

Even So

March 7, 2010
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Opening Words

We are here,
after some delicious days of rising sunlight,
to worship, to welcome questions and insights,
to risk vulnerability before the world's realities,
and to offer the gifts of our heart, and focus
in response to the sacred call to live just lives.

And so, **mindful that we share a common world, but approach that world in different ways, we begin our celebration together by kindling our promise of mutual honesty, attentiveness, and deep courtesy. May we become more proficient at gratitude and awareness, that we might more deeply embody the kind of justice and peace which embraces everyone on earth.**

Affirmation:

From Henry David Thoreau:

“It is not when I am going to meet God,
but when I am turning away and leaving God
that I discover God is...”

then, #487

then: from Gustavo Gutierrez:
“To know God is to do justice.”

Sequence

What would I do, I wonder, if a woman
claiming to be the goddess made a yellow rosebud blossom in her hand, just like that, right
before my eyes?

I would breathe in, breathe out, and ask:

“There will be more roses pretty soon;
wanna go walk in the rose-garden with me come May?”

What would I do, I wonder, if a man who claimed to be the son of god
waved his hand, and a huge mountain suddenly was floating over my head?

I would breathe in and breathe out, and ask:

“Wanna come with me on a road-trip to the
Sierra? They’re beautiful at this time of year, too.”

What would I do, I wonder, if someone said to me

“Your house was destroyed in the earthquake
because you don’t believe in my god,
and I know the real truth and you don’t, you devil.”
I would breathe in and out and ask:
“I’d appreciate it if you would help me rebuild my house.
Hand me that plank, will you, please?”
What would I do if someone said to me
“God lives in my heart when I am giving bread to the poor.”
I would breathe in and breathe out, and ask:
“Did god live inside my grandmother
when she didn’t even know who she was for 11 years in the Alzheimer’s ward?”
And then, after asking all those questions,
I would just sit still for a while and keep silence.

silence

So now I breathe in and I breathe out, and I think of all the people I have known who
have helped me to think that whether or not we ever agree about the language of divinity, there
are certainly godly people in my life and your life, whose humility and tenderness, love and
recovery, have moved us and blessed us all the way to this moment. Remembering them as they
rise out of our hearts of love, we name them to ourselves or pronounce their names aloud softly,
knowing that they are one with us, and us with them.

naming

O the beauty in a life that sings! O the beauty in lives that breathe in the questions and breath out
music to face everything with singing and love.

The First Reading consists of major excerpts from a longer poem by A. E. Spellman, who was
the long-time Poet-in-Residence at the great Morehouse College in Atlanta. It’s called *Theology*.

sometimes the day deceives me and i think
the ashes have settled enough that i might see...

i try to digest all i observe when i search
frantically for god whose most credible sightings
are within.

but silence cannot call god to be.
the colors of the earth cannot call god to be.
“why?” cannot call god to be.
the oppressive distance of the stars,
the making, living or losing of life
cannot call god to be.

god must be the being that calls itself to be
in the unspoken quiet.

oh, i do hear those who claim title
to god's inaudible song.
their arias are brilliant,
their voices swoop;
they sing, they seek to carol
through the grave
to merge with some eternal chord.
do not allow me to belittle the faith
of the godded.

they do doubt the wisdom of their flesh,
their earth, their reason.
they doubt me. i see oppression.
my faith is finite, does not turn corners,
skim time, or till the cosmic soil.
my faith is local and sustains me by the hour.

i would if i could name what lives in me a soul.
but to name a soul is not to be eternal,
and to name that soul god is not to be god.

i crave all, but live on enough.
atheist, i worship the play of the leaf
and the wind, the stand of the strong
against the wrong.
it would satisfy me if my labor left some small advance...
not even my name...to mark my living.

let the next ones notice that the...growth
touched by me, has shifted toward the sun.
if they must call it god's work, i will say,
no it was mine.

and they will say "even so,"
and i will answer "even so."

The Second Reading *is from the late, great American poet with both Jewish and Christian family heritage, Denise Levertov. This beautiful poem is her reflection on the process of how to approach thinking about ideas like "God."*

Contraband

The tree of knowledge was the tree of reason.
That's why the taste of it drove us from Eden.
That fruit was meant to be dried, and milled
to a fine powder, for use a pinch at a time,
a condiment. God probably planned to tell us
about this new pleasure.

