

Faith of a UU Theist for the Website (November 25, 2012):

Prayer James Madison Barr (adapted):

I do not pray; but if I did, here is what I would say:
Hear my prayer, my fondest hopes and deepest longings:
To hurt as few persons as possible;
To resist the pestilences of fear, envy, bitterness and hate;
To come to terms with disappointment, failure and defeat;
To love with all my being:
with my eyes
with my hands
with my heart
To love in every way I can;
To accept the fact that all causes are lost causes, and that there are no victors under
the heavens;
To live graciously in a Universe which at best is only benignly indifferent to us;
To sometimes experience something other than myself;
To never turn my back to the sun;
To be free enough to celebrate another human being;
To have faith enough, to receive grace enough
That I may sing,
Experience Joy,
Say Yes to life...
Be merciful to us, and help us be merciful to ourselves. Amen.

Reading Nancy Shaffer

From a book of poems called *Instructions in Joy* by Nancy Shaffer. The name of
our poem is *For Margaret, Who Fights the Same Battle Over and Over*.

Listen.

When you quarrel with God

Really you are quarreling with
those who have come after God.
It is not God who taught you only
a certain prayer or said reward
lies in only one direction. It is not
God who said "reward" rather than
"embracing love" which is everywhere.
Not God who taught you to hate

God, shun God. Those like you—
two-legged and mortal—did this: those
also hurt, in turn, by others before them.

You could leave off this quarreling:
just begin again, with just yourself
and God. You can choose a different
name for the Holy; stop cringing when
I say mine. Each is only a word for what
can't be said, the barest beginning,
a glimpse. The rest you may do in private.

But see: what you do there in private,
shows: what you come back with is written
all over you. It doesn't matter
what the particular word is. Only
that you return there often, opening
yourself to everything that makes it.

Those who taught you what to pray and
how to pray were wrong, if what they
taught you, you hate.

Sermon: Faith of a UU Theist

We are about to go headlong into the holiday rush and bustle. If we line ourselves up with the dominant culture, there are cards to send, mistletoe to hang, and there is standing tiptoe on rickety ladders to hang up the lights—whether they be white lights or flashing, strobing, pulsing, icicle shaped, 50s retro style or small, twinkling bulbs. Let's not even get into how they may or may not work after being packed away after last Christmas when they were working perfectly well.

Thanksgiving is over and the wreaths are up on the doors, the Carols are blasting in the grocery stores and the local CVS (I know because I was in both yesterday). Invitations are arriving in the mailbox, both the one at our houses or apartments and the virtual one in our computers and iPhones where we receive

Evites. We are making lists of people—people we need to buy presents for that we need to wrap or gift cards we hope they will remember to use. We are making lists of stuff—stuff we can buy or make, stuff we need to do, stuff we need to bring down from the attic or up from the basement or out of our storage unit. Or stuff we need to bring *up* to the attic or *down* to the basement or *out* to our storage unit. So much stuff—come back next week if you want to hear more thoughts about stuff in this most stuff-oriented season. (And no, it is not about the stuff-ing that many of us endured this last Thursday).

Our church has a chock filled calendar of things we can partake in—or not—which you will see when your December Gleam arrives later this week. We have a Craft Fair, Caroling at the Christmas Stroll, Advent Vespers, a Music Sunday service which I hear has Shepherds involved, a Winter Solstice complete with Rise Up Singers and the Ha’Penny Morris Dancers, Soup with the Minister, Evensong, a Nativity in a Trunk on December 23, some thoughts about the Faith of a UU Christian from me on December 16, and Christmas Eve when friends and neighbors join us here in this Sanctuary to hear familiar readings and sing Hallelujah and Silent Night. And don’t forget about our Fourth Christmas SRO concert, this year “A Civil War Christmas.” This month more than even usual, there is “music in the air.” But can we say with the certainty in which we just sang (or maybe you left that one word out): “There must be a God somewhere?” Do we look in the wind, the fire, the cave, or the earthquake like Elijah to find g-d? Can we be quiet enough at this raucous season to listen for the famous “still small voice?” Do the age-old questions considered by theologians about the nature of God...or even if there is a God...have any meaning to us? To you or to me? To modern day Unitarian Universalism? Or are we even asking the right questions?

If you have been coming this fall, you know that my theme for this year is the Faiths of Unitarian Universalism—Faiths with an “s.” Just as we covenant to

affirm our Seven Principles which are drawn from Six Sources—if you need a primer, the complete list of all Six are in front of the teal hymn somewhere near you in a pew, Singing the Journey—we have multiple versions of our UU Faith, multiple models of how to be a UU. I personally feel that there is a version for each and every one of us who are members of UU congregations or who attend them regularly. And there are models for those who say, “If I belonged to any congregation, I would belong to a UU congregation.” And none of these versions are wrong as long as they are in line with our Principles. For instance, since we believe in the Inherent Worth and Dignity of each Individual, we can’t forbid our women clergy the opportunity to become Bishops, as the Church of England did this month. Of course, we don’t even have Bishops!

