

Exploring the Sacred

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD May 15, 2022

There are times in my life where I have felt the palpable presence of my sacred, the company of my God. I remember kneeling in St Patrick's cathedral in New York City, an intricate statue of a Christian saint erected before me as I lit a candle and prayed to my ancestors. Or the evening I sat on the beach, ocean stretching into the horizon in a way that made it seem infinite, sky riddled with stars lightyears away from where I sat. I remember sitting under a blooming tree in the backyard of my mother's house, whispering "I love you" to my sweetheart for the first time, or kissing my stepfather's sunken face before he transitioned out of the realm of the living. A presence, and a mystery.

There is nothing more elusive than trying to understand the sacred. There are myriad names and understandings of a presence greater than ourselves – God, Goddess, Allah, nature, spirit of love, higher power. I do not understand religions as different ways of accessing the same sacred – different paths up the same mountain – but as different mountains entirely. Allah and God are fundamentally different concepts. Religions do not share a God, but share a "Good," the Dalai Lama affirms that "the essential message of all religions is very much the same" – peace, love, and understanding.¹ This is at the core of every faith. And in faith are sacred entities. I use the word "God" and yet in doing so realize the connotations – maleness, monotheism, anthropomorphism, perhaps the classical theologies of an all-powerful, all-knowing presence. Today, I counter that. Today we get to explore one of the most basic and powerful tenets of our faith: a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, which leads to personal understandings that may negate these traditional beliefs entirely. How do we each understand our sacred through the lens of our Unitarian Universalist faith? If our understanding of the sacred does no harm, if it calls us to be a catalyst for goodness and love in the world, if it connects us to our core and all we hold true within, it can serve as ultimate truth in our faith tradition.

¹ *God is Not One: Eight Rival Religions that Run the World* by Stephen Prothero pg. 2

I believe that our sacred wants us to explore and question and lose faith and gain it again – that we were created with this innate ability and tendency to grapple with that which is greater than ourselves. Theologian Karl Rahner understands this consistent questioning as a journey – “the goal toward which our self-transcending minds and hearts are forever reaching.”² No one in our midst will ever fully understand the sacred, but that journey towards trying is a critical piece of our lives in this realm. Why is this critical? I know my personal journey has led me to understand and offer love in myriad ways and has given me purpose and meaning as I grapple with ultimate truth. On this journey people find forgiveness, find hope, find solace and a connection with the ancestors – this is faith. Rahner writes that God is both transcendent – entirely unknowable – and intimately near – held in our hearts and our minds.³

And so I wonder about this classical understanding of God as all-knowing, all-good, and all-powerful. This leaves us with a basic, fundamental question – why is there so much evil and immorality in the world? Could God not stop this evil, and thus not be all-powerful, or does God not want to stop it, and thus not all-good?⁴ There are myriad ways people have tried to make sense of these contradictions and yet, of course, no real solution. I invite us to explore several different understandings of this ever-elusive entity. What is the theological history of our own Unitarian Universalist faith?

Universalists understood punishment after death as inconsistent with the understanding of an all-loving God. Sin is punished in this life, in this realm. God is an entirely forgiving entity. Jesus was not a God-figure but an exemplar of how we can each connect with the sacred in our own lives.⁵ Our faith traditionally sees God as relational and affected by us.⁶ Universalism challenged the idea of predestination by espousing the belief that all were saved by a loving

² *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the theology of God* by Elizabeth A. Johnson pg. 35

³ *Ibid* pg. 43

⁴ *Ibid* pg. 51

⁵ *Universalists and Unitarians in America* by John A. Buehrens pg. 12

⁶ *Ibid* 18

God. Unitarians focused on the innate goodness, not just in God, but in humans as well. Our faith encourages each of us on a journey towards truth and meaning.

My journey has traversed atheism to theism, from a harsh critique of the divine to an understanding of divine love, from a solitary journey in this realm to one of consistent divine presence. This was a journey of years of prayer and meditation and study and church. This journey will never end. I have a current understanding of my God entity. To me, God is the embodiment of love – of caring and goodness in this realm and beyond. God is our ability to fall in love even though we know it will end in loss. God allows us to see the beauty amidst the ugly – God’s presence found in the flowers peeking through the concrete. My sacred gives me the capacity to have a faith that carries me through the harshest of times; to keep living after devastating loss. My sacred is my heart telling me not to give up on myself, or on those I hold dear. My holy cares and loves, celebrates and grieves with me. I have a constant companion that I converse with regularly through prayer and experiences in nature. My journey to this place has been one of hardship and loss but also of peace, love, and spirituality – and there is no end in sight.

I wonder about God and the world – God as understood in pantheism and panentheism. Pantheism sees God in nature, an imminent entity. There is no personal, anthropomorphic being – God is in that which surrounds us – nature itself becoming divine. Or panentheism, the idea that God is a piece of every element of our universe, even within us, extending beyond space and time.⁷ How can this impact our connection with the natural world? I wonder if, in this context, we can understand God as awe. Awe in water cascading over a cliff, in the orange and red hues of sunrise, in cliffs overlooking vast forests filled with trees. And there is awe created by humans as well, in towering skyscrapers or intricate, imposing cathedrals. Or, awe can be found, quite simply, in the person we turn to and genuinely say, “I love you” for the very first time. Those sacred moments we spend with the divine, with something beautiful beyond us.

⁷ *Building Your Own Theology* by Richard S. Gilbert

And yet I acknowledge that hate and bigotry run rampant throughout society. There are myriad ways people are trying to make sense of those contradictory ideas of divine power and knowledge and goodness amidst evil. Each understanding crafts a unique interpretation of God – of the sacred.

