

Letting God Go
Two Rivers Unitarian Universalist
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Story – “Hide and Seek with God” by Mary Ann Moore

Once upon a time God said, “I’m bored because I don’t have anything to do. I want to play with my friends.”

And because God is God, as soon as the words were spoken, God’s friends were there. When God saw all of them gathered, God said, “I’ve been bored because I haven’t had anything to do. Let’s play something.”

“Good idea,” said God’s friends. “What shall we play?”

God thought for a minute and then said, “I know, let’s play hide-and-peek!”

God’s friends closed their eyes tight and counted to ten. When they opened their eyes, God wasn’t there anymore. So they all went off to look for God.

One friend decided to look close to the earth and soon came to a meadow. As he was searching, he stopped to admire the tender new sprouts of green grass pushing their way up toward the sun. As he bent over to look more closely at the tender green he realized there was something special and amazing and wonderful about it. So he jumped up and ran back to home base, calling out, “I found God! God is green and growing! I found God in the grass!”

Another one of God’s friends decided to look for God in the night. She watched the sun go down, and saw the lights in the houses go out. As the peaceful night wrapped itself around her, she listened very hard, and then she realized there was something special and amazing and wonderful about it. And so she jumped up and ran to home base, calling out, “I found God! God is dark and peaceful! I found God in the night!”

A third friend looked on the earth and felt the mystery of the grass growing toward the sun. He stayed and watched the night come on, and he felt the mystery of the darkness and the stars. He thought to himself, “These mysteries are special and amazing and wonderful.” But when he finally came back to home base, he said, “I found wonderful mysteries but I’m not sure if I want to call them God.”

A fourth friend decided to look for God where people were. He joined a group of people going home from work and went with them into the store where they bought food. He went with them back out on the street as they started for their homes. He was with them when someone came up and said, “Please, I’m very hungry. Could you share a little food with me?” The people readily agreed and as he watched them share, he realized there was something special and amazing and wonderful about those people. He turned around and ran to home base, calling out, “I found God! God is love and sharing. I found God

in people who care for others!"

Finally, two more of God's friends, a boy and a girl, decided to look for God together. After a time, they came to a house and decided to look for God in the house. In the house they saw a room, and they looked for God in the mirror. As they looked in to the mirror, they realized there was something special and amazing and wonderful being reflected in it. They turned around and ran to home base, calling out, "We found God! We found God in us!"

At this God appeared again and said, "I had so much fun! Weren't those good hiding places? Some of you found me, others weren't sure, and others are still looking. That's OK because the most important thing is just to play the game. Let's do it again! I'm sure I can think of some other good hiding places." And they all called out, "Olly olly, oxen free, free, free!" And the game started all over again.

Reading – from "God" by Tom Owen-Towle

There exist mounds of words from both apologists and detractors today on the topic of God, an yet there's precious little, spoken or composed, that applauds critical piety, trustful uncertainty, and skeptical believing as complementary attitudes in the theological quest. That's where Unitarian Universalism shines, for, at our most superb, we celebrate an unheralded yet distinct approach to the question of an Ultimate Being.

Being riders of paradoxes is our peculiar niche as liberal religionists. We seem to pitch tent and stoke our flaming chalices in the creases between mysticism and humanism, theism and naturalism, believing and doubting, devotion and skepticism. At our most stout and resourceful, Unitarian Universalists are spiritually ambidextrous, defining ourselves both from below and above. We're a reasonable religion with numinous sensibilities - in short, we're 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."

As Unitarian Universalism turns 50 and blazes ahead theologically, we embrace being fully rational, fully spiritual, and fully compassionate. We deem it not merely tolerable, but desirable, as theological nonconformists to live well amidst the intractable qualms and nasty confusions at the heart of Reality. Who really wants reality tidily wrapped up? Who covets convictions set in stone? Lots of people to be sure, but not Unitarian Universalists. Being riders of paradoxes isn't a dire position of last resort but our first choice. It's the way we desire to walk and talk, live and die during our sojourn on this planet.

