

“Honest to God”

Rev. Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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It was a Sunday morning, like any other, when a young girl was drawing a picture with bold strokes and bright colours.

Her teacher, viewing the work of art that had so engrossed the child, said, “Tell me about your picture.”

The little girl said, “I’m drawing a picture of God!”

“Hmm, I see,” said the teacher, “But nobody knows exactly what God looks like!”

“Well, they will when I’m done,” said the little girl with unquestionable authority.

I, like most clergy, hold a Master of Divinity degree, and, let me just say that I wish I had even a fraction of her confidence, when it comes to speaking about the divine.

That said, I’ll admit I sometimes wish other people had a wee bit less confidence than they sometimes seem to when making bold claims in the name of their own deity.

Frankly, in my experience, few people are actually “masters” of divinity—and the people I can think of to nominate for that lofty title would be the absolute last ones ever to embrace it.

They tend to carry themselves with a certain amount of humility.
Are often possessed by great doubts.
They sometimes wrestle with their sense of the divine,
and, yet, pour out their lives in service to all they consider sacred.

But rarely are these the voices that gain the most attention.

When we hear people talk of the divine these days,
it is too often from voices that speak with such deep confidence
that their understanding of God could and should be yours, too.

If you’ve ever taken the exit off the DVP at Richmond Street downtown,

you've surely seen, as you come around the bend,
the huge sign that reads: "Prepare to Meet Thy God!"

At the bottom, the sign conveniently lists a phone number,
which connects to the office of the church
that sits just below the sign.

Every time I see it, I wonder if it's actually an invitation,
or if it's meant, instead, to be a word of immediate warning,
or somehow a theological commentary on my driving. . .

Full disclosure: our real estate team seriously explored the possibility
of buying that building about a year-and-a-half ago—billboard and all!

It was an interesting exercise to consider just what message
we would put up in the place of the one that is there.

I was rooting for "Prepare to meet thy neighbour."

Or maybe: "Prepare to celebrate your place
in the interdependent web of all existence,
of which you are a glorious and intrinsic part!"

Obviously, I'm not so great at writing pithy billboard ads...

For better and sometimes for worse,
with all our many words, and caveats, and critical nuances,
UU theology isn't easily reduced down to a bumper sticker or a billboard.

* * *

This past week, I and many from our congregation,
took part in the Sharing Sacred Spaces interfaith initiative.
Thursday night was our congregation's turn to be featured.

For a portion of the program,
Lynn and I fielded questions from people of other faiths.

There were questions about
our history, our theology, and our rituals.
And there were a couple of questions

that danced around the edges of what we think about God.

Most any time I am called upon to speak
for this congregation or for Unitarian Universalism in general,
I have to explain that we are not necessarily of one mind
on any subject, and especially in matters of belief.

But, by and large, when it comes to the question of the divine,
it is safe to say that the classic view of God in the Abrahamic faiths
as being all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving—
has been thoroughly debated and dismissed
by many if not most UUs for quite some time now.

After all, such a god has an awful lot to answer for
when we look to the suffering that stems from
what are sometimes called “acts of God”—
tsunamis that wash away life,
or earthquakes that wipe out tens of thousands
in a single, bitter instant.

In the face of such tragic losses of life,
it’s been our common human response
to seek an answer to the comforting question of *why*—
why did this happen? Why does this happen?

In grief and desperation, people with such questions
have long looked to the heavens for answers—
answers that, at least for many of us,
are never answered in a satisfying way.

In what tends to be an endless silence,
there are at least four ways to interpret such tragic moments:

The first option is to assume that God isn’t aware, or just doesn’t care.

The second option is to assume that God is aware of the unfolding tragedy
but lacks the power to prevent it.

The third option is to blame God, seeing divine will—or maybe even divine
punishment—behind such an event.

And the fourth way I see to interpret such a tragedy
is to accept that maybe our conceptions of God,
if God exists at all, are seriously flawed.

With this interpretation may also come just having to accept that
earthquakes and tsunamis, volcanoes and tornadoes,
are simply the high cost of living on a volatile planet—
the natural result of the powerful forces
that make the Earth what it is.

In my experience, I've found this last option
offers cold comfort to many,
and is the hardest explanation
for most folks to embrace.

We want more meaningful answers.
A grounding story that feels less random.
People seem to like the idea
that someone, somewhere, is in charge.

And, so, from the beginning of time, it seems,
humankind has crafted enduring stories
to help us make sense of the forces
that are beyond our own power or control.

These stories have variously regarded these forces
as the divine energy animating the universe,
as the hands-on creator of all that we know,
or the “First Cause” that brought us the Big Bang.

Across time, these stories have cast the divine
as a protective parent guiding the course of history,
as a supernatural superhero working outside the bounds of time
and beyond the laws of nature that seem to constrain the rest of us.

Following the great earthquake of Lisbon in the 18th century
or the Holocaust in the 20th,
when facing the difficulty of reconciling
an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving God
with the hard realities of this world,
theologians and philosophers alike wondered whether

the divine was simply a projection of our deepest human needs.

The poet Langston Hughes got at this in his biting way:

The ivory gods,
And the ebony gods,
And the gods of diamond and jade,
Sit silently on their temple shelves
While the people
Are afraid.

Yet the ivory gods,
And the ebony gods,
And the gods of diamond-jade,
Are only silly puppet gods
That the people themselves
Have made.

