Will the Real God Please Stand Up?¹
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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Opening Words
A small child was drawing a picture and the teacher said, “That’s an interesting picture. Tell me about it.”
“It’s a picture of God,” said the child.
“Well, nobody knows what God looks like.”
“They will when I get done.”²
Today in our worship we will explore the idea of God, and how we wrestle with that idea as Unitarian
Universalists. Because we are a faith without dogma, we believe that nobody knows exactly what God
looks like, and so we find among us many diverse beliefs about God, including the choice to not
believe in a God at all. This diversity is our challenge, and also our gift.

Readings:
Not So, Not So Anne Sexton
Where Does the Temple Begin, Where Does It End? Mary Oliver³

Excerpt from the reading:
There are things you can’t reach. But
you can reach out to them, and all day long.

The wind, the bird flying away. The idea of God...

Sermon

The word God is a challenging one. Some people have a hard time with it. Tom Barrett said,
If I say the word God, people run away.
They’ve been frightened--sat on 'till the spirit cried 'uncle.'⁴

Perhaps it calls to mind particular beliefs and images from an earlier religious community that are
difficult. Some people may be very clear what it means to them, and very assured that everyone else is
wrong about it. Some may have been wounded by the betrayals of those who used that word in hurtful
ways. Others may feel a sense of confusion, perhaps tinged with longing. And of course, for some, it
is a cherished word, and thus confusing that others have a hard time with it.

The word God is powerful and charged with conflict. I believe it is important for us as a spiritual
community to wrestle with that word every so often, and I want to share with you today a sermon
adapted from one I gave about five years ago.

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² Jack Canfield & Harold Wells/ 100 Ways to Enhance Self-Concept in the Classroom
³ From Why I Wake Early
When I was growing up, there was a TV game show called, “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!”

Don’t we wish sometimes that there were a game show host to shout—“Will the real God please stand up?” If only it wasn’t so confounding and mysterious! We know that this is not merely a debate about ideas. People fight wars and hurt each other over the issue of whose God is the real God. And, if God is real, others 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.5

Berry asks how could we be human beings if God appeared in the sky and took away our ability to search, to struggle, to think for ourselves, to love? As soon as God stood up, the game would be over—the adventure of human life would lose its meaning. There would be nothing left to do.

And whether or not that would be true, in any case, we are left here with our questions. We are left with the mystery of it. We are left with our different understandings and our religious battles. I believe we must begin by affirming that difference is real. People—in the same town and all over the world—think differently about the idea of God and have different experiences of God. That is real, and we can choose to fear it, or we can choose to welcome it, explore it, and even celebrate it.

But what does that do to our ideas about truth and reality? We might ask, for example, “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 humans who experience or affirm certain images and ideas of God, and reject other images and ideas of God. We must take into account that all of our understanding about God comes through our human experience.

So if we seek some larger truth, we need to be open to our human experience. This openness sets us apart from people of some other faiths, who 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 reality, and the role of other persons is to follow and obey their authority. In these religions, a

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person may be instructed to discount their own experience as faulty or sinful, in favor of the wisdom of the leader. But that is not what we believe, or what I believe.

Perhaps I have been hurt too deeply by the misused authority of religious leaders. The very idea of God has felt corrupted by the betrayals of religious institutions. Alice Walker explores this question in her novel, *The Color Purple*. Two black women, Celie and Shug, talk about the God 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.”

There was a time in my life, too, when the God of the churches didn’t work for me. At first, when I was a child, God was like a perfect father. I learned about this God from my Catholic family. My idea of God helped me as a child: I felt held in the care of a strong and loving presence. Later, when my family and I became a part of a Pentecostal movement among Catholics, this community also believed that God was a loving father. They emphasized that the Spirit would communicate with us directly and would guide us on our path. It opened a beautiful door to a spirituality of direct experience.

But by and by, a problem occurred for me. This Spirit seemed to be guiding people in really different directions. One man heard the Spirit say that men should be stronger leaders, and women should remain in supportive roles only. But the Spirit in my heart was saying that men and women were equal. So why were my gifts and energy not valued? I didn’t feel equal enough in that group to express my truth, so I left instead. I felt like my heart was broken.

Later, the work of feminist philosopher Mary Daly helped me better understand how culture influences our most personal images and experiences. 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. The father God was white and male and reinforced a system of domination by white men. So where did that leave me and other women and those who were oppressed by racism?

For many years I didn’t know what to do about God. The word had become almost noxious to me, and connected to oppressive forces in my life. Yet I still felt a relationship to some sort of spiritual experience. For a while I didn’t know how to imagine or think about it. But I was part of a group of women who were wrestling with all of this together. We began to counter the oppressive forces of religion by creating new images of the divine in a conscious way. We re-imagined God as female, by calling her Goddess. We realized that many cultures have worshipped the divine in female form.

But here’s the thing: is it possible to imagine a Goddess and then experience her as real? What is real and what is imaginary? Here’s what 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, when it causes transformation in our lives. Images become real when they open a door. 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.

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7 Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973)
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.\(^8\)

When my images and ideas about God began to change, something opened up before me. I embarked on a journey that demanded a deeper humility and a deeper confidence. Here is what I mean—we need humility to recognize the incompleteness of our spiritual experience and the validity of truth beyond our understanding. We also need to have confidence to claim our own experience as valid, whether or not others agree with us.

Each person here will bring our own stories, our own questions, our own journeys of searching for a real God, or a center to life that feels worthy of our loyalty. 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.

This is one reason why I chose to find a home within a Unitarian Universalist spiritual community that welcomes diverse beliefs. There is a Hebrew proverb: “Hospitality to strangers is greater than reverence for the name of God.” To live within a diverse spiritual community, we must cling more strongly to an open heart, than to specifics images and beliefs about God.

What this means for me is that the real God might be everywhere—hidden within each person, in each plant or animal, in each sunrise or stormy day, in the ordinary and the spectacular alike. Or God might be no where at all. It means that revelation is continuous and always unfolding. It means that words and images like God or Spirit or Mystery are metaphors trying to describe what is indescribable. The Sufi poet Rumi said, “Just remember: it's like saying of the king, he is not a weaver... words are on that level of God-knowing.”\(^9\)

The Zen Buddhists say, "Truth has nothing to do with words. Truth can be likened to the bright moon in the sky. Words, in this case, can be likened to a finger. The finger can point to the moon’s location. However, the finger is not the moon. To look at the moon, it is necessary to gaze beyond the finger..."\(^10\)

My colleague, Rev. 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."\(^11\)

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8 Walker, p. 167.
11 From a Unitarian Universalist Pamphlet.
In the end, we need to understand it isn’t really about the words at all. Rev. 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 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 choice you 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.12

It is not enough to ask, do you believe in God or not? It is not enough to ask, what do you believe about God? 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 Mystery, or 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 the transformations I experienced as I wrestled with the images of God and Goddess, I realized that there was a thread running through it 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 ask you to consider: what kind of power will you call forth into the world? What do you hold in your heart and your hands? The words and images we use to describe what we believe and experience 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.

Meditation Time
I offer you the words of the Persian poet, Saadi:

The world is not a courtroom,
there is no judge, no jury, no plaintiff.

This is a caravan,
filled with eccentric beings
telling wondrous stories about God.

Closing Words Robert Mabry Doss
For all who see God, may God go with you.
For all who embrace life, may life return your affection.
For all who seek a right path, may a way be found, and the courage to take it, step by step.13

12 From “Call it Forth: Religion for Atheists” by Davidson Loehr (in Religious Humanism, Volume XXXIV, #1 & 2, Winter/Spring 2000)
13 #700 in Singing the Living Tradition