

Finding Faith

Jamaica Plain, August 29, 2004, Karl Haakonsen

I am uncomfortable when someone asks me if I believe in God. Like the quote in Forrest Church's book, I am afraid that I am being asked if I believe in someone else's idea of God; someone else's little God. So, if I reply, "yes," I fear being branded a superstitious fool by my challenging inquisitor. Yet if I reply "no," I would be answering dishonestly.

Some years ago, I attended a service here that I believe was delivered by our former Religious Education Director Jason Happel. He talked about the difference between faith and belief. One of the things I love about being a Unitarian Universalist is that it allows me to have a faith that doesn't depend on a particular belief. Most of us in this room are aware of the non-creedal nature of Unitarian Universalism, yet many have a hard time grappling with the issue of what it means to have faith without attaching it to a particular belief. The connection between faith and belief cuts to the heart of our culture's attitude toward religion. One often defines a person's faith by whether or not he or she is a "believer." Today I am going to try to challenge you to separating these two concepts, related though they may be, to allow yourselves to have a greater faith and thus a deeper spiritual life.

In Carl Scovel's book, *Never Far From Home*, he quotes playwright Eugene Ionesco, whom Carl calls a "holy agnostic." Ionesco says (and here, please pardon the lack of gender-inclusive language), "If I have shown men to be ridiculous, ludicrous, it was in no way out of any desire for comic effect but rather, difficult as it is during these times of universal spiritual decay, to proclaim the truth. It is still possible, at least, to show what man becomes, or what he may become, when he is cut off from all transcendence, when the notion of metaphysical destiny is lacking in the human heart. That is when "realistic" reality is substituted for the Real, the eternal." "I am always in the state of waiting for a favorable chance," he says. "Finding myself present in all camps, I choose none of them. I am in the situation of one who would like to win the lottery without having to buy a

ticket. I am afraid of choosing badly, so I choose neither religion nor politics. It is precisely the fear of losing that loses you. If grace does not come, that will be a coup de grace. It is the lack of the eternal and the effect of that lack that I proclaim." Carl responds by saying, "In this man I hear an agnostic lamenting our doubt about God's reality. He shows us why we become less human-less wise, less brave, less compassionate, less imaginative. He says it's because we have lost our faith in transcendent reality."

Ask a thinking agnostic if he or she believes in God, and you will likely get a reply in the negative; yet few agnostics I know are comfortable giving up entirely on the idea of a transcendent reality, or a hereafter of some form, and also, when pressed the agnostic will likely respond by saying, "I believe that there's something out there, but I don't know what it is. Perhaps at its most universal, it can best be represented by our seventh principle as Unitarian Universalists that states that we affirm "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." This interdependent web affirms that we are all connected not only to each other as people, but also to all existence. That's pretty transcendent stuff in my eyes.

The trouble with agnosticism is that we become stuck in our own rational minds. Doubt is good, for it causes us to question things rather than blindly accept them; it is this questioning that is at the historic root of our religious tradition as Unitarians and Universalists. Let's hope that we never stop questioning things as we learn more about the universe around us. However, as the title character tells us in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, "Doubt is useful for a while. We all must pass through the garden of Gethsemane. If Christ played with doubt, so must we. If Christ spent an anguished night in prayer, if He burst out from the Cross, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' then surely we are also permitted doubt. But we must move on. To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation."

In order to be free, spiritual beings, we need to free ourselves from the shackles of rigid dogma and outdated notions of God without not only throwing the baby out with the

bathwater, but the whole tub and the rest of the indoor plumbing as well. If we can accept that there is that something out there and that there is an interconnected web of all existence of which we are a part, then why not celebrate that something? We can also feel free to call that something God once we've freed that word from only meaning someone else's little God. This way, it matters not whether you're a humanist or a theist or anything along the theistic spectrum. We can all proclaim faith in a God that's inclusive enough to accommodate all of our varied and changing beliefs.

Diving in with such a faith frees up our minds for the intellectual pursuit of pondering our beliefs. Maybe if we are lucky, we can come up with words to articulate those beliefs. Once we've freed the notion of God from the limiting definitions imposed by the dominant culture, we can be free to explore the nature of this inclusive God.

