church, the Protestant mainline, and there I learned all the stories of the Bible; of creation and God and Israel and Jesus; but there I learned a perspective, too, that said that faith should be reasonable, rational; that my creative spirit was important and that my thinking mind ought to be able to make sense of the mythos of faith, of the ethos of faith, of the social gathering of people amid the deep truth that we belong to one another.

My Christian education expected that the day was coming when I, as a youth becoming a young adult, would need to make a personal statement about my system of belief; and my Christian education taught me that I had the capacity to do it; that I was gifted, as we all are gifted; that I had an innate consciousness that expressed itself in a conscience that, with a helping community of inquiring minds and mentoring relationships, could provide me with a moral compass that could guide my whole life. This period of group study and relationship building with adults and personal self-reflection led to my confirmation, and my being accepted as a member of the church of my formation. Our youth-becoming-young-adults and their teachers and mentors go through a similar process in our Coming of Age program.

When I declared my materialism – that is, not my desire to be (singing) “living in a material world,” but rather the notion that it is matter which is primary, and consciousness which arises out of matter – I was taking a step out of religious orthodoxy. The Bible said that consciousness existed first – that God/consciousness forever existed, thought for a while in the time before time and then said, “I’ll make me a world,” and then out of nothing but an idea, the material cosmos was made. Religion has been for centuries an idealist notion – ideas exist first, and then matter; God first, and then humanity; ideal forms pre-exist, and then fallen, broken, incomplete, sinful matter arises and hopes to find its way to perfection.

But it was not idealism that made sense to me; rather materialism “worked.”

Materialism worked for me as a political person. I could look at the way other materialists described the world and could find truths that echoed with mine. The story of the material rise of the family included the material rise of patriarchy as an organizing form; the story of the material rise of societies included the material imposition of class divisions, of oppression and exploitation. It also spoke of tremendous productivity and the creation of material wealth.

So materialism gave me hope, great hope: if the exploitation and misery I saw had a material basis, then the material reality could be changed and the exploitation could cease. Patriarchy – a material reality – could be undone; political tyranny – a material reality – could be materially disorganized, overthrown; ownership of the means of production by the few – an extant, observable, time-bound material truth – could be replaced by the material reorganizing into ownership of the means of production by the many. Materialism satisfied my intellect and gave me emotional hope.

But then I watched a patient die.

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Or rather, I watched her family deal with her death. She died in the ambulance on the way to St. Vincent's Hospital. Her husband was in the ambulance with her; her large Catholic family was speeding behind the ambulance in their station wagon. I was "on call" and I got the call to get down to the Emergency Department to usher the family into the Grieving Room, and then to accompany them into the private trauma room where her body would lie until taken by the funeral director. I stood with these people that I did not know. I did not know them, and I did not know what to do.

Materialism, based in sensate truth, based in things which are observable, measurable, what we see and touch and hear and taste, had only one set of truths. A family in tears. A hand being held. A coat misbuttoned. A shoelace untied. A pair of eyeglasses that were grimy with grease and tears. A deep silence.

Materialism brought us to the opening of a door. A nurse arrives and I go to speak to her. She offers to walk us into the trauma room. I stop her and whisper, "What will we see?" "It isn't pretty," she says, and she describes the material truth. "Rigor has set in, and her face is contorted, as if she is in pain." I nod to the nurse, and then turn to the family. "We may go in now, if you'd like." They nod, too.

The measurable, the sensate, the material is shocking. We stand in a little circle around wife, mother, mother-in-law, grandmother. There is no sound, but heaving breaths and voices stopped just short of sobbing. I don't know what to do.

I whisper to the nurse, "What do I do now?" She suggests, "I find the 'Our Father' usually works." And so I invite them all, "Shall we be in the spirit of prayer. 'Our Father, who art in heaven, . . .'" and they join me, and finish a few lines before me, they raised in the material reality which is Catholicism, they teaching the materialist dolt who knows the world only through Protestant eyes.

And then they say goodbye. One by one, they touch the cold corpse of grandmother, of mother-in-law, of mother. One by one they move to her and then quickly to the warm body of a family member. They pull each other from the room until only husband remains with what was, minutes earlier, his wife and life partner. And he embraces her cold body, and places his lips on her frozen and contorted face, and promises that he will love her, he will love her forever.

Love, not sensate, but intuited; not known through strict measure of space and time, but intuited as eternal; not found in matter and energy, but in consciousness; and not in only the consciousness of one, but resonating with all the loves known in the consciousness of chaplain and nurse, and all of us. A great love shared in a great consciousness. A consciousness that incorporates an ideal.

"We love because he first loved us," they told me in Sunday school; a love, an Ideal, was here first; Ideal exists and creates the material. How true this is, how true this must be. This political and intellectual materialist leaves the bedside of a dying woman, of a grieving family, and is confronted with his religious and emotional idealism.