Many theologians grappled with this after the Holocaust. How could any sort of powerful, loving, all-knowing being allow something as horrific as the Holocaust to occur? Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel found that the only way to have a God that is compatible with these atrocities is to understand God as an entity that cares and suffers with us. A caring entity that is not all-powerful. He writes that the divine cares for the world through “pathos,” a term that signifies a feeling of suffering. This God feels intensely – love, joy, compassion, frustration. Suffering. God cares passionately about our well-being, especially those experiencing injustice.⁸ What is the theological answer to suffering? A belief in a loving God who truly cares and is present and suffering with.

What about a God of liberation? Theologian Elizabeth Johnson writes of God as a liberating force for justice, defending the marginalized. Johnson understands that if God is love that this love will go where it is most needed. When people are suffering with pervasive grief, facing poverty and dehumanization, that is where the divine can be found, this is where God “pours forth power in solidarity with the struggle for life.”⁹ God is intimately present with the marginalized and the suffering. A Christian theologian, Johnson sees this in the life and works of Jesus, whose life was an embodiment of helping those on the margins, and who lived an impoverished life himself.¹⁰ How does this theologian make sense of suffering? By understanding God as a force with preferential love for those on the margins.

⁸ *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the theology of God* by Elizabeth A. Johnson pgs. 56-58

⁹ *Ibid* pg. 80

¹⁰ *Ibid* pg. 76

Latina theologian Maria Pilar Aquino writes of a theology that is life-giving to suffering Latinas by creating an understanding of God as female – a God that fundamentally challenges the patriarchy that dominated them. She writes of an entity that, instead of demanding obedience, loves and creates, who shows compassion and mercy – a deity more like a mother figure. This new understanding brings women into relationship with the divine. Aquino writes that they felt cared for, that they no longer felt the discomfort of a deity expressed as a king and knew that God was on their side. The women knew an embracing love that liberated them.¹¹ This understanding of a compassionate, loving, life giving sacred allows me to get closer to my own divine. Elizabeth Johnson writes of this female image of the holy as characterized by three attributes of mother figures: She gives life to the world, lovingly nurtures this life, and desires the best for each of Her creations. She attends to the marginalized, just as a mother tends to the “child most in need.”¹² How do these theologians craft a God in the face of injustice? By identifying God as one in the same with the oppressed; by questioning the assumed gender of the sacred.

I wonder of this idea of the sacred in humanism as well and the insights this can offer us as we engage with all that is holy. Humanists do not believe in another realm for the dead – we must create heaven here, on earth. Goodness in the world, healing and compassion and solidarity – this does not come from another source, but from us. We must work to be the change we want to see in the world. We must work to be that sacred source of love.

So far, we have examined entities of God. What about God as an experience? We have a chance and the ability to connect through prayer, meditation, walks in nature, or art in any form to whatever we hold sacred. We can feel within us all that is sacred when we are kneeling in a cathedral, sitting alongside the ocean, whispering “I love you,” or present with death. The sacred is with us, interacting with us in each moment when the awe we experience brings it to the forefront. A feeling, an inner knowledge, truer than any tangible fact.

¹¹ *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the theology of God* by Elizabeth A. Johnson pgs. 96-97

¹² *Ibid* pg. 103

Priest and author Richard Rohr writes extensively of experiencing God. As a Christian, his ideas of God are held firmly within his Christian theology. I have tried to expand his ideas beyond these insular concepts and invite you to understand his word “God” as it feels truthful to you. Even if God is nature, we still engage with something greater than ourselves; a transcendence held sacred. Rohr writes, we experience God when we recognize the divine all around us – even in our enemies. Within the bigot, the hateful, those we have sworn revenge or feel scorn, is held something holy. Rohr writes, “Either we see the divine image in all created things, or we don’t see it at all.”¹³ I imagine this, for many of us, is a fundamental challenge difficult to wrestle with. Each of us feels anger, hate, animosity in some form. In experiencing the sacred, we are called to see the holy in each; to see within a spark of the divine. Only when found in hate can we truly find it in love.

We connect with the divine through our own bodily experiences as well. Rohr posits that those who prayerfully, purposefully engage with the sacred regularly experience an entity that lacks the ability to compare, to differentiate, or to judge. This rings true to me in my understanding of the holy as a force of divine love, and the traditional Universalist theology of divine goodness. Rohr continues that those who truly engage instead experience what he calls a “receptor” who “looks at the divine image in us and almost refuses to look at the contrary.”¹⁴ The sacred sees within each one of us all that is good and holy. That is what matters to the divine, to the sacred, to any force greater than ourselves – that inherent goodness we each hold within. May we be ones to note and cherish this as well. I wonder, what characteristics of God ring true to you? One of companionship, of justice, of truth or love or healing, of life or nature? He writes that all religious traditions aim to have believers find the sacred within themselves; that we truly know God when we completely understand ourselves. We are each beloved and holy. Rohr believes this is how we truly experience God. And we access God by forgiving, and rejoicing.¹⁵ Let us be grateful for all of it!

¹³ *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer* Richard Rohr pg. 58

¹⁴ *Ibid* pgs. 65-66

¹⁵ *Ibid* pg. 88

So go out into the world and rejoice. Whether kneeling before a marble saint or appreciating the beauty of a setting sun, let us notice that sacred all around us. Let us question and grapple and lose faith and find it again. In whatever way the sacred is life-giving, may we cherish that, honor that, and use that as a guide in each of our days. May you breathe the sacred in with each breath and hold that truth within. May we live with peace and find, in each moment, love.

May it be so, and Amen.