

“A LOVER'S QUARREL”
Unitarian Universalists Wrestling with God

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I am profoundly honored to deliver the John Murray Distinguished Lecture this year and personally grateful to Rudy Nemser and Ellen Chulak for inviting me. For it was through the door of Universalism that I entered our responsibly free faith over 30 years ago, and I have always considered Universalism to be the governing source and substance of my religion. I still contend that John Murray's gospel of Universalism to be the most trenchant summation of our liberal religious mission: "Give them not hell, but hope and courage; preach the kindness and everlasting love of God." Indeed, only if we dare to embody Murray's very preachment, will we fulfill our peculiar destiny as spiritual pilgrims. Soaked in this Universalist sensibility I have elected to struggle openly in front of you tonight with one of the perennial puzzles facing our chosen faith: namely, how might we maturely respond to divine mystery? In short, I will tackle the question of God from various angles, staking what I contend to be our primary orientation as Unitarian Universalists.

My own faith-journey has certainly been one extended wrestling match with God -- evolving from an early mindless embrace to categorical rejection, then forward to my current status as a questioning believer or trustful agnostic. I have emerged a theological hybrid who chooses to juggle live paradoxes concerning the Holy. I am at peace with Walt Whitman's claim: "Do I contradict myself? Yes, I contain multitudes!" In truth, innumerable Unitarian Universalists (perhaps including you yourself), when pressed, would admit to being religious mongrels.

In fact, I would venture that being riders of paradoxes is our calling as liberal religionists. We like to set up tent in the creases between theism and naturalism, believing and doubting, devotion and skepticism. At our truest, Unitarian Universalists are spiritually ambidextrous, defining ourselves both from below and above. We are a reasonable religion with mystical sensibilities -- in short, theological crossbreeds. Colleague Frances West puts it sagely: "The humanist and the theist live in me, each sometimes puzzled by the presence of the other, but willing to keep talking. So may it continue."

We presume there to be a live danger in either extreme. Arid humanism can trap one in the mundane and material, making one oblivious to transrational (note I didn't say irrational) nudges. On the other hand, unbridled theism can swallow one in the supernal ether, when our paramount job is to make this precious earth more beautiful and just.

Now, being theological mongrels isn't a desperate position of last resort but our first choice; it's the way we want to walk and talk, live and die during our sojourn on this planet. It's the way we do religion. Who really wants existence tidily wrapped up? Who really wants their convictions set in stone? Plenty of people to be sure, but not us, not Unitarian Universalists.

So, god-fearing or mystical humanism (what someone has awkwardly labeled "humanisticism") is perhaps the principal paradox Unitarian Universalists must harness, then ride. Some do it side-saddle, tentatively; others with both hands to the reins, galloping full-bore ahead. Regardless, it provides a spirited jaunt!

Interestingly, when you examine the credentials of the signers of the Humanist Manifesto back in 1933, you quickly discern two things. First, most were card-carrying Unitarian or Universalist ministers. Second, while the designers were neither secularists nor supernaturalists, they exuded an obvious fondness for the sacred. Unlike the orthodox theists of their day, they didn't worship an omnipotent, patriarchal figure high in the sky. But they were notably reverent travelers; they handled holy things with feeling; they were utterly open to the divine permeating this earthly trek.

These pacesetting humanists struggled valiantly to extend religion beyond narrow humanism and doctrinaire theism. They were both hard-headed and soft-hearted theologians. They were seekers who were equally agile whether meditating upon the heavens or protesting earthly wrongs. They were mystical or god-fearing humanists.

Their posture reminds one of the humorous story of two men Schwartz and Rosen, who are strolling to synagogue. Someone stops them and asks Rosen, "Why are you going to synagogue? Schwartz is a believer -- I know why he's going. But you're not religious!" Rosen answers, "Well, Schwartz goes to talk to God, and I go to talk to Schwartz." You see, a full-fledged, hearty religion such as ours combines both human conversation and divine communion, an intriguing mix of Schwartz and Rosen.

Standing tall in our proud lineage of theological mongrelism, a late-20th century Unitarian Universalist fellow-traveler has noted: "I first entered Unitarian Universalism as a Christian, evolved into a religious humanist, and now am a card-carrying pagan -- and I have never been asked to leave the fold!"

