

To God or Not to God

**Rev. Stephen A. Landale
The Unitarian Universalist Church in Eugene, Oregon
September 30, 2007**

CALL TO WORSHIP

Here we are again.

Humanists, atheists, agnostics, theists, pagans, Buddhists, Jews, Christians, Muslims,
people whose religion is currently found in art,
people who are finding the sacred splashing rubber duckies in the tub.

Here we are again.

Unitarian Universalists, seekers, challengers,
people measuring theology by its effect on your behavior:
does it move you towards life with an inquisitive mind and compassionate heart, hands
ready to serve?

Here we are again,

gathered for Sunday morning worship...

not groveling before a deity who is said to reward belief and punish disbelief,
but striving to name and honor that which calls us to our best selves,
that which moves us to laugh and dance and sing,
that which calls us to mourn and share and organize,
that which we would put at the center of our lives,
again and again.

Come, let us worship together.

Opening Hymn: Bring Many Names, #23

Story for All Ages: "The Animals of Mossy Hollow Gather" by Ken Sawyer
(monkeys, alligators, chickadees, dogs, etc. learn to worship together)

Meditation: "The Atheist Prays" by Barbara Pescan

Readings: from the index to *Wrestling With God*, by Tom Owen-Towle.
(three readers, alternating)

More quotes for 9/30/07, *To God or Not to God*
(taken from the index to *Wrestling With God*, by Tom Owen-Towle)

You can believe in your heart of hearts, in the truest depths of your soul, in the clearest reckoning of your mind, that there is no god, no supernatural being or cosmic creator, and stand as good a chance as anyone else of being a good, trustworthy, loving person, and indeed, a deeply religious one. And as a Unitarian Universalist, you needn't pretend that you believe otherwise.

-- Ken Sawyer (recent UUMA president and Steve's mentor!!)

Like the God, the Goddess can also be recognized as metaphor and still have great influence in our lives. The Goddess reminds us that women are as divine as men. The Goddess is a symbol of the One Who Was Before. The Matrix of the Universe is an all-accompanying creative, fertile potential, the source of Being. In other words, the Ground of Being is a feminine symbol.

-- Sydney Wilde

Freedom resides in every discrete entity in the universe: in atoms and cells and our own identities we call selves. What is created is not god. What creates is god. God is a verb, not a noun. All the world is not god. God is an active indwelling presence.

-- Roy Reynolds

I'm standing in line at the Registry of Motor Vehicles – a long line – to renew my license, and I'm reading some God-book or other and the guy ahead of me asks if I'm a minister and I say "yes" and he says, "Do you believe in God?" The truth is, there are a lot of gods out there I don't believe in. And a few that I do believe in. So I said to the man in line, "I believe in big mysteries. I believe in depth of feeling – feelings so deep within the spirit that the connection, or the bliss, or the peace, stays with us forever. And I believe in a goodness created by our lives and our care." He said, "Fine." That was all there was to it, and I went back to my book.

-- Jane Rzepka (pronounced Jep-ka)

Hymn of Affirmation: A Core of Silence, #286

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September 30, 2007

I haven't researched this to be certain, but I am reasonably confident that our *Singing the Living Tradition* is the only hymnal in which you can find that hymn, and perhaps the only hymnal with one remotely like it. At its best Unitarian Universalism creates room for a broad range of spiritualities and ethics, including atheistic spirituality, which finds meaning in a universe without seeing it as tilting towards justice, and without imagining a creator God or life after death. This hymn suggests that all of our names for the sacred are an attempt to understand a great primordial silence before and beyond all things, as essential as silence is to music.

As my former internship supervisor and mentor the Reverend Ken Sawyer said, as shared earlier, "You can believe in your heart of hearts, in the truest depths of your soul, in the clearest reckoning of your mind, that there is no god, no supernatural being or cosmic creator, and stand as good a chance as anyone else of being a good, trustworthy, loving person, and indeed, a deeply religious one. And as a Unitarian Universalist, you needn't pretend that you believe otherwise."¹

What a gift this is, particularly in a country where professing belief in a personal God is essentially a job requirement for political offices. And surely there is a lot of pretending going on, for only one member out of 435 in Congress openly claims to be atheistic. There may be a greater proportion of atheists in the closet today in America than there are gays or lesbians.

At its best, Unitarian Universalism creates room for atheism and theism – and for the many varieties of belief and use of God and Goddess language, some of which you heard earlier. You can believe in the heart of your hearts that there IS a god, a cosmic creator, and as a UU you needn't pretend you believe otherwise. This is a challenging path we've undertaken, and we don't always get it right. Depending on the current climate in a given UU congregation, atheists or Christians or others can find their views not just challenged, but mocked or presumed to be absent. We have closeted people in our communities, too.

