

## Will the Real God Please Stand Up?<sup>1</sup>

Rev. Myke Johnson

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Do you remember the game show, “To Tell the Truth”? Three contestants each claimed to be the same person. The first would say, “My name is Jane Doe.” The second would say, “*My* name is Jane Doe.” The third would also claim to be Jane Doe. A celebrity panel tried to guess which one was telling the truth. At the end, we all learned the truth when the game show host commanded: “Will the real Jane Doe please stand up?”

A newcomer to our church faces a similar challenge sorting out our Unitarian Universalist beliefs about God. One member might say, “God is a loving parent to all.” Another will counter: “God is an outmoded idea. I don’t believe in God.” Still another might say, “There are many gods *and goddesses* who are alive in the wind and the sea and the earth.” The newcomer might wish there were a game show host to shout—

“Will the real God please stand up?”

And perhaps we all might wish sometimes that it wasn’t so confounding and mysterious. People fight wars and hurt each other over the issue of whose God is the real God. And, if God is real, many ask, why is there so much trouble in the world? Why aren’t our prayers answered when we are suffering? Why doesn’t the real God just show up, make it all clear?

Wendell Berry asked that question, too, through his character Jayber Crow, who was the town barber in a fictional village called Port William, Kentucky. Jayber was very troubled by the war going on—it was the time of the Second World War—troubled by all the pain it caused. He says: “In the most secret place of my soul I wanted to beg the Lord to reveal Himself in power... to lay His hands on the hurt children. Why didn’t He cow our arrogance? ... Why hasn’t he done it at any one of a thousand good times...?”

He goes on to say:

I knew the answer. I knew it a long time before I could admit it, for all the suffering of the world is in it. He didn’t, He hasn’t, because from the moment He did, He would be the absolute tyrant of the world and we would be His slaves. ... From that moment the possibility that we might be bound to Him and He to us and us to one another *by love* forever would be ended.<sup>2</sup>

As the children in our skit today reflected, how could we be human beings, if God appeared in the sky and ordered us to be good and took away our ability to think for ourselves?<sup>3</sup> As soon as God stood up, the game would be over—the adventure of human life would lose its meaning.

And so we are left with our questions. As Unitarian Universalists, we embrace the mystery of it; we encourage those questions. We are not bound together by one answer. Some of us say they believe in God, others would say they are atheists. Others would disagree with both of those statements. We are not bound together by one idea of God. We begin by affirming that diversity is real. People—in this room and all over the world—think and feel differently

about the idea of God. That is real, and we can choose to fear it, or we can choose to welcome and celebrate it. Our choice to be Unitarian Universalists is a choice for struggling with that diversity, for celebrating that diversity.

But what does that do to our quest for truth? Can God both exist and not exist at the same time? That isn't logical. But the truth is: both kinds of human experience exist! There are humans who experience or affirm God and there are humans who do not experience or affirm God. There are also many humans who renounce certain ideas of God, and affirm other ideas of God. What UU's take into account is that all of our understanding about God comes through human experience. So if we seek the larger truth, we need to take all human experience into account. It is our challenge and it is also our gift.

This does set us apart from some other faiths, which have an idea of God that is mediated through external religious authority. Some religions believe that certain leaders or scriptures have the truth about God, and the role of other persons is to follow and obey their authority. In these religions, a person may be instructed to discount their own experience as faulty or sinful, in favor of the wisdom of the elite. But that is not a Unitarian Universalist view.

We believe that each person's experience is valid, at least in part, and the fullest truth is that which is weighed in community with the experience of others. There is a Hebrew proverb: "Hospitality to strangers is greater than reverence for the name of God." This fits our UU values. We cling more to an open heart, than to specific images and beliefs about God. It means that the real God might be hidden in each person, in each plant or animal, in each sunrise or stormy day, in the ordinary and the spectacular alike. Or nowhere at all.

But it is a challenge to honor the revelation hiding in every living being. How do we do a community that celebrates this diversity? How do we talk about our truths? How do we manage the contradictions? How do we worship together?