An eminent 17th century apologist for the Christian religion, as well as astute mathematician and experimental scientist, Blaise Pascal, divided humankind into three groups: (1) Those who know God and love him; (2) Those who do not know God but seek him; (3) Those who neither know God nor seek him. The issue of God's gender aside, these distinctions roughly represent the categories of affirmatist, agnostic, and atheist. It's the genius of Unitarian Universalism that, within our theological embrace, adherents can honestly assume all three positions at different junctures in their journeys, or even concurrently, and be considered honorable religious questors.

When the three A's (atheism, agnosticism, and affirmatism) are clasped in resourceful tension, one's religious identity becomes robust and balanced -- for each of these attitudes brings a valuable gift to the theological table, providing a healthy system of checks and balances.

Atheism is a purifying influence, eliminating obsolete or abhorrent renditions of the divine. Eminent 20th century religious philosopher, Abraham Heschel, routinely mused that true

prophets spend the bulk of their time interfering with and raging against puerile notions of the Creator.

Agnosticism supplies the essential gift of measured indecision, challenging earthlings to handle the sacred lightly without forcing it into formulas, to "live in the questions," (Rilke) rather than yielding to either certitude or apathy.

Affirmatism unflinchingly insists upon the inherent sacredness of existence, announcing "the lurking-places of God" (Thoreau), especially surprising locales of holy portent.

While entertaining the singular wisdom of these three approaches, Unitarian Universalists proceed cautiously along the soulful journey, for each interpretation harbors its own shadows as well. The atheist is susceptible to hollowness of heart and horizon. The agnostic is vulnerable to disinterest or "the brutality of indiscriminate skepticism" (Unitarian Herman Melville). The affirmatist can inadvertently become a sanctimonious crusader.

Simply, beware my fellow pilgrims: tread the sacred path reverently and with eyes wide-open!

Thank God For Atheism!

In our lover's quarrel with God, Unitarian Universalists appropriate what is salutary and helpful in the atheist critique.

Now, there are different kinds of atheists, to be sure.

Hopeful atheists emphasize our freedom and potential. These atheists leave metaphysical speculation to others, while focusing upon human-sized projects at hand -- such as making a living, learning to love, preparing the way for future generations.

Such cheerful atheists live confidently and comfortably a-theos -- without but not against the notion of deity. They harbor no belief rather than disbelief. In any case, these seekers are essentially at peace, both spiritually and socially, living void of metaphysical reference. We Unitarian Universalists espouse that religious people can be self-ascribed atheists. Countless human explorers have experienced what they would call transcendent insights and moments without attributing them to a supernatural source. They perceive such encounters to be indigenous and natural to this earthly sphere.

Elsewhere on the continuum reside pessimistic atheists who stress human forlornness in an impersonal, even hostile, universe. Such non-believers have frequently grown up with tormented and twisted ties with God. Some are not merely skeptical but downright cynical and categorically rebuff anything divine. They grow queasy whenever the supernatural is cited.

Colleague Clarke Wells draws yet another fruitful distinction between the atheist who rejects "the several idols of human invention, searching for a

truth beyond them" and the variety who "are insensitive to the holy things of life and treats them accordingly." The first kind of atheist, claims Wells, and I would agree, seems to fit nicely in most of our Unitarian Universalist societies, while the second species has to reach some -- accepting, as Wells puts it, "our custom of treating life as majestically holy and our handling of it with religious feeling."

Religious maverick Alan Watts had a marvelous phrase for this torching of straw gods. He called it "atheism in the name of God": an unabashed attempt to debunk any god-concepts that seemed either improbable or hideous. A continual purification. Gods that suspend the laws of nature. Provincial or petty gods. Gods that play favorites among teams or races or nations of the world. Gods who are supposedly responsible for premature deaths or crippling of children or cosmic catastrophes. As Emerson well-noted, "Heartily know, when half-gods go, the gods arrive." So, yes, one of the functions of mature religion is to cleanse the temple of destructive, worn-out deities that truer and healthier ones might become apparent.

Unitarian Universalism would submit that the Eternal One delights in earnest atheists who labor to rid the globe of intellectual laziness, emotional immaturity, and moral delinquency. Any deity worth its salt seeks human candor over mindless veneration. Indeed, Meister Eckhart felt that "our last and highest leave-taking is leaving God for God," and, furthermore, that "God is not found in the soul by adding anything but by a process of subtraction."

