

**GOD AND THE “WHAT”
OF UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST SPIRITUALITY**

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For many years I was minister of religious education serving a large congregation on Long Island. Our religious education program attracted many families new to Unitarian Universalism. The parents attended the worship service while their children were in class. After attending services for a while, quite a few of these parents would ask me why God was seldom if ever mentioned. They were perplexed. What kind of a church is this, they wondered, where God is absent? where theists feared to tread?

So much rides on what we understand God to be — not only our own spiritual well being, but the future of Unitarian Universalism as well. The stakes are high. We aspire to live a spiritual life in keeping with our Unitarian Universalist principles. We would like to see Unitarian Universalism thrive. But what kind of faith is it that has no object? We can answer the who, how, why, when and where of spirituality, but, seemingly, not the what. Without a sense of a “what,” worthy of reverence, I fear that Unitarian Universalism will become a dead end in the evolution of religion.

I find the words of playwright and statesman Vaclav Havel that I read earlier to be very compelling, and indicative of our problem. As he said in his 1994 Philadelphia address, politicians may insist upon “universal respect for human rights, but it will mean nothing as long as this imperative does not derive from respect for the miracle of Being, the miracle of the universe, the miracle of nature, the miracle of our own existence.”

It is the same issue we face as Unitarian Universalists. We have a statement of principles which includes respect for the worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity and compassion in human relations, and so on. It is an eloquent expression of our values; but eloquence alone is not sufficient. Ultimately these high-sounding phrases must rest upon a feeling that they are deeply rooted in “the miracle of Being.” Short of this, we find that these principles may have our

common assent, but do not challenge us, in a radically religious way, to live up to them.

Like many of us, Havel was a humanist. He looked for the source of authority in human experience. And he found that human beings have an intuitive and universal awareness, encoded in all religions, of being anchored in the earth and the universe, an awareness that we are not here alone or for ourselves alone, but are an integral part of a larger, mysterious whole. This fundamental awareness is the basis of our understanding of ourselves, our place in the world, and, ultimately, of the nature of the universe. And it endows us, as Havel said, “with the capacity for self-transcendence.”

The larger, mysterious whole Havel speaks of has been known by many names — Allah, Wakan-tanka, the Tao, Ram, Buddha-nature, Yahweh, and, most commonly, God. Some of these names assume that God is a personal deity, others that God is a spirit or force.

In our culture, where the monotheistic religions predominate — Judaism, Christianity and Islam — God is conceived as a transcendent being who created the world and rules over it. This God is omniscient, omnipotent, benevolent and sovereign. He — and most assuredly, it is a he — wants the best for his creatures, but punishes transgressions and sometimes acts in inexplicable ways. It is an image we are all familiar with. This is the view of God that has held sway in the Western world for the better part of the last 2500 years. And it is the concept of God I rejected many years ago.

For a long time I considered myself an atheist. This was God, I reasoned, and since I was not a believer, I must be an atheist. Yet in spite of this I considered myself a deeply religious person — to the extent that, after graduating from college, I entered a Unitarian Universalist seminary. I learned many things in seminary, but it wasn't until some years later that I came to the conclusion that belief was not a philosophical proposition and that my atheism was simply a reaction to a particular conception of God. All the time I had held a very different view of God, but I had surrendered the term to the theists. I considered myself a

humanist, like most Unitarian Universalists. And, like so many of them, I found it very difficult to talk about God because there was so little agreement on what people mean by the term to begin with.