I'm grateful to Rev. Bill Sinkford, the President of our Unitarian Universalist Association, for initiating early in his term a dialogue about religious language, a conversation that continues today. In response to his words, I share with you now two particularly articulate letters to the editor of the UU World magazine, from the summer of 2003.

One writer found "religious language" to be useless at best. He wrote, "*I know that I am deeply moved by a beautiful sunset or sunrise; by beautiful music; by sudden deep rapport with a friend or, more strikingly, a stranger. But I contend that these largely emotional feelings can be described by well-defined words without the need for mumbo-jumbo religiosity.*" (UU World, July/August 2003)

¹ From the index to *Wrestling With God*, by Tom Owen-Towle.

This reader has an Orwellian taste for specificity in language, a mistrust of vague language perhaps designed to illicit, even manipulate, an emotional response. While I continue to use God language, this reader's view has often challenged me to define my terms from time to time, and to avoid using religious language as a shortcut around the writer's task of finding accurate, evocative words to describe the intricacies of human experience.

Another *UU World* reader responded,

God is a metaphor. We Unitarian Universalists take pride in the intelligence and education of our congregations, yet we often miss that basic truth... Liberals in both religion and politics have been surrendering words to conservatives for far too long. Why shouldn't we insist on our right to use simple, powerful words of religious speech? One person's god may be a white-haired old man in the sky; another's may be a moral imperative. As Unitarians and Universalists, our right to all religious language is as strong as any faith's. So long as we remember that these words are not the only way to express our belief, we can only broaden our discourse by reclaiming them. (UU World, July/August 2003).

I'll be expanding upon the views in this letter in a sermon here in a few weeks, about God and the debate for same-sex marriage rights.

The current UU discussion of "a language of reverence" is but the latest chapter in a long story. Unitarianism and Universalism began as liberal, God-centered Christian denominations that began to embrace, to varying degrees, and with much debate, humanism and world religions. By the 1950's, God was out of favor in most Unitarian Universalist congregations; and now the pendulum is swinging back: religious language and practice are more commonly accepted throughout most of our movement, and sometimes atheists are put on the defensive. The breadth of views in our movement and this pendulum-swinging leads to some quite interesting situations.

Prior to becoming a minister, I sang in the choir of the First Unitarian Church of Oakland, California. One year we sang selections from Duke Ellington's Sacred Concerts, with its brilliant interplay of singing, spoken word, and jazz orchestration. During rehearsal, when we were in a pleasant groove, singing Ellington's hip praises to the glories of God, we came to a line that stopped me short: "If you don't believe in God, you don't ex-i-ist."

I immediately turned around to where my best friend Dan, a bass, and an atheist, was sitting. I looked not at him but past him and loudly called out, "Where's Dan? I swear I saw him sitting there just a minute ago! Where's Dan? Does he even exist?!"

I was joking of course, but the line never sat with me well. I loved Ellington and I loved God, but I could not go on without my friend. I dug in my heels. With others I formed the Ellington resistance movement, arguing that while language affirming God's existence (or non-existence) was fine, language denying atheists' existence was not.

Well, now. We had to have a special meeting. The choir met with the choir director and one of the ministers. (Duke Ellington was not available). After we vented our feelings for a while, the choir director and the minister helped us to appreciate the religious devotion and sheer enthusiasm of Ellington, to look at his music not so literally; to see it as an expression of his soul.

Ellington was in love with God, with a presence of Love and Beauty he had known in his life, and people who are in love may speak extravagantly about their beloved – and they can't understand anybody who is not similarly smitten. The other rebels and I were persuaded by this simple reasoning – largely because we had ourselves fallen in love with Ellington's music by this time and had become willing to forgive him of some excesses! In fact, by the time of the choir meeting, my atheistic friend had become so taken with Ellington's music that he no longer minded singing, "If you don't believe in God, you don't ex-i-ist!" "It has a nice swing to it," he said. He knew that his continued existence made any literal interpretation of Ellington's words preposterous.

Ken Phifer, a Unitarian Universalist quoted in Tom Owen-Towle's book *Wrestling With God*, says,

Often theists and atheists seem offended by the other's position, as though somehow it had been adopted merely to insult them. To overcome this, we must learn not only to be honest ourselves but to accept each other's honesty, whatever our theological perspective. We must learn from one another.

I am increasingly becoming convinced that learning from one another is the heart of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. As religiously liberal people, we are called to remain open to new experience; we are called beyond fundamentalism of any sort... and that includes the fundamentalisms of science and political liberalism as well as those of traditional religions. Unitarian Universalism is thus a demanding faith: it asks us to set aside our defensive postures to explore the experiences and religious topography of others. It does not ask us to ignore our doubts, our concerns about the implications of another's beliefs. Our tradition does call us to engage others respectfully, with care, and with humility. Our religious diversity not only allows for monkeys, alligators dogs, and birds to worship together; it also allows each person room to grow in belief and practice without having to change religions.

