

“God is just a Word”, with David Fu, worship associate

The word “God” is, well, just a word. At least that is what I hope to convey. And words are tricky things for us humanfolk. We would do well to be more aware of how they can be used for both good and nefarious purposes. Based on a sermon I gave just about ten years ago.

Reading

These the words of Anthony DeMello:

We're almost never looking at reality. A guru was once attempting to explain to a crowd how human beings react to words, feed on words, live on words, rather than on reality. One of the men stood up and protested; he said, "I don't agree that words have all that much effect on us." The guru said, "Sit down, you son of a ****bleep**** (bitch)." The man went livid with rage and said, "You call yourself an enlightened person, a guru, a master, but you ought to be ashamed of yourself." The guru then said "Pardon me, sir, I was carried away. I really beg your pardon; that was a lapse; I'm sorry." The man finally calmed down. Then the guru said "It took just a few words to get a whole tempest going within you; and it took just a few words to calm you down, didn't it?" Words, words, words, words, how imprisoning they are if they're not used properly.

Reading John 1:1

1:1 In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

Sermon

1 Intro (let's get meta)

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Whenever I preach here, after my initial lead-in story, but before I start in on the sermon proper, I often make a kind of Channing Memorial Church public service announcement. It starts with a simple warning: "Caution: religious language ahead". I then explain that in our church we don't shy away from religious language, and in particular from the word "God". I encourage people to let go of any preconceptions or baggage that they might have.

And even though I often mention that I enjoy using and find great meaning within the "language of God" and the Bible, I don't consider myself to be a believer in the traditional sense. Indeed, if you were to ask me "Do you believe in God?", I would likely stammer uncomfortably and then mutter some vague and incomprehensible hedge. I suppose that in this way, I'm no different than any of the other three non-atheist, non-pagan, agnostic, scripture-loving Unitarian Universalists. And I suppose it's no wonder that I feel so "spiritually at home" here at Channing.

Today I'm going to talk about words, and in particular, the word "God". Such a little word, "God", and yet so fraught. Fraught with what? With peril? With meaning? With power? With joy? Yes. And yet, "God" is just a word.

If you are a believer, in whatever sense or the word, your challenge this morning is to think hard about just what it is you actually believe in. And if you are *not* a believer, in whatever sense of the word, your goal is to think hard about just what it is you actually do *not* believe in. We will proceed as follows. First, I'll talk about some of the problems inherent in words. Next, I'll speak about a possibly familiar religious word game. And finally, I'll play this game in reverse.

2 Three problems.

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Problems with words. I can think of at least three problems with words.

2.1 We let words "yank our chains"

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First, if I may use the vernacular, too often we allow words to "yank our chains", or to "push our buttons". DeMello's example from our reading this morning hits hard. "Sit down, you son of a \*\*bleep\*\* (bitch)," says the guru. Guru, a Hindu word that means spiritual parent or teacher. A guru has just said something extremely rude to you. What do you do? Do you lose control? Do you go ballistic?

I once heard a preacher on a Christian radio station talking about Jesus's sermon on the mount. He read Matthew chapter 5, verses 38 and 39:

5:38 Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an  
eye, and a tooth for a tooth: 5:39 But I say unto you,  
That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on  
thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.

And then this preacher made a point about the word translated as "smite". The original word means a back-handed slap to the face, meant to degrade and humiliate its recipient. Interestingly, he continued and said that Jesus is speaking *\*figuratively\**, that this slap to the face represents any grievous insult, and that to return insult for insult is to lose sight of Jesus's teaching.

The Buddhists believe that anger is just another face of fear, and that anyone who angers you is your teacher. "Sit down, you son of a \*\*bleep\*\* (bitch)," says the guru. What will you do? Will you learn the lesson? Will you dis-cover your fear? Or will you continue to be knocked about by the words of others, like a boat by the waves of a stormy sea? You always have a choice.

## 2.2 We mistake words for reality

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The next problem I have with words is that we confuse them with reality. And we do this naturally, as a matter of course, in order to deal with all the stimuli life throws at us. We use the word as a shorthand, and after a while, we equate the shorthand with the reality. It

sounds so obvious if I say that the word "bird" is not a bird. But what if I say that the word "God" is not God. How does this reckon with this morning's second reading from the opening of the Book of John?

