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IT'S ALL IN THE PROCESS

Join us today as a Unitarian Universalist grapples with God, process theology, atheism and finding a place for ourselves as people of faith.

Reading

WHY JUST ASK THE DONKEY-- Hafiz

Why
Just ask the donkey in me
To speak to the donkey in you,

When I have so many other beautiful animals
And brilliant coloured birds inside
That are all longing to say something wonderful
And exciting to your heart?

Let's open all the locked doors upon our eyes
That keep us from knowing the Intelligence
That begets love
And a more lively and satisfying conversation
With a Friend.

Let's turn loose our golden falcons
So that they can meet in the sky
Where our spirits belong-
Necking like two
Hot kids.

Let's hold hands and get drunk near the sun
And sing sweet songs to God
Until He joins us with a few notes
From His own sublime lute and drum.

If you have a better idea
Of how to pass a lonely night
After your glands may have performed
All their little magic
Then speak up sweethearts, speak up,
For Hafiz and all the world will listen.

Why just bring your donkey to me
Asking for stale hay

And a boring conference with the idiot
In regards to this precious matter-

Such a precious matter as love,

When I have so many other divine animals
And brilliant coloured birds inside
That are all longing
To so sweetly
Greet
You!"

Sermon

I have a problem. And I think it may be a typical Unitarian problem. I have a problem with god. Sometimes I think it just a problem with that little word. When I was a child I remember I couldn't say it. It would get caught in my throat like a fishbone. It made me uncomfortable. And until I was 11, we lived in Dallas, Texas, deep in Bible country. Everyone in Dallas was religious and went to church or temple. The only question there was which did you attend? It was in Dallas that I learned to talk: I learned words for flowers, trees and sky, for school and school buses and friends and family. But not that one word--god. That word always felt unfamiliar, cold. Maybe like a foreign word. I never really knew what it meant.

I heard other people talking about god, some old man in the sky with a long white beard. I didn't know this god. I didn't love this stranger. I didn't feel attached or connected to him. And on Sundays I went to Unitarian Universalist Sunday school, where it did not seem to be a problem.

Fast forward. At 18 I put myself on the path to becoming a minister. I still hadn't gotten down and dirty or even familiar with god. I don't know if I ever will. But I wanted to become a minister. One who talks to...people.

I went to university. My major was religious studies. But that was safe, I was looking at other people, looking at their beliefs. I had no problem with other people talking about god, believing in god or goddess or any number of divine beings. That was interesting. Not what I believed, but really interesting. And some of those stories and traditions I learned about felt true. They felt almost familiar, not like a foreign language. I was most drawn as an undergraduate to Hinduism, the religious traditions of India. I was drawn to the stories, of love and tragedy and wars of the gods and goddesses. I was drawn to their fierceness, gentleness, playfulness, their very human qualities.

I stayed on the path to ministry. Eventually I got to Starr King School in Berkeley, California, a school for Unitarian Universalist ministers. I took a four-year degree

programme...in theology. Four years studying god. I held out as long as I could but eventually realized I was going to have to take a straight theology course. In the classes on scripture, the mechanics of the church and on preaching I was safe enough. But theology...if I took that there was no more hiding, I would have to speak that dreaded word as if it were familiar, as if it were my own, as if I knew what it meant.

In seminary school I found I needed that word: One summer I interned with the Faithful Fools Street Ministry in San Francisco. Part of my work was helping at a soup kitchen and drop-in centre in the basement of Old First Baptist Church. On my last day at Old First, I was saying goodbye to the warm people I had met. There was the regular bustle of people shuffling around, the heat from the kitchen, and the smell of soup cooking. Robert, with a gentle laughing face, came up to me giggling and gleeful. Smiling his toothless grin, he said, "Laura, look what I found. It's good, it's good. You won't believe it...you believe in God don't you?"

Clearly the right answer was 'yes', so he could continue his happy story. I wanted to share his moment of glee. But how could I lie about that? Instead I laid down the heavy truth. "Uh, no Robert, I don't really believe in God."

He was crest-fallen and confused, the gleeful moment forgotten. "But you want to be a Reverend. You have to believe in God." Now I was in a mess. I tried to tell him that God felt like a foreign language to me. I tried to tell him the word God makes the divine feel like a being separate from me. And as far as I have experienced of life all that is divine is the same something that was in Jesus and is in an awe-inspiring tree and in me. But the long, wordy, inarticulate explanation I offered felt overly intellectual and Robert acted like I had hit him.

We stood in awkward silence until he remembered what he had wanted to tell me, "I found this in the street yesterday." He opened his hand to show me a little silver coin from the Salvation Army. It had the face of Jesus on one side and a dove on the other. It said, "Jesus loves you."

Robert said, "I found this and I thought my life was starting to get better. My life is going up from here." He said the words, but they sounded empty, like he no longer believed them. I felt like I had woken him from a good dream. He did not want that dream to end.

My theology had discomfited someone I care about. Waking someone up to reality is sometimes a function of ministry, but this did not feel like ministry. My response left us both without clarity, direction, or an experience of connectedness. Maybe Robert came to me looking for solid faith, and for once, a simple answer. I wished I could somehow have shown him our connectedness rather than created a gulf between us. I feel like I missed an opportunity to grow with Robert because I chipped away at his precious hope. I let him know that I

did not put my hope in Jesus Christ and in God. Further, in that moment I was not able to articulate to him what does give me hope.

