

Reverent Agnosticism

Rev. Mark Stringer
First Unitarian Church of Des Moines
Preached for UUFSMA on 7/10/16

Meditation ("At Home" by Kenneth Patton)

I am at home in the universe. I carry my home with me. No matter where I go, I cannot be less than at home. Forests are the rooms of my childhood's house. The winds are my mother's arms. The sun is my child's laughter. The caterpillar crawling on my hand is my brother's arm thrown over my shoulder.

The children playing in the street of another country are my children. The stranger's bed encloses me in the sleep of my own covers. The earth is my home, and its creatures are my family. There is no loneliness to overtake me. I am not stricken to find my home.

I breathe interstellar space. My eyes leap the expanses. The world is pasture for my mind, forage for my imagination. The universe is at home in my mind. Its creatures live friendly within me. I live warm and friendly with my fellows in the starry world.¹

Reading

A meditation by Patrick Murfin

I do not have a Personal Relationship with God.
I've lost his phone number;
he never answers his mail.

We did not, as young men,
hang out on Wednesday nights,
cigarettes dripping from our lips,
at pool halls.

He is not there like an old neighbor
to fix my broken lawn mower
and hand me a soda
on a blazing hot day.

¹ *The Wonder of Life: Selections from the works of Kenneth L. Patton*, Maryell Cleary, ed. (East Lansing, MI: Meeting House Press Revisited, 1997), #62.

When I rip my shin on a jutting shelf
and cry out his name,
he does not rush to me
with Band-Aids and peroxide.

He does not, at times of vexation,
when my world lies shattered,
my relationships ruptured,
my children insolent,
my finances hopeless,
come with soothing counsel to my side.

He does not take my requests
like a long-distance dedication
on America's Top Forty,
or deliver within five business days
or my money back
on my catalogue order--
my business is not important to him.

I do not have a personal relationship with God.

But in quiet moments—
in the familiar whistle
of a red-winged blackbird on a cattail,
or in spider webs glinting with dew
in the grass of a clear sunrise,
or the passing attention of an old cat—
He/She/It/Whatever does not
speak or do or answer...
but admits me to fleeting union with the greater.

Reading New England folk wisdom, the author is unknown.

A Vermonter bought an old run-down farm and worked hard to get it back in good running condition. The local minister stopped by to say hello. Looking over the refurbished acreage, he commented that it was wonderful what God and man could achieve together. "Yup," allowed the farmer, "p'raps it is. But you should have seen this place when God was running it alone."

Sermon

A few years ago, CNN reporter Wolf Blitzer stood with a young mother in Moore, Oklahoma, the rubble of what had once been her house behind them. The mother was holding her 19-month old son and was sharing the story of how her family had just barely escaped harm in a devastating tornado that had destroyed much of her town the day before. As her child played with Blitzer's microphone, the reporter sought to wrap up the live segment in which they had discussed the good fortune the family had to escape the storm. "You guys did a great job," he said. "I guess you've gotta thank the Lord, right? Do you thank the Lord for that split second decision?" he asked.

The mother, her child squirming in her arms, stuttered her response "I...I...I..." before cocking her head to the side and admitting, "I'm actually an atheist". She then laughed deeply, maybe out of relief for speaking her truth, maybe out of the absurdity of admitting to the CNN audience something that she might not admit too boldly among her Moore, OK neighbors. Blitzer laughed, too. "Oh you are," he said. "Well, all right." More laughter between them. "We are here," she continued, "and you know, I don't blame anybody for thanking the Lord."²

After what she and her neighbors had been through, the terror and the devastation of nature's fury, some would say God's fury, this young mother didn't shy away from her truth, and yet, she left room for the truth of others.

I felt kinship with her in that moment, and I was in awe of her grace under pressure.

I try to imagine what I would have said. Wolf Blitzer standing beside me, my toddler in my hands, the rubble of what was once my house behind us. "Do you thank the Lord, Mark? Do you thank the Lord?"

Lord is one of those words that can flip a trigger in me. It implies to me a puppet-string pulling God who sits on a throne, who saves and destroys by design or even by whim. I suppose that this Lord is possible, since I don't have proof that we aren't being controlled by a supernatural being with a penchant for mayhem. Still this kind of God is not one I imagine I would be thanking because it's not the kind of God in which I put my faith. At the same time, I doubt that I would

² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/21/wolf-blitzer-atheist-tornado-survivor_n_3316312.html

declare that I'm an atheist, because, I'm not. At least not without some explanation.

