

Opening Words from Mechthild of Magdeburg

A fish cannot drown in water,
a bird does not fall in air.
In the fire of its forging,
gold doesn't vanish:
the fire brightens.
Each creature God made
must live in its own true nature;
how could I resist my nature,
that lives for oneness with God?

The Wisdom of Modern Prophets

“Gravel” by Mary Oliver

It is the nature of stone to be satisfied.
It is the nature of water to want to be somewhere else.

Everywhere we look:
the sweet guttural swill of the water tumbling.

Everywhere we look:
the stone, basking in the sun,

or offering itself to the golden lichen.

It is our nature not only to see that the world is beautiful

but to stand in the dark, under the stars,
or at noon, in the rainfall of light,

frenzied, wringing our hands,

half-mad, saying over and over:

what does it mean, that the world is beautiful --
what does it mean?

The child asks this,
and the determined, labouring adult asks this –

both the carpenter and the scholar ask this,
and the fisherman and the teacher;

both the rich and the poor ask this
(maybe the poor more than the rich)

and the old and the very old, not yet having figured it out
ask this desperately

standing beside the golden coated field rock,
or the tumbling water,
or under the stars –

what does it mean?
what does it mean?

The Wisdom of Ancient Prophets

Psalm 147 from the Hebrew Scriptures, adapted

Hallelujah!

How good it is to sing praises to our God,
how pleasant and fitting to praise God!

God builds up Jerusalem,
and gathers the exiles of Israel;

heals the brokenhearted
and binds up their wounds;

determines the number of the stars
and calls them each by name;

covers the sky with clouds,
supplies the earth with rain
and makes grass grow on the hills;

provides food for the cattle
and for the young ravens when they call.

Extol the LORD, O Jerusalem;
praise your God, O Zion.
Hallelujah!

Reflections

Many are the names that we have given to God; many are the ways that we have developed to talk about what we understand as the highest truth and deepest mystery. The Mother God of ancient earth-based cultures. The Father God of the Abrahamic religions. The abstract God of the philosophers. The no-God of the atheists. The gut-level, intimate mystery of

the mystics. These and other concepts have marked humanity's experiences of a universe of beauty and wonder, and our attempts to name what begets and sustains all this complexity.

Religious scholar Karen Armstrong writes in her book *A History of God* that, as our distant ancestors were becoming recognizable as human, by the time we were capable of creating art, we were also creating religion. Some very basic drive to understand our world has been at play inside us from our very beginnings, finding expression in various ways, including religion. "Like art," Armstrong says, "religion has been an attempt to find meaning and value in life." She also acknowledges a discovery that we don't hear much about inside the world of religion: that the word "God," so often tossed about as if everyone knows what we mean, has never had a single, unchanging meaning. Pressure from fundamentalist factions has been to deny that God is a product of human history, but Armstrong finds that, when an inherited concept of God has lost its relevance, it is quietly replaced by one that is more meaningful. As strong as the conservative desire has been to insist on one doctrine as complete truth for all time, we see clearly from our past that both belief in God and disbelief in God have changed over the millennia, responding as humanity's needs have shifted and evolved.

The work of historians has the benefit of taking the long view of our past, and the history of religion shows that the activity of interpreting our experiences has always been colored by the filters of our particular time and place. When I read the 3000-year-old Psalms in the Hebrew Scriptures, I hear the same awe and reverence for nature that is in the 800-year-old poetry of Mechthild of Magdeburg, and also in the modern words of poet Mary Oliver. What I am most struck by, though, is that while the ancient Jewish and medieval Catholic writings respond to the beauty of the world with an answer, that God is great, Oliver's poem leaves us instead in a very different state, a place of the unanswered question: *what does it mean?*

The contrast between these two styles of praise contains a world of significance for modern seekers. One of the reasons I left Catholicism as an adolescent was that I resented the Church's eagerness to tell me what the events of my life meant. Many Unitarian Universalists have experienced this same tension with the religion of their childhood, feeling their heart's response to the world contradict the institution's interpretations of it. What I'd like to explore with you this morning is the importance of being able to respond to the universe with *our hearts'* own questions, and resist the pressure to rush to an answer.

