

## **I Am Who I Am: A Sermon About God** By Alida M. DeCoster (delivered on Alida's behalf by Meredith Higgins 11/16/08)

November 2008 What is your reaction when someone asks "Do You believe in God?" Many people who come to our churches have had it with traditional religion, its language and its trappings. The word God reminds them of all that. Many Unitarian Universalists have an allergic reaction to traditional religious language. It is unfortunate because with reinterpretation, so much richness and beauty can come through the language of reverence, as our president Bill Sinkford has called it. It is important to take back the language and interpret it in our own way. We are talking about a liberal religious understanding of God.

When someone asks, "Do you believe in God?" That is the wrong question. Instead, related questions could be: Is the word God helpful or meaningful for you? What is your source of meaning? What makes you get up in the morning? What is your joy? Your longing? What is your relationship with Life and Love?

The question Do you believe in God? is usually code for Are you one of us? or Do you follow a moral code like mine in all its details?

Having lived more than fifty years now, I am reassured by the way human history seems to go through cycles. For everything there is a season. For decades the religious right has exerted pressure as a political and cultural force. Now there seems to be a shift in the other direction. New books about atheism have come out recently such as *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins and *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* by Christopher Hitchens. We are now living in a time in which the freedom to publicly declare one's atheism has been reestablished. However, I still find these titles somewhat disturbing. After all, I am a **religious** liberal.

I appreciate an honest, searching form of atheism with an openness to different views because after all, what can any of us say with certainty about God? It is not possible to prove either the existence or the nonexistence of God. But militant atheism or fundamentalism of the left, is another thing. It is an absolute certainty of rightness, an attitude of I know best.

Such a fundamentalism, of both left and right, takes faith to the level of certainty, at which point it is no longer faith. Faith requires a leap. Faith is an attitude, not of certainty, not of superiority. Faith is an attitude of openness, awe and trust.

The word **belief** as in belief in God, implies intellect, a head thing. The word **faith** implies trust, a heart thing. True faith comes from the heart. People who claim God as the center of their faith very often, perhaps most often, are NOT fundamentalists. Those of us who question the existence of a conscious God force are NOT fundamentalists either. Humanity really does not divide itself between believers and atheists but between literalists and liberals. When it comes to religion, the opposite of liberal is not conservative. The opposite of liberal is **literal**. So an atheist can be just as much of a literalist as a fundamentalist.

Behind this literalism there be either fear or a need to be sure. This in turn is not truly faithful. Still, everyone has a right to their views based on their own life experience. The problem comes when people think their truth is the only truth and that others better believe it too.

I am one of many liberals who find the word God meaningful. Liberal faith centered in God, however we understand God, is common among the churchd and the unchurchd, among all who are descendants of the monotheistic traditions, and even among UUs. God is a meaningful concept to a very large percentage of people. And each of those individuals has their own way of understanding and relating to God.

My sermon title, **I Am Who I Am** is based on how the Hebrew God names himself in Exodus 3:14. When God calls to Moses from the burning bush, telling him to return to Egypt to free the people of Israel, Moses asks, who shall I say has sent me?

He gets the ambiguous answer, I am who I am, also translated as I am what I am, or I am that I am. Scholars have further translated the meaning as I am Reality, the Aliveness of Reality, the Breath of the Life of the World.

God's statement I am who I am means that I am whatever you need me to be. Whatever that is may evolve over time. The most important thing to understand about God is that God, whatever God is, is bigger than we are. We did not get here by ourselves. Maybe God is the big bang, but it is bigger than we are. My mentor in ministry, Roy Phillips, said maybe we need to talk about God just to remember we are NOT God.

A very helpful definition of God is by Forrest Church, retired minister at All Souls Church in New York City. God is not God's name, but our name for that which is greater than all and present in each. Greater than all and present in each. This is similar to the Buddhist term **Big Mind**. We are each a little mind within Big Mind.

The word God actually gets us away from a relationship with God. We really relate to the sacred through story and metaphor. Our children's book this morning, *What is God's Name?*, gives many examples showing how the guiding power in our lives is our God. It takes the shape of a symbol or metaphor: the shepherd, the friend, the healer. You might say God is a Rorschach blot. God is who we need God to be to help us relate to life and to others.

Metaphors help us understand what God is like, or can be like. Do you have a metaphor for God or the sacred? Examples are a fountain (Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing@), a river (I've got peace like a river), ocean, as in the poem I read earlier, Lie Back and the Sea will hold you. Light is universally expressed the source and sustainer of life.

When I was in Sunday School we sang a song Who Has Seen the Wind? It goes, Who has seen the wind, neither you nor I, but when the trees bow down their heads the wind is passing by. God is invisible, but we know God's presence in goodness and in love.

Earth centered religions, from which we are probably all descended, hold up seasons, seeds and rain as manifestations of the holy. Earth is the central image for the Goddess which has been embraced as an alternative to the traditionally male God of the Bible.