So, given enough time, I might say something like, "Well, Wolf, that's a very interesting question. When you ask it, are you implying that I should be thanking a God who destroyed much of my town and oversaw the deaths of my neighbors, because he or she decided to save me, and my family? I don't think that kind of God should be thanked right now. But, if in your question, you are using "Thank the Lord" as a catch-all phrase to inquire if I am a person who is grateful to be alive for another day of mystery and possibility, another day of trying to live in such a way that a God of love and justice, if there were one, would be pleased, then I might be able to say yes, but I've really got to think about it some more. You see, Wolf, I am agnostic. I don't think we can fully know who we are or why we are here. To assume that there is a supernatural force guiding or even ignoring us is disconcerting to me, because, given what I can observe, this kind of God would be too indiscriminately cruel to be thanked—ever. I acknowledge that this kind of God is possible but I think it is unlikely. Therefore, I don't live my life in service to this God or in fear of it, and I certainly wouldn't be praising it at a moment like this. And yet, I am not without a sense of faith in things beyond myself, a sense of faith, for example, that this storm and its aftermath, even in all the destruction and despair it has brought to this town, may lead us to know each other differently, to grow our relationships, to give ourselves to understand that we are greater together than we could be on our own, a sense of faith that there is a force, an impulse, a biological predisposition in us that, given space and encouragement, can lead us to increase our love and compassion for our neighbors and for the betterment of the world we share. I sometimes call this force "spirit of life" or "that which is greater than all but present in each". I admit that I don't know exactly what those phrases mean. I figure they will mean different things to different people, which I suppose is my intention, especially in the UU congregation I serve where atheists, theists and agnostics all gather to find and make meaning. I offer words like "spirit of life" with the expectation that they can be translated many ways because definitive answers on speculative questions are not within our grasp. I use these words as placeholders for that which is yet unknown to me, even beyond what my own intuition and lived experience have suggested is possible. This kind of God, or "spirit of life", I can thank in a metaphorical way, and I often do, as in, *Thank you all that I don't yet comprehend or understand for the privilege to be alive, to laugh, to cry, to feel, to love, to learn, to grow, to become, to grieve, even to die. Thank you impulse that leads*

me to embrace life, in all of its pain, beauty and mystery, that encourages me to reach out to my neighbors, seeing my own destiny linked with theirs and with the destiny of this planet we share. I'm sure some wouldn't call this homage to all that I don't yet comprehend or understand faith, but I do because, when I give myself to it, I find I am more open to difference, more open to what I can learn from my neighbors, more open to how other people make sense of this life, and how their commitments and understandings can help me grow and refine mine in pursuit of a more loving, just, and connected world. This kind of faith requires a reverence for my companions and for the life we share. I often come up short in my attempts to embrace what I would call the holy possibilities of humble encounter, but I am committed to the importance of trying, for therein lies my faith.

By now, I'm sure the cameras would have long shut off and Blitzer would have been on his way. But if by chance he was still there, in an attempt to wrap up my rambling answer to his question, I could see myself ending my interview much in the same way the young mother did. "I'm an agnostic," I would say. "But I'm a reverent agnostic, so of course I don't blame anyone for thanking the Lord."

Now the cynical among us might say that an atheist or agnostic answering the question by throwing in a comment about not blaming others for thanking the Lord is a self-preservation tactic, and they may be right. In a country, like the US, where admitting you are an atheist (or an agnostic) can leave you open to the fury of "believers" who will flag you as worthy of suspicion, if not ridicule and discrimination, backpedalling a bit on your own godless truth can be an effective way to get you out of a non-persuasive, and therefore pointless, confrontation.

If you are an atheist, or lean that way, you may have been approached, if not accosted, by folks who think they are doing you a favor by pointing out the errors of your lack of traditional belief. How much have these folks, no matter how well-meaning or kind in their approach, altered your thinking? Not much, I'll bet. It goes the other way, too, of course, in that triumphal atheists rarely convert the more traditionally faithful among us.

