

# God, a Personal View

a sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene  
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Local author Gino Sky tells of a conversation he had with his deeply devout Mormon grandmother. She had asked him when was the last time he went to church.

"I'm always in church," I answered, quoting Thoreau.

"You've been using that same excuse for years."

"It worked for him..."

"That's your problem," she answered..., "you think God is everywhere so you don't have to look for him." She shook her head. "You're going to end up in the lowest degree of heaven along with your Henry David and the Unitarians. They can't figure out whether God is a tree frog or a car muffler." (Sky, pp. 112, 113)

Tree frog, car muffler, amorphous spirit -- or word with so much destructive baggage that it should not be used at all. "God," sometimes referred to laboriously among us as "the g-word," is one of those association-laden words which causes strong responses in Unitarian Universalist societies. You may be an agnostic, a Christian, a pagan, a Buddhist, a panentheist, an atheist. Whatever your theological outlook, you probably have ideas on the subject of God.

The hymnal which is used by a given faith tradition usually mirrors the theologies of its users. Ours is no exception. It reflects many of our attitudes toward the idea of God, including the following:

The "True Religion" gathers up its text:

"In the beginning was the Word."

But I seek quietness behind that start

and name it nothing, much less "God." (Singing, #286)

Those who share this outlook may sometimes feel frustrated when the tone of our services feels theistic -- particularly since the minister is a theist of some sort. One BUUF member told me that he feels excluded from our Fellowship each time I use the word God. A strong statement, and one not to be discounted -- particularly since the speaker is a lively, positive, hard-working church member, not a peripheral grumbler seeking to sow discontent.

It has been four and a half years since I reflected from the pulpit upon this problematical issue. Today I re-open our conversation on God by sharing my own concepts and those I find in our new hymnal. My hope is that you leave this morning with grist for your own theological mill. My hope is that you will leave with a renewed commitment to continuing the conversation about Great Causes and Cosmic Verities. My hope is that we will all join the dialogue about what it is that sets our spirits free.

I invite you to let my words flow with your thoughts and feelings about the nature of the Greater Truth (Truths!).

I am a devoutly-committed Transcendentalist, which is to say that my connection with the Larger Mystery is a vital, vital part of my life. I would not be who I am without my dynamic, passionate, ongoing connection with God. Understanding the problematical nature of the word "God" to many people, I nonetheless use it sometimes, finding it a convenient nickname for that which transcends and dwells within all.

My relationship with the Cosmic Pattern infuses me with energy, passion and laughter. When I am able to be relatively serene and non-judgmental, I credit mindfulness and prayer, devout and sustained attention to the world around and within me. To "see the world in a grain of sand" (#398) -- to know that the Universe and the lowliest of beings are part of the same great Mystery -- gives me the perspective and humility I need. When I connect with God -- as continuously as possible -- I do so in this body and in this world, and gain strength to do the work I am called to do.

The Divine was very apparent to me once on a Bay Area Rapid Transit subway ride. There was a Downs' Syndrome child across from me, rhythmically rocking in his own private world. The clickity-click, clickity-clack of the rails, over and over, made a kind of snare-drum accompaniment. Shadows from the outside flashed as we shot aboveground, providing my eyes with an accompaniment for the symphony of sound and rhythm. And each time we slowed down or speeded up, I was delighted to note that all of us passengers, as though directed by a conductor, leaned forward in unison, leaned backward together. Everything was exactly in its place, doing what it ought to be doing, playing its part in a cosmic orchestra or dance or tapestry. At another time, I would have seen it all as random; on that lucky day, I simply knew everything that was happening at that moment was an integral part of a Great Harmony.

Three hymns in our hymnal apostrophize God as "The Great Musician" (#74), "Singer of Life" (#196), and "Perfect Singer" (#332). On that mundane subway ride, never for a moment leaving this natural world, it was as though I was blessed with faint echoes of the Great Musician's ongoing concerto (or was it a fugue? a rondo? rhythm and blues....?).

And if not a pattern woven in sound, perhaps another kind of pattern. The "Dear Weaver of Our Lives' Design" is addressed in one hymn:

Dear weaver of our lives' design whose patterns all obey,  
with skillful fingers gently guide  
the sturdy threads that will survive  
the tangle of our days. (#22)

Another small but notable occasion in which I was able to be open to the Source of All (#21) happened as I ate dinner with a friend of thirty years' standing. This friend happens to have definitely curmudgeonly tendencies, and they were very apparent that evening. I don't see him very often, and was finding myself feeling annoyed and restless at his seemingly-gratuitous complaints about everybody and every institution we knew. "So-and-so is too lazy to get that job done right." "Such-and-such never return their phone calls." "Such-and-such a church is popular with the younger crowd just because going to it is the cool thing to do." Blah, blah, blah.