We stuffed out mouths full of it,
gorged on "but" and "how" and again "but.."
knowing no better.
It's toxic in large quantities; fumes swirled
in our heads and around us to form a dense cloud
that hardened to steel,
a wall between us and God, Who *was* Paradise.
Not that God is unreasonable...
but reason in such excess was tyranny
and locked us into its own limits,
a polished cell reflecting our own faces.
God lives on the other side of the mirror,
but through the slit where the barrier doesn't
quite touch the ground, manages still to squeeze in:
as filtered light, a strain of music heard then lost,
then heard again.

Sermon

So my good friend Bonni finally emailed me after I had been calling her for days. She and her husband live in Puerto Montt, Chile, 515 kilometers south of earthquake-ravished Concepcion. Their daughter, Andrea Maria, lives up in Santiago, where the airport was closed for days because of the quake.

I used the overseas operator *seven* times in two days and couldn't even get a line to *any* place in Chile, let alone their farm. Finally, I got a dial-tone, but to no avail. No one was home, and the answering machine wasn't on. Of course, I started to imagine the worst.

But Bonni, bless her heart, finally emailed me to tell me that all three of them had been on vacation in the deep south, in Patagonia at the gorgeous *Torres del Paine* mountains, when the quake shook up north.

As it is, they have been stuck down in Patagonia, since Chilean airlines are not flying. But they did find out from friends with local cell-phones, that their house, their farm, and their daughter's place in Santiago are all ok.

"Thank God, or whatever," wrote Bonni, "nothing was damaged."

God or whatever. Interesting phrase that.

Now, let me be clear. Bonni's letter to me was not an essay in her theology. She was not defining God as the author of earthquakes. She was simply saying she was relieved. Glad. Happy that the places where her family members lay their head at night were not damaged. She does *not*, however, I assure you, think of herself as somehow deserving to be saved, someone especially blest.

But it did strike me that she knows that there is a language problem with the word *God*, because she added the "whatever." Maybe, you might think, that's her substitute for the word Luck. Or, Fate. But *those* are words as problematic for many as the word "God" is, no?

Still, her phrasing reminds me that, at the very least, the word "God" poses a problem for many.

Seems like it has been since ancient times. The passage from the Hebrew Scriptures (Book of Melakim/Kings) up at the top of your orders of service was written over twenty-four hundred years ago.

(Here is the passage: "And look! The Eternal was there. A great torrent of wind rent the mountain into gravel, yet the Eternal was not in the wind. And after the wind, an earthquake, but the Eternal was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake, a fire, but the Eternal was not in the fire; but after the fire, a lean, thin silence...")

Yet that particular author is quite clear that whatever else the Ineffable may be about, earthquakes, hurricanes and forest fires are not evidences of God in any way. They, the biblical editor suggests, are just what they are. If you are looking for God, pay attention to the lean, thin silence *inside you*. The famous King James Version renders that Hebrew as "still, small voice." Still other translators render the Hebrew phrase *qol demamah daq'* as "a soft murmuring sound" or "the sound of a whisper." Take your pick. You get the picture, whichever translation you favor.

Because the author of that poetic passage thinks that whatever else God may mean, bombast and lightning bolts are simply not part of the picture. You have to search in subtleties, the passage is saying. Silence and hunches and whispers. What Unitarian minister Waldo Emerson used to call "intuition," or "spontaneity" or even "instinct." I like how poet Denise Levertov describes this subtlety: God, she says, manages still to squeeze in: as filtered light, a strain of music heard then lost, then heard again.

But there is no God, you say. Auschwitz proves that once and for all. Or how can anyone know if there is a God, you ask. How can you imagine any Being that could explain both a pink and purple sunset over the Pacific near Hawaii, and a child dying of a one-in-a-million genetic disorder? You can't, so why bother. "A strain of music heard then lost?" What does she mean? She's not saying God is a song by Sinatra that I've half forgotten, is she? What sense does that make?

None. But that is her point. Levertov is not against reason. She is entirely for it. But there can be *too much* reasoning. It's like food, she says. Food, in all of its varieties, is certainly good. But you don't have to be the Surgeon General of the United States to realize that too much of it will rob you, eventually, of your health.

Same thing with reason. I can reason that the word God makes no sense because all of the famous philosophical proofs of God fail to convince me. I can reason that the overwhelming narcissism of many of the television preachers is so blatant that the word God is simply too tainted to use without wincing. I can reason that because God is depicted, in stories, as being downright brutal in many biblical and quranic passages, that it's better to have no truck with that word at all. I can reason that Buddhism and Confucianism and other religions do very well without such a word, so what's wrong with me doing that as well?