When we examine the signers of the Humanist Manifesto in 1933 - most of whom were Unitarian and/or Universalist ministers, we see that the designers, unlike the orthodox theists of the day, didn't worship an omnipotent, patriarchal figure, high in the sky. Nonetheless, they were utterly open to the divine circulating through this earthly trek. These thorough-going humanists dared to talk of God, indeed, comfortably so, but in collaborative, naturalist terms. They considered some sort of partnership between heaven and earth to be our sacred summons. Unitarian signer Burdette Backer put it this way:

'Whenever we are helping humanity to be at its best, we are worshipping God...we are the children of a creative and dynamic universe, and its restless energy is at work within us to carry forward the work of creation. This is something of what I mean when I say that I believe in God....God is not an idea to be believed in, God is work to be done in the world.'

Sermon – “Letting God Go” by Gretchen Haley

I could hear my own breathing. Heavy, nervous. I did not want to be nervous. I wanted to be a minister. Calm, centered, wise.

It was no use. It was my first pastoral care appointment – *ever*. I was sitting at the desk in the Chaplain’s office at the Denver Women’s Prison, waiting for one of the inmates. She’d sent a note that said generically: “I want to meet with a chaplain; I have some spiritual questions.”

She arrived shy, and slow. And then it was quiet. And I could hear both of us breathing.

“Did you have something you’d like to ask me,” I began. “How can I help?” I asked.

It was quiet again before she said, “I’ve been having some struggles with the Devil. Actually, I’m angry at God.” She backpedaled quickly. “I know that’s a sin. I can’t be angry at God. I’m just angry at myself. I’ve been fighting myself.” And then she held out her arms, covered in scars, lines running horizontally up and down her veins.

They say when you are providing pastoral care, you always want to ask yourself the questions – *why me, why here, why now?*

There were probably other reasons. But the one I return to whenever I think about our conversation, was God. With all her scars and her anger and her fear, she was stuck on God. Stuck on a God that couldn’t handle her for who she was, couldn’t take her anger, her pain, or her truest self. Stuck on a God that required her to injure herself to make herself worthy of life, worthy of forgiveness and transformation.

And I think I was there because in a lot of ways, I can get stuck on God too. Stuck on old notions, stuck on all the ways I’ve let God go, let a certain kind of God go, stuck on asserting what *I* mean when I say “God,” asserting so much I sometimes fail to listen to what others experience as “God,” asserting so much I fail to experience alongside others, the mysterious, the transcendent, the active source of a Love greater than I can even conceive.

One of the things that brought me to Unitarian Universalism was its sparse use of traditional religious language, including the word, “God.” The absence of traditional language opened me up to the possibility of religion and being religious in ways I would have otherwise shut down. But I have wondered, over time, if in our pursuit of religious freedom, *we’ve all* gotten stuck on God. I mean, stuck on an idea of God that’s so small, we have no choice but to reject it. Not unlike the one this wounded woman brought to me that day.

And I've wondered what it would mean for us to go back, to let that old God go once and for all, if out of that space might a new vision of Ultimate Truth, Ultimate Meaning, a new understanding of the divine mystery at the heart of the universe emerge.

I don't know who God is exactly, but I'll tell you this. (This is a story from Mary Oliver. She goes on.)

I was sitting in the river named Clarion, on a water splashed stone and all afternoon I listened to the voices of the river talking. Whenever the water struck the stone it had something to say, and the water itself, and even the mosses trailing under the water. And slowly, very slowly, it became clear to me what they were saying. Said the river: I am part of holiness. And I too, said the stone. And I too, whispered the moss beneath the grass.

Some places simply require such a pantheism – that's where God is the universe, and the universe is God. Places like Bryce Canyon and Moab, like Orcas Island and the Olympic Rain Forest, like the Roaring Fork Valley and all its off-the-trail hidden gems – the serious beauty takes our breath away, with awe and wonder we can barely survive looking at such divinity.

Many a times last year on the train ride from Denver I thought, this is God, this is it. This snow covering this river, the sounds of this train, and these people headed with hope and intent towards some new destination all along this route that finds its way through what was once solid rock. All this, all everything is God. Divinity is everywhere, everything counts and creates holiness in its coming together, and all we have to do is notice, and be grateful.

