

Sermon for May 6, 2007

Do you want God with that? By The Reverend Lone Jensen

Over ten years ago, when I was the only Unitarian Universalist minister in a quaint and beautiful North Carolina town on the coast, I performed lots and lots of weddings and services of union. It was a romantic place to get married, with Victorian houses, the Cape Fear River and paddle wheelers. The couples kept calling because I would do inter-faith weddings where most ministers or rabbis would not, I would also perform Services of Union for same sex couples and yes, I would even create wedding ceremonies that were religious in nature but avoided overuse of the G-word. I could usually tell as the hopeful couple would do a careful verbal dance around the issue, hesitating to ask that much of this particular “holy woman”. A part of me wanted to cut to the chase and ask them bluntly: *So, do you want God with that?* Its ok, I can use other words, it is your ceremony! As a UU, I won’t impose my own beliefs on your wedding.

We usually got around to it without me being quite that blunt. That was a good thing I knew for even though they wanted to avoid the G-word, they still wanted a minister and my utter and seemingly irreverent frankness might have made them wonder just what kind of “Reverend” I really was. Our free faith, creedless with dogma removed, means that you

can choose among any number of paths, some of which use the word God or Goddess and some of which do not. Hence the jokes, with apologies to seasoned and experienced long time UU's, I know you have heard them all before! *You might be a UU if you pray, "Dear God, if there is a God, if you can, save my soul, if I have a soul."* Or if you say: *I'm not even sure if I am UU. I suppose that removes all doubt.* For centuries Unitarians have argued with Orthodox Christians about whether God was one or three - Unitarian vs. Trinitarian. Later when Humanism took root in the 1930's, we said "Unitarians believe in One God - at Most". But after the heady days of the women and religion resolutions and exultant goddess chants at our General Assemblies we added to our principles the sixth source - earth centered traditions – so we now say, *"UU's believe in One God - more or less."*

Your choice! Do you want God with this? Or perhaps a nature centered, all embracing, nurturing Goddess? Or is perhaps it in the very absence, the empty space at the center that you find the sacred? Andrew Newberg writes in the book *Why God Won't Go Away* (co authored with Eugene D'Aquill and Vince Rauss): *In the midst of this scientific revelation, Nietzsche proclaimed God dead. Its important, however to realize that the God he thought science had killed, the God that was no longer compatible with rational thinking, was the personal Creator God of the Bible. There is nothing that we have found in science or reason to refute the concept of a higher mystical reality.*

I will return to this idea. However first let us look at this image of a personal creator God. It is not the idea of creation that is at issue here. If we say, instead of God, the All Embracing, Ever Birthing Evolving Universe we are still talking about creation. I used to have an image of the birth of a star taken by the Hubble telescope as my screen saver. Even if it is “through a glass darkly” when we get a glimpse of the age and mystery of our immense Universe, we stand in awe of creation. Nor do I have an issue with the word personal, for each of us can only have a personal idea of what God or the ultimate reality might be like. I do embrace the Universalist concept of God as love wholeheartedly, for whatever you believe, it is by how this belief becomes reality and manifest itself in our lives that a good theology or philosophy can be separated from a destructive one. As the teacher Jesus once said: *By their fruits shall you know them*. The image of God that I have trouble with, and that most Unitarian Universalists reject, is the ancient tribal God, the one that separates and divides us into believers and un-believers, the saved and the damned, the ones on our side and our enemies, who must be destroyed. The God of suicide bombers is a delusion of hopelessness and hatred, the God who is said to have created the entire world in seven Earth days, some 4000 years ago would indeed be a very small and limited God. Many recent books, many good, scholarly and thought provoking books assume that this is what the word God must mean. Edward Harris’ *The End of Faith* and Richard Dawkins’ *The God*

Illusion both make this point. Hawkins writes: *Some people have views of God that are so broad and flexible that it is inevitable that they will find God wherever they look for him. One hears it said that 'God is the ultimate' or 'God is our better nature' or 'God is the universe.' Of course, like any other word, the word 'God' can be given any meaning we like. If you want to say that 'God is energy,' then you can find God in a lump of coal.* “ Guilty as charged! I must admit that I and many of my colleagues have used all of those words. The problem is that what God may be can't be expressed adequately by any words. As in *the Tao that can be expressed is not the real Tao*. But if, as the poet says, the world is “alight with the fire of God” then you can indeed find God in a lump of coal and it may not be a “him” either. Where Hawkins calls himself an atheist and naturalist I find him to be religious. But then we UU's tend to celebrate and embrace science. Hawkins sees the wonder and awe in nature: *The boy lay prone in the grass, his chin resting on his hands. He suddenly found himself overwhelmed by a heightened awareness of the tangled stems and roots, a forest in microcosm, a transfigured world of ants and beetles and even - though he wouldn't have known the details at the time - of soil bacteria by the billions... Suddenly the micro-forest of the turf seemed to swell and become one with the universe, and with the rapt mind of the boy contemplating it. He interpreted the experience in religious terms and it led him eventually to the priesthood... In another time and place, that boy could have been me under the stars, dazzled by*

Orion, Cassiopeia and Ursa Major, tearful with the unheard music of the Milky Way, heady with the night scents ...in an African garden. Why the same emotion should have led my chaplain in one direction and me in the other is not an easy question to answer. A quasi-mystical response to nature and the universe is common among scientists and rationalists. It has no connection with supernatural belief.