My first settlement as a minister was in Spokane. It was in this congregation that John Dietrich, the greatest of the twentieth century Unitarian humanist ministers, had also gotten his start, just prior to the First World War. He, too, had wrestled with the subject of God and had come to a similar conclusion. In a sermon entitled, "What and Where Is God?" Dietrich confessed that because the notion of God was "subject to various interpretations," he seldom used the term. Nevertheless, he said, there is one thing on which all religious liberals would agree, namely:

...that God is immanent rather than transcendent; that he dwells in the universe rather than outside of it; that he is the indefinable indwelling life of the universe and present in every part of it, just as the thing which we call life is the activating principle of the human body and present in every part of it. Some ascribe to it personality, some do not ... but all agree that it is the indwelling spirit of the universe, which rolls through all things and impels us all.... [T]his is the God of liberal religion. It is defined and described and applied in many different ways — but fundamentally it is simply the indwelling life of the universe.

I suspect many if not most of us here today would subscribe to this definition of God. But because of the reluctance of humanists like Dietrich to use the term, it was long assumed that to be a humanist was to be an atheist. This may be true of secular humanism, but few of the prominent humanist ministers were secular humanists. Most considered themselves religious humanists. We may not be theists in the traditional sense of the term, but that doesn't necessarily make us atheists, in spite of what others may think. I ask myself, after all these years, why do I continue to feel a sense of trepidation in using the term?

There are several reasons. One is that I respect the diversity of views of God that Unitarian Universalists hold. Mine is certainly one of many different views, no more authoritative than any other. A second reason, related to the first, is that

Unitarian Universalism is a non-creedal faith, and there is no proscribed doctrine of God. Thirdly, God, for me, is not a personality — certainly not one who intervenes on behalf of human beings, individually or collectively — and therefore not a being to be beseeched in prayer or ritual. The fourth reason for my hesitation in speaking of God goes deeper than any of these. It is also puzzlingly paradoxical. It has to do with God's vastness, on the one hand, and God's "shyness," on the other. What do I mean by this?

Emerson once said that he denied the personality of God not because it said too much, but because it said too little. I agree. If you asked me to characterize my own belief in God, I would say that I am an unabashed pantheist, that most maligned of terms. I believe that God is present in everything everywhere, from the interstices of the smallest atom to the vast cosmic mists that envelop the universe. I side with essayist Scott Russell Sanders who writes:

Pantheism has taken a beating since the rise of the great monotheistic religions. I believe there is only one power, one shaping urge, but I also believe that it infuses everything — the glistening track of the snail along with the gleaming eye of the fawn, the grain in the oak, the froth on the creek, the coiled proteins in my blood and in yours, the mind that strings together these words and the mind that reads them.

It is also expressed for me in one of my favorite poems, written by the great Bengali poet, Rabindranath Tagore:

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.

It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth and in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.

It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and death, in ebb and in flow.

I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood at this moment.

I feel so strongly about our Unitarian Universalist principles — the worth and dignity of every person, for instance — because I believe that God is in each and every one of us, not because God is outside of us and will punish us if we do not obey his commandments.

The most compelling proof of the existence of God for me is the argument from the miraculous. I do not refer to the so-called miracles ascribed to Jesus, not the supernatural, not hocus-pocus or fortune telling. God picks no locks, as Emerson says. The miracles I mean are the everyday, ordinary ones that Whitman describes in his *Leaves of Grass*:

Why, who makes much of a miracle?
As to me I know of nothing else but miracles....
To me every hour of the light and dark is a miracle,
Every cubic inch of space is a miracle,
Every square yard of the surface of the earth is spread with the same,
Every foot of the interior swarms with the same.
To me the sea is a continuous miracle,
The fishes that swim — the rocks — the motion of the waves — the ships
with men in them,
What stranger miracles are there?

This is the evidence I find convincing. As Whitman says in another one of his poems, “a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels.” I, too, have been staggered by miracles like these, common, everyday miracles. And I experience a sense of awe that makes me feel very humble. Such experiences are so deeply personal that it feels unseemly to boast about them. And they are often so simple and seemingly ordinary as to defy description.

Which leads me to God’s “shyness.” What is this all about? A fourth grade Sunday school class in a church I served wrote letters to God. These were wonderfully refreshing letters, remarkably free of the religious baggage most of us grew up with. The letter that most attracted my attention was this one:

Dear God:

What is heaven and what does it look like? How do you feel about atheists? If you are real, why don't you show yourself, or are you shy?

