

**“Godtalk:
Theist Language and Unitarian Universalist Children”
20 August 2006
Unity Church–Unitarian**

**Worship Leader: Kerri Meyer
Worship Associate: Sonia Hazard**

READING: “You’re It”

-- Hafiz, 14th century;

translated by Daniel Ladinsky

God

Disguised

As a myriad things and

Playing a game

Of tag

Has kissed you and said,

“You’re it—

I mean, you’re Really IT!”

Now
It does not matter
What you believe or feel

For something wonderful,

Major-league Wonderful
Is someday going
To

Happen.

**READING: from the writings of Arthur Foote,
Minister Emeritus, Unity Church**

The term "God" for me, therefore, does not mean a Supreme Being, a Divine Person; it is rather my affirmation that the universe and life have some principle of coherence and rationality. It epitomizes my faith that, despite the tragedies of personal life and the unavailability of any final answers, life is tremendously worth living, and the heart of reality is eminently sound. [...]We may outgrow ancient imagery, but we still know

the hunger for truth, the benediction of love and beauty, and the moral imperative within. "God" is the term most generally used to name all this. Its meaning changes and grows with our understanding of its reality; but its many meanings do not convince me to abandon it. Like the word "love," it seems nearly indispensable, for it has gathered unto itself precious cargo. It is the word of devotion. I understand the reluctance of many nowadays to use it. It is difficult to divorce the word from anthropomorphic and supernatural connotations.

Nonetheless, we lose more than we gain by abandoning it. If we are to live religiously - that is, in open responsiveness to the whole of life, sensitively, appreciatively, trustingly - we need words that can evoke feelings and give life wings. We need the language of poetry as well as of science. God is not a proposition to prove but a reality to experience; not something to define but to know in the mind's commitment to truth, in the claims of justice, in the prevalence of beauty, and in the sanctities of love.

**SERMON: Godtalk: Theist Language and Unitarian
Universalist Children – Kerri Meyer**

It begins with colors or maybe animals. Next come shapes and letters, people in photographs, places in the neighborhood, Eventually we move on to the States of the Union and the parts of animal cells. Later, all the forms of poetry and music. And all along the way, every human being we ever meet.

Naming happens.

This is red. This is a cow. Yellow duck. Can you say triangle? Here's Pop-Pop and Grammy. Which one is Montana? Please label the endoplasmic reticulum and the Golgi apparatus. I prefer Italian sonnets to Elizabethan. Isn't this called a mazurka? Guys, this is Andy and we're in love.

As we grown, our ever-expanding reality is really just an infinitely long list of names. And maybe one name for the Infinite.

Earlier than you might imagine, pretty close to the part about triangles and Pop-Pop, children have their first self-aware encounters with that which is called by many names and is

beyond all naming. They meet it close up, hands on. They meet it in the tingling sensation of wonder at fireflies, in the dissatisfaction with our answers about why the goldfish is not going to swim any more, in the clinging love they feel for us, their grown-ups.

And what they really want to do, what they are meant to do, when they meet this Holy Mystery...is name it.

The more time I spend with Unity's kids in worship, in fellowship, in lessons, the more certain I am that the best name – the working name – for Unitarian Universalists to use with the children we love and cherish is the word God. They have a right to this word, if they choose it. Such an ancient word, older than any faith whose living adherents might pronounce it now as if they had coined it – a word that when it first was spoken centuries ago, simply meant, "That which is invoked".

God.

Outside of "Is it too late to register?" it's the most common question I end up discussing with folks about our religious

education program, this God question. Are you going to talk about God? Is what's happening in the basement different from what's happening in the Sanctuary? The answers are both yes, albeit qualified: we talk about God, together, and in our work to help grow souls, we encourage our children to try the word God as they find more and more of their world slips beyond naming.

