

“The God Word”
Rev. Karen Fraser Gitlitz
First Unitarian Fellowship of Nanaimo
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Reading

In 1994 Carl Scovel was asked to give the prestigious Berry Street lecture – an annual event since 1820.

Scovel was then minister at King’s Chapel, Boston, one of the oldest Unitarian congregations in North America, and one of our most avowedly Christian Unitarian congregations. Scovel shared his trepidation about speaking on his topic by telling the gathered assembly about a dream that he’d had while preparing the lecture. In this dream he saw himself sitting on a hill in a glow of sunlight. All around him were his colleagues, each on their own hill.

He says that he almost considered resigning from the lectureship, out of a concern that he would not be able to communicate what he wanted to say.

But lecture he did, and he went on to say this:

... what changed my life and moved me to speak today and brought me down from my private Olympus was my own discovery, or the divine disclosure, that I, who trusted least, could trust this love, that I, who believed so little, could believe it, that I, who wished to be above all self-sufficient, could receive it, that in my own imperfect way I could even sometimes live a little bit of it; and that I could do this, not because I was good, moral, clever, or wise, but because that love, that good intent at life’s own center, was beginning to transform me, not as I expected (God’s other name is surprise) but most surely and most steadily.

Sermon by Karen Fraser Gitlitz
“The God Word”

Of all the religious words that might give pause in a Unitarian Universalist congregation, ‘god’ is likely to evoke some of the strongest reactions. Though I have no beautiful and profound dream imagery to

share with you, I will tell you that I did have some trepidation in choosing this topic.

There are concepts of god are that are quite compatible with Unitarian Universalism, and others which are most certainly not.

For the sake of clarity, and because it is the most difficult of all the words we use to name divinity, I am going to stick with 'God' this morning. If goddess or spirit or holy one, or any other word or phrase is more appropriate for you, please make that translation for yourself as I speak.

Whatever name we choose, whether we are talking about God – upper or lower case 'g' – gods – plural – or goddess, or the divine or holy or spirit – there are a multitude of images available to us, some of them not particularly appealing to early 21st century Unitarians, many of whom had unpleasant encounters with these forms in their own religious past.

Not all experiences and encounters with God have been negative. Many Unitarian Universalists have found meaning, satisfaction and personal growth through their theistic faith. As a people who state that we are open to religious wisdom and inspiration wherever it is found, I believe it behooves us to take a closer look at these experiences.

I am not here to suggest that you should believe in God (if you don't already). I do want to say that theism – belief in god -- is a part of our religious tradition. Not just in the past, but alive today as a part of our living tradition, right now, even in this very room.

The great variety of experiences of beliefs about god makes for challenging conversation.

A significant percentage of Unitarian Universalists have come out of other religious communities. That leave-taking may have involved a gradual process of feeling less and less comfortable, less and less at home. It may have been the result of a moment of insight or understanding, a flash of awareness of inner knowledge. It may have been the result of a life-saving voyage of stepping out from underneath messages of distrust and shame. Whatever the experience, messages about God are amongst the strongest reasons for leaving a religion, and the strong feelings may persist many years later – for entirely understandable reasons.

If conversations about God can bring up such painful memories, and questions of identity and belonging, how do we have this conversation? In our day-to-day congregational life, unless one is taking an adult religious education course, the topic may not come up. Having decided that individual beliefs are a matter best left to individual conscience, we sometimes put aside these conversations altogether – preferring instead to emphasize the values and beliefs we do hold in common, or to focus on getting on with the work that our common values point toward.

That is fine and good -- as long as it doesn't become such a habit that we aren't able to learn from each other's experiences, because that would be sad, a loss of richness and depth for all of us.

What I hope to share with you this morning is not one way of picturing God, but a few of the many ways in which Unitarian Universalists might understand God.

So. What might a Unitarian Universalist conception of God include? First of all, I suggest that we would want to find a God who is accessible to all.

In Prague in the late 1300's and early 1400's, the learned preacher and early reformer Jan Huss spoke against the excesses of a church hierarchy that seemed more interested in raising funds for war than the condition of people's souls. He argued against the then common belief that "the church" meant the priesthood and the Roman hierarchy. Instead, following the English reformer John Wycliff, he thought all of the saved were to be included in "the church."

Huss preached to the common people, and was deeply concerned with their fate. He believed that they should have access to God's word, Biblical revelation, and so conducted services and read scripture in Czech -- practices which contributed to his excommunication from the church in 1412, and to his being burnt at the stake for heresy in 1415.

Huss' followers continued in his footsteps, offering both wine and bread to the people during communion at a time when the people usually served bread only, wine being reserved for priests.

These people, the Hussites of the Bohemian reformation, who believed that God's gifts were meant for everyone, lay or ordained, took as their symbol the flaming chalice. The chalice being the cup of communion, shared with everyone, and the flame being the sacrifices made to serve the people.

While the Hussites preached that the church included not just priests, but all the saved, four hundred years later the Universalists proclaimed that the church included everyone – there was no special elect group of “the saved.”

Early Universalist Judith Sargent Murry (1751-1820) argued that all souls are equal. In 1790, she reminded her male readers that “the same breath of God animates, enlivens, and invigorates us.”¹ Therefore, women deserved the same educational opportunities as their male counterparts – opportunities which had been denied to Sargent as a child.

The extension of God's love and saving message to all people was used to promote the full participation of women in society, and later, the abolition of slavery.

What else might be characteristic of a Unitarian Universalist understanding of God? We might expect that such an understanding or experience of God would open us up to others, encouraging us to be inclusive rather than exclusive.

