

“Shades of God”
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I'm thinking of a television commercial from the early 1970s. A lovely young woman stands on a grassy hillside and sings. The camera pulls back and there are other attractive young people, also singing. They are of every race and culture and hue. They sing: “I'd like to build the world a home and furnish it with love. Grow apple trees and honey bees and snow white turtle doves. I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony...” And since each of them is holding a bottle of Coca-Cola, they add, “I'd like to buy the world a Coke and keep it company.”

For those of you whippersnappers who were too young or were not yet born when this commercial was made, you can easily find it on You Tube. I looked it up the other day, and found to my profound embarrassment a few tears welling up. What was that about? This 60-second commercial (an eternity in today's ad market) was one that captured people's attention and stuck in the memory. It is now considered one of the most influential commercials of all time. It inspired a separate recording – minus the references to Coke. My junior high choir sang it for our spring concert. Again, why? In 1971, the time was right – we were so divided. Over the Viet Nam war, over race. We were anguished over the assassination of Robert Kennedy, the assassination of Dr. King, and hunkered down in the scared aftermath of the race riots. Perhaps this commercial captured some kind of shared longing. It touched a part of ourselves that wanted to believe that people could come together across the great divides. It helped us to believe in some kind of shared beauty.

And it was a commercial. The handsome, young multicultural singers were lip-syncing. They did not speak with one another, nor did they touch. And when Coke was done filming, they went home.

Coming together across differences is a lot harder than it looks. We still feel great division in our country today. We are separated by race, and certainly by political worldview. In the midst of these deep divisions is still a longing to be whole. So we come – eagerly – to the Unitarian Universalist church, seeking some kind of harmony across our differences. Every week in our worship, we welcome people by saying, “This is an intentionally inclusive church which welcomes all. No matter what your race, no matter what your creed, no matter what your financial situation and no matter whom you love, you are welcome here.” Each one of these “no matter”s in our welcome requires conscious effort to be a reality. To have people feel welcome who are different from the

majority of folks here – or who feel different - takes work on our part. Overcoming differences of race, creed, financial status and sexual orientation is complex and would each deserve its own sermon.

Today, I am going to focus on the “creed” part of our welcome - our different beliefs about or in God. God is a subject we tend to avoid around here. Kind of strange for a place with “church” in its name, don't you think? But talking about God is awkward. Because we do have some significant differences. Unlike the singers on the hillside, you just can't see them.

If you look around you on any given Sunday morning, you will see people who have many different beliefs. Usually there is no way to tell this. Some of us wear faith symbols on our sleeves. I will often wear a *hamsa*, a Jewish symbol for the hand of God. Our senior minister, Josh Snyder, wears a bracelet of wooden mala prayer beads, as part of his Buddhist practice. A few brave souls wear crosses. Some wear flaming chalice pins or necklaces, to symbolize Unitarian Universalism. Most of us wear no faith symbols at all. So our attachments are hidden. It's practically impossible to tell who believes what.

There are groups that have started meeting in our church over the past few years, which do talk specifically about their beliefs. One is the UU Christians, and the other is called the Godfrees. The UU Christians share a very liberal version of communion, and study the gospels in a loose and open-ended way. The other group, the Godfrees, are self-proclaimed atheists, agnostics and skeptics, who discuss modern atheist writers, or as skeptic Jennifer Michael Hecht would say, “graceful life philosophies” which do not include any notion of the divine. Both the Godfrees and the UU Christians seem to represent different ends of the spectrum of belief, and enjoy the company of other like-minded souls. And there are remarkable similarities between them. Members of both groups expressed to me at various times a sense of isolation they experience within our church. When we were first starting the UU Christians, I had people come up to me and ask about “that Thursday group”. Or about that *group*, hoping I would know what they meant and that they didn't have to say, “Christian”. Within the group, there was a relief from worry over feeling too different, or that they did not belong in a UU Church. Some of the Godfrees have expressed similar feelings of aloneness in our church. What a gift it is for them to be in a group of people and say, “I am an atheist” - and not worry about having to apologize, defend, explain themselves. Some people whose schedules conflict with the meeting times of the UU Christians or the Godfrees have told me that even though they don't attend, the mere presence of these groups in our church helps them feel more like they belong here. Because they too are worried.

It interests me, this worry. As your minister, I care deeply about it. And I have felt it myself more than once. Being one of the people with the serious responsibility of leading you in worship, I feel it. “Please don't mention God – I feel excluded,” one person will say. “We never pray or worship God. It feels so empty,” another person will say. If you were leading worship, and you cared about every person here, what would you do?