The first challenge is in our words. Words don't always mean the same thing to different people. When we use that word, *God*, what do we mean? My colleague, the Rev. Laurel Hallman, in a lecture one year at General Assembly,<sup>4</sup> spoke about a seminar she had given at her own church, entitled "Why I am not a theist." Many people in her congregation were surprised that she identified herself as not believing in God, because she often used the word *God* in her worship services. But for her, the word *God* was a metaphor, a symbol, a poetic expression for experiences that were larger than words. She believes that a word like *God* was never meant to mean just one thing—such as an old man with a beard who sees everything we do. It was never meant to be frozen in concrete.

Buddhists often speak of the teaching of the Buddha as "a finger pointing to the moon." If we spend our energy looking at the finger, and arguing about its texture, color, length, angle, and so forth, we are missing the point. Its purpose is to call our attention to something beyond itself. Words like *God* are meant to be fingers pointing to the moon. The Muslim poet Hafiz said, "It is like saying of the king, he is not a weaver. Words about God are on that level of accuracy."

UU minister Forrest Church has written: "The power which I cannot explain or know or name I call God. God is not God's name. God is my name for the mystery that looms within and arches beyond the limits of my being. Life force, spirit of life, ground of being, these too are names for the unnamable which I am now content to call my God."<sup>5</sup>

The word *God* can be a finger pointing to the moon, something that moves and transforms us, as we let its meanings grow and change with our experience. But it also might be a stumbling block. Sometimes the word *God* feels corrupted by our experience. Alice Walker explores this question in her novel, *The Color Purple*. Two black women, Celie and Shug, talk about the old white man that they find in the white man's Bible. Shug says, "Ain't no way to read the bible and not think God white... When I found out I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest."<sup>6</sup>

There was a time in my life, too, when the word *God* didn't work for me. When I was a child, God seemed like the perfect father—I didn't notice that I saw it as white and male. My idea of God helped me as a child: I felt held in the care of a loving presence. Later, my family joined the Pentecostals, who also believed that God was a loving father who would guide us on our path.

But by and by, a problem occurred for me. Our father God seemed to be guiding people in really different directions. One person heard God say that the men should be stronger leaders. But my God was saying men and women were equal. I didn't feel equal enough in that group even to express my truth. So I left instead. Feminist writers helped me to understand the cultural influence on such personal images and revelations. A white male-dominated culture will create white male-dominant images of God. We draw a picture of God shaped by our cultural expectations. And those images in turn reinforce the cultural values by which we live.

For many years after that I didn't know what to do about God. The word had become noxious to me, and connected to oppressive forces in my life. The feminist movement tried to counter those forces by creating new images of the divine in a conscious way, by re-imagining god as female, by calling her *goddess*. But is it possible to imagine a goddess and then have her be real? What is real and what is imaginary?

Here's the thing I discovered. The goddess began to feel real to me when my life started to change. Something is real when it makes a difference to us. The goddess became real when the power of women became real, when we were able to embrace our own sacredness, affirm our own intrinsic value and dignity, and live out our own gifts and talents and leadership. Then the words and images had something to point to. Images become real when they open a door.

In *The Color Purple*, Shug also found new ways to imagine God. She said, "My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day, when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was."<sup>7</sup>

When my images and ideas about God began to change, I embarked on a journey that demanded a deeper humility and a deeper confidence. This is what I mean. We need humility to recognize the incompleteness of our experience and the validity of truth beyond our understanding. We also need to have confidence to claim our own reality as valid, whether or not others agree with us. Both humility and confidence are important to make our way as a diverse UU community.

We have a chance within our church community to really explore and name our own experience of the world. In our UU Theology class, I ask participants, “If God is an answer, what are the questions?” Then we explore our own answers to such perennial human questions as: How did the world come to exist? Why is there evil and suffering in the world? What gives us hope? What relationship can we have, if any, to powers greater than ourselves?

There have been many responses to these questions through the ages. Even the religions that seem the most bizarre to us are an attempt to find meaningful answers to these fundamental queries. Each of the answers has certain implications for how we live our lives, and what we value. Should our attitude toward all that is be one of caution or thankfulness? Obedience or exploration? Aggression or compassion? Who or what is valued by us? Warriors dying in battle, or mothers giving birth? Those who are tough and tenacious, or those who are thoughtful and kind?