My religious perspectives have changed over time. As a child, I experienced what I now call God most strongly in nature, particularly in a field in the woods where I lived in Pennsylvania. God was something open, quiet, and peaceful in a place of life – it was something I felt most often alone or with a close friend. After several years I came to

call it God because of a feeling of connection I experienced: with myself, with my companion or companions when I had them, and with this “other” that was the field – and the trees and the stream and the sky beyond. I know many who have had similar experiences without naming it God.

I also experienced God as a being who was aware of me and cared for me, as a loving father – this God I came to know through my church. My sense of God as a presence, open, quiet, and peaceful fused with this more personal deity when I went into my church sanctuary alone. There I prayed to this God that was part father, part field. I felt its presence and was comforted.

My relationship with God underwent significant changes in my twenties, when I went through a period of several months of depression. During this time I felt no sense of God at all – no field, no parent-God, no sense of oneness, no music, nothing transcendent or connecting or peaceful – nothing. I felt that God had abandoned me – or that I had walked too far away from God to return – or perhaps that God never was. I got through this depression with the help of loved ones, therapy, exercise, medication, and my will to live. God, as I then understood God, seemed completely absent.

After this difficult period, my relationship with what I call God slowly returned. And I was angry with God for abandoning me. During this time, I came across a story you may have heard, about a man reviewing with God his life, symbolized by two pairs of footsteps on a beach. When the man came to the part of the beach representing a painful time in his life, he saw only one pair of footsteps. The man turned to God, angrily demanding, “Where were you when I needed you the most?” God answered, “Those were my footprints. I carried you.”

In this story I saw how God had carried me – through the acts of caring of my family, friends, and my religious community. I thought God was absent because I thought God was something I had to feel, like in the field or in church – and I had felt nothing but depression and fear. But could it be that God was with me, through the love of others?

It certainly could be, particularly if one’s theology is allowed to change. I no longer rely on spiritual feelings of connection as my only means of identifying the presence of what I call God. I certainly welcome those feelings when they come, and I strive to sharpen my awareness of them through meditation and prayer. But there are times now when I can identify God through observation and reason, as well as through intuitive feeling. I see God now as readily in community and everyday acts of human caring as I do in nature. I can identify God even when I don’t feel God.

My understanding of God, my relationship with God, continues to evolve. I have come to question, if God is love – then perhaps love is God. Perhaps there is no purely spiritual presence aware of us as individuals. Perhaps there is no God as such – but there is something that happens in moments of true meeting – ocean to beach, wind to leaf, human being to human being – something that is so powerful and tender and

ultimate that we may call it “God.” Perhaps – I don’t know. By most definitions I would be called agnostic.

And yet I pray. God is now less father to me than field, and perhaps less field than Love – or Trust, Trust embodied in commitments, word made flesh. If I had to define God, I would not define a discrete, person-like being. And yet even if I knew for a fact that there were no being or presence aware of my praying, I would still pray. I pray because doing so moves me into closer relationship with that which is ultimately reliable, which I still sometimes call “God”. I ask this great Something for help because even if it turns out to be nothing more than Love, then Love needs to be so real to me that it seems like a friend or a parent or an ally to whom I turn for help. I pray because whatever is God to me – whatever it is within, among, and beyond that I trust most deeply – whatever it is, I want to be in relationship with it. I am not content to talk about it as if it were an academic subject. I want to put it at the center of my thoughts and actions; I want it to shape my life. I want to serve it, breathe it, sing it for joy.

God may turn out to be more than this, but God is to me, at least, a metaphor, for all that brings us back to life. It is a kind of living metaphor that can have great power in my life.

What is it that you rely on when all else fails? In what do you want to place your trust? What would you like to know at the center of your being?

You may not know what that something is exactly, and it may be changing for you this very moment. It may be something that you feel, or observe, or aspire to. It may be Beauty or Truth or Peace or Creativity or The Law of Dependent Co-Arising, or it may be God or Goddess or some crazy community of gods in your heart. It may be a Courage or Freedom you find when you face the meaningless of life and realize that your meaning is yours to create. It may be a great Silence or Emptiness in the company of which your attachments and thus your suffering vanishes.

But I submit that there is something of deep value to you, perhaps something you sense within, among, and beyond us, and the main reason you come to this church is to move into deeper relationship with it. I will do my best to name it for you. I ask for your help. Tell me about your god, your highest value, that which rejuvenates or centers you, tell others here about your god, and may we know, good Unitarians that we are, that the seemingly many gods to which we turn are actually One God, one Unity; and being good Universalists, may we know that this Unity, this Spirit, this Great Mystery, this Love, this Trust, this Truth, God, this Name Unnamed, this Core of Silence, is available to all. May we continue to search and to question, to doubt and to weigh, but may we always know ourselves in an ongoing relationship with this Something Greater.

Blessed Be and Amen.

Closing Hymn: *Name Unnamed*, #31 (verses sung by soloists)