Part of our trouble, I believe, is that we don't talk with each other about what we believe. Especially when it comes to a subject as touchy as God. It's a little scary. It could be awkward. You could disagree with someone on a basic level about the very nature of reality. Generally when this happens, the person becomes “other” to you, and you become “other” to them. Either you prove yourself to be right, or they do. Either way, someone gets hurt.

It's easy to feel we are exposing the most precious part of ourselves, a part that could be damaged through insult or laughter. Even in Unitarian Universalist churches, sometimes, there is such laughter, and I've watched people pretend not to be hurt. No one wants to feel like an *other*. No one wants to view someone in their community as *other*. So we don't talk about it. Or we put some vague label out there – Atheist, Agnostic, Christian, Theist, Wiccan, Buddhist – and don't go any further. We don't ask many questions. And we get no closer to understanding one another. We miss a profound opportunity to understand ourselves.

Samir Selmanovic is a Christian pastor who was raised in a communist/atheist home in Croatia. He wrote a book called, *It's Really All About God: Reflections of a Muslim, Jewish, Atheist Christian*. He shares much of his personal struggle in remaining connected to his family, who was horrified that he became a Christian. He is committed to learning from other faiths and encouraging dialogue across belief – from his own desire to become more whole. He writes, “Our honest conversation about [the mysteries of religious experience] is an intimate endeavor. Only when we believe that the other is not there to hurt us – though the other may struggle to understand us – can we begin to share the light of our religion. To step into such conversations, we have to be ready to embrace the holy awkwardness that surrounds our God talk.”

I like that phrase - “holy awkwardness”. Any good conversation across any kind of difference will, in fact, have some holy awkwardness about it. “Awkward” is certainly part of being vulnerable, which we are when we share our deepest beliefs. But also “holy” – in the sense that it is very important to do, and rare, and represents a sacred trust to respect one another.

The point of these “holy awkward” conversations is not agreement. Since we have so many experiences to the contrary, this is a tough idea to really grasp. But I'll say it again. The point of the conversation is not agreement. The point of the conversation is understanding. A greater understanding of what each holds dear. A greater understanding of yourself in the process, too.

The risk that we must take whenever we have such conversations is to allow ourselves to be taught by the other, to be changed by the other. We usually want to be the teacher, the one giving out wisdom. It is to take a weaker position to be on the receiving end. And yet, Selmanovic argues, unless we are willing to be so humble, a true conversation will not really take place.

Example: I used to work in a bank when I lived in Minneapolis, several years ago. I had an brief encounter in this very unlikely place for spiritual conversation. It was so brief and so long ago, I can't even tell you her name. We were standing at the copy machine and she said something about God. As I think about it now, this was a very rare and impolite subject to raise at work. “I don't believe in God,” I said, equally impolite. “What do you believe in,” she asked. “Well, I have spiritual experiences – intuition, love – things like that,” I said. “Ah”, she said. “I'll bet that what you call spiritual experiences and what I call God are a lot more alike than you think.” This simple statement really started to change my conception of God – it was at least the first crack in my delusion that I understood God. What you believe when you say “spiritual experiences” and what I believe when I say “God” are a lot more alike than you think. Remarkable. And humbling.

We have many reasons to be humble when it comes to “God talk”, actually. We often are of conflicting opinions ourselves. Some days I am completely convinced that there is a higher power, a source of love and guidance that is free and available to everyone, and very obviously at work in my life. Other days, I'm not so sure at all. This is humbling to say out loud sometimes. We long for certainty on these subjects, something that might match the TV evangelists, or even the New Atheists, like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, who speak with equal certainty in their rightness. Frank Schaeffer, who was once a popular speaker for the religious right and then “left the fold” describes the dilemma of being an evangelist. He says in order to be successful in evangelical circles, “one always has to feign a degree of certainty about the Big Questions that no sane person ever feels.” (p. 105, *Patience with God*, Frank Schaeffer) I would add that this is true of any spiritual conviction. We are change from day to day.

The statement, “I believe in God” (or “I don't believe in God”) contains two very complicated words, “believe” and “God”. These are words of which we have precious

little understanding.