We are fed by multiple versions of expressing our faith through word, song and ritual. We addressed Judaism on the occasion of Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah earlier this fall. We were inspired by the Day of the Dead, informed by Earth Based Theologies and tricky combos of Christianity and Native American customs. And I addressed humanism when I focused on the Faith of a UU Humanist. Still to come this church year are the “Faith of a UU Christian” on December 16—and, yes, there are many UU Christians, both in our congregations and among our clergy...although they might be very different versions of Christians than some of our conservative neighbors might recognize. After the new year will come the “Faith of a UU Buddhist” in the weeks before our Bicentennial Meditation Retreat, the “Faith of a UU Feminist” and finally in May, a sermon called “Faithiest,” after the new book by Chris Stedman. But today, it’s the Faith of a UU Theist.

So what is it we are talking about when we talk about theology? And what would be a UU Theist? According to my dictionary, the definition of Theism is:

the belief in the existence of a god or gods. More specifically, theism could be said to be the belief in the existence of *one* God viewed as the creative source of the human race and the world, who transcends yet is immanent in the world. But in an even broader sense, theism is the belief that at least one deity exists. In traditional theology such as we study in seminaries, theism is a doctrine concerning the nature of a monotheistic God and God's relationship to the universe, our world, the world we live in breathe in. Theism, in this more specific sense, conceives of God as personal, present and active in the governance and organization of the world and the universe. As such theism describes the classical conception of God that is found in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Sikhism and some forms of Hinduism. The use of the word theism to indicate this classical form of monotheism began during the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century in order to distinguish it from the then-emerging deism which contended that God, though transcendent and supreme, did not intervene in the natural world and could be known rationally but not via revelation.¹

Aha! Deism sounds more like us—maybe! Maybe I should have a Sunday topic of the Faith of a UU Deist! Of course, we also say that “revelation is not sealed”, sort of an ongoing revelation being interpreted by you and I alike, along with the theologians and the dancers on the head of a pin.

The term theism derives from the Greek word *theos*, which means "god". The term theism itself was first used by Ralph Cudworth back in the Seventeenth Century. In Cudworth's definition, they are "strictly and properly called Theists, who affirm, that a perfectly conscious understanding being, or mind, existing of itself from eternity, was the cause of all other things". Atheism is rejection of

¹ Wikipedia, "Theism", adapted.

theism in the broadest sense of theism—for instance, the rejection of belief that there is even one deity. Rejection of the narrower sense of theism can take forms such as deism, pantheism, and polytheism. The claim that the existence of any deity is unknown or unknowable is agnosticism. Hmm. Perhaps I should add the Faiths of the UU Pantheist or UU Polytheist to my list. The positive assertion of knowledge, either of the existence of gods or the absence of gods, can also be attributed to some theists and some atheists. Put simply theism and atheism deal with belief, and agnosticism deals with the (absence of) rational claims to asserting knowledge.²

Put it simply. Well, there is really nothing simple about this stuff. Trying to get your head around it all can give you a real brain cramp, in fact. And you might wonder, why even bother? But the questions of theology—what or who created us, why are we here, and what is the nature of this creative force is the stuff of seminaries, philosophers, retreat centers, faith communities and for each individual, if we are at all the reflective sort. Of course, many of us have rejected the God of our upbringing. We may have rejected the concept of God altogether. But something drew us to this place and to being in a congregation.

Many of us have shared our stories with each other, either in a small group, at one of our Adult Faith Formation events, or maybe even at coffee hour. What was our church of origin and what was the faith of our families? We know that many of us—most of us—come from other traditions. I have told you in the past that I grew up with an American Baptist father and an Episcopalian mother. Mom won out; it was to the Episcopalian Church we went growing up. The church was the center of our family life. There were certain assumptions about what we

² Ibid.

believed; questions weren't really allowed. Or if they were, they figured it was youthful arrogance and we would come around to their way of thinking. Or at least, that was what I thought. Frankly, it didn't occur to me to question why it was we went to church every Sunday when I was really young. I loved the picture of Jesus surrounded by little children in a garden that hung over my bed. It reminded me of one of Dad's favorite hymns:

I come to the garden alone
While the dew is still on the roses
And the voice I hear, falling on my ear
The Son of God discloses...

I loved my plastic cross that lit up in the dark. I don't think I had a clue about the difference between Jesus and God, let alone the Holy Spirit and what Christ might be.

