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“The Transcendent Experience; or whose God is it anyway?”

Rev. Chip Wright

There was a little old man, who every morning stepped out onto his front porch, raised his arms to the sky, and would shout: PRAISE THE LORD!

Well one day an atheist moved into the house next door. The old man’s ritual of praising the Lord every morning started to really grate on this new neighbor. Eventually she decided to go out onto her front porch each morning as well and after his pronouncement would yell back at him “THERE IS NO LORD!”

The months passed with the two of them doing their morning rituals: him praising the Lord loudly from his porch each morning and she yelling back across the yard “There is no Lord.”

One morning, in the middle of winter, the little old man stepped out onto his front porch and raised his arms and shouted: "PRAISE THE LORD! Please Lord, I have no food and I am so hungry and cold, provide for me, oh Lord!”

This set the woman back a few steps so she decided to just go back inside without saying anything that morning.

The next morning when the old man stepped onto his porch there were two huge bags full of groceries sitting there.

"PRAISE THE LORD!" he cried out. "HE HAS PROVIDED GROCERIES FOR ME!"

Now the neighbor woman had not expected something like this to happen and had been watching from her porch. As soon as he had done his praising she stepped out and crossed into his yard and said looking him straight in the eyes this time: "Like I've told you before, there is no Lord. I bought those groceries for you!"

The man looked down at her with a quizzical glance and then raised his hands above his head once more and looking into the sky and called out: "Oh Lord, you are beyond words. Thanks you for providing for me. You not only brought me groceries; but you made the devil pay for them!"

People often seem more like this than not--convinced of some supernatural power that is not only listening but willing and able to act on what they hear, --- or convinced that the world is on its own, and we are as well, so we had best figure it out and act accordingly. This either-or kind of perspective fits well for many, particularly when it comes to positions on divinity or lack thereof. It seems it is a natural way to look at this nurtured from our upbringings in the religious context of this country and the western world as a whole.

Most all of us in the Western world were raised with in a Abrahamic cultural world view, be it Jewish, Christian, or Islamic. This world view has a very specific image of God which it perpetuates. We theologians refer to this as monotheism or the belief in one god, one singular god.

It is a rare experience for our children to grow up with diverse images of God. I consider myself lucky that my family made sure I had a full plate of possibilities for potential choices. As a Unitarian Universalist child I had pictures in my mind of God as an old man with a long white beard speaking in a low and commanding voice, and sitting on cumulus clouds like I am sure many of my generation had. But it was only one of several god images I played with as a child. Another was Nicoma, daughter of the moon, mother of Hiawatha (the messenger of peace.) I pictured her

Nicoma, with long black flowing hair sitting at her wigwam at the side of a great lake pounding rawhide to soften it.

And my formal Unitarian Universalist religious education program offered even more images: Diana, Goddess of the Moon; Sarasvati, Goddess of music, literature and knowledge; Krishna, God of joy and song. And as I learned the stories of Zeus, Oden and Thor I saw in them the roots of that old white bearded man in the clouds, most memorably depicted on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel. It made perfect sense; why re-invent the wheel after all.

My circle of understanding continued to widen as I took in more expressions of the divine. There is a little poem some of you may know, written by the Universalist Minister, Edwin Markem that speaks to this.

"He drew a circle that shut me out
heretic, rebel, a thing to flout
but love and I had the wit to win
we made a circle that drew him in"

The question was no longer "Whose God is it?" But "Whose God isn't it?" Is there a common understanding that can be derived from the multitude of names given to a God or Goddess?

Over the years I have often gone to the good book for reference--and as Unitarian Universalists, you all know what I mean when I say the 'good book' (?) I mean the dictionary, for me the Oxford unabridged which is my King James version, although The American heritage will do in a pinch. I find using the good book helps define a common understanding, a means to point out a definition or reference to the moment. But with 'God' I decided not to go there because I don't think that a dictionary would be of any help.

Why? Well, because the 'one true God' thinking has dominated for the last three thousand years or so. The dictionary on the other hand is at best a few hundred years old. It doesn't have much of a chance to see a bigger picture if you think about it. What we for the most part think of as God is built upon a biblical mythology of Abraham, and the covenant. I'm sure the dictionary leans towards this; some omniscient and omnipresent figure generally personified in some way.

But here in a room full of folks -- of whom many likely ended up here because someone else tried to tell them just what God was or wasn't, it seems this would offer little if any help.

