

# "Growing the Space Between"

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I have been doing theological reflections for much of my life. Although, of course, I would not have called it that. But ever since I was little I have been reflecting on the world, pondering the meaning of things. Developmental psychologists would probably call this Intrapersonal Intelligence – or the knowledge of self. Growing up Unitarian Universalist, meant that I was always pondering, always questioning and searching for truth. Trying to decide how people interacted, and why they interacted the way they did, and making connections.

I learned about the Seven Principles, probably before I turned seven. And I was always asked to connect our faith's principles to everyday reasoning. My parents expected that I would use the principles as a tool when making decisions and I have now relied on this practice for many years. This soon became habit for me. To look for deeper meaning in everything around me. Whether it was for a school assignment, or listening to a music album I would look for more, I would seek deeper understanding. Reminiscing on a conversation I had with my best friend, struggling to remain considerate through my divorce or trying to determine how I was going to move across the country. Every aspect of my life required greater decision making, required that I look to my faith, and the ideals that I proclaimed were important to me. Although I would not have known I was doing it, I have been reflecting on theological concepts since I was a pre-teen.

I decided that I wanted to go to seminary, that I wanted to become a minister, because while I was in my Bachelor's degree, studying to become a child psychologist, I was unable to stay away from my church. Evenings, were spent going to committee meetings, and hosting Soulful Sundown worships, instead of being filled with homework and studies. Weekends were spent helping organize fundraisers, and getting to bed on time to wake up for church. But I also spent much of my academic studies trying to engage my theological ideals. In one class, on Religious Practices of death and dying I wrote a paper about the worth and dignity

of assisted dying practices. In a Psychotherapy and Counselling class I talked about the importance of free and responsible search for truth and meaning. No matter where I went, or what I was studying – my faith and my values always seemed close at hand.

And I was very happily engrossed when, as a seminary student, most of my assignments asked me to find theological meaning in class readings, or activities – or even on walks around the neighbourhood.

So it came as no surprise when I was to reflect on my theological understanding in a class called Unleashing your Multi-Cultural Ministry. The first day we were asked to help decorate the altar that would be at the front of the room for the rest of our time together. My professor, who I would argue is more a religious educator than a professor, and who loves to incorporate different ways of learning into his curriculum, gave us two tasks to take home with us that evening. The first was to take home a river stone and to write on it one word. The prompt that he gave to us was to think about a time when we were asked to experience someone else's culture, and to describe it in one word. For the second task we were asked to take home several pipe cleaners, and to create an image that for us would reflect God/Spirit of Life/The More/Ulimate Reality... choose whatever name suits you the best.

So that night I went home, and I started contemplating what I wanted to create. There are many different times that I can think of when I have been invited to experience someone else's culture, having participated in a youth group for aboriginal girls and being a part of an interfaith clergy group. But because the class was based on ministry, and because I was struggling with particular emotions, it being only weeks after the Christmas holidays, I thought about my younger brother's wedding. A wedding in a Greek Orthodox Church, after his conversion from Unitarian Universalism to his wife's religion.

As I thought back about that experience, when my family was in town from all around the continent, and we were supposed to be celebrating my brother's union to the love of his life, I tried to remember what it was like to be invited into a new cultural experience. A wedding ceremony, where the family members were asked to stand for the whole service, almost 2 hours long; where the partnering ceremony happened at the back of the room, under the arced doorway, that was difficult to

see. Where the language was paternal and misogynistic, and the smell of strong frankincense filled the air. The one word that I could use to describe my experience was challenging.

So I wrote challenging on that river stone – not because the multicultural experience that I had was challenging, although it was a challenging experience, but because in those moments I was remembering the relationship that brought me into that experience, a relationship with my younger brother, the boy that I had to protect at school from bullies. The preteen that was my confidant when secrets needed to be kept from our parents. The teenager, who I rode in an ambulance with, after he had sliced open his thigh while skateboarding. And the young man who left behind those seven principles because he fell in love with someone who disagreed with them. As all of these memories overwhelmed me, and the complexity of emotions washed over me all I could write down on the worn and smooth river stone was challenging.