If God exists, Mary says. If God exists, he isn't just butter and good luck. He's also the tick that killed my wonderful dog Luke. Said the river: imagine everything you can imagine, then keep on going.

She's not done yet. If God exists he isn't just churches and mathematics. He's the forest, He's the desert. He's the ice caps that are dying. He's the ghetto and the Museum of Fine Arts.

There's this billboard that's just about everywhere in Denver right now that asks if we really want a zip code to determine a kid's future, and sometimes when I see it I think, *what else does?* Where we end up, it's so much a matter of luck. Some are chosen, and some are not.

And let's not even get started about the randomness of illness, of natural disaster, of tragedy. Just hearing one day's worth of stories from my sister the pediatric oncologist will have you joining up with the Presbyterians (those inheritors of pre-destination theology), and wrestling with just how much we are divided into the saved and the damned.

Especially if we believe that Heaven and Hell are right here on earth, then Universalism seems a lot of the time, an impossible fantasy. God is not love, God is amoral at best, cruel at worst, and Jonathan Edwards' trope about being sinners in the hands of an angry God is not all that far off.

He's van Gogh and Allen Ginsberg and Robert Motherwell. He's the many desperate hands, cleaning and preparing their weapons. He's everyone of us, potentially. The leaf of grass, the genius, the politician, the poet. And if this is true, isn't it something very important?

But then I'm reminded of what's wrong with a pre-destination approach to Ultimacy - which is, we're all in this together. One of my favorite answers from the question I asked last month: what does it feel like when the I becomes we? was when a few of you said, "It's always been we."

Our destinies are wrapped up together, and as Unitarian Burdette Backer said, “God is not an idea to be believed in, God is work to be done in the world.” Every day we choose what to do with our interdependence, how to respond to our interconnectedness, our unity. Everyday we decide how much of our own privilege to relinquish and share with another, how much of ourselves to reveal and release, how much love to give and grow. And every day the world is changed by our decisions. God may not be Love the noun, but rather Love the verb. And I am saved when you are saved.

We are saved when all are saved.

Yes, it could be that I am a tiny piece of God, and each of you too, or at least of his intention and his hope. Which is a delight beyond measure.

There are so many ways to think about Ultimacy. The ultimate force, the ultimate truth, the ultimate organizing principle. The things you dedicate your life to, in an ultimate way. The things you belong to, *whose* you are. What matters - ultimately. Theologian Paul Tillich talks about the object of Ultimate Concern.

I tend to think of it as the big *everything*. The big mix up of us all, the big way the universe works, the big ways we wish it worked, what we don't understand but long for, what calls us. And just as much in the mix, our values, our relationships - the specific people who save us, who keep saving us, the places and people to whom we belong, all of our different answers to all these things - and then the big mash up of all these things into something we call life. Somehow, out of all this, we just keep getting life!

And I think, we need a word that describes all this big mash up of this big everything, and sometimes, the best word I can come up with, is God.

In the middle of her ponderings about God and the River, Mary Oliver pauses to say:

There was someone I loved who grew old and ill. (I imagine here she means her partner of 30 years, who had died just before the publishing of these poems)

One by one, she says, I watched the fires go out.

There was nothing I could do

Except to remember

That we receive

Then we give back.

Nothing to do but remember, that's Jewish poet, theologian and teacher Elie Wiesel's answer to God. In his memoir of the holocaust, *'Night*, he literally puts God on trial, and God dies. God's gone. So then what does it mean to be Jewish after God has died? Wiesel's answer is *to remember*. The new act of worship, the new religious act— is to remember. That we *can* remember, and that we can locate ourselves in a history, something greater than ourselves – that is a kind of Ultimacy too.

But still a surprising one for Wiesel, given all he's seen and experienced, you'd think he'd say, what we should try to do is *forget*. Except that he knows, we *all* know, not telling doesn't make you forget. Not telling means the story itself becomes a kind of god, ruling your life.

Beware the tiny gods frightened men create, Sufi poet Hafiz says.