1:1 In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

According to Wikipedia, Christian scholars have spent hundreds of years trying to figure out just what these few lines mean. But I'm not surprised that many people who read or hear these words fall into the trap of worshiping the *word* "God" (in quotation marks), instead of worshiping God.

It's seeing the finger pointing at the moon, and then obsessing about the finger.

And there is a more subtle version of the trap here. In this passage, it is generally accepted that the word "Word" means the "Word of God", which is also equated with Jesus. This is, after all, a book in the New Testament. Now the words of Jesus, as put forth in the Bible, are an invaluable tool for living our lives, but I say they are not God. I would say that God is more than that; and in his sermon "Unitarian Christianity", William Ellery Channing said so, too.

2.3 We believe that words can capture reality

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The third problem I want to cover is related to the last. We mistakenly believe that words can "capture" reality. When I use the word "bird" to describe a bird, I am actually losing almost all of what it is: feathers, eyes, fluffy, orange beak, alive, flying... The word "bird" is a kind of shadow of its reality. And so it is no wonder to me that the mystics are always telling us to spend more time with Nature, where words are not "a thing". And words are a leaky sieve, a Swiss cheese; I can add more and more words to describe a bird, but the description can never be complete.

And yet so often we live our lives as if it were the case, as if just the right words could encompass reality. Even though there are always loopholes.

My favorite part of Shakespeare's tragedy {Macbeth} is the character Macbeth's undoing by this very trap. Through supernatural means, Macbeth learns that [quote] "none of woman born shall harm Macbeth" [enquote], and that [quote] "Macbeth shall never vanquished be until Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill shall come against him." [enquote] All in all, it sounds like a pretty good deal. Who is not born of woman? And how could a forest move against him? And so, putting his faith in these words, Macbeth proceeds with his bloody, murdering ways. But it turns out that Macbeth's rival, Macduff, was born by cesarean section, and the army that rises against Macbeth cuts down the branches of the trees in Great Birnam Wood and uses them as camouflage to hide their numbers as they sneak up on Macbeth's army on Dunsinane Hill.

Loopholes. Swiss cheese.

So there are problems with words, but they are what we have and live by. Our society is based on them. Indeed, what is the rule of law, but an agreement to be ruled by words? But what about our religion? Is religion based on or ruled by words? I say no, not really...

### 3 The wedding nihilist (God->nothing)

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In our mid-to-late 20's Cathy and I attended many weddings, including our own. There must have been a half a dozen in the space of just a few years. This meant that we got to hear much more "God" talk than usual in our otherwise secular lives. The amount and the intensity of the religious language varied from church to church, but one wedding at a Chicago suburbs megachurch stands out in my memory. I swear that every second word out of anybody's mouth was "God", or "Lord", or "Jesus", or "Christ". I felt conspicuous and uneasy as a nonbeliever among believers.

So to deal with this uneasiness, I decided to play a little word game in my head to pass the time. Whenever someone used a religious word, I would replace it with another word. This was a common spiritual practice of our Minister Emerita, Reverend Susan LaMar. She would invoke God as “Spirit of Life”, or “Spirit of Wisdom”, or “Spirit of Creative Energy”, and then hold forth. Had I known then what I know now, I would have probably done something similar. But instead, I did something else. Whenever I heard the word "God", or "Jesus", or "Our Savior", et cetera, I would substitute an appropriate /negative/ pronoun, like "nobody", or "no one", or, in some cases, "nothing".

Blasphemy. [pause] It was great fun!

Every time I made one of my substitutions, I would secretly smile on the inside. Such a clever nihilist. But then something happened. Whenever I made a substitution, I would try to make sense of the mangled verbiage. Sometimes it was pure nonsense. But sometimes it was \*interesting\*. It was still a Mystery. It was still Holy. It was still a Miracle. In fact, it sometimes brought a miracle into focus.

Let me try to show you what I mean by making a substitution in the opening of the Bible. Genesis, chapter one, verse one:

1:1 In the beginning nothing created the heaven and the earth.