As I see it, conversations about theological concepts over which none of us can be certain, can be so burdened with definitive assertions of "right" and "wrong" that they quickly devolve into tedious, self-righteous, and counterproductive attempts at conversion. When it comes to religion, it seems, one person's reason is often another

person's lunacy. Given these differences, how can we stay in relationship in service to the spirit of life toward which my reverent agnosticism points? How can we stay in relationship? It's not easy. That's for sure.

A while back, when I offered a sermon to the congregation in Des Moines that suggested the least helpful conversation is one in which the participants try to prove who is right theologically, a friend wrote to disagree with me. He said we religious liberals are too accommodating of those with exclusionary beliefs, especially when we say that everyone has a right to believe whatever she wants about God. He wanted to know why religious views are so often not up for discussion, why we bother with interfaith dialogue if we can't really get down into the nitty-gritty of our differences, the differences that, at their core, can represent dangerously varied world-views and expectations about what life means and is worth. My friend shared that his belief system causes him to feel a need to change the belief system of others. He cited as examples his need to change the beliefs of those who believe homosexuality is a sin and who therefore feel they are justified in restricting the rights of gays and lesbians, and those who believe that an embryo is a person and therefore work to prohibit stem cell research.

I understand his desire to "change beliefs". I really do. It would certainly make things a lot easier. (I'm sure that fundamentalists of all stripes feel the same way.) However, the question I offer to any of us who are working to "change the religious belief system" of others is how is that working out for you? How many fundamentalists have you converted to your truth? I suggest that trying to convince people that their theology is wrong is not a very good strategy. How many times has it worked when someone has tried it on you?

I'm reminded of a story I like that shows the folly of such attempts. In a town not all that different from ours, there is an elderly woman who every morning for years has gone out onto her porch, raised her arms to the sky and shouted "Praise God!"

One day an atheist moves in next door to the woman, sees her morning ritual, and is irritated. So every morning he waits for the woman to shout her praises, so that he can shout back at her "There is no God!" This daily exchange goes on for months.

Come winter, though, the woman experiences some hardships and this time goes out onto her porch to holler "Praise God! I spent the food

money on heat and now I am going hungry. Provide for me, God!" The next morning she steps out onto her porch and discovers two full bags of groceries have been left by the door.

"Praise God!" she proclaims. "God has provided me with groceries!"

Just then the atheist neighbor jumps out and shouts back "There is no God! I bought those groceries!"

The woman throws her arms into the air and shouts "Praise God! Who provided me with groceries and made the devil pay for them!"

The moral of the story is clear and I'm guessing familiar in our own lived experience: No matter what is said to convince those who are predisposed to not agree with our speculative truth, chances are good that the attempts will just further entrench the differences between us.

In a reflection from our denominational magazine, *UU World*, UUA president Peter Morales points with optimism to the news that more and more people, in the developed world at least, seem to be moving away from "religious exceptionalism", which he explains as "the conviction that [their] religion possesses the truth and, by extension, [every other religion] is false." This kind of religious exceptionalism is being replaced by what we might call a softening, a growing appreciation for what we can share even across the lines that often divide us. Common core values of the world's religious traditions such as compassion, community, and the pursuit of higher consciousness are becoming more important than differences in our specific sectarian beliefs. As a reverent agnostic, I share his optimism about the emergence of this kind of "faith beyond belief" because I've seen the impact this kind of faith has had in my own life. I've had many meaningful encounters over the years with clergy and lay people from other faith traditions, who have shared with me the commitments of their faith not only through their words and rituals, but, perhaps more importantly, through their actions in the community.

For example, I worked for about five years with three other pastors in Des Moines on a workforce development initiative called Project IOWA that has become a bridge for the unemployed and underemployed into career track jobs. These three pastors have significantly different theologies than mine. I worked with a Seventh Day Adventist, a non-denominational Pentecostal and an African Methodist Episcopal. As we got to know each other, we shared a few details of our theologies, but mostly we focused on the work we had in common rather than on our

differences. I remember the first one to one meeting I had with one of these pastors. I sensed he might not be on the same page with the very public stance I had been taking in support of marriage equality, so I brought it up. I said, "We may have different views on same-sex marriage, but that's not a subject we are working on right now, so I don't want it to come between us." He agreed and so it hasn't. Meanwhile, we have done important work, together, work that has had an impact on our community, and I count him as a friend.