Those are all fine reasons. But those reasons will clog my brain and my heart both if I assume that such reasons *ought or should be universal*. For example, Gustavo Gutierrez says that to know God is to do justice. I can get upset and say: "Why not just say 'To do justice is to do justice.'" But even to *say that* means I must think Gustavo Gutierrez is a lot like me...an American citizen living in a mid-western city with moderate but very real affluence. But he is not. He is a Peruvian, a Native American of Quechua ancestry, and he has lived much of his life among people who might be described accurately as *remarkably* poor, and poor because of insane systems of injustice. Will anyone then tell me that the word God is useful only as a crutch for the poor, but is easily dismissed by the affluent? If so, I have many more sermons to preach ...about systems theory, about economic theory, and about shame, power and privilege.

At the BREAD interfaith clergy meeting on Thursday, Susan Smith of Advent United Church of Christ preached a truly thrilling sermon on God as the source of the call to justice, quoting a passage from the book of the prophet Haggai in the Hebrew Scriptures, which contains the following observations put in the mouth, so to speak, of God: "*Consider how you are faring. You have sowed much and harvested little. You eat without being satisfied. You drink but are never full. You clothe yourselves but are never comfortable. And if you earn a salary it burns a hole in your pocket.*" These are stinging words of social criticism found in a justice-rooted text. After the sermon, Tim Ahrens, who ministers at First Congregational downtown, told us how those words affected him. He got up and said: "I never understand what people mean when they say they 'believe in God.' As if to say, it's important to decide whether or not God actually IS something somewhere. Rather," he said, "I'd rather turn to the words ascribed to God, interpret them with my own heart and mind, and listen to their call to love and justice, and then put them into practice."

This theology is similar, it seems to me, to the words of the lesbian Episcopal priest, Carter Heyward, who writes, putting the word in small case letters, that "god is our common strength, whose movement is to empower, whose name in history is love."

Recently I heard a story about an event in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Who knows what congregation it was; maybe it was nearby, or maybe it was far away, but no matter, this is a

true story. A husband and wife were at a dinner together with other members of the congregation. I really don't know what the husband's theology was, but the wife was definitely someone for whom God was an important word. She was not a fundamentalist, or a rigid person, any more than Gutierrez or Heyward are rigid people. Or Martin Luther King, or Rumi, or Kabir, or Denise Levertov. No, the wife was not a fundamentalist, nor did she have some religious agenda to foist. But she did find comfort and support and challenge in what Heyward calls "the movement" of god, "to empower us... together."

Now another member of the same congregation, also at that dinner, when she heard the wife bring God into the conversation, responded, "I just don't know how you or anyone can believe in such a thing as God. With all the suffering in the world, with all the wars and fighting, it simply makes no sense. There's no reason in it."

I wish this woman had simply asked the wife what god meant to her, or how she imagined god. But she didn't. She proclaimed: "There's simply no sense in believing what you believe."

Well, you see, it did make sense to the wife. Mind you, she was no fool. She knew about suffering. Auschwitz. Pol Pot. The various genocides. The death of innocents daily. She knew about racism and other injustices. But, it's fair to say she was actually suffering right there at that dinner. Why? Because the phrase "How can you believe?" is not English. It's a knife. It's ridicule, however unintentioned. It's a proclamation of personal superiority in theological matters. It's a sundering of any possibility of a real relationship or conversation.

What happened was predictable. The wife never came back to any church suppers. Or to anything at the church from that day on. Why would she?

This is a sad story for me. Oh, I understand the passion behind questions about God. I understand the electricity of freedom crackling in those who have turned away from what they were taught: namely, that god is superhuman being who is rigid, controlling, the source of sickness and storms, and who flings people into hell forever. I am all for rejecting such gods. But still, I'm troubled.

What troubles me is that it was impossible for this person to imagine that someone else, someone she might have a great relationship with, might also feel the electricity of freedom *flowing inside her*. The electricity of an image of god that she feels spurs her to justice-work, deeper compassion, and fiercely honest self-questioning.