Mystery. Does this mean that heaven and earth have always been? How can this be? If we parse the word "nothing" as the two words "no" and "thing", the flavor changes. No thing created the heaven and the earth. Then the fact that they exist is a miracle. To me, this says that God is somehow beyond, somehow transcendent of the realm of things. It is a mystical say. Let us continue for a few verses.

1:2 And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness  
was upon the face of the deep. And no thing moved upon the  
face of the waters.

1:3 And no one said, Let there be light: and there was light.

1:4 And no one saw the light, that it was good: and no one divided the light from the darkness.

After this particular wedding, Cathy remarked to me about how uncomfortable she was with all the "God" language and the overtly theatrical aspects of the ceremony. I tried to explain my little game to her, but I did a poor job. (Aside) Did I do better today? [shrug] Who knows. Anyway, after wedding season ended, we went on with our lives, and I had no further occasion to think of such things—

—until we started a family and came here to Channing Memorial Church, Unitarian Universalist, where I discovered that I had more to say about such things, and I began to view the world and God through different eyes.

4 Neil deGrasse Tyson (The Universe->God)

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Now I want to apply Reverend LaMar's "God invocation game" in reverse. That is, I want to take a nonreligious passage and substitute \*in\* the word "God" in hopes of revealing an underlying holy essence. I want to get you to look at the moon and not the finger. The author of our passage is the physicist Neil deGrasse Tyson.

Our story starts on December 25, 2014, when Tyson tweeted the following:

"On this day long ago, a child was born who, by age 30,  
would transform the world. Happy Birthday Isaac Newton b.  
Dec 25, 1642,"

A "tweetstorm" of sorts broke out as a result of this little jab. And I do mean to use the word "jab". Neil deGrasse Tyson is a very smart dude, and he knows the power of words. Over the years he has had some comings and goings with the fundamentalist Christian community, especially in the area of creationism versus Darwinism. And so surely he knew he was "yanking the chains" of some Christians with his tweet. And indeed, many Christians were offended. Tyson was accused of "trolling" Christmas. He posted a brief explanation, but made no apologies.

I find the whole episode rife with irony, because neither Jesus nor Newton was born on the day that we reckon as December 25th. Biblical scholars and many preachers believe that Jesus was born in the spring, and Newton was born in 1642, before the 10 day Gregorian calendar correction of 1752. Accounting for this, his actual birthday is January 4th, 1643.

But the greater irony is that, though this Christmas tweet episode seems to portray Tyson as a cynical, non-religious, Christian-baiting gadfly, through his other writings, it is perfectly clear to me that Tyson is, in his fashion, deeply spiritual. Listen to these words

“Recognize that the very molecules that make up your body,  
the atoms that construct the molecules, are traceable to  
the crucibles that were once the centers of high mass  
stars that exploded their chemically rich guts into the  
galaxy, enriching pristine gas clouds with the chemistry  
of life. So that we are all connected to each other  
biologically, to the earth chemically and to the rest of  
the universe atomically. That’s kinda cool! That makes me  
smile and I actually feel quite large at the end of that.  
It’s not that we are better than the universe, we are part  
of the universe. We are in the universe and the universe

is in us.”

This is reverent, holy language. True, Tyson uses the phrase "the universe", and he speaks in the language of physics and chemistry, but to me, the universe, and each of the sciences, physics, chemistry, mathematics is but a \*facet\* of God. A piece of the elephant. And the beginning of this passage is a scientific creation story. Being based in science does not make it any the less \*miraculous\*. Let us conclude this morning by, at the end of Tyson's passage, replacing the phrase "the universe" with the word "God":

"So that we are all connected to each other biologically,  
to the earth chemically and to the rest of God atomically.  
That's kinda cool! That makes me smile and I actually feel  
quite large at the end of that. It's not that we are  
better than God, we are part of God. We are in God and God  
is in us.”

As Reverend LaMar used to say, “Within us, around us, among us.” [To the tune of hymn 343:] Some call it the Universe, and others call it God.

God is just a word.

Amen.