

Seeking My Source For Some Definitive

Rev. Joe Cleveland

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan

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The problem in coming up with a sermon about “god” is not lack of material. My ears are certainly tuned focus in when the word *god* is mentioned, but it is certainly true that there is no shortage of books or articles or songs about *god*.

We are rational people, and surely as rational people we let go of the idea of God a long time ago, so why bring *God* up yet again?

One of the reasons I think we need to talk about *god* is because of the kids. A colleague of mine is a mother and a long-time religious educator in addition to being a Unitarian Universalist minister. In a sermon that she gave this summer, she articulated what is for me perhaps the most important reason there is for talking about *god*.

I believe as a religious leader and a parent and a religious educator, I have a responsibility to say SOMETHING about God because someone else—on the playground, at a friend’s house, at a summer camp--will fill the vacuum I’ve left if I say nothing at all. I choose, therefore, to tell my young children that God loves them—that God loves all people. Everyone’s in. Because I need to counter another message about God, which is that God picks and chooses. That some souls—not all souls—are saved.¹

And there are all sorts of other ideas about god that need to be countered, too. In one respect, this is a cultural literacy argument: There are all kinds of ideas about god that you will run into in American, in Michigan, in Mount Pleasant, and those ideas will have an effect on you, so we need to be able to talk about them. It takes a lot in order to counter these messages that we get from the culture we live in.

Galen Guengerich is the minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City and he has a new book out called *God Revised*. In it, he tells this story:

One day a woman in my congregation contacted me in a state of advanced apoplexy because she had overheard her two-year-old son talking with his friend about God, and her son referred to God as “he.” She told me that she had been determined that her son wouldn’t succumb to such silliness. She had read him stories about the ancient belief in goddesses and how the universe came into being with a Big Bang. She had brought him to All Souls, where we don’t use gender-specific language for God. She even made sure that his toys and games had more women in positions of power than men.

Even so, after less than thirty months, her son had already drunk the Kool-Aid: God was a male. After commending her on her intention and efforts, I told her that this problem exasperates me too. Male dominance remains so pervasive in our culture that it rarely needs to be asserted. It’s the rule to which the occasional female who becomes well known for something other than a fetching face or fulsome figure proves the welcome exception. Yes, we need to

¹ Robin Bartlett. “Our Saving Message.” Summer 2013. First Parish in Cambridge?

change our children's storybooks and toys, but we also need to change the underlying cultural assumptions about how we know and what's divine.²

So now I suppose that the task I've set for myself is to give you the plan for how we can go about changing underlying cultural assumptions about *god*.

Here is one necessary piece for that plan: We need doubt.

The poet Jennifer Michael Hecht wrote a while back called *Doubt: A History*. The subtitle of the book is *The Great Doubters and Their Legacy of Innovation from Socrates and Jesus to Thomas Jefferson and Emily Dickinson*. Yes, she describes Jesus as a doubter. She points out that "Only in modern times is doubt equated narrowly with a rejection of faith." It is doubters who take on religious questions who, as Jennifer Michael Hecht puts it, "found the possibility of other answers."³

Doubt is a vital part of religious life.

The champion doubter is the French philosopher René Descartes. He was looking for a doubt-proof basis for philosophy. Once he starts doubting, he finds that he can doubt everything, except he can't doubt that he's the one doing the doubting.

Ever since I first read Descartes in college I wondered why he stopped there.

Why couldn't he doubt himself? I've doubted myself now and again!

But now I'm thinking that the problem with Descartes might be that his goal was to get rid of doubt. He is doubting in order to get rid of doubt. Maybe we should hang on to doubt.

Doubt can be a kind of rabbit-hole. So this is dangerous. We can go overboard with doubting. I don't mean that we have to doubt that everything or anything exists. That kind of doubting is an extreme form of skepticism and it's not really practical.

The contemporary American philosopher Thomas Nagel, after writing about how hard skepticism is to refute, says:

"I have to admit that it is practically impossible to believe seriously that all the things in the world around you might not really exist. Our acceptance of the external world is instinctive and powerful: we cannot get rid of it by philosophical arguments. Not only do we go on acting *as if* other people and things exist: *we believe* that they do, even after we've gone through the arguments which appear to show we have no grounds for belief."⁴

So, no, I'm not going to doubt everything. But what about doubt as a way of opening up other possibilities? That kind of doubt I want. That kind of doubt sounds like *hope*, which is one of the names I use for *god*.

Doubt is the counter to certainty and it is certainty that can be a problem.

Let me bring this back to *god*.

We can think that when we hear the word *god* that we know what it is that they mean by *god*. And we can think that we know what we mean when we say *god*.

² Guengerich, Galen (2013-05-28). *God Revised: How Religion Must Evolve in a Scientific Age* (Kindle Locations 1102-1110). Palgrave Macmillan. Kindle Edition.