The subject of God-language puts many Unitarian Universalists on the defensive. Like many of you, I've been on the receiving end of disparaging comments about my religious identity, and have heard that ours is not a legitimate faith, not a real religion but just a philosophy or a club or even a cult -- all because, I'm told, we don't believe the right things. It's no surprise that so many people come to our congregation feeling wounded and wary about the abusive potential of religion, and determined that this place, at least, will be one where God won't be wielded as a weapon. I came to Unitarian Universalism in such a state, and I was one of those people who actually read ahead during the hymns to make sure that I wasn't going to be required to sing "the G-word". I resented our minister's occasional forays into theological reflection, and did what I could to avoid having to hear other people's use of religious language. Ironically, I would have really disliked this service, for just these reasons.

One of the consequences of being a movement that acknowledges the evolving quality of religious thought is that we have to feel the tensions of our changing identity. James Haught, a member of the Charleston, West Virginia UU congregation, where I preached last summer, wrote, "When I first joined our denomination, it was the faith of the skeptics, the nonconformists and the outsiders. Now we are turning more churchy. Our (denominational) leaders throw in all

this God talk.” Timothy Travis, of the fellowship in Fredericksburg, Virginia, echoes, “We are becoming more overtly Christian.” And a member of a congregation I worked with previously exclaimed, with no sense of irony, “but I came to church to *get away* from God!” These concerns were sparked in part by Unitarian Universalist Association President Bill Sinkford’s call for more “language of reverence” in our movement, but I want to point out that their laments are not entirely accurate. Unitarian Universalism is not becoming more Christian, although it is certainly becoming less anti-Christian, which is not at all the same thing. This is a movement where many UU Christians and theists still do not feel safe identifying themselves as such, and I’m disappointed that our embrace of diversity still falls short at certain religious identities.

I want us to address this issue because I believe that our culture’s infatuation with labels is distracting us from the conversations that matter most. I was reminded of this point in my previous congregation during a brownbag discussion group I was leading, in which we were discussing the Nicene Creed, the statement of belief that most Christian churches expect their members to profess, which begins, “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible.” After I read the whole creed aloud, a woman in the group exclaimed, “but this doesn’t tell me *anything* about the person who believes it -- none of the things that are most important about a person are even mentioned here!” Agreeing, Unitarian Universalist theologian Paul Rasor writes, “. . . saying that you are a theist doesn’t really say much about the *nature* of the God you affirm. . . even calling yourself a humanist or an atheist doesn’t say much about you.” My own experiences as a minister remind me of this -- it’s not uncommon for people new to Unitarian Universalism to take me aside and confess, “I don’t think that I believe in God.” My response is always, “tell me more about the God you don’t believe in,” and I invariably find that they’re stuck on a very narrow, almost caricature, image of the Divine. Religious labels can serve as shorthand for identities that are much more complex, but it’s been my experience that these labels are always woefully inadequate -- our seeking is much too complicated and interesting to be contained so easily.

Before Karen Armstrong became a religious scholar, she had lived as a young nun serving in a religious order, trying to make sense of her questions and doubts about God. She had learned about the long tradition of medieval mystics, often women whose encounters with the Divine were so intense that they were struck down by visions and seizures. Mechthild of Magdeburg was one such seer, being visited by God in a form unmediated by thought or language, and she translated her visitations into poems like this:

How God answers the soul:

It is my nature that makes me love you often,
For I am love itself.

It is my longing that makes me love you intensely,
For I yearn to be loved from the heart.

It is my eternity that makes me love you long,
For I have no end.

Mystics often describe these encounters as a total union with God, being utterly dissolved into the Divine so that no sense of separation can be felt. My colleague Axel Gehrmann was taught in seminary to strive for this direct experience instead of what his professor called “aboutness,” the detachment that we use to be able to talk “about” our experience of the world. To be able to speak from within the experience without this “aboutness” is what allows mystics to experience

heaven directly, rather than the discussion group about heaven Unitarian Universalists like to joke about.

Armstrong had no such sense of intimacy with God. Had she lived 800 years earlier, she too might have been labeled a mystic visionary, for she is also an epileptic, but she looks at her episodes through the scientific lens of our day, and gives them no such mystical meaning. She has had religious experiences, but none of them fit the formula she had been taught in the catechism, the lessons that Christian churches use to teach their children what to believe. Because her understanding of the world's beauty was not resulting in the "right" interpretation, she felt like a failed Catholic, and eventually left her religious order.

