

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock
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What About God?

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Early in my time at seminary, I took a class with a priest from Chile. The church had smuggled him out of the country with a price on his head and his life in danger years earlier because of the radical work he and other priests had done on behalf of the poor in Chile. During our class, he told us about a young man he worked with who declared to the priest that he was an atheist.

“I would like to know more,” Father Pablo responded. “Tell me about this God you do not believe in.” The young man said he could not possibly believe in a God that let floods and earthquakes kill innocent people, that allowed some to have wealth beyond measure while others starved, that brought suffering into the lives of people who did not deserve it.

“This is good,” Father Pablo responded, “I understand. I am atheist from that God also.”

Within the realm of my experience with Unitarian Universalists, I can say that we don't like to talk about God. We don't like to use the word God, or hear it, or let it in into our worship or our common

language. We for whom language is one of the most important things do not want to engage God language. One powerful effect of this reluctance is that other good people of faith don't understand us when we talk about religion, and that can be a formidable drawback when we want to work together toward a common goal. Another aspect of this reluctance is that it can inhibit our own search for truth and meaning. When we say that we don't believe in God, I don't hear us naming, describing, identifying that God that we don't believe in...as Father Pablo said, that God from which we are atheist. If we did pursue this exploration, one result might be that we would discover that what any one of us does not believe in may not be God. Or certainly, is not all there is of God.

A question that I get asked frequently by people from other denominations is, do Unitarian Universalists believe in God? I always reply that I can't speak for all UUs...some do, some don't. Inevitably, I will be asked, "Do you believe in God?" Yes, I do, I'll answer, but I make it clear that what I mean when I say God may not be the same as what the person I'm talking to means what she or he says God. This can be difficult when the person I'm talking to believes there is only one way to define God, but that's the chance you take when you enter a conversation such as this. You probably know by now that I ask a lot of questions and rarely answer any of them, so if you expect that I've come here today to tell you what God is, you're going to leave disappointed. Of course, you may leave annoyed, surprised, disturbed, and all of those responses would indicate that I had successfully troubled the waters. It's a good thing when that

happens in church...if you leave church uncomfortable, that means God's been at work. I've said that we need to identify what we're talking about when we say God, and I hope to start doing that with you today, and ask that you participate with me in this lifelong conversation.

When I say God, I mean good. I mean love. I am atheist from a god that can be defined by personal pronouns or personal identity. The God that is alive in my life is not a male. It's not a female either, and I appreciate the policy in the Presbyterian seminary where I received my theological education. There we were called to use inclusive language in worship and in the classroom. Thus we did not use a pronoun at all when referring to the deity; we used the noun every time. Somewhat awkward grammatically maybe, but theologically sound. Women have told me they don't believe in God because they can't embrace the idea of God the Father Almighty. That male dominant image is appalling to them, and I understand why. We can reject the language around God, though, without rejecting God. All language of God is human language. God is separate from God language.

The God that I hear people talk about most frequently is sort of like an ultra-powerful Superman. It is a larger than life, but still human-like, identity that has enormous power to manipulate all aspects of our lives and deaths. This God wants things, likes things, hopes for things, expects things. It is a God with super-human characteristics, but human nevertheless. This God can, if you beg

hard enough, make a tumor benign or keep a soldier safe in a war zone. This God can work us like puppets, prevent us from getting on a plane that's going to crash, keep us at a rest stop on the highway just long enough so that we miss being involved in an accident that we pass miles down the road. It is a God from which I am atheist.

I have heard God described as a ferocious judge who strikes out at those who have displeased the ones who believe in that God. This is the God who created AIDS to punish gay people for being gay, or who caused the destruction of the World Trade Center to punish Americans for so selfishly exploiting the Earth's resources which are for all people. Needless to say, I am profoundly atheist from that God. I can not believe in a God that willfully destroys that which God loves.

And there is the root of what I do believe about God... God is love, God is good. There's a children's story which I can't remember the title of, and I can't remember the author. I found it by accident one day and thought sure I *would* remember it, so I didn't write it down. There are many wonderful stories for children about the Creation, though, and this one that I can't remember was one of my favorites. God in this story is a grandmother character; she begins by making the sky and the firmament, she separates the light from the dark, she makes the plants, the fish, the animals, and at each stage of creation she looks at what she has done and says that's good, that's beautiful. When she's done, except for the humans, she admires her perfect creation but she's not satisfied. There's

something missing. Finally she realizes: there's nobody to swap stories with on the porch when the sun goes down. So she creates humans, because she needs their stories. She needs their companionship. One of the reasons this story resonated with me was because it alluded to the same question I asked in Old Testament when I was in seminary. Everything was beautiful and perfect in creation until humans were introduced...why put us there at all? The answer then, and the answer in this children's book, is that God is relational. God exists in relationship, and I don't mean only in interpersonal relationships. God exists in whatever we relate to that pulls us outside of ourselves and into the world. God can exist in one's relationship with the river, or with a garden, or with a camera, or with pigment and brushes, or with animals. Wherever, however stories are created, God is present.

This relational nature of God means that God is present in each of us...that pure light within us that guides our way on, the inherent worth and dignity that we affirm in our first Unitarian Universalist principle. God will not make our lives free of grief, but because God is present in us, we can find strength to grieve when grief is necessary, to struggle and suffer knowing that we have within us what we need, and that it will be sufficient for the day. God's grace will bless us with what we need. The God that I understand doesn't fashion our lives so that we never suffer, but this God stands with us as we suffer, never leaves us alone, and holds us in good hands. The promise in the gospel of John is I will not leave you desolate; I am coming to you. The psalmist says you cover us with your mighty wings.

This is the God I believe in: the God that is for us and never against us, the God that covers us with mighty wings, the God that craves and cherishes our stories and the roles we play in creating our stories. This God is good. This God is love. My hope is that you will think about and tell each other stories about the God that you believe in, as well as the God from which you are atheist. These stories will help shape the identity of this fellowship, and provide you with some interesting and compelling time together.

And so may it be.