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SERMON: "An Agnostic Talks to God"

Ted Mooney, a Unitarian Universalist from Montclair, New Jersey, wrote this poem titled: "The UU Blues":

"God. Gimme a break – tell me if you're here,  
You listenin' through some big merciful ear?

Or are we all alone on this little sphere?

I'm wonderin' what you are,

And if you are,

And where you are on this little blue star,

Cause I got them open-minded,

Searching, growing wondering

Unitarian-Universalist blues.

"Other religions, they got their minds made up,

While I ask all the questions, one by one,

So how come they got all the answers

And I got none?

They go 'round converting souls,

It must be so exciting...

All I ever convert

Is empty bottles at recycling.

They go 'round Jerusalem.

Trying to cure the blind,

While I go through my hymn-book

Crossing out the word 'mankind'.

"A simple yes or no will do, big friend.

Is there a gold castle in the sky, or is this the end?

Life's mystery is great, but I can only stretch it so far,

And I'm wondering what you are, and if you are,

And where I are on this little blue star,

Cause I got them open-minded

Searching, growing, wondering...

Unitarian Universalist blues."

Me too! But, I actually wonder whether I have stopped wondering. I call myself a mystical agnostic; I am comfortable with my theological stance. Does that mean I have stopped growing and searching? Am I avoiding tough questions by inventing theological categories? I have found some truth, but worry that I am not looking

hard enough for more. I wonder whether I have put enough spiritual discipline into my search. Have I, as one of our ministers [John Baker], asks. "Have I made a premature peace with my ignorance?" Is my rejection based on narrow, outmoded conceptions? Am I talking to God, or is this just self-talk to calm my fears about having to die and being alone in this big universe?

I am an agnostic. I don't know who I am talking to. I don't know if there is a God; I do not think a human being can know. As Kant established, the finite cannot know the infinite. I make a distinction between knowledge and belief, the former is verifiable, empirically; the latter is based on faith, and does not produce the same kind of knowledge.

The term agnostic is a relatively new one. The famous English biologist, Thomas Huxley, coined it in 1869, from the Greek term, meaning "not to know." I am an agnostic because I believe we cannot know whether there is a God or not. I call myself a mystical agnostic because even though we cannot know about a creator or sustainer, we do know that the proper response to the miraculous gift of conscious existence is wonder, reverence, gratitude. Adding the word "mystical" reminds me of this; it reminds me to honor the mystery and to soften my stance towards the beliefs of others. On the intellectual level I am an agnostic, on the emotional a mystic. Will I ever be whole? Will I ever know?

Probably not. Most people do not change theologies all that readily. Also, everyone, even believers, admits that God is awfully hard to find and define. Pascal, the 17<sup>th</sup> century mathematician, and philosopher wrote: "Truly thou art a God that hides thyself." So when I fill out surveys that don't have a space to write in your own category, I list myself as an agnostic.

Unitarian Universalists are a diverse association; we are a pluralistic community, open to all sincere searchers after truth, justice, and spiritual strength and Unitarian Universalists are changing spiritually, we are becoming more open to various conceptions of deity. For example, one of our ministers, David Scheyer wrote the following poem:

"If there is a God  
I think he must be shaped something like a mountain  
And something like a tree  
And something like an ocean...  
I rather imagine he looks something like a black man

And something like a white man  
 And something like a yellow man  
 And something like a woman, too...  
 I think [s]he see the universe through the eyes  
 Of a big, brown bear  
 And through the eyes of a dove  
 And through the eyes of a gentle, medium-size whale...  
 I rather suspect that [s]he happened  
 Something like a small child's smile happens,  
 Mysteriously,  
 But as unavoidable as the morning,  
 And I think [s]he treasures [her] his friendship with the stars  
 The way another star does...  
 And, finally,  
 I imagine [s]he is as much afraid of death,  
 Of nothingness,  
 As I am,  
 And that there are moments  
 When [s]he wonders if [s]he is real..."

I wonder; and it is not easy wondering, being an agnostic. In "Children's letters To God" [by Eric Marshall and Stuart Hemple], one reads, "Dear God: How do you feel about people who don't believe in you?.... Somebody else wants to know. – [signed] A friend, Neil." I saw a category of Hallmark Cards, which perhaps applies to some of us, it read, for the: "Religiously Seriously Ill".

Perhaps it would be easier if I believed in God. But, maybe it is true as Pascal said that such belief is a gift of grace; you cannot garner it; and if you do not have it, he concluded, you are cursed. Maybe I had it and lost it; maybe I never had it at all. Maybe it is just my definition that needs changing.