Gradually, I began to be aware of a change descending upon my irritated spirit, a feeling that could only be called love. I looked across the table at him and could somehow feel his ruffled heart, not my own. Without conscious articulation, I was aware of the decades we have shared, of what a true friend he has been; I knew that I will not have him around forever. I felt no need to embarrass either of us by speaking the love I was feeling. It needed no expression, and needed nothing from him. It was just there in my soul, a pearl without price, the great cosmic gift of love without judgment.

"What wondrous love is this," asks one of our hymns, "that brings my heart such bliss."

To love and to all friends I will sing, I will sing,  
to love and to all friends I will sing.  
To love and to all friends  
who pain and sorrow mend,  
with thanks unto the end I will sing, I will sing,  
with thanks unto the end I will sing. (#18)

Love is one of the most powerful metaphors I have, for envisioning the role of the Great Mystery in my life. (It is the single most common metaphor for the Divine in our hymnbook.) If my connection with God is to inspire me to a better life -- and it seems mere navel-gazing if it does not -- then I need all the reminders of love I can get. Left to my own devices, I am simply not very good at loving my neighbor; to feel the Divine as an opening to non-judgmental, compassionate love is inspiring in the highest.

Experiences of Cosmic Design and embracing Love are gems in my life, events to which I return in memory, for a smile and a reminder. Most of my spiritual life is like nice, rich dirt clods rather than gems, though.

Because I believe fervently that my relationship with God leads me to be my best self, I am forever engaged in prayer and aspiration -- I am always tilling the ground. It is a matter-of-fact process, often part of the matter-of-fact business of breathing. I pray for openness, guidance, awareness, openness, patience, love, openness. It matters not that I don't know exactly what it is that I am praying to, that I can't draw a picture or tell you what it sounds like -- what matters is that I am articulating my highest aspirations, and acknowledging my role in the Life That Maketh All Things New. (#12) Daily practice -- constant practice -- of prayer and mindfulness help me toward the humility I need to remain open and creative, and it informs what I do at times I am not practicing. It is very ordinary, and it is profoundly affecting.

Here on the paths of every day --  
here on the common human way --  
is all the stuff the gods would take  
to build a heaven, to mold and make New Edens.  
Ours the task sublime to build eternity in time. (#312)

You will remember 1994's Proposition One, the initiative which sought to take basic rights away from homosexual citizens of our state. Nancy Taylor (First Congregational Church pastor) and I founded Voices of Faith For Human Rights. In this organization, we state explicitly that discrimination is not an act of faith, and we seek to build bridges of respect among people. God did not come to us in a dream and tell us to found Voices of Faith -- but we did it because of our belief in God, our love of God, our conviction that such belief and love must be expressed in speaking for justice.

Creative love, our thanks we give  
that this, our world, is incomplete,  
that struggle greets our will to live,  
that work awaits our hands and feet. (#289)

I love the Weaver of Our Lives' Design with all my heart and all my soul and all my mind and all my strength, and it deeply informs my life. Sometimes I call it God.

As Unitarian Universalists in a congregation I serve, your faith need have no resemblance to mine, in experience, concept or language. Your sources of inspiration need not look like mine. You, each and all, have a sacred responsibility to articulate for yourselves that which is highest and best and most encompassing of all existence.

But if you are pulled toward the Great Mystery that enfolds and dwells within all existence -- and perhaps shy away from the associations the word "God" brings -- look to our hymnbook for a metaphor which works for you. How do you feel about "Spinner of Chaos," or "Midwife of Changes"? (#31) Can you relate to the "great and fiery force" (#27)? Or is "sovereign and transforming Grace" (#33) more to your taste? In our more Buddhist moments, we may find comfort in the "Calm Soul of All Things" (#88). For those of us who eschew the old, oppressive patriarchies, perhaps our delight will come from the "Lady of the season's laughter." (#51)

If you tire of images, you may turn to one of the hymns which simply spells it out for us:

A firemist and a planet, a crystal and a cell,  
a starfish and a saurian, and caves where ancients dwelt;  
the sense of law and beauty, a face turned from the sod --  
some call it evolution, and others call it God. (#343)

Our faith, dear friends, is in the conversation. What we call the Unnameable Source of All is up to each of us. How we allow it to be manifest is up to us. Whatever we do, may we join the one who asks of the Weaver:

Take up the fabric of our lives with hands that gently hold;  
bind in the ragged edge that care  
would sunder and that pain would tear,  
and mend our rav'ling souls.

Let eyes that in the plainest cloth a hidden beauty see  
discern in us our richest hues,  
show us the patterns we may use  
to set our spirits free. (#22)

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Sources Consulted:

*Singing the Living Tradition*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993

Sky, Gino. *Near the Postcard Beautiful*. Boise, Idaho: Floating Ink Books, 1993.

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