What troubles me is that it was impossible for this person to understand that this woman might be strengthened by the image of god in Denise Levertov's poem, which affirms that God *is* Paradise itself. Maybe this image helps her to desire that the world, too, become Paradise...full of abundance for all. "Oh," my critic might chime in, "all that poetry stuff...it's just your imagination!" To which, I hope the woman in question might have had the strength to say, "Of course it's my imagination! Do you think that what I imagine isn't also part of reality? Is there really something wrong, evil or stupid about seeing the world as a sacred garden?"

What troubles me is that someone who lives with fears, like the girl in our story this morning, might want a way to address fears which paralyze her. In the story this morning, the girl names the jibberwillies, the fears, one by one, and the wise mother tossed them out the window. Maybe for some, God is like an image in their heart as sturdy as that pail, an idea they find powerful and effective to free them...not just from fears, but from addiction, and self-loathing. OK, maybe for you, those images don't work. Maybe you face your fears by just whistling in the dark, or like me, by working with a therapist over long years to confront my own jibberwillies. But my point is, what business is it of any of us to even suggest that it's better for others not to use certain words or ideas or concepts that work well for them...even if it's true they don't work for others? What business is it of anyone's?

I like what A. B. Spellman says in his most remarkable poem. "Do not allow me to belittle the faith of the godded..." he prays. And he prays that, *even though* he says he is an atheist, who doesn't worship god, but rather, "the play of the leaf and the wind, the stand of the strong against the wrong."

But my colleagues in BREAD also, most certainly, worship "the stand of the strong against the wrong..." heck, that's what the organization is about. And, of course, Cantor Chomsky and Rev. Frosh, and Imam Hany also adore "the play of the leaf and the wind..." To use God-language is hardly to give up on ecstasy based on the natural world. I know I always am lifted up by the beauties of the season. It's hard to imagine *anyone* who hasn't gotten a little lift around here this week as the sun draws the unfurling leaves of new shoots up past the snow line. So some speak just of leaves, and others speak of leaves *and* god in the same sentence. Is one person really better or wiser than the other? So one person speaks of justice and the other speaks of justice *and* God? Is one person really more representative of the human race than the other?

No, do not allow me to belittle the faith of the godded, writes Spellman. Right. But note, just because he doesn't belittle doesn't mean he has to give up observation and even critique. He notes, for example, *they do doubt the wisdom of their flesh, their earth, their reason. they doubt me*. But, he also is not afraid to look at himself either. *My faith is finite, does not turn corners, skim time, or till the cosmic soil. my faith is local and sustains me by the hour*.

But what I like most about Spellman's amazing lines is the ending. He seems to realize that there will never be a time...*never, never, never*... when *everyone* agrees there is a common image of god that everyone can share...the stated hope of most religious conservatives that I know, believing it will be their own. And, just as true, he also realizes that there will never be a time when everyone just gives up religious and spiritual language, the stated prediction of many non-religious progressives of the last century...and this one. This is how Spellman does it: he writes: *let the next ones* (that is, the next generations) *notice that the...growth touched by me, has shifted toward the sun. if they must call it god's work, i will say, no it was mine*. And then, with humility that almost blinds with its brightness, he concludes: *& they will say "even so," and I will answer "even so."*

And so it goes on. The earthquakes and the fires.

The poetry and the prose. Stories and questions. Reason and feelings. Intuition and science. Newer images of god coming to life, and older images of god being dashed to the ground; people like Thoreau turning away from God, and thus, he claims, then *discovering* some intimation, some “filtered light” illuminating ultimacy. Who knows? All I know is that God...and Bonni’s “whatever”... need to share the same world, the same beds, the same communities, and the same historic age. And that, at least part of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist is to always find a way to help people feel as safe and supported as possible while they deepen images, smash them; run to them, or away from them; or try to live without images at all. I can’t imagine a more beautiful way of living out our days together.

Offering

What gift can we bring? We sang at the beginning of our celebration. What gift can we bring? Our presence. Our humility. Our teachable-ness. Our self-questioning. Our risking. Our hope. Our ideals. Our conversations. Our financial support, either given in more modern ways behind the scenes, or offered in this more ancient way as an integral part of our celebration. The ushers are invited forward.

Sinkoffian Prayer

Question and answer; question.
Question and answer and question.

Listening and speaking; reflection
Listening and speaking and reflection.

Experience and vision; imagination.
Experience and vision and imagination.

Image and emptiness; struggle
Image and emptiness and struggle.

Solitude and community; deepening.
Solitude and community and deepening.

Compassion and justice: divinity.
Compassion is justice is divinity.