

What About God? by Karen Johnson Gustafson December 27, 2009

I am, by nature, an honest person. But I confess that I am sometimes tempted and occasionally succumb to untruth when asked what I do for a living. It's not that I am in any way ashamed of what I do. On the contrary, I like being a Unitarian Universalist minister, especially in Unitarian Universalist contexts. But being a Unitarian Universalist minister at a cocktail party or on an airplane where I am captive audience for a stranger whose armrest I am sharing, I would rather be a prep cook in an '80s-style supper club. Sometimes I don't want to talk about religion.

On one such occasion when I chose to be honest, the young woman on my right said, "I tried the Unitarian church once and was surprised and uncomfortable with the frequent use of the word "God" in the service. I don't believe in any God," she said, "and I thought that the Unitarian church was a place where the term would not constantly be thrown in my face."

I was frankly surprised to hear this and was reminded then, as I always am when I resurrect this story, about the continuing ambivalence that Unitarian Universalists and certainly many others in our society have about the use of the word *god*.

If we look at the sources of *The Living Tradition* as stated in the front of our hymnals, we see the word "God" capitalized, and everything right there in the fourth statement: The living tradition we share draws from many sources including Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves."

This same hymnal contains numerous hymns and responsive readings that use the *god* word. In fact two of this morning's hymns present to us a veritable theological stew. In our first hymn, "Lady of the Season's Laughter," we are pointed toward feminine images of the divine. In "Bring Many Names," we sing the desire to acknowledge the human qualities of goodness and nurturance that one might associate with a God in human form. Both of our readings this morning use the word; one within the context of spiritual practice and the other in the context of liberal theology. In our closing hymn we will sing of praise and adoration, "Joyful, joyful, we adore thee" a hymn written to the glory of the anthropomorphic creator god, to the music of Beethoven whose gift of composition have evoked

for countless godless mortals their own kind of transcendent experience.

The issues for me divide into three parts: the word, the meaning, and the context of religious community. John Buehrens, past President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, says that a "religious community is one with a spiritual center and a civic circumference." What this means to me is that our fellowships and churches and societies serve as contexts in which people come to tap into a source of strength or power embodied in community and/or one or more sources of the living tradition as a way to be supported in living moral and responsible lives in accordance with the principles of our tradition. I'm going to say that again.

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The idea of a spiritual center has to do with providing a pool of ways to discover and to be in relationship with that which is life giving and sustaining and greater than the self. The civic circumference is all of the ways we extend ourselves to making the world a better place. The relationship between the spiritual center and the civic circumference is like the way that powder milk biscuits give shy people the courage to go out and do what needs to be done.

In traditional churches the spiritual center emanates from a particular life giving and sustaining power that is "God" and is further defined as "God the Father, maker of heaven and earth and Jesus Christ his only son ..." whose nature is spun out in the rest of the creed. This is no doubt the God whose name the woman on the plane heard on the Sunday she visited the Unitarian church, and which she found understandably impossible to reframe within a different context.

What is different about the use of the word *God* or any other word in *this* context, is that it does not, as we are fond of claiming, define the context but rather is allowed to be defined *within* the context of acceptance for the tremendous diversity of interpretation that is claimed by those who gather here.

This means that at this very moment you may be sitting between two people whose view of the meaning of the word *God* is vastly different from your own. On your right may be someone who believes in a personal God but has felt that the exact nature of that belief has been too limited in another context. This person is seeking a more open and unfettered connection with the divine in the company of people who support and sustain one another in a loving and compassionate way, whose judgment is not about beliefs but about behavior.

On the other side of you may be someone who might call him or herself a humanist or an atheist, who finds the idea of God to be extraneous, unhelpful, or even an impediment to spiritual health and wholeness, who, at the same time, seeks to have human needs for community and service addressed within a community of intelligent, reasonable, and caring individuals.

These views, we claim, are not incompatible because the larger context is not determined by a creed or dogma but rather by the principle of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Among us have always been people of many religious and spiritual persuasions.

And yet, the word *God* continues, for many who gather here to be a sticky issue. For so many of us, it is a word that shoots the arrow that pierces the best fortified defenses against what we may have understood to be the idolatries of the past as well as much of what we have experienced as the idolatries of our families, friends, and neighbors. For many of us the word triggers an avalanche of associations and references that very particular being who lays claim to all creation, all wisdom, all rewards and punishments, in whose image we are created; a God who demands absolute allegiance and obedience to rules and practices whose meaning and purpose is assumed only by those learned and ordained ministers and priests.

This is the God in whom so many refuse to believe.

But non-belief in this particular God cannot serve as the basis for spiritual center, or perhaps for any center at all.

Elizabeth Barrett, a member of FUS, purchased this sermon at last spring's cabaret. When she and I had lunch to talk about what I might say, she recommended to me the book, *How God Changes Your Brain* by Andrew Newberg M.D and Mark Robert Waldman, sub titled, *Breakthrough Findings from a Leading Neuroscientist*. I confess that this is not a

book that I would have picked up without her urging. My own ambivalence and suspicion about the use of the word "God" is such that I might well have passed it off as another evangelical Christian in pseudo scientific clothing. This was another important reminder of my own sometimes short sightedness and of the old saw, "Don't judge a book by its cover".