Finally, being an honest atheist places one in good company. There are clearly non-theistic as well as theistic strands of Hinduism. Such questors are also consonant with the philosophy of Theravada Buddhism, one of the major world religions, where there exists no single, uniform concept of a personal deity but rather a sense of the sacred permeates our moral actions. Buddha himself warned that ethereal speculation about the nature of deity or an after-life was not only futile but also tended not to edification. And as for the Zen Buddhists, when one famous Rishi was asked: "What does Zen say about God," he remained silent.

The high religions of Asia do not acknowledge a personal absolute yet consider the world unmistakably numinous. In China, Confucianism is essentially atheistic in that it concentrates on rules of behavior for the good conduct of human life and has little to say about deity as a personal god. It challenges earthlings to live in harmony with the way of Heaven and duty rather than worship a supernal being.

Throughout the sweep of our history, Unitarian Universalists have sincerely wrestled with one or another of the aforementioned atheistic positions. My goal tonight is merely to goad us to update our relationship to "atheism" in order to possess an honest and honorable faith. So I ask you, my fellow Unitarian Universalist sojourner, what version of atheism most informs your spiritual voyage?

Atheism at its healthiest, dare I say at its holiest, provides an essential, purifying role in the pursuit of reasonable religion.

The Gifts of Agnosticism

The permanent suspension of belief based on incomplete knowledge signals the human condition. We can't escape the existential state of partial wisdom. Certitude will never be within our human grasp. The term agnostic is fairly new, first used in 1869 by the famous English biologist, Thomas Huxley, who stayed a fervent religious follower throughout the course of his agnosticism. However, the populous at large remains oft-confused or unresponsive to the integrity of the agnostic. Philosopher Bertrand Russell illustrates this in a telling anecdote about his refusal to enter military conscription.

"When I reported to the prison warden," Russell said, his eyes changing from their objective gravity to a twinkle, "he asked me the customary questions -- name, age, place of residence. Then he inquired, "Religious affiliation?"

"Agnostic," Russell replied. The poor man looked up, "How do you spell that?" Russell spelled "a-g-n-o-s-t-i-c" for him. The warden wrote the word carefully on the prison admission form, then sighed, "Oh, well; there are a great many sects nowadays, but I suppose they all worship the same God!" Such ignorance surrounding frankly-held qualms about God remains rampant to this day.

In many ways, agnosticism has become the distinctive form of modern unbelief and is central to our Unitarian Universalist weltanschauung. For ours is a faith that is filled with doubts, even as it proffers bountiful affirmations. The key concern is to display healthy rather than debilitating doubt. There are important distinctions outlined by Unitarian Universalist Charles McGehee who categorizes six brands of doubt: honest, necessary, creative, destructive, immortal, and lonely doubt. He further pens: "In facing our doubts with honesty and honor, we learn privately and progressively that doubt is not only the darkness of the questioning night; it is the light that comes with the dawn, shining through the mists which prevail."

As an intentionally pluralistic religion, Unitarian Universalism invites, nay challenges, us to select the brand of agnosticism most fitting our personal quest. And, as with atheism, there are varieties to be encountered and selected.

George Smith astutely observes that one can be either an "agnostic theist who believes in the existence of god, but maintains that the nature of god is unknowable. The medieval Jewish philosopher, Maimonides, is an example of this position -- or one can be an agnostic atheist, for whom not only is the nature of any supernatural being unknowable, but the existence of any supernatural being is unknowable as well." Take your pick.

While some critics have lampooned agnostics as being spineless and wishy-washy, others carp about their seemingly hardened, noncommittal ways. Agnostics have occasionally been caricatured as being unwilling to admit that a rainbow is beautiful or to recognize a divine epiphany even when struck in the heart by one.

Scientific theologian John Templeton is patently suspicious of this posture: "The more committed agnostics are to their doubt, the less humble or open-minded they are. Only that doubt

which is truly humble, sincerely open-minded, should be labeled agnostic. Only the man or woman who admits the possibility of being wrong is a humble agnostic." But doesn't the same critique obtain for atheists and affirmatists? The sincerity of another seeker can always be thrown into question. But we would do well to slow down in our criticism of another, for it's enticing to see the speck in our neighbor's eye and miss the log in our own.