And so one kind of God died for Wiesel, and a new one was born. In our remembering together, we are all creationists, speaking the world we dream of into being.

Of course for each of us, Mary would have to remind us. There is the daily life. Let us live it, gesture by gesture. When we cut the ripe melon, should we not give it thanks? And should we not thank the knife also? We do not live in a simple world.

Every night before we have dinner, my family holds hands as we light a chalice, and we take turns saying some words. Curiously, both my kids have fallen into a routine. Without fail, whoever starts will begin with: We pray for God. Or, as an alternative: We light this chalice for God. We've never asked exactly what they mean, we don't want to break the magic. Because we *don't* live in a simple world, and they already know it. God has a lot to carry, this great moaning earth, these great stumbling creatures, and even joy in all its mass can be overwhelming to witness. I think, God needs a lot of chalices being lit, and a lot of little kids' voices saying, we pray for you, God. We see how hard this work is, and we see how many gifts keep on being available, and so we'll do what we can to help, and we'll keep on saying thank you.

As for Mary Oliver, she says it this way.

I pray for the desperate earth.

I pray for the desperate world.

I do the little each person can do, it isn't much.

Sometimes the river murmurs, sometimes it raves.

The woman, she held out her arms covered in scars and I knew she believed God couldn't take the anger inside her. It would be too overwhelming, too frightening or offensive to her flimsy God.

And so we started imagining what it would mean to let God grow, let God be bigger, big enough to take it all – all the messiness, all the anger, all the fight you can throw.

I kept encouraging her – *God can take it! Just yell, and scream, and ask God why? Look at Job who places God on trial. Look at the prophet Habbakuk, who repeatedly calls God out: "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you 'Violence!' and you will not save?" (Hab 1:1-2) See, you're in good company! Just let it all go!*

I think she was terrified. But I am also confident that if even for those few moments, she had a vision of God beyond that which offered her salvation by way of self-injury.

Sometimes the river murmurs, sometimes it raves.

Sometimes I believe, we are all held in Love. I believe there is a guiding force of Love, it's real, and it has a purpose. And I believe that it is with us, right here in this room. Call it God. Go on. Try it.

It's older than words anyway. This force holds all of us, and it holds people who aren't here too, people in the other rooms of this building, the people beyond these walls, the people under the bridge, our

ancestors, their spirits, their life force, and more than just the people, you understand, the world that was, the universe that was, all that led to right now.

And I believe that the paradox we're riding is that in the greatest point of difference amongst all this, this Love allows us to be one. All of us. All of everything.

The mountains, and the air and the depths of the ocean, and the smallest place between two bodies, and the birthing rooms and deathbeds, the first dates, and the bathroom floor, where we are facing the darkest night, it's there too. And it holds the future too, all the possibilities for how each life will go - *imagine everything, and then keep going.*

And this Great Love places all of these things here before us, and it invites us in as partners, and it says: here is all the love that is possible, here is all the life that is possible, it's all here for the taking: now, what will you do with all this beauty?

And still, Mary says, pressed deep into my mind, the river keeps coming, touching me, passing by on its long journey, its pale infallible voice singing.

When we let all our ideas of God go, we aren't left with nothing – the river keeps coming. It's the opposite of nothing – it is *everything*. Like the Hindu scriptures remind us: 'Those who think that God is not comprehended, by them God is comprehended; but those who think that God is comprehended, know God not.'

When we let all our ideas of God go, we get in their place an opportunity to construct a vision of Ultimacy that is life-giving, a vision of the many names of God that are both rational and mystical, sensible and numinous, and we get a path for us all that keeps growing God beyond any kind of container that words can describe.

Imagine everything you can, and then keep going.

Because we really have no idea. And yet we keep on riding this paradox. Keep on growing our God so that its big enough to take whatever we can throw at it, whatever we can wonder or imagine or grieve, keep on letting God go, letting God loose, free enough that we know we do not know, familiar enough that we know more than we can say, open enough that it can hold every one of us, wherever we are, whatever we brought to this room, whatever life is giving us right now. From the mountain top, to the valley. And then keep on going.

Namaste. And Blessed Be.