Many of the ideas presented here were in line with those presented last year by Richie Davidson as part of our science and religion series.

In the early chapters, the authors assert that "the human brain is uniquely constructed to perceive and generate spiritual realities. Yet it has no way to ascertain the accuracy of such perceptions. Instead our brain uses logic, reason, intuition, and emotion to integrate god and the universe into a complex system of personal values, behaviors and beliefs."

"But," they go on, "no matter how hard we try, the ultimate nature of the universe continues to elude our brain. So the bigger questions remain. Where does life originate, where does it end, and what ultimate purpose does it serve? Is there a spiritual reality, or is it a fabrication of the mind? If there is a God, does such an entity reach out to us like the hand that Michelangelo painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel? Or is it the other way around? Does our mind reach out to embrace a God that may or may not be real?"

"Neuroscience," they continue, "has yet to answer such questions, but it can record the effect that religious beliefs and experiences have upon the human brain ... as far as we can tell, most of the human brain does not worry if the things we see are actually real. Instead, it only needs to know if they are useful for survival ... when it comes to thinking about God, our brain creates a vast range of utopian, utilitarian, and sometimes useless theologies.... The end result of the remarkable contemplation has been the creation of thousands of differing spiritual practices and creeds."

The authors go on to assert the value of spiritual practice—those conscious acts of meditation, or prayer, or contemplation, or theological study, or immersion in nature, practices embodied in attention to the sources of our UU Living Tradition that support Unitarian Universalism, as ways to strengthen our neurological pathways as well as our pathways to deeper connection with one another. This is what forms the basis for the kind of religious community described by John Buehrens with a spiritual center and a civic circumference.

Many of my most important insights about Unitarian Universalism come to me from people who are new to our community or those of other faith traditions. What do we look like from the outside in? I refer to us as a non-creedal faith, a tradition in which there is a wide variety of informing metaphors but a certain uniformity of values about being in right relationship with one another and the society at large.

We are bound together by a desire to live lives of principle and integrity and conscience and responsibility. We form communities and congregations in order to support one another to do this—to minister to one another in times of painful life transition and to celebrate with one another our joys and successes.

We thrive on the opportunities we provide for one another to ponder and to pray and to express gratitude and to engage in activities that build relationships and communities. We are committed to the wellbeing of children and families at all stages of life, and we express that commitment in what we call “religious education.” Notice of our existence as a “religious community” appears in the “religion” column in the newspaper. We are included in inter-faith social justice projects; we refer to what we do on Sunday as “worship”; we celebrate holidays and holy days. To the casual observer we look like so many other “communities of faith.”

What is different about us is that we are not held together by a common language or a common ritual life. The good news about that is that we do not presume to hold a single truth or to fly in the face of anyone’s human experience of reality or reason. We avoid the prescriptive edicts that some people of faith would impose, not only upon others who believe like them, but upon those who do not as well.

The bad news is that many of us are engaged in personal and often lonely struggle to be in some kind of relationship with that source of human strength and meaning to which we are understandably reluctant to give a name. In our efforts to include every possible manifestation of that struggle, we sometimes fail to acknowledge individually or collectively even an acknowledgment of what John Buehrens refers to as a spiritual center.

In her book *Longing for Darkness*, China Gilland says, “Saints, poets, mystics, philosophers, believers, and theologians throughout the ages have wrestled with the dilemma of description. The language of paradox seems most accurate: God is both nei-

ther/nor, both is and is not. The mind is pushed beyond conceptual limits.”

Are we then left with something so ambiguous as to be meaningless or so concrete as to be offensive?

Whether or not we use the word God, it is important that we do not shy away from any language that supports the full acknowledgement of our hunger for a spiritual center for our religious community. Our challenge is to engage in the struggle to understand our spiritual center, not necessarily as something static and unchanging, but as something that gathers substance from the shared experience and unfolding understanding of its members. We need to not avoid the expression of our theological diversity but to engage it with passion and humility. This is what makes our search for truth and meaning free and responsible.

Whatever else, the use of the word *God* in every part of our culture will not go away any time soon. As we come to understand the spiritual center of our Unitarian Universalist community, we could do worse than to make some part of it reflect the vision of *God* as put forth by John Shelby Spong in this morning’s reading, a conclusion approached 150 years ago by Unitarian Ralph Waldo Emerson. Spong says:

God is not an external being apart from us, to which we must relate as powerless ones to an all powerful one. God is more a glimpse into the meaning of the totality of human experience, where we recognize that we are part of an ultimate grasping after a universal consciousness with which we are one, with which we are whole. This universal consciousness was, however, hidden from us until we exhausted the possibilities of religion in which God was always perceived as other. God is present whenever a person transcends human boundaries and sees a portrait of unity, not separation. God is the journey beyond the fear of loneliness into new wholeness. Suddenly everything in both the religious landscape and the human landscape begins to shift and to be reconfigured in newly incredible ways. It is as if someone had turned the theological kaleidoscope and now the task before us in the post-religious world is to embrace the new vision, stare at the new configuration and learn to speak of the holy in a new way, a way that becomes not the domain of religion but the domain of life.