

My God

**a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

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A colleague of mine likes to tell the story of his favorite response to a question he often gets from other Unitarian Universalists. When someone asks him, "Do you believe in God?", he smiles, and says to them: "By the way you frame that question, it appears you think it is possible not to believe in God - but the God I believe in cannot be denied!" A great conversation, he says, invariably ensues.

In that spirit - the spirit of dialogue - and even, to use the language of reverence, in the spirit of testifying, of sharing my own experience of God - today I continue my three-part sermon series by offering you a look at "My God."

Next Sunday, it is my hope that the conversation will continue, as some of you share your thoughts and ideas on the subject. If you would be willing to speak for 2-3 minutes next week about your theology, your own personal belief or non-belief in God or Goddess, gods or goddesses, please see me after the service.

Let's begin this morning, though, with a simple declaration of faith: I believe in God.

Now, if you had told me 20 years ago that I would one day be a minister, standing at a pulpit, starting out a Sunday sermon with the words "I believe in God," I almost certainly would have told you that you were crazy.

You see, for a long, long time, I didn't believe in God. Had no patience with the notion. Couldn't abide the concept. Cringed every time I heard the word -

especially in a Unitarian Universalist church. So if my sermon topic today makes some of you uncomfortable, believe me, I do understand.

Perhaps the reason I couldn't abide the notion of God all those years was because it was someone else's notion of God - and a dangerous, idolatrous notion at that.

The perverted picture of God that I so naturally recoiled against for much of my life goes way, way back. It began, so to speak, "in the beginning." To my mind, it can be traced to one crucial verse in the Old Testament . . . and to the thinking that inspired that verse . . . as well as to the thinking that has since been engendered by that verse. My copy of Genesis, Chapter 1, verse 26, reads: "And God said, let us make humanity in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the earth."

As debatable as the common translation of that passage is, I think most of us could agree that its two central ideas - the idea that God and human beings somehow uniquely resemble each other, and the idea that human beings should dominate the earth - these two ideas have shaped our culture for thousands of years, and continue to have enormous power over it, even today. This particular world-view can be implicated in most of the great tragedies of human history - wars and genocide, nationalism and racism, and the nuclear proliferation and environmental degradation that today threaten our very existence.

Such thinking, I believe, is precisely what we need salvation from; such thinking, in fact, is what made me an atheist for much of my life.

Yet here I stand today, not only to say that I believe in God, but to share my thoughts on God - my God - with you. For the God I believe in is neither Father nor Mother . . . this God doesn't resemble human beings any more than it resembles dolphins or dinosaurs or black holes in space.

It's a God, I have come to realize as I have become a parent, as I have entered midlife, that I have a deep, abiding need to accept into my life, and into my daily consciousness. For as Lindi Ramsden, a colleague of mine with whom I served on the UUA Nominating Committee, once said, "The old understanding of God - as a father figure in the sky, evaluating and judging our every action, acting in history to help one and damn another - no longer makes sense for us. Yet we still yearn to be connected to the Source

of Life, to have a purpose and meaning more profound than simply making it through another day."

It is a yearning I share - a yearning I imagine many of you share as well.

For my part, after years of letting others name God for me, I finally decided to claim God for myself . . . on my terms.

So it is that I can now say to you, "I believe in God."

Such a statement, of course, used to mean something. Something very specific. For centuries, Christians the world over have recited creeds: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth..." These creeds, based on the trinitarian conception of God, include assent to a further belief in the divinity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, as well as the acceptance of a variety of supernatural miracles.

But Unitarian Universalism is, and always has been, a creedless religion. We have no agreed-upon statements of faith. From our perspective, defining is often tantamount to con-fining.

Thus, I can say to you that I believe in God, and - in a Unitarian Universalist church - you will ask yourself (if not me), "What do you mean by that word 'God'?" "What kind of God are you proposing?" In Unitarian Universalist churches, at least, we eventually are confronted with what the great 20th century theologian James Luther Adams meant when he wrote, "The word God is so heavily laden with unacceptable connotations that it is, for many people, scarcely useable without confusion."

So in order to clarify a bit, let me begin by telling you about the God I don't believe in.

I grew up in a small Southern town in the Smoky Mountains. Before the Summer of Love. Before DVD's. Before integration.

I suppose I must have had the usual child-like wonder in the face of the novelty and mystery of life, for recently - as I was looking through some old black-and-white photos of myself as a child - I was struck by how spirited the little boy in those pictures appeared.

Like my son Patrick's now, my eyes sparkled, my grin extended from ear to ear. No doubt the Polaroid had captured me eagerly embracing the richness of life as it burst forth all around me. No doubt, at that moment, I believed in God, for I'm certain that right then, I was experiencing God - first-hand.

But I was soon to meet a very different God. While attending Sunday School in my parents' Methodist church one Sunday, I was told that God was angry with me. That I was a sinner. That everyone was a sinner, and that this God - so different from the God of the little boy in that picture - was actually willing to condemn me to everlasting torment in Hell, if I didn't accept his only son, Jesus Christ, as my savior.

Now up until that time, I had the strange notion that we were ALL children of God. That boys were sons of God and girls were daughters of God, and that we were all EQUAL in our relationship to God. But apparently, I was told, only one person was God's child.

This proposition came from my Sunday School teacher, a matronly woman whom I adored and trusted - at least, up until that day. According to family legend, my response to my teacher's assertion was swift and unequivocal - I spat on the floor.

Apparently, thought I didn't know it at the time, I was well on my way down toward becoming a Unitarian Universalist!