In time, some theologians came to conceive of the divine in different ways, calling it, instead, the “ground of being” or “creative interchange.”

Others, beginning with Nietzsche and continuing on ever since, have simply pronounced God dead.

Over the course of 30,000 years of human history, our notions of and relationship with the gods, the Goddess, or God (“Himself”) have evolved as our circumstances and needs have changed.

In every age, the divine has taken on a different character.

And what has been true of human history has, for many of us, been true of our own history, as well.

I imagine that few of you are still working with the same god you started out with, if you had one to begin with at all.

It’s certainly been true for me.

I long ago let go of the belief that God was some kindly,

but unpredictable elderly gentleman
with a booming voice and a flowing beard,
sitting on some cloud in judgment of my life or yours.

While this understanding of God is still widely held,
and continues to animate religious fundamentalism
in many of its varied forms,
it isn't and hasn't been the understanding of God
held by a significant number of religious leaders or theologians
for a very long time, especially in the Unitarian Universalist tradition.

Did you catch what Emerson had to say about the Over-Soul in that passage
I read earlier—those words he penned 180 years ago?

Let us learn [he said] the revelation of all nature and thought;
that the Highest dwells with us,
that the sources of nature are in our own minds.

As there is no screen or ceiling
between our heads and the infinite heavens,
so there is no bar or wall in the soul
where we, the effect, cease,
and God, the cause, begins.

I am constrained every moment to acknowledge
a higher origin for events than the will I call mine.

There is deep power in which we exist
and whose beatitude is accessible to us.

Every moment when the individual feels invaded by it is memorable.

It comes to the lowly and simple;
it comes to whosoever will put off what is foreign and proud;
it comes as insight; it comes as serenity and grandeur.

Within us is the soul of the whole;
the wise silence, the universal beauty,
to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One.

When it breaks through our intellect, it is genius;

when it breathes through our will, it is virtue;
when it flows through our affections, it is love.

I don't know about you, but that's not the God I grew up with,
though it's definitely one I wish I had!

How I wish I had known earlier of the teachings of the Transcendentalists.
How I wish I had read theology in kindergarten!

How different it might have been
to move through this world more alive to its wonders,
more awake to the sense of the divine in all things,
more attune to my part in the unfolding creation of the world.

Yet, I see myself as a work-in-progress,
and am grateful that my own understanding of theology
continues to change and evolve.

While I don't consider myself a theist by any definition,
my more ardent atheism from a few years back
has given way to a more comfortable agnosticism over time.

I resonate with those words from Jean Paul Sartre, who said:
"That God does not exist, I cannot deny.
[But] that my whole being cries out for God, I cannot forget."

And, so I recognize that the feelings of awe that well up within me
when I look out upon the majesty of the natural world
or peer into the depths of resilience in the human heart,
when I see the power of creativity—
the force of creation—alive in and around me—
I recognize these things as the inspiration
to which others give the name of Goddess or God,
that stirring in the universe and in life itself that some call divine.

Now, I often find that others are much more comfortable than I am
in assigning intelligence and agency to this sense of the divine.

I don't personally experience the world that way,
but I know and honour the fact that others do,
and so I endeavour to listen and learn and hold my heart open.

And, I try to resist judging people to be ignorant
when they see and name these things differently than I do.

I try to “reverence the reverences of others,” as best I can.

That doesn’t mean, though, that I don’t welcome a debate.
Sometimes I’ll even start one,
when I believe a person’s theological beliefs
are harmful or destructive.

And it’s not just religious fundamentalists that I’m talking about.

One of my greatest frustrations
with the spate of books put out a few years ago
by the “New Atheists”
was that Dennet, Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris—
sometimes referred to as the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”—
all spent far too much time tearing down
the most egregious, violent elements in religion
and almost entirely failed to recognize or engage
the variety of voices that have struggled and stretched
to reach deeper and different understandings.¹

While much of what they wrote rings true for me,
I don’t believe it was enough.

I want to hear the constructive and creative response that says
there is another way that leads on to life—and life more abundant.

I want to hear an appreciation for the poetry and the metaphor
that speak to our sense of being part of the web of life,
and capable of feeling a sense of connection
to something larger than ourselves—
that something that many find within, between, and beyond us.

Perhaps that will have to be a book I write myself one day.

Or perhaps it really is simply the book each of us writes
in the comings and goings of our daily lives.

¹ To his credit, Sam Harris has softened his stance and, in recent years, even written about meditation practices.

The theologian Gordon Kaufman has said that
“The central question for theology is not merely,
or even pre-eminently, who or what God is,
or how God is to be distinguished from the idols . . .
Most fundamentally [he says] it is a practical question:
How are we to live? To what should we devote ourselves?
To what causes [should we] give our [lives]?”²

These are the questions that matter most to me.

They are, I believe, the questions at the heart of this great faith.

They are the questions that swirl in my mind
when we affirm in our covenant each week
the hope that “all souls shall grow into harmony with the divine.”

That all may grapple in life-giving ways
with what they hold to be most true, most sacred, most divine—
whether they call it the Spirit of Life,
the power of love, the call of justice,
or the beautiful, organic unfolding of the universe itself.

By whatever name we may call it,
may we endeavour to live in harmony with it,
aware of the countless ways it shapes our days,
and gives substance to our lives.

So be it.

Amen.

² Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*, p. 15.