

## “Relating with God”

I am always eager for the challenge of sharing a beginner-level explanation of Unitarian Universalism. This is because I get to tell people one of my favorite things about this faith: that any beliefs we may have about God are *not* what unites us as a faith community. Rather, it is values held in common. It is the careful choices we make, the kind of actions we take in the world.

So I tell people that our community is graced with theists, atheists, agnostics, and more. *All* of these may find a home here. And I feel excited and rewarded when I glimpse a sparkle in their eye, because I have told them something that perhaps they didn't *expect* could be true of a religion. I have opened a door of possibility that's entirely new... something that may take some time for them to digest and understand.

But there is something deeper that I don't usually have time to get into, and that is this: I think that when we frame our theological diversity around those who believe in God and those who don't, we miss the opportunity of discovering the *nature* of those beliefs, whatever they may be.

I think the truer and more interesting diversity comes out of questions like, “What God *don't* you believe in?” or “Tell me about your understanding of God.” When we hear or read about *others'* thoughts, ideas, and impressions about God, our own beliefs have a chance to shift and develop. That's what's happened for me.

So I'm going to do just that: try to express to you some of *my* theology.

I was raised to believe in God. *Some* understanding of God has pretty much always been part of my worldview. I grew up attending an Episcopal church, where I learned about The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It was all very straightforward, in fact even though my sisters and I attended hardly any Sunday School, we picked up key concepts quite well by attending services with my parents. For example, when my youngest sister was six or so, my grandfather asked her about the Trinity. “Easy,” she replied, “God is the Father, Jesus is his Son, and the Holy Spirit is their little friend.”

My beliefs stayed mostly unquestioned for a long time. In church, it was implied that questions weren't necessary. Then, in college I took a class called, *The Philosophy of Religion*. Here I discovered that, *centuries* ago, men argued *proofs* for the *existence of God*. How cool?! Later in the semester, we moved beyond proofs for God's existence and when we got to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Jewish theologian, Martin Buber, a new door of possibilities opened for me: here was a *relational* God.

While I *still* don't totally get everything Buber says in his influential book, *I and Thou*, some of his statements still jump out and stun me, for example: “The extended lines of relation meet in the eternal *Thou*.” Or -- “... to step into pure relation is ... to see everything in the *Thou*.”<sup>ii</sup> I received from Buber the notion that *true* relationship is something *sacred*. And while this relationship might be between two *people*, my favorite

gleaning about it, was that it could be between a person and an animal, a person and a plant, or even a person and a sunset....

*So, you mean, I said to Buber in my mind: The easy love I feel with my cat when he hops up in my lap and purrs -- is God? The open expansive feeling I have when I hike in the woods... when I touch the mossy rocks and the trees – that enlivens God's presence somehow? Being authentic, honest, and true in my relationships with other people – God is there?*

It's the essential relational nature of this kind of theology that I truly resonate with. Here, God is more like a verb, or maybe an adjective, but not a noun – not a thing, a being. God is about the back and forth. God is in and of *all the connectedness*... of stuff, of time, of space.

But there's more about God that I believe. The still, small voice within? Yup, sometimes. The Ultimate Mystery? Definitely. Creator? -- Here's one of my favorite personal beliefs and I love it because it's a paradox: God created people AND people created God. In other words, there is some inexplicable, overarching *je ne sais quois* that offers a meaningful context for my own existence and that of everything else..., AND at the same time, to *explain it*, people *fabricated* this notion of *God*. I hold *both* as true.

Now, I could imagine admiring, respecting, and loving all this wonder and mystery and Ultimate Relationship *without* bringing up God. That one word is so loaded and heavy that it's often easier to leave it out. But I choose to use it because that *word* connects me to all the people who have used it for centuries before me. Generations before the scientific revolution, people tried to wrap their minds around the "whats," "whys," and "hows" of their existence, and in that wrapping they *found* -- they *put* gods, or God. I just intuit a *human connection* that *some* reason for their use of that word, for having that belief, is inspired by the *same* awe and wonder that motivates *my* life.

We do our darndest, as self-conscious, human animals, to try to convey deep, personal, meaningful experiences to each other. Spoken language, limited as it is, has helped us convey webs of meaning that get re-woven and draped over every generation that grows up into them. And I guess I just love the fact that this one strand in that web, the word *God*, is so old, so beat, and so worn from all the batting around it has received. It's like an old wooden spoon – made by hand to serve a basic need to feed people. It's been used hard and daily. It's plain and simple, but for me, it works. It's part of what keeps me alive.

<sup>i</sup> Martin Buber: "The Eternal Thou" in *Classical and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, *Second Edition*, edited by John Hick, p. 302.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid*, p. 303.