I acknowledge that this has the potential to find many of us feeling pretty turned off, maybe even a little squirmy, possibly downright anxious or vexed. We each have good reason for our current relationship with the word God. Some of us have come to Unitarian Universalism from another tradition, sent packing with a freight of God words weighing down on us with the heft of authority, guilt, wrath. Some of us have grown up Unitarian Universalist perhaps in religious education programs where all Godtalk appeared exclusively as items on a fairly long checklist with the running title "Well, Here's What We're Not". Some of us cherish a humanist faith and the word God applies to ancient imagery that, out of its context, is unhelpful and distracting. I daresay all of us are feeling more than a little wary of the theistic rhetoric of some of our

neighbors, whose God conveniently hates the same people that they fear.

I don't deny that theistic language is, in our circles, a source of some tension, nor am I suggesting that all debate over Godtalk ought to stop someday soon. I can't deny the shortcomings of human language and the scope of meaning that will remain beyond words – I experience this lack daily and especially in the company of children.

However, I agree with the assertion of our former minister, Arthur Foote, that in abandoning the word God, we lose far more than we gain. Unitarian Universalist children who come to own and employ Godtalk on their own terms may grow to become more spiritually healthy members of liberal religious communities. We, the community of their childhoods, have an opportunity to offer them a rare gift: this deeply reverent language, no strings attached – this singular word and all the precious cargo that it has gathered unto itself.

God.

So, start here with me: It's the fall of 2004. Imagine me, new DRE, in the basement of this Unitarian Universalist church, in an Art room full of kids, all of us coated in a layer of oil pastel – I know these children and our curriculum pretty well for being here a few months and I already know some of the families well enough to have a working idea of the religious education that happens at home -- imagine my surprise when the answers to my last very open-ended God Question start sounding like this:

“Well, God is kind of like a smart boss and he says what's right and what's wrong.”

“But He also takes care of us and he loves us.”

“Hey, you shouldn't say He. He isn't a he or a she.”

“Right. He was a HE, but he died.”

“God can't die.”

I probably responded with a gentle sort of ‘Mmmm hmmm...’ but I'm sure my little eyebrows shot up and I think I asked myself, “Where am I?”

I learned that day and have since confirmed that our kids are getting a dose of Godtalk somewhere. Sometimes as parents and educators, we are caught blindsided by words we had no idea they'd absorbed. Our kids, with the name-sponges they have for brains, live with us in a Judeo-Christian culture where faith and morality currently have a big, bright spotlight in just about every venue. Our children come home from school with a collection of casual theological certainties dropped like breadcrumbs by their peers, kindheartedly indicating to our religiously lost children, "Look! Ours is the path that will lead home to God." As one of the adults who works with our kids asked, "Well, seems to me plenty of people are talking God with our kids – does it have to be everywhere but church?" And indeed, the God Shaped-Hollow within our children will be filled. It demands to be filled and there are well-intentioned people out there with a theological mandate to do the filling with a limited diet of very specific Godtalk. I would just as soon we do our own work, thank you, the work of offering kids more embracing, more open words and ideas that might fit inside that holy space. If the word God is what does it, I'll work with that.

Our elementary school curriculum's working title is *Journey In...Toward the God Shaped Hollow*, a reference to the philosophical notions of Blaise Pascal. While I do much of the lesson writing and I am decidedly theist, it's important to note that the theological content of our curriculum was presented to me when I came here, the two-year work of a committee of lay leaders who were driven by deep love for this community to distill our hopes for ourselves and our kids into a few worthy questions.

The first of these five questions is, "What is the nature of God?" In our Sunday School lessons, we intentionally use the word God in our discussions and metaphorical explorations. Teachers are encouraged to stick with the word God, but also to demonstrate that God is interchangeable with many other words, including Truth, Mystery, the Source of Life, Spirit and the Universe.