It is not enough to ask, do you believe in God? Rather, we must ask, what kind of God is worthy of our belief? Twentieth century Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams said that everyone has faith in something. To what will we give our devotion, our loyalty, our sacrifices? Our “God” is whatever claims our deepest allegiance.<sup>8</sup>

It isn’t really about the words. UU minister Davidson Loehr tells a story about a worship class in graduate school, when he was a part of a group of Unitarian and Christian students who had the assignment to create a worship service together. They spent quite a bit of time arguing about words, about how to address the focus of their worship. The Unitarians objected when the Christians wanted to pray to Jesus or to God. The Christians backed off when the Unitarians suggested maybe God and Goddess. The conversation went around and around. Finally, their professor intervened. Loehr writes:

He glared at us [and said]: “And the only thing you have been able to agree on is that you would like the Spirit to be a part of your worship service?”

Yes, we all stammered: “But we don’t know what to *call* it.”

Still the stern father, he shot us a punishing glance and said three words: “Call it *forth!*” “Call it *forth!*” No matter what you choose to call it, he explained, call it forth. Because unless you can call forth the quality of spirit that is rightfully called holy, you don’t have a chance of staging a worship service anyway.<sup>9</sup>

It is not enough to ask, do you believe in God or not? Rather we must ask, what God do you want to call forth into the world? What you call it isn’t so important. Use the word *energy* or *power* if you wish. What *energy* do you want to call forth into the world? What *power* do you want to call forth into the world? Despite all the changes in my images of *God* or *goddess*,

I realized that there was something that stayed the same: an experience of the power of love. At some point in my life, I realized I wanted to call forth the power of that love into the world.

And so I will conclude with that question, what kind of power will you call forth into the world?

*If your power is in humanism*, may you call forth sound thinking and the guidance of reason, and warn us against manipulations of the mind and spirit.

*If your power is in Buddhism*, may you meditate faithfully, that we might experience the oneness of all beings and manifest compassion.

*If your power is in justice*, may you confront the structures of evil with courage and vision, that we might create a world community of peace and liberty for all.

*If your power is in pagan ritual*, may you invoke joy and ecstasy through movement and sound, and teach us delight in the cycles of life.

*If your power is in the teachings of Jesus*, may you be a witness to the nonviolent force of love in the world.

*If your power is in the natural world*, may you call forth our appreciation of the wonder and majesty of the universe, with its evolving patterns.

*If your power is still unknown to you*, may you follow your questions wherever they lead you.

What do you hold in your heart and your hands? The details of what we believe are less important than living our faith to the fullest, testing it in practice, calling it forth into our community, for the benefit of all. When we live our faith to the fullest, then the real God will stand up in our midst.

*Closing Words:*

We are grasped by what we cannot grasp;  
It has its inner light, even from a distance -  
And changes us, even if we do not reach it,  
Into something else, which hardly sensing, we already are;  
A gesture waves us on, answering our own wave...  
But what we feel is the wind in our faces.     *Rainer Maria Rilke*

*Our readings today were two poems: "Not So, Not So" by Anne Sexton<sup>10</sup> and God Says Yes To Me by Kaylin Haught.<sup>11</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*, p. 295. *Italics added.*

<sup>3</sup> “In the Clouds,” by Rick Kimball, from *sUUPER plays*, (Green Timber Publications) #18.

<sup>4</sup> This was at GA in 2003.

<sup>5</sup> From a UU Pamphlet.

<sup>6</sup> *The Color Purple*, (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1982), p. 166.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>8</sup> See “A Faith for the Free,” in *The Essential JLA*, edited by George Kimmich Beach (Skinner House), p.21-44.

<sup>9</sup> From “Call it Forth: Religion for Atheists” by Davidson Loehr (in *Religious Humanism*, Volume XXXIV, #1 & 2, Winter/Spring 2000)

<sup>10</sup> Can be found in *The Complete Poems: Anne Sexton*, (Mariner: 1981,1999); or in *The Awful Rowing Towards God*, 1975.

<sup>11</sup> Found in Steve Kowitz's, *In the Palm of Your Hand*, 1995 and other anthologies.