Like so many powerful words, this one, God is open to extensive interpretations. In fact there could be, and likely are, as many definitions of god as there are people who use the word. God in a very real way is like the word love, or emotion, chucked full of possibilities and potential meaning. So I decided to pass on the impossible task of defining God in any way in favor of an exploration of the experience of God or divinity. When all is said and done, God is just a word used to describe experience.

The God experience is curious that it has such power. This word can call up feelings that run deep and that are often hidden even to our own senses and understanding of things. It is a word that is able to leap tall buildings in a single bound and to stop thundering locomotives loaded with boxcars full of scientific process and reason. It has the power to halt things dead in their steps by its mere mention. In this way it is quite different from all other words.

For the devout theist the word has a power that seems to rival any other human expression and to bring into focus deep and rich relationships; where for the devout atheist the word represents a psychological process, and to some, a manifestation of imagination.

Both of these positions seem to me to be two ends of a dividing line that in the end come together. This argument or dialogue depending on which

side of the line one is on, holds a common assumption, that God is essential to a real life; or that God is unrelated to real life; yet both address the same question, “What about God”? Either answer is unfortunately predicated on an assumption that it is one way, or the other.

I work from a very different assumption. It is that life is real; and all the rest is what we get to do with it. I think that God, as it's generally understood and widely represented, be it as the Holy Spirit, Jesus, Krishna, Jehovah or any of the others, is missing the point. Objectifying or personifying God is a shrinking of divinity to make it fit into a definition. This experience, this transcendence of self into a larger truth or meaning, just can't fit in a single bottle.

And the personification of God has done little to enrich the mystery and joy in life. The idea that we have a unique relationship to 'A' God is at best a conjecture or perhaps a speculation.

Paramahansa Yogananda, a revered Indian Yogi once said “This idea that mere people are made in the image of God is laughable”. I get that, for me, it's like believing you can 'actually' float a steamship in a thimble full of water.

Moreover, to personify God and place it in our house rather than in any another's (who may hold a different truth) is an action that will in the larger picture hurt us. Claiming God for one's own house has been instrumental in developing power over and an unsustainable use of this planet and all its life and matter.

This God of Abraham, of faith, leads us away from engaging in relationships that truly awaken our spirits. It lures people down a path of illusion of 'dominion over' rather than deep relationship with. The lack of relationship in our world, the distrust of our neighbors, and the destruction of life and our environment can all be traced back to some marionette God or another claiming the "correct" world view perpetuating a myth of dominion in one way or another.

But instead, if we turn toward, engage in relationship, we can discover the experience of god, if you chose to call it that. The experience of transcendence or God not as a noun or thing to be named, owned exclusively or to hold over others, but a word that describes an experience, a journey and a response that is continually lived and reflected upon.

Engage with the rivers, the mountains, the seas -- the deer, the elk, the salmon -- the eagles, the doves, the quail, the trees -- the rocks, the sea shells, the sky and clouds, wind, rain, your children, grandchildren --

puppies, kittens, butterflies, lovers -- all that makes up this mysterious thing we call living --- if you want to experience God.

For too long now, Unitarian Universalists, many who sense a connection to the larger life, but have been afraid to speak the G word, have all but given up on the idea of divinity, God, which can be the most joyful, most precious and most humbling relational experiences of life.

When we give away this ‘relationship gained of experience’, which teaches us the ancient and deep truth of our natures; calling us into balance and stewardship, we lose much more than a safe place to talk about deep experience in profound ways; we can get removed from the conversation, isolated from the deepest relationships we can have.

Doing this has left gaping wounds in the breast of humanity; wounds that can be healed, but not without conscious effort. It will certainly take some work to free us from the last few thousand years of sticky monotheistic glue.

We have the ability to get unstuck, to shift, and to do better. We can choose not to define God as an object or instructor, but rather as an action, an experience. And in choosing the experience as our ground for this gift, we also say in very real ways that we trust ourselves and our connections

to this world to be true spiritual and transcending. When we have faith that our experience in this complex and wonderful dance of existence will reveal meaning, we are offered a window through which we may transcend the mundane and experience the wholeness of being – or God. We will touch the divine within our own spirit. That's one of the great powerful gifts we thinking apes get to enjoy, to ask ourselves old questions in new ways; to search for the hidden spirits inside. It's a good gift -- divine actually -- and becomes more intimately valuable as we learn to grow into and with it.

So be it.

Om, Peace, Amen.