The key is to remain open-minded -- neither closed nor empty but open-minded. Easier said than done. Authentic openness banks on maintaining, from start to finish, a sense of humility -- one of the least appreciated and under-practiced virtues in human discourse.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith, in the sources section of our UU Principles, "warns against idolatries of the mind and spirit." In a hearty lover's quarrel with God, the fundamental attitude of humility alone enables us to counter the allure of idolatry. Humility encourages us to preserve a flexible disposition as we cultivate any relationship with divine mystery, reminding us that we might just be wrong.

True humanity is both literally and spiritually related to our being humane, being humorous, and being humble. In the last analysis, humility beckons us to define ourselves in terms of human duties and yearnings. We aren't the center of the universe, no matter how bloated our egos might grow.

We humans are integral contributors, to be sure, even co-partners in the ongoing cosmic flow, but we didn't start creation, our record is checkered at sustaining it, and we won't likely end it. We are mid-streamers, earthlings who have come from the dirt -- the humus (another root of the word human) -- and we shall return to the dirt. That's our story -- a noble yet humble one.

Definitely, there is a time in the religious sojourn to voice our affirmations with clarity and cogency. There is also a season to show the courage of our confusions. The agnostic proudly identifies with the following sacred journeyers: the Muslim who speaks of a quaking heart and a stuttering voice in the presence of God; the person in the Christian scriptures who cries out: "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief!"; and St. Anselm of Canterbury, the great theologian of the Middle Ages, who posited *fides quaerens intellectum* -- namely, "faith in search of understanding." These spiritual companions embodied a reverent agnosticism.

And so would we.

The Way of Affirmatism

What do I mean by Unitarian Universalist affirmatism? We make something firm by both saying and doing it. Affirm is a stronger term than believe, think, or hope because it invites attachment. The affirmations we venture concerning God must be confirmed in action. As T. S. Eliot says in "Ash Wednesday": "We dare not affirm before the world but deny between the rocks." So, the only affirmations worthy of the name are those lived in the interstices, between the rocks, of our very existence. All else is abstraction, not affirmation.

While the existence of God cannot be conclusively proven, God's importance in our daily lives can often be vividly demonstrated. Hence the litmus theological test, from our perspective, is: Does believing in a loving God makes us loving? What kind of people do we become when we hold in creative tension the sparring notions of atheism, agnosticism, and affirmatism?

So, when do we experience God? When we say Yes to Life with open minds, loving hearts, and welcoming hands. The affirmatist maintains that Yes is perhaps the central synonym for God. But one huge Yes will not suffice. We must embody Yes in the minute exchanges of our daily trek: giving generously of our time, our energy, our resources, our very beings.

Most traditional theology has focused upon definition whereas Unitarian Universalists emphasize location. It is impossible to define the who or what of deity, but it proves beneficial to suggest when and where intimations of God or Goddess may appear. So the second half of my lecture will manifest some of the surprise spots, or what Thoreau called the "lurking-places," where God is sighted in our lives.

Now remember, theophanies intrude in peculiar places and ways. In most God-sightings -- such as those of Amos, Job and Micah -- the deity is either not described at all or little content of the vision is reported. When Moses and the elders ascend to the top of the mountain, the narrator describes only what is under God's feet. And bear in mind that Elijah didn't find God in the earthquake or the wind or the fire, the normal ways in his time for bona fide theophanies, but in "a still small voice" or as one translator poetically phrases it, "the sound of a soft stillness."

My point is that God exhibits in ways beyond human calculation and control, confronting us in startling, even disquieting, fashion sometimes, as when Isaiah announced that God was working through the pagan Assyrians to arouse the Israelites from their disobedience.

We earthlings must be content, even if dissatisfied, with angles and pieces of the Everlasting One. Abraham Heschel used to say that we are more likely to find God's fingerprints on a kitchen table than on a holy altar. Sage religiosity is one of awe rather than analysis -- freeing one's eyes and hearts for radical amazement.