I know that many of us have had that same experience of not being able to measure up to a religious community's doctrine, and Unitarian Universalism strives to do religion in a different way. Rather than teaching our children *what* to believe, for example, we share our values with them as they learn about a variety of ways in which people make sense of their world and their experiences. I occasionally hear critical comments from people in the Madison community who have trouble understanding why we don't simply provide our children with an official teaching, as in a Christian catechism. With this approach, our children would be *told* what meaning they're supposed to find in their experiences, and they'd know for sure whether what they felt was right or wrong. Those of you who were here two weeks ago for our Coming of Age service have heard just how thoughtful and articulate our young people become when we give them the resources to develop *their own* identity and search for meaning, without an official truth being fed to them.

One piece of guidance that my colleague Michael Schuler gave this year's Coming of Age class as they prepared their credo statements was not to stop at just identifying what they *don't* believe. As easy as it is for Unitarian Universalists to label ourselves by what we deny, it's more significant to know what it is we actually embrace; again, the categories we're offered just don't do our lives justice.

However, the pressure to settle for simplistic labels is hard to resist. Conversations about atheism, raised in new books by authors Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins, have stirred up a minor tempest between mainstream religion and the skeptics who challenge it. As glad as I am that atheists and other doubters are asserting their intellectual and moral legitimacy, I worry that the tone of these debates has been less than constructive. When our conversations lapse into rhetoric, that is, persuasive language, I find that these exchanges no longer serve the purpose of communicating our experiences, but instead focus their energy on winning an argument. One of the reasons I didn't want this sermon to devolve into simply taking sides on whether there is a God, is that, like the Nicene Creed that had us scratching our heads, it doesn't address what I think are the most important questions.

Even as I'm discouraging us from being combative about religious identities, I want to be clear that I'm not encouraging us to withdraw from the conversation. One of the less constructive ways in which some Unitarian Universalist congregations have managed their religious diversity is by avoiding difficult topics entirely. But choosing not to discuss divisive issues is NOT the same as taking a neutral stance! Instead, this creates what is called a "null environment," a lack of engagement in which awkward silence reigns, and the *status quo* actually wins the day. For example, when we fail to say out loud that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are welcome in our congregation, it's natural for them to assume that we're as unwelcoming as the rest of the religious world. When we fail to say that atheists, agnostics, pagans, and other off-the-beaten-path seekers are welcome in this congregation, of course they're

going to assume that they're not. Silence is *not* neutrality – it is instead abdicating our responsibility, and letting the majority call the shots for us.

I can understand why hard-line positions like fundamentalist Christianity and in-your-face atheism are so appealing – America loves confidence, and those who speak with complete certainty are even more attractive than those who are right. The way that this love of confidence finds expression in the religious world is through dogma, and what I would say is the essential closing of our minds. Rather than bring our seeking to an end with an answer that is expected to serve for all time, I prefer Mary Oliver's approach: to stand awestruck in the face of the universe and respond by exclaiming, "what does it mean? what does it mean?"

Paul Razor reminds us that the core of liberal faith is not certainty, but *conviction*, the willingness to pour our passion into things that may not be for ever. For example, don't we give our hearts in love to people we know won't live forever? Don't we engage in a labor of love over our gardens, knowing their beauty lasts only the season? I've been lucky to have been a scientist, because the idea of replacing old truths with new ones has never struck me as threatening, but I know that the world of religion is not as conversant with this way of operating. Another brilliant piece of writing from Mary Oliver that I like to use regularly in my work is the poem "In Blackwater Woods," which ends with these words:

To live in this world you must be able to do three things:
to love what is mortal,
to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.

I'd like to invite you to give your heart to the questions of this world, especially the one that asks, "what does it mean?" The answers, I find, are merely provisional -- they have a way of changing as we grow, and are often not as important as the act of questioning itself.

I'd like to end with a short poem by the Indian mystic Kabir:

Are you looking for me? I am in the next seat.
My shoulder is against yours.
you will not find me in the stupas, not in Indian shrine
rooms, nor in synagogues, nor in cathedrals:
not in masses, nor kirtans, not in legs winding
around your own neck, nor in eating nothing but vegetables.
When you really look for me, you will see me instantly --
you will find me in the tiniest house of time.
Kabir says: Student, tell me, what is God?
(God) is the breath inside the breath.

May our experience of the world fill us with joy and wonder, even as we recognize that there are many names we might give it, and that we always have more to learn about it. May we be grateful to be together on such an adventure.

Benediction

Some places promise you answers;
we promise you... more questions,
and a community that embraces you as you ask them.
If you are a lover of the page not yet filled with writing,
the unfinished story,
the open road,
I hope that you will find a home here.
With open minds and open hearts,
may it be so.