The second task that we were given that cold January evening in Chicago was to create an image of God with pipe cleaners. Now, I am not a theist; I don't think I ever have been. I grew up a Unitarian, in a Fellowship church, listening to the story of Jesus and God like it was a fairy tale. For me stories from the bible held the same symbolism of love and morals that Winnie the Pooh stories held. And, it wasn't until I was a preteen that I actually discovered that Jesus was a man who had really existed, and really lived through some of those struggles. Before this he was just a character in my Sunday school classes.

But having spent 3 years in seminary, working through my theological reflections, has allowed me to claim my belief in God. Not a Christian sense of God, because I am still not a theist. But using the word God to mean more than just a deity, to mean more than a Proper Noun. Now I know that Wikipedia is not considered the most reliable source for information, however it states “The concept of God, as described by theologians, commonly includes the attributes of omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, divine simplicity, and as having an eternal and necessary existence.” In that same wiki article God has also been described as incorporeal, the source of all moral obligation, and the

greatest conceivable being in existence. And while the Christian God can be described using these words, the Christian God is not the only thing that fits this definition.

I believe that GOD is relationship. The being that I recognize as all-knowing, ever-present, and all powerful. The concept that holds my moral obligation and the greatest 'being' in our existence is relationships, they underly everything.

Whether it is my individual relationship with each of you, or the special relationship that this group of us here in the screen create together, or the relationship that I have with myself, or with the earth, doesn't matter. It is the relationship that is important.

How we are in that relationship  
how we engage the other or how we don't,  
how we hold the other's emotion and logic,  
how we choose to change our behaviour because of the relationship,  
or how we choose to ignore the relationship by not changing.

This is my God. And though relationships are not a personal being, they are divinely simple and their existence is necessary. Relationships hold my moral obligation and I believe that it is the greatest conceivable existent.

And much like the Christian God I believe that relationships can be misunderstood, misrepresented, and even abused. So in order to create an image with pipe cleaners for my assignment I created two people holding hands, to show the space between them, the relationship that I see as god.

I took my two objects back to class the next morning. We were all asked to share the meaning behind our words, our images, and then we spent the rest of our class time together trying to build an understanding of ministry based on our experiences of a different culture, and our understanding of God. It was a really great class, I learned so many things, so many tools to add to my tool box. But there was a deeper meaning hidden in those two objects that I was soon to discover.

I took the two pieces of art back to my apartment at the end of class and I left them on the kitchen table. That night, while my roommates and I were all milling about someone was trying to get my pipe cleaner people to stand up, I had given them feet, but they were a little lopsided and wouldn't stand on their own. But my roommate accomplished the task by placing the Challenging Rock on top of their feet.

This is where my theological light bulb went off, when I saw the two ideas come together, and become one. I have a theology of process relationality, that means that - I believe that the most basic and most fundamental entity that our world is made of is Relationships, and that they need to be treated as sacred. And I also believe that these relationships are in an ever changing always shifting process. That by putting energy into them or ignoring them, holding them as sacred or mundane, believing in the power that they hold over our lives, and the existence of our world - we are able to change and develop or de-evolve these relationships. And I believe that this theology is really challenging. That I am required to consistently be vigilant with my ideas and my words, and my actions. That everything that I do has effect on not only my future but the future of this world. And that is really, really challenging, and it can be heavy to carry. It is really challenging to put that kind of pressure on me, and on those around me, and on the world. But no one ever said that faith was easy.

It is like Oriah Mountain Dreamer's poem *The Invitation*:

*I want to know what you ache for*

*I want to know if you will risk looking the fool, for love*

*I want to know if you have touched the center of your own sorrow,*

*I want to know if you can sit with pain, with joy, with Disappointment.*

When we learn to share ourselves, when we learn to be in a deeper relationship, even though it will be challenging, and even though it is scary to be vulnerable, we can only grow from that experience. We will be able to build up the layers, and we will be able to grow more cells, and we will become larger constellations.

Over the next week, I give you an invitation, or perhaps a challenge, and it will start during our break out rooms today. What does God look like

to you? If you were to create an image of the sacred, what would that image be? Tell each other, let us get to know each other better. Maybe find some pipe cleaners, or your paints and canvas, or what every type of visual art you feel called to do, and create an image of the divine. And then share that image with someone, strengthen the relationships that you have by sharing a precious idea with them.