One thing's for sure - I was well on my way to receiving a first-hand demonstration of what my teacher had meant when she referred to the "wrath of God." After being evicted from the classroom for my transgression, I was, irony of ironies, placed at the mercy of the Sunday School Superintendent - who just happened to be my father.

So it was that the grownups in my life came to define God for me - and in the process took God away from me - for much of a lifetime. The kind of God presented to me those many years ago by my Sunday School teacher - the kind of God reflected in my own distant, judgmental father - remains, tragically, our culture's dominant image of the divine.

The roots of this God run very, very deep. And the problems with this gray-bearded, man-in-the-sky Father-God go far beyond any of our individual family histories, of course. They are part and parcel of our cultural history, a

fact that by now has been well-documented, particularly by modern feminist scholars. As my favorite Christian theologian, Sallie McFague, notes, "The crucial [fact] that God language is, [by definition,] metaphorical, is lost when only one important personal relationship - that of father and child - is allowed to serve as the entire grid for speaking of the God/human relationship. In fact," she continues, "by excluding other relationships as metaphors, the model of Father becomes idolatrous, for it comes to be viewed as a literal description of God."

Thus, in her early book "Models of God," McFague encourages us to explore other relational metaphors for the divine - God the Mother, God the Lover, God the Friend. A more recent volume finds her speaking of God with fewer human metaphors, and instead picturing the universe as "the body of God," and its animating force as the Holy Spirit. At least such a theology, she asserts, makes more sense than what she calls "the nonsense that is the idea of a disembodied, personal God."

The evolution of McFague's thinking parallels that of my own - away from the traditional, inherited, confining definition of God as Father, through God as Mother, to God as companion and, eventually, to an image of the divine that is infinitely beyond anthropomorphic boundaries. For as I see it, the problem with parental images of God is that they leave us perpetually children - and the problem with anthropomorphic images of the divine is that they soon enough become anthropocentric, and in the end, turn us into God.

It is no wonder that many among us have rejected the idea of God altogether. It is no wonder that I, given my experience as a child, turned away from such a God.

Let me share with you a passage from the most recent book by Robert Fulghum - who, if you didn't know it, is a retired Unitarian Universalist minister. Fulghum's experience mirrors my own, and - I suspect, that of many of us.

He writes, "In the credo I wrote at age 21, the longest part was devoted to God. It was a Supreme Court appeal against the existence of the Sunday School version of the deity imposed on me in childhood.

On reading my fiercely argued case, one professor said that not only had I thrown out the baby with the bathwater, but I had thrown out the soap and

towel and bathtub as well - and then tried to burn down the bathroom while I was at it."

But Fulghum goes on to say that now, he has made what he calls "an accommodation with the idea of God" - and so have I. After years of fighting against their concept of God, I have finally started the work of developing a relationship with my God.

I undertook this work, in part, as a natural result of parenthood, and middle age; in part, as an outgrowth of curiosity fueled in seminary classes and conversations in UU Sunday School classrooms - where, this time, I was on the other side of the table.

As you might have guessed by now, the God I have reclaimed is not some supernatural supreme being, external to me and you and this earth and this universe, but is instead a God that is, as Eckhart Tolle would say, more akin to being itself - the living force that animates the universe, the connecting principle that holds together this unfathomably mysterious interconnected web, this organism we call the Cosmos.

I believe in a God that is "the depth of the universe itself." When I sing "Spirit of Life," I am calling out to my God, connecting with that which I believe is sacred, while at the same time reminding myself of my place in the universe - tiny and seemingly insignificant, yet at the same time utterly unique and irreplaceable.

On good days, I trust my God - to use the language of reverence, I have faith in my God - to sustain me when I don't have the strength or courage to take care of myself. On my good days, I find, I frequently think about God.

But on my bad days, I tend to lose sight of just how miraculous is the fact that, as Robert Weston puts it, I come from the dust of stars, and the same Spirit of Life that brought me into being, continues to make me what I am, with each breath I take.

On my bad days, I think I'm all that I need.

But, more and more often now, there are days when I remember that I am a dependent creature in an interdependent existence, when I remember that my

life is not just mine alone, but part of other lives - part of the life of God itself.

The God I believe in now is very different from the God I didn't believe in when I was younger. So different - and so big - that I keep quotes I like about God in a large three-ring binder at home. Here are two of my favorites, two that capture, as well as any writings I have yet found, my God:

The first is from the controversial 19th century Universalist minister and mystic Abner Kneeland, who declared, "I believe that the whole universe is Nature ... and that 'God' and 'Nature', so far as we can attach any rational idea to either, are perfectly synonymous terms. Hence, I am not an atheist, but a pantheist; that is, instead of believing there is no God, I believe that, in the abstract, all is God."

The second passage I pulled from my "God binder" comes from Joseph Campbell, in his book "The Hero with a Thousand Faces." It sums up what I mean when I say the word "God" as well as anything I've ever read:

"There is," Campbell writes, "a ubiquitous presence in the universe, a process which brings everything into being, sustains it in its manifestation, and then dissolves it back into the universe."

There, in a sentence, is my theology. I believe that there is a ubiquitous presence in the universe. I see it as a process, the process of becoming, and being, and eventual un-being. A cycle of life and death that we are part of, that we are, in Campbell's words, a manifestation of. What a glorious thing - to be a conscious part of the process of the universe!

And so, it seems, I have, in a way, come full circle. The wide-eyed child in the old black-and-white picture is now - on my good days - a wide-eyed adult, once again celebrating his own unique place in the unfolding of life. That I choose to call that unfolding "God" may still rankle some, but "God" is the only word I know that's big enough to hold all that I mean.

What are your thoughts? I look forward to the conversation.

Namaste...