First, the word “God”. We have no idea, really, what we mean by “God” - or if we think we do, we're probably not thinking big enough. We like to tame this idea, to bring it down to a manageable size, something we can “get our hands around” so to speak. Samir Selmanovic calls most religions “god management systems”. That is, each tries to get a definition of God that appeals to them, get it out there, and impose it on the rest. We are no less guilty. Most of us, when we think of God, think of Yahweh, an old man in the sky with a long, white beard who runs the universe, though not terribly well, and punishes or rewards us according to some rather mysterious and impossible rules. But God, at least according to the basic teachings of our religions, is not something we can fully describe in words or concepts. (Karen Armstrong, *A Case for God*)

Paul Tillich says that there is a problem when people ask if A god EXISTS. Right there, he says, we are reducing a vast, ineffable mystery down to something we can quantify – A god (maybe two, maybe more) – and something that has something that follows our human notion, “existence”. And therefore the answer is yes or no, black or white, something that exists or doesn't with the flick of our decision. Defining “God” is not simple and certainly not nearly as black and white as we tend to think. That is why I am starting this sermon series in the first place – to help fill out the spectrum of the many ways there are to understand God – the many shades between our usual black and white which exist among us.

Then, there's the word “believe”. Our modern understanding of this word means something like intellectual assent. I hear an idea and I agree that it's true. Or I don't. Karen Armstrong says that when it comes to the religious, there is much more to 'belief' than hearing an idea and agreeing with it or not. The ancient teachers, pre-enlightenment, used the term 'belief' to mean a commitment, or a practice – something you might give your life to. They wrote the great myths for people to enter into through ritual, not intellectual understanding. They required practice, community, a willingness to explore truth through myth and story, to experience something of the divine that shines through. Only through years of practice and ritual and action informed by these myths about God, the great mystery, did any understanding come about. This takes a lot of patience and a lot of time. We want the understanding to come first, we want it to make intellectual sense before we sign on. I don't know if we can change this about ourselves. It seems pretty hard-wired into modern, post-enlightenment people. But we can take the time to learn what experiences people have had that have led them to their commitments, their beliefs. We can take the time to contemplate our own experiences, our own commitments.

Example: two years ago, the board and the executive team held a retreat at the beginning of the church year. To get to know one another on a deeper level, our president, Nancy Pinson and I decided to ask each person two questions. One: who or what to you is God? And two: Have you ever had a holy moment? That is, have you ever had an experience that felt sacred to you? (However you wish to define this.) The first question “Who or what is God to you?” was difficult. It brought out some basic differences, and felt uncomfortable at times. Or it did to me. Some found the question itself off-putting. The second question, “Have you ever had a holy moment?” had the opposite effect. People shared amazing experiences – birth, death, awesome wonder at the stars, remarkable and even life-changing events they couldn't fully explain. If the first question made us feel uncomfortable, the second question made us feel like family.

But here's the thing: both questions were really asking about the same thing. If we are truly humble about these conclusions we make about our lives and about the universe, we are talking about mystery, about the ineffable, about something we belong to, wonder at, something that infuses our lives. And, my apologies to those who still dislike the word – we are talking about God.

How and where do you most come alive? What makes you willing to sacrifice comfort or put aside your self-interest? When you experience something like a diagnosis of cancer with its feelings terror, disappointment and sorrow, what helps you transcend this and live – or die – with some form of grace? The answers to these questions form our theology. Shorthand: God.

We UUs are the folks who passionately believe – and by believe I mean commit to, practice, give our heart to something that is greater than what any one person can imagine, and underlies all our various individual beliefs. *Egy Az Isten*, said our ancestor, Francis David. God is one. We need not think alike to love alike, and love is larger than thought. This is a religion that takes great faith, and requires great commitment and long practice. We come here to find our allies in the dream of love, respect, healing and justice, in spite of our differing beliefs.

So why talk about God at all? Why not throw out the word and just talk about experience? It's tempting. But if we do, we are imposing a sort of censorship that makes our conversation flat and uninteresting. How can we ask someone to not use the word “God” when his experiences of God form the very heart of his spiritual life? How can we ask someone to not use the word “atheist” when that is the word that sets her soul free? If we censor what words we use, I think we are giving away a lot of the riches offered by spiritual thinkers. Including ourselves.

“At its best,” writes Frank Schaeffer, “faith is about thanksgiving, shared suffering, loss, pain, generosity and love.” The language that captures this for each of us may be different. It will be inadequate. But it is a beginning to understanding one another. It is a beginning to address that longing we have, that tender affection we feel for those young people standing together on the hillside. I encourage you to begin sharing what you believe – what you have experienced of the holy in your life, with each other. Here. One way to do this is to join an Open Circles group. These small groups offer a safe and encouraging place for you to explore your beliefs and share them with others. To share God, or the absence of one, in your life. Or you could just ask people you already know. Perhaps you know what they believe, perhaps you don't. You will be taking a great risk. You may change in the process. But each time you do, you will be taking a small step toward becoming more whole. Amen.