

**“MY GOD”**  
**A sermon by the Rev. Roger Bertschausen**  
**Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**2600 E. Philip Ln.**  
**P.O. Box 1791**  
**Appleton, WI 54912-1791**  
**(920) 731-0849**  
**Website: [www.fvuuf.org](http://www.fvuuf.org)**

**December 6-7, 2008**

Call to Gather: “Natural Theology” by David O. Rankin

Is there such a thing as God?

I saw a sunrise at Jackson Hole.

I fell in love many years ago.

I caught a tear in my father’s eye.

I watched a lily bloom.

I saved a boy from drugs and death.

I touched the hand of Martin Luther King, Jr.

I feel the warmth of children.

I laugh almost every day.

I hold the hem of hope.

The only God I can possibly know is the God of life—and life is endless.<sup>1</sup>

Reading: “If I Were Asked” by Victoria Safford

If I were asked to confess my faith or my beliefs out loud, and I were scrambling for some place to begin, I would start in the desert, in the lonesome valley, and say that first of all and ultimately we are alone. No god abides with us, caring, watching, mindful of our going out and our coming in. The only certainty is mystery. We are alone, and because we are alone it is the chance connections, both chosen and involuntary, that matter most of all and ultimately help and heal and hold us.

We are alone yet intricately bound, inextricably connected to soil and stream and forest, to sun and corn and melting snow. We are alone yet bound by stories we cannot get out of to ancestors and descendants we will never meet. And all these natural conditions, these bonds we did not forge ourselves and yet cannot deny, are the strands of a theology, the seeds of faith, the beginning of *re-ligion*, of binding all things.

When I say *God*—and sometimes I do, because sometimes there is no other metaphor, no other symbol, no other poetry, no other offering—when I say *God* I mean that place of meeting, that place where solitudes join. The space between my hand and that dogwood, the space where the tiny feet of the ant brush the dry dirt beneath her, the space between Mercury and Venus, between electrons, which we unblinkingly believe in without seeing. *God* is the space in between, the bridge between solitudes, the ground where we meet, you and I, or any two, by grace.

If I were asked I’d say that all of us, together, are alone, and the emptiness between us is waiting to be filled.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> David O. Rankin, *Dancing in the Empty Spaces* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2001), p. 18.

## Sermon

I spent this past Wednesday evening with the high school youth who are participating in our Coming of Age program. The program is designed to help our youth go deeper into their spiritual journeys. It will culminate in the spring with a vision quest retreat. During this retreat, each youth will spend time many hours alone in the woods, contemplating what she or he believes. A few weeks after that we will have the privilege of hearing them share their beliefs with us during a weekend of services. In beginning to take ownership of their own spiritual quest, each youth will take an important step from childhood to adulthood.

This year we are blessed to have twenty-six youth participating in the program. With a similar number of adult mentors and coordinators, this is a big group! In fact, it has outgrown our space and so meets instead at the Heckrodt Wetland Preserve.

Wednesday night's topic was God. We talked about whether we believe in God, and if so, how we view the nature of God. We talked about how whatever belief we have about God into our understanding of why bad things happen. And we talked about on what we base our beliefs about God. I have to tell you that I was blown away by what the youth shared in the conversation. It is simply remarkable how much thought they've put into these questions, and how well they were able to articulate their views.

I started off the evening by inviting the youth and mentors to place themselves on a spectrum. We drew an imaginary line diagonally across the large room. On one end I invited people to stand who believe that there is no higher power. At the other end I invited people to stand who believe that there is a higher power, and that this power created life and in some measure controls life. And I asked people who find themselves between these two poles to place themselves somewhere on the spectrum.

I then invited folks to talk with people standing in their area of the spectrum to find out if their neighbors had similar a similar view of God. If not, I invited them to consider adjusting their location on the spectrum. The buzz and energy of the conversations filled the room.

I was glad to see that the youth spread across the spectrum. Interestingly, a majority of them stood on either end of the spectrum, while a majority of adults (including me) stood more in the middle. If I had done this exercise ten years ago, I think there would have been far less diversity among the youth. This is a sign that we've come a long way in nurturing the theological diversity of our Fellowship.

I had the sense that no one standing on the spectrum believed that they were in the One True Spot. No one believed that they were right about God and everyone else wrong. I hope this was true, because it would reflect our deepest UU principles and values.

Whenever I meet people who claim to know the Truth about God, I am skeptical. Whether they believe God is exactly as they describe or are a hundred percent certain that God doesn't exist at all (like Richard Dawkins in his book *The God Delusion*), it feels to me like an incomplete understanding is lifted up as the whole Truth about God. In my opinion, no one view of God can ever be total and complete. No one view of God can ever be completely right (with, of course, the corollary that all other competing views must be wrong). When it comes to God, I believe that ultimately we are in the realm of

---

<sup>2</sup> Victoria Safford, *Walking Toward Morning* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2003), pp. 49-50.

mystery. We will never know for sure whether there's a God; we will never know for sure the exact nature of God. God lies well beyond any human being's—or even any religion's—ability to completely understand it.