Having faith does involve choosing to believe some things. Even if you're an atheist, you have to choose to believe that there is nothing other than biology, chemistry and physics driving all life. As the character Pi tells us in *Life of Pi*, "atheists are my brothers and sisters of a different faith, and every word they speak, speaks of faith. Like me, they go as far as the legs of reason will carry them - and then they leap." I'll add that to be certain, I have encountered Atheist-Fundamentalists who rival Christian Fundamentalists in their zeal and utter certainty of their beliefs.

So where does all of this leave us in respect to the question of God as it relates to the God of traditional belief-- the God who's referred to when someone asks if we believe in God? Here is where I believe that religious traditions of old can have new life breathed into them like so many dry bones; when they can be seen as the metaphors that they undoubtedly were at the time they were recorded.

Part of having faith is understanding that because something is a metaphor doesn't mean that it isn't true in the deeper sense of truth. And a myth is a story-length metaphor. Since we can't see or touch God, we need metaphors in order to access or to describe God and our encounters with God. This is the same now as it was two or three thousand years ago.

Indeed religious tradition can be thought of as metaphors handed down through the ages inspired by the indescribable mystery that is all of creation as well as timeless testimony to the foibles and aspirations of human beings. When viewed like this, it becomes easier to see the human beings who created these traditions, in all their flaws and lofty aspirations-- to see them as people of their time and culture - and to see our connection to them, and our mutual connection to God in spite of the great chasm of time and culture that separates us. These ideas are at the heart of the Bible study classes that Terry and I do here.

In *Bringing God Home*, Forrest Church writes, "Truth in religion is like truth in poetry, our common text being the creation. Though limited by the depth and field of our vision, we are driven to interpret this text as best we can. So we tell stories, formulate hypotheses, develop schools of worship, and pass our partial wisdom down from generation to generation. Not only every faith but every philosophy, ideology and scientific worldview uses the creation as its text. By whatever name we call its author, we are all interpreters of the poetry of God."

Church continues, "Since truth in religion is like truth in poetry, by its very nature the language of religion is poetic language: words like God, soul, angels spirit; Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory; salvation and sin. Because such words are imprecise, many thoughtful people shy away from them. I can understand that. Even as a divinity student I avoided traditional language whenever possible. Today, however, I need such words. Rather than abandon it, I do my best therefore to rescue the old language from captivity by literalists, who strip it of all poetry, diminishing its symbolic nuance and vitality. Though easily reduced to an idol, God is still the biggest word I know. It points toward a power beyond our own, yet mysteriously present within us. Stretching here the metaphorical possibilities of both God and home, I am no longer ashamed to mine the poetry of my forbears in search of touchstones for my faith."

In one of the most brilliant and honest quotes about faith, a friend and fellow Unitarian Universalist once said in conversation, "How can you not believe in God? I mean, look at a tree!" So, I challenge the agnostics and doubters among you who have troubles seeing beyond your doubts. Doubt is OK, and is even healthy. But it can be crippling when taken to extremes. Let doubt and reason inform your decisions. But when it comes to faith, think about whether the God whose existence you doubt is someone else's little God. If you can imagine that there is a transcendent reality-an interconnected web of all existence-that's greater than your capacity to comprehend it, then embrace that sense of wonder and let that be the mustard seed of your faith.

Readings:

From Thoughts in Solitude by Thomas Merton
(taken from the King's Chapel Book of Common Prayer)

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, I will trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Excerpts from Bringing God Home by Rev. Forrest Church

Every religion has its idols. When we grow too comfortable in our faith, there is always the danger that the God we believe in is too small. Yet non-believers fare no better. When we accustom ourselves to disbelief, the God we disbelieve is someone else's little God.

No word is more mysteriously freighted or admits to a wider range of meanings than the word God.

For this very reason, both to avoid being misunderstood and also to keep from fooling myself, for years I skirted God language whenever possible. When I employed it in my writings, more often than not, I spoke "about" not "of" the subject, keeping God at a distant and thus more comfortable remove. Though I had formed an image of God that my intellect could countenance, I truly believed only in what I could demonstrate by proof, in things I could count and touch and see. The problem was... this knowledge got me nowhere.

Over time, my attitude has changed. Today, in a sense, I believe only in God. Only something as large as God encompasses the mystery and wonder of my being. To do justice to life as I experience it, everything else is far too small.