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Our Transcendentalist forbears stood in the balance. They imagined that their radicalism was an antidote to the over-reasoned liberal Christianity of their day. They believed that religion was about more than simply understanding the truths of the social and political location of the Bible and its authors and editors; that religion was about more than teaching by rote that which was morally correct, ethically supportable, intellectually coherent. They understood that religion is about something more, that it exists in the realm of feelings.

They had studied the material truths of Bible and history and Jesus and God-the-Great-Ideal, and even their own social systems; and they found such materialism wanting; and Idealism brought them to confront new understandings. That each person could know directly, through imagination and feeling, the imminent Divine; that we are one with each other and that any social system which stands in the way of our intuition of profound kinship is an unreasonable institution; that our calling as parts of this Universe is to express in our lives our unity, our passion for life and compassion for others, or deepest desire for justice in our living and our relations, our commitment to the equitable use of our own lives in communion with others.

Our Transcendentalist forbears were united, some say, only by their diversity. Few could reasonably reconcile the individualism of Emerson and Thoreau with the communitarianism of Riley and Alcott and the call to radicalism of Parker and Fuller. And yet this group of idealist practitioners of liberal religion knew that they were called, at their moment in history, to proclaim a fuller gospel, to broadcast a newer truth, to intuit with one another the new age that they were experiencing and the freedom that the new age gave for a new idealism in their country, in their personal lives, in their publications and lectures and even sermons; for a new idealism in their congregations and in the ways their congregations lived in the world.

This new age holds true, I think, in our time. Our country stands in a new place, a new place in itself and in the role it may play in the world. You can feel it everywhere. A materialist reading of our time is necessary – we need to measure the remedies that must be taken to revive our economy so that suffering may be abated and our creativity and productivity may be unleashed. The material reality of economic downturn and decades of abandonment of cities and manufacturing and working people with sustainable wages and benefits – this measurable, material truth must be known, understood, honored.

But an intangible is in our midst, as well, something less easily measured. Hope is our new ideal, hope the word for the new age; not an amorphous hope that hovers distant, but an imminent hope, an audacious hope that we experience directly, and deeply, divinely and socially. Hope the Ideal stands among us, balancing the Material. It is here. I know it. I think you know it, too.

Beyond the measurable and material proof that we are individuals, that we are diverse, that we are largely different from one another and maybe even the supportable conclusion that we cannot know each other's lives, we cannot live in each other's skins, there is a truth, a Unitarian Universalist assessment, if you will, an intuitive understanding that we are, indeed, one: one with each other in one human family, inhabiting one living planet in its cycles around one sun, imbued with one divine presence.

More than that, we are one with all of creation. We embrace the material truths of cosmic science and planetary evolution and the intuited appreciation for our kinship with other

animals, to our interconnections with the plants, our dependence on the minerals of earth herself. With Thich Nhat Hanh, we face our frailties, our skepticism, our sense of inadequacy and incoherence and incompleteness by touching the earth; reaching down into the ground mirrors reaching into the ground of our being.

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Our congregations stand in a new place in this new age; we stand balancing the hard material truth of economic challenge and personal exhaustion, acknowledging the material reality of bands of co-religionists, statistically few in number, inhabiting places like this beautiful setting; materially stating that we want in this world to be communities of compassion, and equity, and justice; and knowing that our material context of a de-industrializing country, exporting jobs and with an economy in chaos leaves many of us wondering whether we can sustain self and family, home and hearth; where a conflicted civic realm might convince a materialist simply to look out for number one, to close ranks and to “make it work.”

And yet mystery calls us to balance this material truth we live with certain ideals, certain ideals in this new age which call us to a commitment to one another, not out of a sense of desperation or guilt, but out of the joy of discovering the deeper truths: that we are kin, that we may know love, that being with one another ought to be an expression of our joy in living; our joy in the direct experience of hope immanent, of universal and all-conquering love, of creativity and play, of beauty and even truth. This community stands not wondering which came first, the material or the ideal, but accepting the mystery that each is discovered in the other, that we may intuitively know each other and truth and love and God; that we discover these things as we belong to each other, to matter and energy and consciousness; that we may be one in this moment and in all the moments of this great story of a living universe.

My hands are marked by a spring day in the back yard, raking leaves, uncovering hellebores and tulips, pulling the detritus of last year’s plant growth. I listen to the drips, now, outside my window. I feel the warming sun on my tear-streaked face. I notice the evergreens peeking through the brown leaves, holly bush that stands and lingon bush that creeps. I smell balsam pine needles in the carpet under my feet, the remnants of Christmas that never seem to go away. This material world, it fills me with such joy. And I touch gently the earth, and the earth touches me, and somehow, somehow I am one with everything.