Indeed, the deliverer of the Ten Commandments is not allowed to see Yahweh and live, which means that we can't see the face because God never shows it directly, or because it would terrorize or humble us, or worse yet, we might provincialize the vision, then stop growing ourselves, even exclude others. Therefore, Moses shielded himself from divine impact in the crevice of a rock, where he could catch a fleeting glimpse of Yahweh, as he departed, in a kind of hindsight. We humans never get a direct, clean shot of God's face, only moving snapshots of the hindparts. But such will do; they must suffice.

In any case, affirmatists recognize that we always live in relationship with an absent presence, a God who withdraws and advances, conceals as well as reveals. Such is the paradox of questing after God. To complicate matters, when Isaiah or Paul is having a vision of God, others around them

rarely are partaking of it. Humans simply never share the same epiphanies or mystical moments- the best we can manage is exchanging notes in open company. Therefore, we covet the critique and challenge of a beloved community lest our revelations become privatistic or unbending.

I remember leading a children's worship service years back. Kindergarten through sixth-grade children were gathered in a beautiful chapel setting. We were conversing about God, a ticklish theological term for adults, let alone kids.

One of the older children, a bright sixth grader, rose to her feet and with immense self-assurance, if not some arrogance, uttered: "I think that God is a force!" She spoke with such imperiousness that discussion promptly ceased. The little ones in the room gazed up at the sixth grader in glowing adoration, as if to concede that God's nature was definitively revealed. Only adults and God itself could be larger, in their eyes, than this budding teenager.

Then one of our irrepressible five-year olds broke the silence and blurted out, "Hey, I saw a forest once!" Then with an immense smile on my face, and even greater one in my heart, I reached out to appreciate both the gifts of the big child and the little one and all sizes in between gathered in our Chapel that morning. And these words tumbled forth from my throat: "Yes, children, God is a force who can be found in the forest and oh, so many other neat and wild places as well."

When focusing upon where to look for God in the crazy tangle of the cosmic web, it is seductive to fixate upon the familiar haunts such as natural beauty, sexual communion, musical epiphanies, truth-speaking, and deeds of goodness. While admitting the richness of such well-trod avenues to Divine Presence, the challenge of Unitarian Universalist affirmatism remains to stalk the Holy in fresh hangouts. Hence, for purposes of this lecture, I would reference but five "lurking-places" of the divine: service, silliness, struggle, silence, and surrender.

FIVE LURKING-PLACES OF GOD

My profession is to be always on the alert to find God in nature, to know his lurking-places, to attend all the oratorios, the opera, in nature.

Henry David Thoreau

I. SERVICE

A mystical activist, such as Gandhi, was clear that God came to him not through science, reason, or intuition so much as through action. The Bible, from front to back, is far more interested in deeds of goodness than creeds about God. Elie Wiesel alerted: "God is telling us: 'I can take care of my own ideas, images, theories - you take care of my creation!'" So, our mission is to be concerned about earthly service not heavenly speculation, riveted on economic justice not metaphysics.

Carter Heyward claims that we are involved in "goddling or doing god" whenever we make justice and share joy with the whole creation. The Beatitudes accent this same linkage when Jesus says: "Blessed are the merciful for they shall see God." This means that signs of the Holy appear in the countenance of those we serve and love.

Unitarian Universalists are often parodied by the orthodox for "being thick on ethics and thin on theology," yet, in truth, we belong to that tribe of religious explorers who, like Jesus, were loving servants more than ardent scholars. Our theology is incarnated through our ethics.

The Nazarene possessed no systematic doctrine of God, mentioning God only rarely. Nevertheless, Jesus aspired to incarnate what he knew of ultimacy and goodness. He "godded," to use Heyward's astute phrase. Or as Abraham Heschel states it: "God is hiding in the world and our task is to let the divine emerge from our deeds." Therefore, as we earthlings exude compassion, we ourselves share in divinity.

Our early Universalist forebears spent occasional moments chatting about God and heaven, but their chief concern was focused on the earthly life. They felt that a more heavenly existence could be delivered upon this known, precious globe. So, Universalists attacked the prevailing belief in eternal damnation while focusing upon serving their sisters and brothers during this lifetime. All social reform -- be it penal reform or humane treatment of criminals, animals, and children -- issued from their gratitude for gifts of a loving God.