Along the way, I have been humbled by how these pastors have put aside their differences with me to work toward the common good, how they have made their own compromises to stay at the table, how they have modeled for me what it means to be in community. Collaborating with them has actually strengthened my faith, because I have seen yet again how our different views of the holy matter less than what those views lead us to do.

My experiences with them remind me of something a church member shared not long after we started working with people of other faiths in our local congregation-based community organizing effort [AMOS]. His words have stayed with me because they echo the same discovery many of us have made in this interfaith work for justice. He said, "I used to think that Christians were good people despite their faith. Now I know they are good people because of their faith."

Not long ago, I came across a quote from Henry Slonimsky, a Jewish writer and philosopher, that articulates what I have learned in my interfaith encounters and in my commitment to my reverent agnostic faith. He wrote,

"Religion is a momentous possibility, the possibility namely that what is highest in spirit is also deepest in nature - that there is something at the heart of nature, something akin to us, a conserver and increaser of values...that the things that matter most are not at the mercy of the things that matter least."

To me, what matters least is the wrangling we do over whose terminology and metaphors are the "right" ones. What matters most is the impact our differing faiths can lead us to have on bringing about a world where community is grown, where justice is pursued and where peace is made real more often. What matters most can be shared by those of various theologies—atheists and theists alike—and the kind of religion that might arise as a result would be a momentous possibility, indeed.

UU minister Marilyn Sewell sees the momentous possibility and the role each of us could play in bringing it to life. She counsels us to “be wary of the usual distractions and follies” of our Unitarian Universalist approach to religion. She says:

“It’s grown-up time now. We no longer prioritize how ‘religious’ our language should be, [or] conflicts between humanists and the more spiritually inclined.... The mission of the church [she says] is to not meet our needs; the mission of the church is to heal our world. It is to give ourselves to something larger than ourselves.”³

I contend our something larger as UUs doesn't have to require God. But I think it should be hospitable to those who find meaning in notions of the divine. It has to leave space for difference. And that’s why, for me, it has to focus less on what we don’t know and more on what we do. Less on what we will never fully understand and more on what we can together create.

Here’s an example of what I’m talking about. Around the same time that Wolf Blitzer interviewed that young mother, Juan Mendez, a state representative from Arizona offered an invocation for his colleagues in the Arizona House, an invocation that fits well into a religion of momentous possibility. He said:

“Most prayers in this room begin with a request to bow your heads. I would like to ask that you *not* bow your heads. I would like to ask that you to take a moment to look around the room at all of the men and women here, in this moment, sharing together this extraordinary experience of being alive and of dedicating ourselves to working toward improving the lives of the people in our state.

This is a room in which there are many challenging debates, many moments of tension, of ideological division, of frustration. But this is also a room where...by the very fact of being human, we have much more in common than we have differences. We share the same spectrum of potential for care, for compassion, for fear, for joy, for love...

³ Marilyn Sewell “Reimagining the American Dream” from *A People So Bold: Theology and Ministry for Unitarian Universalists*, John Gibb Millspaugh, ed. (Boston: Skinner House, 2010), p. 80.

Carl Sagan once wrote, "For small creatures such as we, the vastness is bearable only through love." There is, in the political process, much to bear. In this room, let us cherish and celebrate our shared humanness, our shared capacity for reason and compassion, our shared love for the people of our state, for our Constitution, for our democracy—and let us root our policymaking process in these values that are relevant to all Arizonans regardless of religious belief or nonbelief. In gratitude and in love, in reason and in compassion, let us work together for a better Arizona."⁴

In this invocation, he didn't put his own religious views above those of others. Rather, he invited his colleagues into the work they shared, pointing out their similarities rather than their differences.

He may not call his perspective faith, but I do, and it's similar to the reverent agnostic faith I strive to claim myself. Could this be your faith, too? A faith that is not dependent upon God, but that doesn't deny the power that notions of God may have in the lives of our neighbors? A faith that is open and curious and respectful of difference? A faith that admits us to "fleeting union with the greater", to the spirit of life that transcends our differences and invites us into relationship and all that we can together become? A faith of momentous possibility, indeed.

The world is hurting and needs all of us to be our most fair-minded, compassionate and faith-full selves across all the lines that divide us, each relationship at a time. Each blessed, reverent, faithful relationship at a time.

May it be so. May we be so. Amen.

⁴ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/22/juan-mendez-carl-sagan_n_3316864.html