

Wrestling with God

Written by Rev. Alison Miller, December 2021

In 1838, celebrated Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson addressed the graduating class of Harvard Divinity School – “Let me admonish you, first of all, to go alone; to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil.”

Emerson spoke against simply receiving doctrines from the past and for the importance of trusting in our own intuition and our own experience of the divine.

He addressed the future preachers before him and said, “cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with Deity.”

And in that sermon he did cast off conformity. He spoke against supernatural miracles and pointed out the divinity in humanity, “If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God; the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God do enter into that man with justice.”

While Emerson hoped that a thoughtful academic debate would follow, instead, he was immediately attacked by the powers of the day in Unitarianism and at Harvard, which was a school for Unitarian ministers at the time.

Emerson was called a heretic and an atheist. He was not welcome back on the campus for decades.

In 1838, the 35 year-old Emerson and his fellow Transcendentalists were considered radicals. Now, we look back at Emerson and are inspired by his openness to new sources of truth outside of the confines of Christianity, but he was not always beloved by all in his own time.

It is, of course, ironic that in 1903, on what would have been Emerson’s 100th birthday, a marble plaque with the words, “acquaint thyself at firsthand with deity,” was placed on the wall of the very room where he preached them and that room is now called the Emerson Chapel.

We owe a debt to all of our spiritual forebears who opened multiple doorways to truth and to God. We enjoy a Unitarian Universalism that allows for atheists, agnostics, and theists of all stripes to give voice to the uncensored stirrings in their soul as Emerson once did.

Getting to this place has included an evolution and revolutions of the spirit that moved congregations and the people in them from the Orthodoxy of Puritanism in the 1600s to become the progressive Christian Unitarians of the 1800s, and ultimately open-hearted, open-minded, religiously diverse Unitarian Universalists in the 1900s. We continue to evolve and change as a religion now in the 2000s. As the dean of St. Lawrence, a former Universalist seminary once said when asked where we stand on matters of faith, “We don’t stand, we move,” was his response.

We enjoy a religious freedom and pluralism within our communities that I hope you find liberating and to be an invitation to explore your own meaning-making. The ability to make sense of the world and our place in it and the ability to articulate that is vital to the spiritual life and to resilience, especially in these times of trouble and trial.

What we believe about God is an important part of that spiritual work, and remember “god” is also the three letter word for what we hold as ultimate. The question of what do you believe about God is also partly about the question, what guides your life?

I know this kind of question can be challenging for many of us, so let me show you what I mean. My definition of God is “the creative power of love that is able to enter the brokenness and suffering in our lives and our world and move with us towards healing.”

It is that which transforms despair into hope, injustice into liberation, and the forces of destruction and isolation into creation and interconnection. It is the spirit of love which is a part of all of us and yet greater than each.

One of the guiding questions for me that is born out of this definition is, *what is the pathway of healing, and how can I or we move in that direction?*

There is a story in the Bible of Jacob wrestling with an Angel or a man, who is actually God. They wrestle all night and Jacob survives, but is left with a limp. When the angel man is about to leave, Jacob asks for a blessing. His blessing is a new name: Israel. There is much written about this name for Jacob and what it might mean, including he who wrestles with God, he who sees God, he who contends with God.

In any event, what resonates with my direct experience in that passage is that so often when we ask questions about God or what is ultimate, we are wrestling with an urgent need to make meaning – whether because of contending with despair, or loss, or illness, or injustice. We usually don't come away unscathed by those times in our lives, but we often come away with insights that serve us to live more fully and deliberately. Whatever that blessing is that you receive during a time of wrestling might hint in the direction of what is ultimate for you – the quality or qualities that sustain and nourish you through hardship and challenge.

Thinking of the headlines this week:

How will the parents of the children who were shot in Michigan survive through their long nightmare just begun? How will they make meaning of what happened? What power inside of themselves and in others will bring them back to life? Where will they find God, or hope, or some framework to make sense of the senseless? How will they find peace or justice?

These are questions of theodicy. Rabbi Kushner famously put that question in this way: Why do bad things happen to good people?

This kind of question is especially challenging for people who believe that God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and everywhere (omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent). Why then would God choose these children and these parents to suffer? We UU's don't tend to hold on to that type of belief, but we may still hold beliefs that fall away for us in a time of travail.

I remember serving as a chaplain in a burn ICU where a man was working underneath a car when it exploded. He miraculously survived, but as you can imagine he was in the most precarious and painful condition. I would visit with his wife daily. She prayed without ceasing. Her pastor came frequently and prayed with her. So did I. She told that she believed that God would answer her prayers, if she prayed well enough.

As he grew more and more gravely ill, I asked her, "Do you think God works that way?" I knew she found hope in being able to do something, and I do believe prayer can be powerful. But, I was worried that if he passed away she would blame herself.

As he moved closer and closer to death, I listened to her struggle with her theology and did my best to create a safe place to ask her own questions and find her own answers.

Our answers will not always be the same to questions about God or theodicy. I know some of you believe that all things happen for a reason, while others don't. I don't believe God chooses and sends good things for some and bad things for others as a matter of testing or strengthening or punishment or any for other reason. However, I do believe that we human beings can move through those challenging experiences towards growth, towards insights, towards more abundant life. The greater the challenge or loss the harder that may be. However, human beings learn, grow, and change through experience – perhaps these creative impulses are a reflection of the divine spark in us.

So, what do you believe about God. Is she immanent – within you? Are they transcendent – beyond you? Or Is he both – within and beyond?

If you believe God is in every blade of grass and in everything, you could be called a pantheist, and that understanding of everything as sacred might inform your commitments to the environment.

If you believe that God is a verb and not a noun – then you might find the divine to be revealed in actions of love and compassion. Many who resonate with this understanding identify with what is called process theology.

If you believe that we can say more about what we don't know about God than what we do know about God, as in the case of the puzzle pieces that remained a mystery in the story for all ages, then you might be following the apophatic tradition. God is wordless, imageless, and filled with wonder.

If you believe God is on the side of the poor and the oppressed, then you may resonate with liberation theology. The question then becomes how do you live into that proposition with your life? Are you engaged in movements for social change? Or, is it merely abstract thought and an academic exercise.

In the end, what is important is that our beliefs help to nourish, sustain and inspire us. Our beliefs matter as in they help us to lead lives grounded in love and act in ways that repair and heal brokenness in whatever ways our particular gifts suit us to do.

If you don't believe in god/goddess/a higher power, then does what you have put in place of the God you rejected, or the God your parents rejected, hold you in a time

like this – can it hold your grief and the possibility of growth – or do you feel you are without the tools to begin to find a way forward.

I'll be quick to add that this meaning making is not the work of one day – rather it is the journey of a lifetime. It is also one of the gifts we offer one another here in this Fellowship – through classes like Building Your Own Theology, discussion groups, our weekly services, and pastoral appointments.

This is a place where the questions and the wrestling is welcome. Whether you believe God exists or is a metaphor or poetry, may our movement towards what is holy, just, and true transform our lives and our world for the better. May it be so!