If God were a being, as is so often alleged, it would make sense to ask him to show himself, either in person or through some sort of supernatural event. But, for me, God is so much vaster and subtler than this that it's impossible to imagine a personal appearance. In response to an inquiry from a young admirer, Henry David Thoreau wrote the following:

Let God alone if need be. Methinks, if I loved him more, I should keep him — I should keep myself rather — at a more respectful distance. It is not when I am going to meet him, but when I am just turning away and leaving him alone, that I discover that God is. I say, God. I am not sure that that is the name.

This is what I mean by God's shyness. God is only revealed indirectly — out of the corner of the eye, or just as we are turning away. An old spiritual saying goes something like this: "We don't know who first discovered water, but we can be sure it wasn't a fish." We are immersed in God like a fish in water. God is simultaneously around us and within us, like the oxygen in the air and in our veins. So elusive because so pervasive.

God — known by this or some other name — sustains our spiritual life. For Emerson God was the Over-soul, which he described as,

...that great nature in which we rest, as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere; that Unity...within which every person's particular being is contained and made one with all other.... [W]ithin us is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE.

Our connection with this reality and with one another is the essence of what we mean by spirituality. The cultivation of the soul is nothing other than establishing and maintaining a relationship with the whole of which we are a part. It has enormous consequences for how we choose to live our lives privately and publicly, personally and socially.

In another of his speeches Havel pondered how democratic principles could be given “universal resonance.” In answering this question he offered the following reply:

I am deeply convinced that it lies in...the spiritual dimension that connects all cultures and in fact all humanity. If democracy is not only to survive but to expand successfully and resolve [the] conflicts of cultures, then, in my opinion, it must rediscover and renew its own transcendental origins. It must renew its respect for the nonmaterial order that is not only above us but also in us and among us, and which is the only possible and reliable source of man’s respect for himself, for others, for the order of nature, for the order of humanity, and thus for secular order as well.

Sadly, the loss of this respect leads to the loss of respect for everything else, including the obligations we have to one another and to the living planet which is our home. Havel went on to insist that “the relativization of all moral norms, the crisis of authority, the reduction of life to the pursuit of immediate material gain without regard for its general consequences” result from the loss of our “transcendental anchor, and along with it the only genuine source of [our] responsibility and self-respect.”

For all our reluctance to speak of God, for any of the reasons I have mentioned, I am nevertheless convinced that Unitarian Universalism is weakened by what appears to be a void in our spiritual life. We need, in Havel’s phrase, a “transcendental anchor” to keep us from drifting into religious shallows and uncertainties. We shouldn’t avoid the subject because we fear to be misunderstood. Nor should we be afraid to reconsider some of our own cherished misconceptions about the nature of God and Unitarian Universalist views on the subject.

I don’t mean to suggest that we should substitute a new orthodoxy for an old one. Nor that everyone will or should agree with me. My views are my own. I welcome the diversity that exists in Unitarian Universalist congregations. It is a strength of ours, and not a weakness, as some of our detractors allege. We offer a forum for the respectful exchange of views, a meeting ground for the religious

quest. It is not merely common ground; it is holy ground, such as Emerson describes in his essay on "The Over-Soul":

[I]n groups where debate is earnest, and especially on high questions, the company becomes aware that the thought rises to an equal level in all bosoms, that all have a spiritual property in what was said, as well as the sayer. They all become wiser than they were. It arches over them like a temple, this unity of thought, in which every heart beats with noble sense of power and duty, and thinks and acts with unusual solemnity. All are conscious of attaining to a higher self-possession.

May we, in our conversations between and amongst us, attain the "higher self-possession" that Emerson enjoins in all earnest debate on high questions. It is on this elevated platform that we will find, in concert with others, the "transcendental anchor" that will secure and validate our Unitarian Universalist principles.