So I have to say up front that my belief about God is incomplete and imperfect. It will always be so. And hopefully it is clear to all of you—even if you're a first-time visitor—that my view does not have to be your view. Here at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, we are all welcome to come to our own conclusion about God's existence and nature.

My belief about God is a work that is constantly in progress. Based on life experiences and my own internal spiritual process, it is ever evolving. My belief about God should not be inscribed on a Ten Commandments-like stone tablet. I would say that it is rather more like a...recipe.

What I want to do now is share the recipe for my belief about God. I need to be clear: I'm sharing the recipe for my belief about God—not my recipe for God. (That would be a bit presumptuous.) It's actually a pretty simple recipe. Basically I mix everything together in one large (metaphorical) bowl and then bake.

The first ingredient in the recipe is **one cup of agnosticism**. An agnostic view of God maintains uncertainty about God's existence. Ultimately I am uncertain about God's existence: there might be a God; there might not be. I don't know for sure. I expect I'll never know for sure. So this uncertainty is a very important ingredient. It has always been the first ingredient I put in the bowl.

Next I add **one cup of equal parts Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Oversoul" and the Hindu view of God**. Emerson, who so consistently celebrated the uniqueness and individuality of each person, paradoxically also believed that at the deepest level of each individual soul, there is a unity. This unity is within all of us and in everything in nature. It is exactly the same in each of us. Emerson often called this unity the "Oversoul." Sometimes he called it "God." "Within each of us," he wrote, there "is the soul of the whole, the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One."<sup>3</sup>

This central belief of Emerson reveals the great extent of Hinduism's influence on him. He drank deeply at the spiritual well of the *Bhagavad Gita* and other significant Hindu texts. In Hinduism, God is everywhere: embodied in stones and statues, in trees, rivers and mountains, in animals and people. There are millions and millions of gods and goddesses in the Hindu pantheon; each is unique. And at the same time, there paradoxically is only one God: the great God Brahman in whom everything on the earth and in the heavens is included. This is the seed of the idea in Emerson's Oversoul.

The Hindu and Emersonian view of God appeals to me. In this view God is not somewhere else, far away, but is everywhere—even within us. Every person, every creature, every stone, every place is sacred. Everything is part of God. God is in the Grand Canyon and a Transylvanian village with more horse carts than cars and Disney World (to name three very disparate places I've been lucky enough to visit in recent months). God is atop Mount Everest and in the junkyard outside of town and in the sprawling cattle feedlot in Nebraska. God is in the concert hall and the library and the Mumbai train station. God is in the young man's petting of his golden retriever companion outside my office window. God is within you and me and Barack Obama and

---

<sup>3</sup> Responsive Reading #531 in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon, 1993).

George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden and the cantankerous neighbor across the street with the heart of gold and the shivering woman I saw walk into the homeless shelter the other day. God is in the beauty and in the mess of life.<sup>4</sup>

This idea about God is not foreign to Christianity. “Emmanuel” means “God with us.” As we sang earlier, Emmanuel shall come within us as Love to dwell, as Truth to dwell, as Light to dwell, as Hope to dwell.<sup>5</sup> To me this is the meaning of the Christmas story: God came to dwell within this baby born to a poor, powerless family in the middle of nowhere. The point is not that God came to dwell within this one person, but that God dwells within each of us. God dwells within those we love and those we hate. Every human is an incarnation of the divine.<sup>6</sup>

Next I add **half a cup of process theology** to my recipe.<sup>7</sup> Like Emerson and Hindus, process theologians believe that God is in the midst of life with us. God is not somewhere distant or ethereal. Process theologians believe that God is especially with us when we are suffering. With the Buddhists, they believe that suffering is inevitable in our lives; experiencing it is part of being human. Since God is neither all-knowing nor all-powerful, our suffering cannot be caused by God. Nor can it be prevented by God. Rather, our suffering is caused by bad luck or bad choices on our part or a combination of these two. And though God does not cause suffering, God is there with us as we suffer. The God with us when we suffer comes in many different forms: for example, as a quiet serenity within our souls even in the worst moments, or as the outstretched helping hand of another person.