I was born into a Roman Catholic family; they taught me a lot of definitions. My mother's family especially was devout, pietistic. Their farm home was full of blessed virgins and pictures of Jesus. I want you to remember the image of God you had at age five.... To me, God was an old man, with white skin, and a long white beard and hair. The picture I see is the old man of the north blowing the winds of winter, the blasts of icy air. I was told he loved me, but I was more frequently admonished that he was judging me—harshly; and I must have been awfully bad, for intermediaries were necessary to protect me from his wrath. So, I was not very convinced of God's love, nor

did I ever feel protected by the intermediaries. After all, his son, his number one intermediary was crucified; the pictures in my grandmother's home showed a lot of blood. There was a four-foot high statue of the Blessed Virgin on a table in my grandmother's house. The "Mother of God" was standing on top of the world with her foot holding down a ferocious snake; the statue was big, but not convincing. Mary was staring down at me with a look of pity, but the snake looked slippery, ready to slither off and sink its gigantic fangs into my very heart and soul. At least that is how I felt at age five, as I would cautiously edge my way through my grandmother's dining room with my back pressed against the wall on the opposite end of the room away from the frightening iconography.

As time went on God became more distant for me; there were always intermediaries. Even in church, all I could see was an intermediary, a priest. As they say, perhaps as a young man, I could not see the forest through the trees. There were a lot of trees. And I left them, I left the Roman church, but not God, I continued my conversations with God, with others, with myself.

I remember, for example, when I was about 17 being deep in discussion with two friends. We arrived at the point I would later learn is called the "argument du pari," Pascal's argument of the bet in which he agrees that we cannot know if there is a God. It is a 50-50 proposition; so he says you lose nothing by betting yes, and possibly everything if you bet no. At that time, I said, "Yes, I think there is a God." It was only about two years later while in college that one evening I came to the same point in the discussion with some new friends and this time to my own surprise found myself saying, "No, I don't think so." I had become an atheist. I don't know all the reasons why that change happened, but I kept that belief through theological school (which you can only do in a UU school). But, after several years in the ministry my theology changed into agnosticism and now mystical agnosticism; however, it is no easy place to be, in uncertainty, between categories. I feel, and I think; I believe, and I don't believe.

In the gospels of the Christian Bible there is strange but interesting story about Jesus performing an exorcism, driving the evil spirit out of an epileptic young boy. As the parents bring the child forward Jesus starts to harangue about this wicked, faithless age. (Don't we all do this, especially now after the US election?) Anyway

Jesus is complaining when the father of the stricken child interrupts him and says, "I believe, help thou my un-belief."

What sort of an exorcism would help our un-belief? Updating our images of God would help, and looking at our underlying feelings as well. My friend, and former UUA President, Bill Schulz, wrote, "It is...a failure of the imagination to believe that the important question about God is whether or not he or she exists. The important question is, 'is my attitude toward creation, one of trust, generosity and enchantment, or suspicion, indifference and cynicism?'"

And, John Buehrens, who followed as UUA President, wrote that when he meets someone who says to him, "I don't believe in God." He replies, "Tell me about the God that you don't believe in. The chances are that I don't believe in 'Him' either." Buehrens quotes Dag Hammarskjold saying, "God does not die on the day when we cease to believe in a personal deity. But we die on the day when our lives cease to be illuminated by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason."

Updating our conceptions of divinity, developing not just our reason, but our spirituality, examining our attitudes and feelings might lead us to a new more inclusive understanding of the meaning and value of this human tendency to theologize existence. Instead of just devising more questions without answers, I want to find ways to believe in something more—not less. We need to either be open to evidence less dramatic than miracles, or to change our definition of them.

Belief and knowledge, knowing and believing are not necessarily mutually exclusive. There are different ways of knowing. We cannot, for example, always prove love's existence, but we know love; we know it in another way, through our feelings, or our intuition; and those feelings and beliefs can be influential, perhaps even more so than our logical and rational ideas. Even though we cannot completely define, nor rationally control love, we can know it; and, we can understand, appreciate and encourage its reality. Could this not also be true of divinity? We don't have to "know" whether there is a God to "know" by intuition that we should be reverential in response to the gift of life and respectful of others.

Appreciating, understanding, and encouraging divinity, that sense of reverence for all life and the universe which brought it forth, is what I try to do as a mystical agnostic. However, I wish I could do

that more thoroughly. I want to experience transforming feelings of connection and compassion. I want to experience a purpose, a power that I imagine and hear about from others. I see possibilities of divinity all around me in the beauty of nature, the dignity of humanity, and the pursuit of peace and justice, but I don't see them fully functional yet. I want to help them develop; my heart beats with hope, but my mind being wary wants more proof; it tells me to be careful, rational.

I have come to the point where I can use the word "God" to name the mystery of life that we encounter when we try to understand our experience of love and that leads us to develop our faith in its goodness. To me the word "God" refers to the goodness in life that I want to extend. I can call it "God," or I can just call it "Goodness"; the moral development is most important to me. To be intellectually honest, I am an agnostic. To be emotionally honest, I am a mystic whose heart is filled with gratitude and hope.

I am an agnostic that is talking about moral development to someone, whether it be God, or just myself, doesn't matter as much as whether I live a life of love, which also involves me in the pursuit of justice and peace. Will I ever be whole? I don't know, but I do know that I could use some help; it is important to be part of a faith community, to stay open to new learnings, to life; it is important to continue the conversation. So, Dear God, let's talk... Signed, A Friend, Stephan.