

God By Any Other Name
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

from the poetry of Rumi (1207-1273)

Lo, I am with you always means when you look for God,
God is in the look of your eyes,
in the thought of looking, nearer to you than your self,
or things that have happened to you
There's no need to go outside

from "Song of Myself" in *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

Why should I wish to see God better than this day?
I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then.
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass;
I find letters from God dropped in the street, and every one is signed by God's name..
And I leave them where they are, for I know that others will punctually come
forever and ever.

Sermon

Why preach a sermon about theology (which literally means "words about God") when there are so many pressing concerns, worries, fears in our minds and hearts – from the war in Ukraine to the accelerating climate crisis, and much else?

Well, for that matter, why religion at all? Why do we gather like this each week? Why does someone choose to devote his life's work to religion?

My short answer to all this: Because we intuit (I do anyway) that whatever else is going on in the world and in our lives, we need, sometimes with a thirst as if we were stranded on a desert... we need the moral and spiritual grounding and inspiration that the ancient wisdom of humanity and our own heart's wisdom offer.

The great-souled one, Mahatma Gandhi, knew this and grounded all that he did in ancient wisdom and in his affirmation of God as Truth (capital "T"). Grounded, every day in all that he did..

Indeed, it is said that as Gandhi slumped to the ground after being struck three times in quick succession with the assassin's bullets he spoke "He Ram," which means "Oh God."

Whether true or not, it is undisputed that Gandhi in his last years often said that he wished to die speaking the name "Ram" – one of the innumerable names of God in Hinduism. In this spirit he had taken to the practice of regularly and mindfully chanting "Ram." He encouraged others to do the same.

Ram is said to be the seventh avatar or incarnation of the God Vishnu. Ram is described as the perfect human being, perfectly incarnating the dharma, the law, the Truth and teaching of religion and religious living – all that Gandhi strived to embody in his own life. So it makes sense that Gandhi would feel a special affection for this particular manifestation of the Divine.

The story of Gandhi's speaking "Ram" as he died, whether apocryphal or true, has led me to wonder what word I might be likely to speak in some circumstance of sudden and unexpected dying. I fear to think what it might be. Other sorts of words come all too quickly to one's lips in the midst of much more trivial incidents and accidents.

But could I train myself to have at the ready something higher or deeper than an exclamation of dismay in such a moment of distress? Might daily practice of saying Ram or God, Krishna or Jesus, Elohim or Allah... or love ("God" by whatever name) in response to even the smallest of irritations... might daily practice as best I can find its way to my dying moment... love above all?

Yet at least as, if not more importantly, would such practice matter in the meantime? Might it change me in some essential way, some way good for my soul, my spirit – and my behavior... my choices?

"God by any other name."

I remember a period of time when I was a teenager during which I wished I could have the certainty of belief in God, a certainty that many others seemed to have. Well, wishing doesn't make it so, and the apparent certainty I see in others has continued to elude me all these many years later – and you know what? I no longer particularly wish for it, having realized some time ago that "certainty" as we usually understand it, the ordinary certainty for example of a mathematical proposition or a proven truth of science – is not what God is about, if God is about anything.

To begin with, whatever else the syllable "God" is, it is not God's name, since whatever else the word "God" (or Allah or Brahman or Tao or Great Spirit) signifies, it must by its nature signify some reality beyond names, beyond articulation in words, at best only pointed to with words – like a finger pointing towards the moon.

Because to be worthy of any or all of those names, God must be something other than just another thing, just another being among all the beings in the universe, only much, much bigger and smarter.

How do the various religious traditions deal with this elusiveness of the Divine reality beyond names and forms?

Well, Hinduism, among the most ancient of the traditions, has by some counts several hundred thousand gods and goddesses in its pantheon. But the deepest wisdom of the Hindu tradition affirms that each of these is in the end simply another manifestation of the one, ineffable, unnameable divine reality, source of all – creator, sustainer, and destroyer.

At the other extreme, the Buddha pretty much simply did not talk about God, one way or another, reminding any curious questioners that he, the Buddha, was here to relieve suffering, not to weave a metaphysical system of speculation about realities beyond words and concepts.

Similarly, Confucius told his followers to give most of their attention to *this* world, as he developed his system of educating people to become fully human (by which he meant humane) in the context of our various social and political relationships.

And the first lines of the Chinese text the *Tao Te Ching* remind us in precisely so many words that the Tao (the "Way") that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao and the name that can be named is not the eternal name.

Judaism simply prohibits the speaking of the name of God, acknowledging in this way that words are entirely inadequate.

Christianity may seem to have forgotten this, with its Trinitarian creeds and unabashed frequent use of the word "God." But the contemplative and mystical threads woven throughout Christianity also suggest that in the end words fail and only silent presence will do.