Today, some of the loudest and most visible streams of the three Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – have been highly exclusive, claiming a monopoly on a particular way of relating to God. Christian literalists have focused particular Biblical passages (e.g. Jesus' saying “I am the way, the truth and the life, and no one comes to the

¹ Judith Sargent Murray, *On the Equality of the Sexes*. Originally published in *The Massachusetts Magazine, or, Monthly Museum Concerning the Literature, History, Politics, Arts, Manners, Amusements of the Age*, Vol. II - For 1790. Available online at <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/murray/equality/equality.html>

Father except through me" John 14:6) as if there weren't other, equally important passages which suggest that God is available to all. The original covenant with Noah was between God and all humans, indeed all beings, because God promised, after the flood, that the rainbow would be "the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come" (Genesis 9:12). This is a relationship between God and the whole earth (Genesis 9:13), not just a particular people.²

The great proponent of Christian interfaith dialogue, Wesley Ariarajah tells a story of the young Willfred Cantwell Smith, who later to become a groundbreaking scholar in the field of comparative religion. As a young man in the United Church of Canada, Smith took a missionary posting in Pakistan. Living in Karachi, he was surprised to discover that the Muslim population already had a direct and profound relationship with God. He was equally surprised by his superior's response to his report. They were not as delighted as he was. They had serious concerns about his loss of faith. Smith could not understand. Here he had found people who prayed five times a day, who fasted, who had a direct and personal relationship with God. Shouldn't this be cause for celebration?!³

What else might we look for, in a Unitarian Universalist understanding of God? I would suggest that we might hope for more than accessibility and openness. We might find that belief in God would lead us to action, to liberation from suffering, not just contemplation of existing conditions.

Perhaps one of the strongest arguments *against* God is the way that ideas of God have been used to promote other ends, including large scale economic domination of one country over another, and – on a smaller scale – the cruel practices that result in children believing they are wrong or sinful or rejected by God because of their gender, race, sexual or

² Interpretation courtesy of S. Wesley Ariarajah. See his book *Not Without My Neighbour: Issues in Interfaith Relations* (WCC, 1999), or his online article, "Many Voices, One God: Remodeling Christianity for a Pluralistic World" available at http://www.tcpc.org/library/article.cfm?library_id=89

³ S. Wesley Ariarajah, "Many Voices, One God: Remodeling Christianity for a Pluralistic World" http://www.tcpc.org/library/article.cfm?library_id=89

affectional orientation.

There has always been a radical stream of thought in all three Abrahamic traditions that countered this tendency. There is a concept of God available to mystics and social activists that sees each person as having God-given worth and dignity (in the phrasing used by the Catholic Worker Movement).

This stream sees relationship with God as a means of liberation from oppressive constraints, not as a bolster to conformity.

It flowered in Latin America in the 1960's and 1970's when Catholic priests and lay leaders organized small groups of peasants and working poor, exposing them to the Biblical story, and encouraging them to interpret it from their own perspective. These interpretations rested heavily on the images of Jesus as a radical – someone who brought unrest, rather than harmony – someone who preferred the poor and the outcast to the rich and wealthy.

Statements like that of Matthew 10:34 (Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword) meant something different to these peasants than they might to us. For people who had experienced the language of peace and order as the vocabulary of a repressive military regime, used to put down their legitimate protests, the language of unrest is a validation of their worth and dignity.

This movement, called liberation theology, emphasized God's call to action on behalf of those who are poor and suffering. God, in liberation theology, isn't just accessible to all, God gives preference to those who suffer. Those who are not on the receiving end of the brutal stick of social control have a role too -- they are called to stand in solidarity with the poor.

In naming characteristics of God, you may have noticed that I have skipped over some of the traditional aspects of God – all powerful, for one. All-knowing, for another.

Probably the single most influential theological movement of the 20th Century for UU theists is process theology. Against the medieval model of God as King, capable of intervening and wielding coercive power,

process theology imagines God as the divine lure, the presence and possibility of goodness that leads us on in new and creative ways. God is in everything (immanent) yet God is also more than just what is – God is the possibility of new creation, just ahead of us. In the process worldview, just as new life is growing and adapting and evolving, so God is always growing and developing.

All of the images and concepts discussed so far lie in the realm of the theology. Theology means talking about God, thinking about who or what God may be and how God is to be understood and interpreted in our lives.

As important as this is to us – and it is important to think through our beliefs and understandings – it would be for naught if we did not talk about practice.

Being in relationship with God means being in relationship with something more than yourself. There is more than one way to do this of course – finding ways of growing in connection to all beings is a practice in almost all religions. But in the theistic approach to religion this personal and spiritual development happens through growth in relationship to the divine.

Images of God often rely on personal characteristics – God as mother or father, God as sister or brother, God as lover or friend – because this is how we as humans best understand relationship – as love and connection between people. We learn to get outside of ourselves by caring for others, by letting them in to our lives. So too with God.

The Sufi poet Hafez says it well:

Pray
To be humble
So that god does not
Have to appear to be so stingy.

O pray to be honest,
Strong,
Kind,
And pure,

So that the beloved is never miscast
As a cruel great miser.

I know you have a hundred complex cases
Against god in court,

But never mind, wayfarer,
Let's just get out of this mess

And pray to be loving and humble
So that the friend will be forced to reveal

Himself

So

Near!⁴

May it ever be so.
Amen. Blessed be.

⁴ from The Gift—poetry of Hafiz translated by Daniel Ladinsky (p. 46)