II. SILLINESS

I don't say that God is one grand laugh, but I say that you've got to laugh hard before you can get anywhere near God.

Henry Miller

Humor assaults sin. Merry-making brings the Transcendent nigh. We exist to make a joyful noise unto the Lord. Nothing sabotages religion more swiftly than a band of humorless crusaders. Rowing toward God is a serious but not grim business. Foolishness and fun are necessary to a satisfying trek.

In German the world for blessedness is *saelisch* and is etymologically related to our word "silly," reminding us serious, sober types, that in order to be blessed we will have to become irrepressible practitioners of zaniness.. Additionally, the word "enthusiasm" means "God-filled," reminding us that as humans demonstrate exuberance and joy, our lives radiate divinity.

May we Unitarian Universalists hold our gods and goddesses buoyantly -- with a light-heart and a light-touch -- for God is a playful being itself. The Great Spirit presumably created the world out of boredom, being in dire need of playmates. Through games and song and dance we are ongoingly surprised by evidences of the Sacred breaking into our oft-bleak lives and calling us to play. Surely, God is about surprise and serendipity and silliness and calls us to follow suit.

The notable Danish theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, went right to the heart of the theological quest when he wrote: "When I was young, I forgot to laugh, later when I opened my eyes and saw reality. . . I began to laugh and haven't stopped since." There is so much untapped fun and playfulness in existence. May we keep on laughing all the way to our grave and beyond where we just might join a chorus of chucklers surrounding the Almighty.

We are creative beings made in the image of a re-creative Being.

I close this section with some humor that good-naturedly jabs at each of the triple A's: atheism, agnosticism, and affirmatism:

On his deathbed, the atheist panicked, looked up to Heaven and pleaded: "Oh, God, if there is a God, save my soul, if I have one."

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A diagnostic is someone who doesn't know whether or not there are two gods.

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I am an agnostic pagan. I doubt the existence of many gods.

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To you I may be an atheist. To God, I'm the Loyal Opposition.

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What does an agnostic dyslexic insomniac think about at night: "I wonder if there really is a dog?"

III. STRUGGLE

Contrary to popular opinion, God does not surface strictly in happy times but moves repeatedly amidst clamor and travail. The prophet was correct: "God is like a refiner's fire," where dross and gold are being separated. Wherever there is disquiet, God lurks, habitually stirring things up.

Later in his life, psychoanalyst Carl Jung reflected: "To this day, God is the name by which I designate all things which cross my path violently and recklessly, all things which upset my subjective views, plans and intentions and change the course of my life for better or worse." That's pretty strong language, but not an unfamiliar occurrence for wayfarers in our household of faith.

The story of Jacob wrestling with a being greater than himself in the Hebrew scriptures stands as a paradigm for displaying the divine in the throes of strife. After a harsh night of unrelenting struggle, Jacob exits with a limp plus the new name Israel: "the one who strives or struggles with God."

Israel, throughout its spiritual evolution as a nation, comes to represent a kinfolk that is willing to rage and grapple openly with God. Cloying or groveling are considered undignified human

activities in Jewish lore. Indeed, healthy religion has always agreed with Unitarian Carl Sandburg who imagined that "God grows tired of too many hallelujahs!"

We humans are not only evolving, the Supreme Being is also in process. As a co-struggler, God circulates in the midst of sorrow and evil. God is not in the business of intending, causing, or tolerating human misery or natural evil, but struggles alongside human beings in alleviating it.

After the second destruction of the Temple in Jewish history in 70 CE, Talmudic scholars, standing amidst the rubble of their own society, realized that God joined them in weeping. Evidently, the angels couldn't tolerate viewing God's immense sadness. It pained them so, and they did everything to prevent God from shedding tears. To no avail, because God's response was equally dramatic: "If you seek to prevent Me from crying here, I will simply find another place where you cannot approach, and cry there."

God will not be prevented from throbbing and tears, neither will we. Heaven and earth weep together during life's unavoidable swirl of anguishes.

IV. SILENCE

Words are wondrous vehicles, and we Unitarian Universalists will never relinquish them by descending into utter stillness and hush. Yet their fragility and inadequacy must ever be acknowledged. The ancient Hebrews refused to write or speak the whole name of God explaining that the concept is inherently unknowable.