I agree with that. I find it frustrating and a bit sad when someone like Carl Sagan writes: *How is it that hardly any major religion has looked at science and concluded, 'This is better than we thought! The Universe is much bigger than our prophets said, grander, more subtle, more elegant'? Instead they say, 'No, no, no! My god is a little god, and I want him to stay that way.'* A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the Universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. To which I want to shout: ***But we Unitarian Universalist do just exactly that!*** We really must do a better job of spreading our good news!

So if our “Old God” is gone, with what do we replace him? Why won't God go away? My colleague David Robins writes:

There is no definition of God acceptable to Christians, theists, agnostics, atheists, and other religionists. Most UU's prefer to not use the word God, because it is so heavy laden with Trinitarian and sectarian

Christian meanings. UU's will have come of age when we can talk about God, deity, transcendence, higher power, Goddess, with confidence, curiosity and appreciation for others, without falling back on fears, defensiveness, and criticism.

Well I think we are getting there. The UU minister Forrest Church define God as *"That which is within each person and yet greater than all."* With advances in Neuroscience it is also not surprising that we now search for God in the human brain. In the book ***Why God won't go Away*** we find the following description:

In a small, dark room at the lab of a large university hospital, a young man named Robert lights a stick of jasmine incense and folds his legs easily into the lotus position. A devout Buddhist and practitioner of Tibetan meditation, Robert is about to begin another meditative voyage. His goal is to quiet the constant chatter of the conscious mind and lose himself in the deeper, simpler reality within. It's a journey he's made a thousand times before, but this time, as he drifts off—as the material world around him recedes like a fading dream—he remains tethered to the physical here and now by a length of common cotton twine.

One end of that twine lies at Robert's side. The other end runs into an adjoining room where we are waiting... I feel a gentle jerk on the twine. This is my cue to inject a radioactive material into a long intravenous line that runs into Robert's left arm. We whisk him off to a

room in the hospital's Nuclear Medicine Department, where a massive, state-of-the-art SPECT camera awaits. The single photon emission computed tomograph is a high tech imagining tool that detects radioactive emissions. We aren't disappointed. The finished scan images show unusual activity in a small lump of gray matter nestled in the top rear section of the brain. The proper name of this highly specialized bundle of neurons is the posterior superior parietal lobe, dubbed the orientation association area.

This is the part of the brain that differentiates between us and the rest of the world. Patients who have damage in this area find that even simple tasks like getting into bed becomes very difficult.

The scans taken at the peak of Roberts's meditative state show the orientation area to be bathed in dark blotches of cool greens and blue—colors that indicate a sharp reduction in activity levels.

We knew the area never rest so what was going on? *What if the orientation area was working as hard as ever, but the incoming flow of sensory information had somehow been blocked?*

What would happen if the OAA had no information upon which to work? Would it continue to search for the limits of the self? With no information flowing in from the senses, the OAA wouldn't be able to find any boundaries. What would the brain make of that?

The team repeated the experiment with Fransiscan Nuns. The nuns spoke of uniting with God and Jesus instead of reaching enlightenment but the brain scans were similar. While much more research is needed, with better controls than a cotton string, still I find this idea fascinating. It resonates with me, this idea of reaching beyond our narrow selves to a place of peace and unity. Call it coming home if you like.

Once I stood on beach at a summer night with no moon and saw starlight on the waves. There were no electric lights to dim the stars and no human voices to drown out the rushing surf. I threw off my shoes and felt the coolness of the wet sand and the grains between my toes. At first I saw only the beauty and reveled in the rare gift of an empty beach and a starlit night. I reached up to the sky and laughed. I watched, I listened and my soul sang with the stars. I think I spoke with God however I understand her. There was a deep sense of peace, that all was well, that all the struggles and all the different faiths and divisions were nonsense, fragile humans groping in the dark for meaning, getting a fleeting glimpse of eternity now and then much as the white sea foam would shine for a second on the dark waves and then disappear. It felt as if the Universe was smiling and that all our separateness was indeed an illusion, we were one with all there is and it was good. Deep in my bones I still know this to be true and I will forever long to get back to that place of peace. I get there now and then but you can't command a religious experience. All you can do is open the window.

In the words of the Hindu Upanishads,

As the river flowing east and west

Merge in the sea and become one with it,

Forgetting that they were ever separate rivers,

So do all creatures lose their separateness

When they merge at last.

So, how about it? Do you want God with that?