The Godtalk in which we engage our children is free of anthropomorphic assignations, it doesn't employ pronouns and makes no assumptions about a child's perception of the degree to which God is involved in or removed from the workings of

the universe. In fact, the certainties that we propose are few: thus far, only these: first, the belief from our Unitarian heritage that God is One, the single truth that shines like light through so many windows; second, our Emersonian inheritance of a God that is directly available to each of us, accessible in individual, original relation, without intercessor and without special dispensation of knowledge or grace; and third – one of this year’s Big Ideas – that in great part, God remains and will remain a *Mystery* beyond human comprehension. (This, of course, is all easily accomplished with kids through a handful of time-tested stories, songs played on handbells, a little yoga and the odd science experiment.)

A bystander outside a classroom door downstairs is most likely to hear the word God in a question. We like to start them out by saying, “I wonder...” With a couple years of occasional practice, our kids here at Unity are often responding to questions about God their own varied and beautiful ideas, a landscape of spring green theology.

- *God is in and around me.*

- *God is like the wind that you can't see but you can feel.*
- *Maybe God is what you might hear if you sit really, really still – but I wouldn't know.*
- *God is in people.*
- *God is probably the answer when no one will tell you why.*
- *God is peace.*

In the mouths of children, the word becomes a vessel large enough to hold all their wondering, large enough to hold mystery and human potential and serendipity and reason.

Of course, you may also hear some of our children respond to Godtalk with something along the lines of “We don't believe in God” or “We don't talk about God.” It's the “we” part that always catches my interest. Theologian James Fowler describes the early stages of faith development as primarily imitative – we many of us know this from experience. When Unitarian Universalist kids reject or withdraw from Godtalk, we might be tempted to believe that some of our families are successfully raising early-blooming humanists or precocious deists... maybe they've spared them the very real potential

psychic damage that can be wrought by misnaming anything with this single syllable, God. But Fowler states that most children under the age of 8 are simply imitating the language and practice of their parents. “We don’t believe in God” has the same cognitive spot in the schema of a seven-year old as “Jesus loves us.” The idea has been assimilated but its purpose is to reinforce the child’s sense of belonging to a family or village. And the other part of this crucial early stage is Story, where children busy themselves naming the characters in the world myth and in their own schemata. Psychologists are pretty adamant when they tell us you can’t skip this concrete stage. Fowler and his inspirations, Erikson and Kohlberg assert that children can not manage the abstraction of non-belief. They can *find out* that something isn’t true – as in the cases of certain jolly saints and ethereal dental entrepreneurs, but they cannot start with an idea from Square One if the contents of Square One are absent.

It isn’t until our adolescence that we start to consider the existence of theological antimatter, because at that point our cerebral cortexes can almost handle the idea that reality might be completely contrary to our beliefs. With this new capacity,

we begin to work out our own theological identity, to relocate the power of definition from outside to inside ourselves.

People who have taught or parented teenagers understand when we say “working out one’s identity” we mean “pushing every boundary and every button we got from our family of origin”. Fowler observes that the net result of these new abstractions, for kids raised as believers in Judeo Christian tradition, is quite commonly a period of teenage and young adult atheism, a summary rejection of the word God (even if they can’t figure completely how to reject the definition).

Now, Fowler was a Methodist theologian, and probably couldn’t have anticipated how the Individuative-Reflective stage might play out for some of our Unitarian Universalist kids. Many fellowships have raised a generation or two essentially free of Godtalk and its corollary symbolism and metaphor. I haven’t any empirical proof for you, but I’ve been observing a trend in faith development that has me theorizing: While Christian teens sometimes reject Godtalk in favor of a developmental sort of atheism, *for some Unitarian Universalist youth, it seems the net result of rebelling against a vacuum of theological language is *a turning toward that

which is clearly defined, toward any belief system in which the objects of belief come with a name, in which meaning has an attached word. It's interesting to me, too, that in any given meeting including some of our empty nesters, one or two parents often share that story of their young adult children who have converted to Catholicism or have decided to raise the grandchildren in the local synagogue. I've seen the early developments of this, both personally and in the numbers. I'm watching several of our church youth struggle with this developmental crisis right now. Their peers seem to have all the words and all the definitions and some of our kids are desperately looking for a word for all that they can't name.