So I had come to a point where I needed to reconcile myself to this g-word. I was finally ready to take a class in theology. It was in one of those classes that I first began to learn about process theology.

To me process theology is exciting because it gives me a way to talk about god that I can use, that I can find meaning for. And there is hope, undeniable hope in process theology.

The idea is that each moment is composed of two distinct parts. The first part is everything that came before to make this moment or this thing exist. The second is the full potential of the moment, the freedom of decision, the possibility of what will happen, of what can be done in the next moment. That potential comes into being in an instant and then fades away in the next instant. The way that god fits into this whole idea is like a magnet drawing us towards more beauty, greater complexity and diversity. Not that the world is necessarily getting better but that there is a great desire for increasing beauty. And to me that is very hopeful.

In our small corner of the world it seems so natural to think about beauty and diversity and how much they enrich our lives. I crave cultural and biological diversity; I am drawn towards it... except perhaps for rats. I have been working in the Downtown Eastside, the downtown core of Vancouver and I have seen rats of all different shapes and sizes... I could do without them. Maybe in process thought the rats are where I fall away from the magnetism the attractiveness of god?

In process theology the idea is that creation is not over. The world is still being created anew in each given decision, in each given moment. The god of process theology is a god of connection and ongoing creation. We are a part of creation, and creation happens with and through us. Using our creativity we have a role in divine work. God is a part of the world, affected and moved by what happens in the world.

Some process theologians and philosophers use the word god. But not all do, some speak in terms of creative interchange. Creative interchange can happen between any living beings. What happens is that there is some magnetism, some excitement that arises from an action, or conversation, from an interchange that draws one actor into making a movement towards greater beauty, greater diversity.

A while ago I was talking with a colleague about process theology. Her excitement was infectious. Here I stand before you today having thought and read more, having worked with these ideas to make them my own, and having added some of them to the brine of my life. Some of her ideas especially about

hope, are reflected in this sermon. A kind of circle I guess, a sort of wholeness. A creative interchange.

Each moment that we live is full of potential. And each action in our lives adds to the potential for all other living beings. In process theology, the fate of the world is not preordained. God has not written out how things will turn out for our lives. We have free will; we act and respond in each moment. And how we act and respond in one moment will add to the potential for the next moment. It becomes a part of the mix, the brew of creation. And therefore what we do with our lives, the big things and the little things, matter. What we do in life adds to the creative brine of what is possible.

Creative interchange happens with all life as we interact and communicate and create together. Once when I was in seminary school in California, I went for a walk. It was warm and sunny, and I was up in the Berkeley hills. As I was climbing, I turned around to look at the view of the bay. The trail was dusty and steep, the fresh air smelled of trees warmed in the sun. Below me stood a single tall pine, and below that, the edges of the city of Berkeley. I heard far-off car noises. I saw dark-green and earthy red-browns framed by sky. My heart was pumping blood through my body in response to the steepness of the hill. But I felt calm and relaxed and suddenly I didn't feel like my breath was being produced in my lungs but instead it was the tree whose breathe I could feel inside me. I felt like I was being breathed through by the tree. My lungs accepted the tree air as I breathed in and produced air for the tree as I breathed out. I felt very aware that the tree was part of who I was. Creative interchange.

Process theology sees the world as living, breathing, creating itself...in process. Ours is not a mechanistic world. The sum is greater than the parts, because if you look at the parts alone you miss the electric magic of what happens between living beings. In mechanistic thought the two objects or building blocks such as atoms just move or are rearranged. In process thought the two things that interact change through the process of interaction. If two friends have a deep and meaningful discussion, the two people may actually have changed.

Creative interchange is those electric moments of connection that you sometimes have with a good friend, a lover, a stranger, a dying person, a sacred tree, or a deer you meet in the woods. When for whatever reason you connect in mystery and wonder deeply with another being. It doesn't happen in every moment. In most moments I think I am the donkey in the Hafiz poem. But I have so many other beautiful animals and brilliant coloured birds inside.

Living to increase the beauty and complexity of the world is living with a commitment to bring those other animals inside me into conversation, into creative interchange with the world. Hafiz talks about the Friend (capital F), and this is a Sufi name for the Beloved, God, Allah. And I think in terms of what I have experienced of creative interchange with my very human friends. When I

love and trust someone and they give me advice, I feel drawn to follow it, as if it were magnetic. And the ones who show me their beauty and complexity, their beautiful animals and brilliant coloured birds, well I feel drawn to them too.

I told you the story of Robert from Old First. Since that day I have thought a lot about his question and my doubts and sense of inadequacy with the answer I gave. Yet, if he put me on the spot again I don't know what I would answer. Maybe in the moment if I focused and realized that electric spark of creative interchange was passing between us, maybe just for a minute I could catch his excitement for life, for ongoing creation, for a life of things that are looking up. Maybe in that one magic moment I could answer yes honestly. Or maybe not, and that is why I am remain a Unitarian. I continue to search, and question not only other's beliefs but also my own. So be it. Blessed be. Amen.

Benediction

It is my hope and prayer that as we move and breathe and love in our lives...May we all have the foresight to recognize those precious moments of electric interchange. May we all have the courage to act in this world to create more beauty, more justice, more diversity. May we all have the curiosity and courage to question and wrestle with god all the days of our lives. Blessed be.

A couple good articles to check out if you want to read more:

- process thought: its value and meaning to me...
by Charles Birch
- a perspective from process theology...
by William Stegall (Reprinted from Creative Transformation [Autumn 1994], the quarterly magazine of Process & Faith)