Islam? There are ninety-nine names for the *attributes* of God – Allah in Arabic – and this large number serves as a reminder that no single attribute and not even all taken together can possibly encompass the reality beyond our conceptual powers to embrace. Instead, each is just another “divine door,” as one translator puts it, a finite door into the infinite we might say.

Well, where does all this leave us? One God? Many? No God at all?

There are these days many voices of so-called “neo-atheists,” some of them respected scientists and literary figures, many of them pretty loud.

But loud doesn’t necessarily mean right. (Doesn’t mean wrong either.)

Yet there are, it seems to me, some fundamental misunderstandings among at least some of these “neo-atheists.” You don’t believe in God? Tell me about the God you don’t believe in... because I probably don’t believe in that one either:

The father God in the sky with the beard? I don’t think so.

The Zeus-like God with thunderbolts in hand? Of course not.

The God who separates believers and unbelievers, welcoming the first to heaven and sending the others to hell? Not that one either.

And so on.

Well then, *which* God/Goddess/Braham/Tao/Great Spirit... if any?

Well, how about these fingers pointing at least in the general direction:

The whatever/whomever it is that creates and sustains... whatever force or creative power or principle has made everything possible. There is order to the cosmos. We may not always think we like the order, mixed bag as it is for us humans, but order there is, from quarks to galaxies. Maybe a hint, perhaps more than a hint, of something we could call (in the spirit of the finger pointing to the moon) God.

Or... how about...

Beauty beyond any conceivable need for beauty – the sunrise, the sprarkling snow on the trees, the flash of cardinal in the snow-covered woods, the crocuses that will, yes they will, in not too many weeks make their appearance.

More hints, abundant hints of some reality we might for lack of any better word call God.

Or how about...

Goodness and virtue in the face of terrible suffering or in response to cruelty and evil. Yes, our genetic heritage can explain this on one level. But still, extraordinary heroism and goodness (that we see everywhere from Boston to Kyev) offer yet further hints, so it seems to me.

Or how about... in the spirit of this morning’s readings...

Love. That feeling of profound intimacy with another human being or with the creation around us, the look in someone’s eyes (in the spirit of today’s readings). Or just simple kindness. Sure, biologists can teach us of the evolutionary benefit of love and kindness. But abundant love and sympathy – even for those thousands of miles away also feels like another abundant hint.

None of this is meant to be some sort of “proof.” For whatever “God” is, is not by its nature susceptible to proof or certainty. God is not that sort of reality, is not just another “thing” in a universe of “things” that we may discover someday to exist or somehow discover doesn’t exist.

Now... we can choose not to use the word “God” and it is an honorable and understandable choice. It is the choice I often make, since we can be so easily misunderstood. Use the word “God” and someone else might think they know exactly what you mean: You must mean what they mean, their God which is in some conceptual box or another – Christian, Muslim, Hindu, whatever. Whereas you may be intending to use this syllable (“God”) to suggest a reality that is way, way beyond any sort of box, a reality we might now and then *experience* even though we may not be able to adequately name... maybe even just a glimmer of experience in the form of truth or love or beauty or simple presence.

Back then, to my initial question: Why might any of this matter (particularly these days with bomb raining down on Kyev) – or does it matter... this talk of God, this question of whether there is something of worth suggested in syllables such as: “God/Goddess/Brahman/Ram/ Tao/Great Spirit”?

Wouldn't we do better, in the spirit of the Buddha and Confucius, to put such questions aside and turn our attention simply to waking up here and now, and to relieving suffering and seeking justice?

First things first and all that? Maybe.

And yet... doesn't the experience of breathing into the mystery of cosmic order, breathing into the miracle of beauty, breathing into the spirit of goodness, breathing into love and kindness, breathing into wonder (God by whatever name or no name at all) ground us and fuel us for the work at hand... from the personal to the social and political?

We are indeed living in a particularly fraught and dangerous time in the world and on the planet we share. We may not individually feel we can do anything in relation to the terrible suffering right now in Ukraine... or in so many other places on the planet. But because we can't do everything, we of course ought not shirk from doing something, whatever small thing we can do, often quite close at hand, remembering that everything we do ripples outwards.

And aren't we better able to relieve suffering and seek justice and peace if we align ourselves with cosmic order, with the Tao, with God as Truth, Beauty, Goodness? In this world of what surely feels like too much suffering and meanness and cruelty and ugliness, doesn't such alignment or grounding help us better to *live* – each of us and all of us as part of this experiment of human life on earth – to live at least *toward* lives of truth, beauty, goodness, and love, in service of the flourishing of all life?

My answer is “Yes!”

May we, then,...with every breath right to our last find ourselves uttering and living as best we can words of truth, beauty, goodness, love... God by whatever name, of many names, or beyond names....

So may it be. Amen. Blessed be.