The hills and rivers are mute, yet they shout the wonder of deity. "To you, silence is praise" sings the Psalmist to God (65:2). There is an Hasidic saying: "The altar dearest to God is the altar of silence." The nearest altar as well.

Some religious folks seem to think that the number of times they mention the word God during conversation or worship predicts the presence of the Infinite. Hardly. One church attendee during our 22 year San Diego ministry, coming from a fundamentalist background, was initially disconcerted by the paucity of times God's name was mentioned in our Meeting House.

After months of increasing involvement in our fold, she paid our band of freethinking mystics a high compliment: "I have never worshipped in a religious community where the *word* God is so rarely mentioned yet the *reality* of God so deeply felt. I now feel balanced as a Unitarian Universalist, bridging both heaven and earth!" Indeed, spiritual equilibrium is the objective: where the intellect and soul, rationality and intuition are evenly affirmed.

Silence is a particularly potent and evocative lurking-place of God for verbal Unitarian Universalist types. We underpractice quietude in worship and underappreciate freedom from turbulence and self-assertion at work. Our lives are prone to being cluttered with chatter. Yet periods of sufficient inwardness enable us to be receptive to the wholly other -- be it the sounds of nature, the sounds of our own interior castle, or the sounds of divine humming.

We aspire to join the fellowship of the Buddhists who, among other seekers, would claim that the Void can furnish a worthy container for the sacred. Ralph Waldo Emerson in pointing to the numinous, said: "I like the silent church before the service begins, better than any preaching. How far off, how chaste, the persons look, begirt each with a precinct or sanctuary." Or as he stated elsewhere: "Let us be silent, that we may hear the whispers of the Gods."

Furthermore, there are contemporary Jews who lament the silence of God, not only in the closing ten books of their scriptures but also his glaring non-appearance during the Holocaust. For some this state of affairs leads to passionate atheism, others are left in the clutches of agnosticism, and still other Jews, in the face of God's quietude, muster affirmations of his presence, even partnership.

In the light of God's tormenting silence, I can only concur with Mary Virginia Micka who put it poignantly: "It isn't that I believe God is dead, but God is so silent, has been for so long, and is so hidden, that I take it as a sign I must watch in other places or simply tend my small fires until the end."

Despite what God may or may not be up to, there remains ample moral challenge and spiritual discipline for humans to pursue. Our work is pretty clear. And a portion of it is to keep our lives lubricated with adequate periods of solitude, stillness, and silence.

In our wiser moments, we Unitarian Universalists try to adhere to Meister Eckhart's invitation: "Quit flapping your gums about God -- The most beautiful thing a person can say about God would be for that person to remain silent from the wisdom of an inner wealth."

Befriending the Great Silence is a hallowed, occasionally harrowing, imperative for the religious pilgrim. Because one day when we cross over into our final silence, the ultimate darkness, we will be spiritually seasoned, ready to connect with Silence as God.

V. SURRENDER

For full enjoyment of sex, one does the same thing one does with God -- one says: 'I am Thine...'

Maya Angelou

Earlier in my religious adolescence I clung to God in a way that didn't do either of us justice. Then I rebelled against God and eased into a state of presumed self-sufficiency. Presently, although I refuse to subjugate myself to any external power, I am willing to surrender to divine mystery. As life-long Unitarian Universalist, Linda Stowell, voices: "The idea of turning my life over to God no longer seems alien."

This process of turning can prove to be a valuable one. In the Hebrew scriptures, the sign of the burning bush led Moses to say: "I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not

burnt." Only when God sees that Moses does in fact turn aside, turn around and take notice -- does Yahweh speak to him.

In a sense, that's the way with all of us, is it not? God supplies signs of presence and activity, both obvious and obscure, but refuses to speak to us until we make a move, show interest, turn around to see. Affirming an omen of the divine doesn't pose an effortless endeavor. It requires openness of heart and sharpness of vision. Human attention. Effort.

As with any relationship of value and power, we humans need to move forward rather than against or away. This goes for forging both earthly and heavenly bonds. St. Paul reminds us in his sermon on Mars Hill, "God is not very far from each one of us." But as long as the Spirit remains but an abstract notion not a transforming power, we will freeze in our philosophical tracks and fail to risk a relational leap of faith.