³ Jennifer Michael Hecht. Interview by Krista Tippett. "A History of Doubt." http://www.onbeing.org/program/history-doubt/transcript/497#main_content

⁴ quoted in: Guengerich, Galen (2013-05-28). *God Revised: How Religion Must Evolve in a Scientific Age* (Kindle Locations 473-476). Palgrave Macmillan. Kindle Edition.

A central insight of liberal religion is that, “any way of speaking about God may become an idol.”⁵ Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all warn us against idolatry. Capturing *god* in a picture or a statue, we might think we have it all figured out.

The Christian provocateur Peter Rollins thinks that the problem with contemporary Christianity is the idolatry of God. He argues persuasively that Christianity has made an idol of God and that is the problem. He points out how lots of Christianity today presents God or Jesus as a product that will solve our problems. He says that the “Good News” of Christianity “is sold to us as that which can fulfill our desire rather than as that which evokes a transformation in the very way that we desire.”⁶ The subtitle to his book, *The Idolatry of God, is Breaking Our Addiction to Certainty and Satisfaction*. What he ends up arguing for is the necessity of encountering other viewpoints — this is what God calls us to do.

There’s a parable written by David Foster Wallace that a lot of people cite, and I’m surprised that Peter Rollins doesn’t use it in his book. Galen Guengerich uses it in his. Here’s the parable:

“There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, ‘Morning, boys. How’s the water?’ And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, ‘What the hell is water?’”⁷

It’s easy not to notice the water we swim in and how it shapes what we think is possible and, therefore, what we do.

What Rollins seems to be arguing that religion should do is to take us out of our assumptions by encountering different viewpoints. And that being present to different possibilities? Rollins would say that’s what God is calling us to do. One of the names that Guengerich gives to *god* is, “God is the transcendent source of possibility...”⁸

Instead of seeking our source for some definitive, we get closer to fine when we open ourselves up to possibilities.

The cottage meetings that are starting today and that continue this week are an attempt to see the water this congregation is swimming in so that you can be open to more possibilities for the future of this congregation.

Let me tell you a story from a book called *Fluent in Faith*. I’ve mentioned this book before. The author of that book is a Unitarian Universalist minister and religious educator. She writes:

A few years ago a friend told me of a conversation that occurred one gentle summer evening when her son Nathaniel and his father sat on their deck in a quiet lull before bedtime. The breeze was light and there was a smell of cut

⁵ Rebecca Ann Parker and John A. Buehrens. *A House for Hope*. (Beacon, 2010). 94.

⁶ Rollins, Peter (2013-01-01). *The Idolatry of God: Breaking Our Addiction to Certainty and Satisfaction* (p. 2). Howard Books. Kindle Edition.

⁷ David Foster Wallace quoted in: Guengerich, Galen (2013-05-28). *God Revised: How Religion Must Evolve in a Scientific Age* (p. 28). Palgrave Macmillan. Kindle Edition.

⁸ Guengerich, Galen (2013-05-28). *God Revised: How Religion Must Evolve in a Scientific Age* (p. 83). Palgrave Macmillan. Kindle Edition.

grass in the air. As the sun dropped lower and the sky became streaked with rose and orange, Nathaniel's chatter slowed and his attention drifted away from the toys around him. He sat quietly, chin in hands, just watching the changing colors— deeper oranges, the beginnings of lavender and amethyst, the burst of red on the horizon as the sun disappeared.

His voice was reflective as he asked, "What makes the sun go down?" His father, creatively demonstrating with objects from his dinner plate, answered, "The earth is like a giant ball that spins very slowly, and each time it turns completely around, a new day begins. The sun doesn't really move. We are moving, even if we can't feel it. It seems that we see the sun move across the sky, but actually it is the earth, with us on it, that is spinning. The sunset happens when the earth turns away from the sun." Nathaniel listened and watched the demonstration, then looked out at the horizon and said simply, "Oh, I was hoping it was God."

The father looked again at the sky, then set aside his demonstration, seeing beyond the science in his mind to the beauty and amazement before his eyes. Together father and child sat quietly as the colors continued to darken and the blessings of the night sky settled around them.⁹

We can think we have it figured out. And in a lot of ways, we do. But there is more than one way to experience the setting of the sun. The point isn't that one is right and another is wrong. The point is to be open to possibility, to experiences of beauty and connectedness that are difficult to name, so it's useful to have a word like *god* around.

What do you get fixed on? What do you think you have figured out? Where might doubt be useful in your life?

Instead of seeking our source for some definitive, we get closer to fine when we open ourselves up to possibilities.

May it be so. Amen and Blessed Be.

⁹ Nieuwejaar, Jeanne Harrison (2012-08-15). *Fluent in Faith: A Unitarian Universalist Embrace of Religious Language* (Kindle Locations 211-224). Skinner House Books. Kindle Edition.