As Sonia and I sat over breakfast, planning some of the elements of this service, she responded to this working theory of mine – UU youth seeking out the language of theism -- with a story of her own 'conversion' in Fowler-speak – a radical upheaval in her faith development when she abruptly found herself hungry for the language and symbol that had lacked in her religious education here at Unity. For a time in her adolescence, Sonia enthusiastically turned to evangelical Christianity – it started to fill the God-shaped hollow that had

been neglected. I'm not suggesting this story is reason for alarm. I wouldn't be concerned if Sonia had remained committed to the language and practice of Christianity. When she came of age, we chose to trust her capacity to be the steward of her own soul. We would be hypocrites if we criticized the outcome of any individual's free and responsible search for truth and meaning. However, these stories bear discovering and examining -- the story that Sonia shared about her own faith development and the lost stories of many youth who disappear from our congregations after their Coming of Age year. It's worth wondering if our children need Godtalk.

These developmental and philosophical reasons may not inspire families to try out theist language in the home. This is okay, though I think parents need to know that the Godtalk will continue here at church. Whether we as adults choose theist words, though, our kids can still surprise us with their own word choice. Parents, theist and humanist, have asked, "What do I say when he asks questions about God?" "How do I respond when Laurel says, "God planted all these trees, right Mom?" They're looking for practical tips for handling these moments. I have only a few. A parent or teacher can

reply with a simple, “I wonder...?” and a generous silence. We can invite more work from them with a question in reply, “Do you think so? Tell me more...”. Some teachers wonder would it harm a child to say that the answer is “the gardener planted the tree” or “the wind planted the tree” I don’t think so. I don’t mean for us to supplant reason with theism. If there is knowledge to share, we should share it. But I assure you that there will come a moment when all our knowledge, yours and mine, will be exhausted, but their questions will keep coming. We may be able to tell them all about how the tree grows, but try and answer the one about why the tree grows at all. If we’ve given our kids the gift of theological discourse, then in moments like this, we can let go, share in the wonder, and in one word, invoke God.

And if our children say, “I don’t believe in God”, we can take our cues from Forrest Church, who wisely answers, “Tell me more about this God you don’t believe in. Chances are, I don’t believe in that God either.”

What is most important is this: When our Unitarian Universalist children speak with us about God, we must not

leap to respond out of our own adult philosophy, the product of our lifetime, but out of a tender respect for the unfolding of our children's inner lives, respect for the work of their lifetime. We must be with them, with open hearts and honest intentions and help them do their naming. We can bring them to a church where lots of different people, including kids, are trying out the name God. We must place in their hands the poems of Hafiz or the hymns given us by Arthur Foote, believing that the words may open up to them in ways most of us will never experience. As they grow, we can watch the meaning of the word God change and grow with their understanding.

In the larger scope, we have this saving faith, set in the middle of a real and present mess, millennia in the making, a mess of hatred and division, the grip on theist language as tight as the grip on the weapons themselves. We cannot afford throw up our hands and say, "This is not our word, this isn't even our native tongue" and allow the only word we have for "that which is invoked" be expropriated for another century, not when that century belongs to our children. This generation has the potential to grow into the redeemers we believe them to be. In a world ripped apart in the name of God, perhaps

our Unitarian Universalist children will be able to speak in a language of reverence that will serve as common currency in transactions of peace.

Our children are growing and they are naming. One day soon, they'll name themselves. They may name themselves Christians. They may name themselves humanists. They may name themselves Unitarian Universalists. They may find the Holy in so many places, in so many familiar words. The Mystery might reveal itself in colors, in the beloved faces in the photographs, in the places in the neighborhood, in a sonnet, in the miracle of a living cell. All these they will name. And if they meet the nameless Infinite in any of these, they might be able to come and tell us. They might tug on our sleeve and say, "I think I call this...*God*."

May it be so and amen.