So far, we are talking about a conceptual understanding of God. That is, an idea about the nature of God. But what about a personal relationship with God. For most UUs even if they use the word God, it is a concept. For most of us it is too much of a leap to actually be in relationship with a higher power. With my first spiritual director I talked about UU values and her response was, But you can't have a relationship with a value.

The traditional word for being in relationship with God is prayer.

Spiritual Memoirist Patricia Hampl has written, God, believed in or not, remains only the elected Official for the colossal job of mystery. To my mind, prayer (is) the real question...prayer is the human response to this endless mystery. If prayer is a way to relate to the mystery of God, then what is prayer?

Prayer makes many of us nervous. We UUs may feel silly addressing what seems to be a fantasy being. Does God actually have an EAR? What is this all about anyway?

Let me explain what it has come to mean to me, why it works for me and why I now would say I have a friendly relationship with God.

God is that which is greater than all but present in each. The way I understand it is that I am talking to the part of God that is present in me: the still small voice in my heart. It is a dialogue with the part of me that is wise, deep and honest. The part I forget about a lot of the time. That is why we need to be quiet and alone sometimes, to tune in to our deeper selves, to the God place in us, whatever form that may take.

I have heard prayer described in many ways, as an attitude, as a radical response to life, as authentic living, as any sincere spiritual practice. For me prayer is a conversation. Prayer is admitting we long for richer fuller life and putting into words our deepest wishes.

In asking for something in prayer, we should avoid the material.

Asking for a Mercedes Benz a la Janis Joplin is probably not going to work except by coincidence. The prayers that seem to get answered instantly, when I speak to the God in my heart, are prayers for things such as strength, courage, openness, forgiveness, and patience. I also pray for insight in making choices. I pray for the people in my life and for the sorrows of the world. Often this just takes the form of thinking about them during the day. I try to eliminate negative thoughts. When I have a conversation with this inner God, I feel supported and like I am not alone.

God and faith are about connection. The more we feel connected to ourselves, others and the universe, the more whole and happy we can be. And the more able we are to give back.

Having a sense of our own sacredness is very helpful. As children of God, or of the universe, we are innately precious. Do you know the word *namaste* from Buddhism? It means I bow to the Buddha in you. There is a holiness that lives in each one of us, whether it is the Buddha or the still small voice.

I hope you are still with me if you consider yourself an atheist. It is my conviction that we never have to give up reason. Reason is a very important standard, especially in human relationships and in social structures. We have to agree on what is real to get along on a material level. But there are times and places in life that reason cannot reach. It is those times when images, poems and stories are most helpful. They get at things that are not easily expressed in words.

In her book *Eat, Pray, Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert wrote "If we truly knew all the answers in advance as to the meaning of life and the nature of God and the destiny of our souls, our belief would not be a leap of faith and it would not be a courageous act of humanity; it would just be a prudent insurance policy ... I couldn't care less about evidence and proof and assurances. I just want God. ... I want God to play in my bloodstream the way sunlight amuses itself on water."

Having a love affair with God is where the spiritual quest can lead. I want God to play in my bloodstream the way sunlight amuses itself on water. Another aspect of this relationship with God is recognizing that it goes both ways. God loves us too. Now there is a leap. Yet it may be no more than finally recognizing that we really belong and are part of everything. Each one of us is precious.

We are part of Creation. Can it be that Creation loves us back? Because I believe that love is the driving energy of the universe, this is something I can have faith in.

No one can be persuaded to have a personal relationship with God. Our faith is our faith. Openness to possibility increases the possibilities.

Meanwhile, most UUs find connection and meaning through human community and relationships. There is the story of the man whose house is being flooded. Neighbors offer to save him, but he refuses, saying "God will save me". Two more times people come by in boats, asking him to come with them. Each time he refuses their help. Finally he drowns. When he meets God in heaven, he asks, "Why didn't you save me?" God replies, "I tried three times and each time you refused".

God comes to us and through us in all kinds of ways. I find it is helpful to use the word God as a kind of short hand. There are many ways to describe the experience of transcendence, to recognize sacredness, the divine spark. Images abound in poetry and mythology. The holy knocks on our door, rains down upon us and dances in our blood.

The reading *Out of the Stars* this morning shows a way of blending a description of natural phenomena with the language of awe. Science and religion, finally are not at odds. Process theology finds God in the creative unfolding of the universe at the level of sub-atomic particles, all the way to the distant stars. We are part of this vast creation, always evolving, always co-creating.

We know now that everything is energy, goes back to energy, that all matter is made of energy which reforms itself eternally. You and I, we are all part of everything.

Though suffering may be great, even though we die, we are, always and forever, part and particle of this eternal universe.

We are collected here together for our brief time on earth. Out of the stars have we come and to them we return. I call this miracle God. Whatever you call it, may you appreciate each amazing day.

Amen

References for readings:

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*Virgin Time* by Patricia Hampl

"Lie Back Daughter", poem by Philip Booth

"Out of the Stars", by Robert Weston, UU Hymnal #530

*The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins

*God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* by Christopher Hitchens

*Eat, Pray, Love* Elizabeth Gilbert