Everyday I surrender willingly to the inexplicable mysteries of vocation, marriage, and parenting. I can explain these no more conclusively than I can explain deity. Think of sexuality -- a matter of allowing oneself to be profoundly vulnerable, intimate, and released into the safe keeping of one's partner. Authentic love requires treading the fine line between surrender and submission. Appropriately, the Hebrew word, *yadah*, for knowing God is the same term used for knowing one's lover sexually. The key in surrendering to God is to enter the being of God and to allow God to enter ours -- without either of us losing our respective identities. The divine-human encounter should produce a meeting not a merging.

Whatever else Ultimate Mystery might be, it surely resembles a fount of universal and limitless love, inclusive of all creatures and infinitely sympathetic. I imagine that's what John Murray meant in affirming the "kindness and everlasting love of God." Our Universalist theology posits that love is the Alpha and Omega of existence -- the Source, the Substance, and the Summit of all religious nourishment and directive. The fundamental energy of reality is not air or water, fire or earth, as Ionian philosophy claimed, but love. Our human imperative, then, is to pass love on, insistently yet imperfectly, to all of creation during our earthly stay -- to sisters and brothers, soil and sky, animals and plants, to keep the gift moving.

Infused with and surrounded by abiding love, as Unitarians we would cherish every unit of existence and treat it as holy, and as Universalists we would exhibit a spacious love inclusive of all creatures. Through loving we fulfill our human destiny and foster connections with divine presence. Through loving we bridge heaven and earth. This is why process theologian Henry Nelson Wieman was led to affirm that "God is Creative Interchange."

The Hindu way of religion emphasizes three pathways to communion with Brahman: the way of knowledge; the way of devotion; and the way of action. Each has its own merits. Surrendering emphasizes the way of devotion: love and affectional bonding. It reminds us that seeking understandably culminates in some form of surrender, that our rendition of religion is based on relationality, "deep calling unto deep" (Psalmist), requiring ample heartfulness. As

Jeremiah stated it: "When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord." (29: 12-14)

Classic Unitarian Universalist adherents have majored in the ways of knowledge and action, while minoring in the pathway of devotion. We have been accustomed to define ourselves more as seekers than finders, debaters instead of devotees -- pilgrims focused on discussion rather than experience, endlessly tracking, rarely making peace with what we've found and with whom we reside. But it is my observation that we are currently learning, then incorporating, the values of healthy surrender in our spiritual lives. I would venture that we are beginning to resemble the pietist Universalism written about in John Morgan's recent Skinner House book entitled The Devotional Heart.

Indeed, religion is ultimately about what you do with who you are and what you possess. As such, it's finally less about knowledge and more about relationship. Can we Unitarian Universalists envision having a close and loving connection to God? If so, what is the nature of the affectional tie? Do we allow God to be an active, controlling, or silent partner? I tend to envisage God not as a perfect senior partner but as a mystical comrade who companions me through the trials and delights and blahs of earthly travel.

How about you?

Again, in surrendering to God, the Holy One, Creative Interchange (call it what you will) submission is not required, but trust is. Indeed, the Hebrew word for faith, bitachon, really means trust. Surrender is about pledging our troth, our trust, forging a vow, making and keeping promises. Surrender implies that sacrifices may be in store for us. For whenever we enter a holy union with either human or divine beings, we do not emerge the same. We are eternally changed.

Surrender denotes giving ourselves over without giving ourselves away -- giving ourselves to an ally with whom we can play, wrangle, and labor to co-create an evolving universe. Sometimes I call that reality God; sometimes I don't. Sometimes I choose to talk about it; others times I hold my tongue and simply revel in the numinous embrace of partnership.

Holding to the critical gifts of our atheism, agnosticism, and affirmatism we love God as wholeheartedly as proves reasonable. Unless we succumb to premature hardening of our spiritual arteries, we will wrestle with God all the way home. But the good news intrinsic to our life-affirming religion is that, as Thomas Carlyle remarked: "Life is one long quarrel with God, but we make up in the end." Well, to be honest, some of us will reconcile and some of us may never. And, for others, the connection will remain ever-partial.

All I'm urging today, from the bottom of my Universalist heart, is that we remember to keep our quarrel with God a current, honest, and loving one!