By my teenage years, the saying of the Nicene and Apostles Creeds just didn't make any sense to me. Of course, I was questioning everything about then. After it all, it was the Sixties and a whole bunch of things didn't make much sense to me. I attended a presentation by the NAACP in 1965 and never thought the same way about race and privilege again. The poverty I would see when I went into Boston to visit a boyfriend and the violence of the Vietnam War seemed unjust. Where was God in this? Where was God in the congregation I attended? Maybe there wasn't a God at all? I certainly didn't believe in a God that sat somewhere on high, sending edicts down below from his cloud. So it was that I left church when I went away to college, as so many do.

My colleague Rosemary Bray McNatt, an African American UU minister writes about this time in her life this way:

“Becoming a Unitarian Universalist more than a decade ago was the path that led me back to God. Brought up in an African American Roman Catholic home, I measured my childhood days by the feast of the saints and the holy days of obligation. By the time I was ten, I found my youthful devotion challenged by the rigidity of the church and deeply damaged by its rejection of women's gifts, even when those gifts were as small as my desire to serve Mass as my younger brother did several times each week. My spirit crushed, I tossed aside both the church and all thoughts of God before I reached my teens.

Not that God wasn't due for some serious criticism from me by that time. It was the 1960s after all, and questioning authority was more than a slogan to millions of us. The unfairness of life, the poverty and racism I knew from personal experience, the violence that was present all around me—including in my own home—had me asking tough questions about the God my mother clung to with such fervor. I informed her by the time I reached my teens that whatever God she thought she knew had done her precious little good and that I was fed up with all this religious mythology.

My mother, bless her, was more than used to her oldest girl; she had great experience with my periodic pronouncements of cynicism and rage. With her usual aplomb, she simply looked at me and said, ‘Just keep on living, baby. You'll find out.’”

My mom could have said the same thing to me. And I had the same experience that Rosemary had of UUism leading me back to God. Of course, it was not at all the same kind of God that sat on a fluffy cloud pulling puppet strings I thought I was hearing about but rather some force, some order in the universe, that was beyond me and around me. I loved that in my new UU world, I have the

freedom to think for myself, question for myself and be in community with others who have the freedom to do the same. And I began to feel the sense of this being or force, this g-d, in my life. Being in tune with this sense ended up pushing me to where I felt I was co-creating with this force; that my gifts were the hands and feet of the holy working towards love, truth and justice. Not every minute, of course. Certainly not perfectly. And there were several times in my life when I was surrounded with a presence that was holding me. It was palpable. And I choose to believe that it was not something I ate or whatever but instead something beyond me and my understanding. But still we are called to try to understand, many of us.

My father had what seemed like a simple yet profound and important faith. My parents liked to tell the story that when my Dad asked my mother to marry him, the first thing he asked her was whether they could pray about it. But even he had questions. At the very end of his life, two nights before he died, I stayed up all night with him in the Hospice talking, talking, talking. Some one of the hospice drugs he was taking for his fractured vertebrae that had paralyzed him several days before made him super talkative. I heard about his high school girlfriend, playing touch football as a youngster, the pranks his brother Arden used to play on the neighborhood and all sorts of things. But then we talked about whether he would be seeing his mom and dad after death and what heaven might be like. And he said, “We don’t really know, do we?”

No, we don’t. We don’t know for sure what God is, whether you call it Cosmos, the holy, Spirit of life or any number of other names. Those of us who are theists believe that there is something rather than nothing. But we don’t know the right name for it. It is beyond naming.

I will end with a story that another of my colleagues recounted: “I remember when my best childhood friend told me that she used to think God's name was Andy, because of the old hymn we often sang in church (‘Andy (And he) walks with me, Andy talks with me, Andy tells me I am his own....’) and small children have been known to intone ‘Our Father Who Art in Heaven, Howard be thy name’.

I like that—my buddy Andy shares his garden with me, the garden of the universe...of cats and eagles and flowers and trees. Though my father who art in heaven is named Merritt, it's okay if someone else's is Howard.”

My father who art in heaven is named Harold. And he loved that same hymn that Elizabeth Ketcham’s friend did. My Dad felt God’s presence in the sunsets he would watch from the window of the home I grew up in, the walks through the woods behind his house, the gardens that my mother worked so hard in, and in being with his family...and in church, especially if they were singing the good ol’ hymns. As I have grown older, I have felt the same presence of the holy in some of the same places as my Dad. I guess that makes me a Theist. That presence is not pulling puppet strings or controlling my life but I do know that *something* is there. I see it in the way people interact with each other. I see it in how things get done around here. We pray with our hands and our feet, working towards a more just and loving world, co-creating with that spirit that lifts us towards our best selves. It is really simple in a way. Just talking about it is complicated.

May it be so. Amen.