Next I add **one teaspoon of liberation theology** to the bowl.<sup>8</sup> Though this ingredient represents a small volume in my recipe, it has a big impact because it is the leavening agent—it’s the yeast or baking powder in the recipe. It’s the ingredient that makes my recipe come alive. The most important thing about liberation theology—whether it is Latin American or black or feminist or gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered theology (to name just a few)—is that it always puts justice at the center. Liberation theology tells us that contemplating or worshiping God is meaningless (at best) if it doesn’t translate into an active commitment to justice. So the recipe for my understanding of God is incomplete if it doesn’t help me build a better, more just world. Liberation theology breaks down the walls of denial I have built up and shows me where my words and actions have contributed to injustice. It demands that I clean up my act and that I join voices and hands with others to fight injustice. Liberation theology asks me to be courageous and to take risks for justice.

My recipe next calls for **one tablespoon of the Star Wars’ Force**. Hey, I wasn’t a young teen when Star Wars came out for nothing! There’s no way it couldn’t have seeped into my spirituality! Now I don’t believe the Force can help me levitate airplanes (darn!) or fight with a light saber, but I do partly envision God as the Force. In the first

---

<sup>4</sup> Parker Palmer writes about God being in the mess with us in *The Active Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), p. 92.

<sup>5</sup> Hymn #225 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

<sup>6</sup> Both Joseph Campbell and Parker Palmer make this point: Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 50; Parker Palmer, p. 136.

<sup>7</sup> For an introduction to process theology, see “Process Theology 101,” a sermon I did on April 12-13, 2008: [http://www.fvuuf.org/component/option.com\\_docman/Itemid,127/](http://www.fvuuf.org/component/option.com_docman/Itemid,127/).

<sup>8</sup> For an introduction to liberation theology, see “Liberation Theology—Like a Slap in the Face,” a sermon I did on December 8-9, 2007: [http://www.fvuuf.org/component/option.com\\_docman/Itemid,127/](http://www.fvuuf.org/component/option.com_docman/Itemid,127/).

Star Wars movie that came out, Obi-Wan Kenobi defines the Force as “an energy field created by all things. It surrounds us, and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy together.”<sup>9</sup> To me, the Star Wars notion of the Force is a striking contemporary mythical depiction of Emerson’s Oversoul and the Hindu deity Brahman. It aptly captures the pervasive, hidden but still impactful nature of God.

Finally, for good measure, I finally add **a quarter teaspoon of forgiveness, half a teaspoon of gratitude and half a teaspoon of joy** to the mixing bowl. This lifts up how important I believe these three attributes of God are. If God is all about guilt and wrath, then it’s not for me. It’s absolutely essential that my understanding of God contain a little bit of forgiveness. This ingredient helps remind me that I need to be forgiving in my life—of myself and of others. And no spiritual path is worth anything without a healthy dose of gratitude. I want my belief about God to help me feel gratitude—for the small, everyday things as well as the big things in life. And I hope that my understanding of God helps me recognize and feel the joy that is, like suffering, an inherent part of every human life.

So, to recap, here’s the recipe for my belief about God:

#### INGREDIENTS

1 cup agnosticism  
½ cup Emerson’s Oversoul  
½ cup of Hindu view of God  
½ cup process theology  
1 teaspoon liberation theology (for leavening)  
1 tablespoon Star Wars’ “Force”  
¼ teaspoon forgiveness  
½ teaspoon gratitude  
½ teaspoon joy

#### DIRECTIONS

1. Combine Emerson’s Oversoul and the Hindu view of God in a small bowl and mix.
2. Combine all ingredients (including the Oversoul/Hindu mixture) together in large bowl and mix.
3. Spread batter evenly into container—namely, me.
4. Bake in an oven preheated to 98.6 degrees for 45 years and 356 days.
5. Let cool and enjoy!

That’s it! That’s the recipe! Of course the recipe will automatically be different tomorrow because there will be an additional day of baking. And who knows: I might decide to change the ingredients tomorrow. I might even decide to change the ingredients in the next twenty minutes as I hear your responses to the sermon!<sup>10</sup>

Returning to today’s Reading, my colleague Victoria Safford also expresses a part of my belief about God. When she writes about how we’re alone and we’re bound to one another and to everything in the universe, she expresses a variation of the paradox at

---

<sup>9</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Force\\_\(Star\\_Wars\)#Footnotes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Force_(Star_Wars)#Footnotes).

<sup>10</sup> This in fact happened. In my new, revised recipe, I add a dash of humor to my recipe.

the heart of Emerson's Oversoul. "God," she writes, is the meeting place where our solitudes join. I often think of God as a symbol for our connections with other people and with nature. This strikes me as the same idea.

There's another word besides God that describes this meeting place: love. For me, saying that "God is love" wonderfully sums up my belief about God. And I would say that *this* meeting place—this congregation—is a holy place, a place of love. If there is a God, surely God dwells in this place (and everywhere).

© 2008 by Roger B. Bertschausen. All rights reserved.