

“What Do You Believe About God?” © Rev. Erika Hewitt
delivered 23 November, 2014 ★ Midcoast UU Fellowship, Damariscotta ME

“Religious and nonreligious people alike are in for a lifetime of unresolved debate and often meaningless discussion if we continue to convince ourselves that what is really important about religion is whether or not we say we believe in God.”

~ Greg Epstein, Good Without God

The week before the elections, I spent many hours volunteering at the headquarters of the Sagadahoc County Democrats. Every day, I assigned to the task of phone-banking. Here’s how it works: you get a long list of names and phone numbers, a cubby with a phone, all the cookies and coffee you want, and a script of what to say so people won’t hang up on you.

In that crowded room of volunteers, hunched over and murmuring into their phones, I talked to hundreds of voters, who promised me they’d get to the polls. But I also veered off-script. (If you’re going to let a minister phonebank, you have to let her be... a minister.) I lingered on the phone, chatting with elderly widows who seemed lonely; I tried to listen compassionately when one man, a sick Vietnam veteran, needed to spend eight minutes ranting his fury about feeling abandoned by social services. And I found myself drawn into a memorable theological conversation. It went like this:

“Gladys [not her real name], I’m calling as a volunteer to thank you for being a voter in the past, and to make sure you have a plan to get to the polls on Tuesday.”

Gladys: “I don’t know who to vote for. My daughter told me not to vote for that one, what’s his name, who wants to let all of the Mexicans into Maine.”

“Well, Gladys, I can’t speak to that, but I’m unhappy with our current governor and the way he’s left behind Maine families who are hungry or poor or who need health care.”

Gladys: “Honey, it’s all too confusing for me. I’m just going to pray that God will put the right person into office.”

Me: “I think it might take a little more than that, Gladys. What if God works through us, so we make the change we want to see around us?”

Gladys: “Nope, I trust God to elect the right man.”

(It’s my professional opinion that God messed that one up on Election Day.)

I don’t have an aversion to the word or the idea of God — I refer to “God” more than you’d think. But when *I* use that word, it means something very different than the God that Gladys is referring to.

In his book *Good Without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe*, Greg Epstein asserts¹ — and I agree — that “in this day and age, the word *God* can mean anything; and so it means nothing.”

For years (in fact, for generations), Unitarian Universalists have fixated on the question “Do you believe in God?” (Maybe not you, maybe not all of the time, but...) Sometimes we don’t know what else to ask, but some UU’s have used this question to size people up, keeping score of who’s on what side of the imaginary theological line that can and does create real division among us.

For my part, I consider this yes/no, binary question a non-starter; Greg Epstein calls it “totally meaningless,” saying, “The real question all people — whether secular or religious — ought to be asking themselves and one another is ‘What do you believe *about* God?’”

So let’s ask: What do you believe *about* God?

Gladys, a Sagadahoc County non-voter (apparently), believes that God can determine the outcome of a gubernatorial election. Someone in your life may believe that God has a hand in the Superbowl or World Series; you may know somebody — or perhaps it’s you, yourself — who believes that God actively heals disease, infertility, or mental illness. Yesterday I presided at the memorial service for a woman who died suddenly and too young; her brother, clearly struggling between his dogmatic faith and his broken heart, shrugged sadly and said to me, “It was the will of the Lord.” That, to me, is the most anguishing thing you can believe about God.

What do you believe *about* God?

¹ p. 12.

Like the late Rev. Forrest Church, I believe that “God is not God’s real name.” Or, in words of my colleague Rob Hardies, “God is the answer our ancestors gave to some of life’s important questions.”²

When I use the word “god,” it’s the small-g god of process theology. As Jeanne Nieuwejaar explains,³ this

god is not a creator but the process of creativity itself. The world moves, changes, evolves in every minute by the choices of every living being... god not as controller but as persuader, as seducer, as invitation to imagine, to grow, to dream, to create, to enjoy — enticing us toward goodness and growth and health and wholeness. This god does not coerce; this god invites. The choice is ours.

What do you believe about God?

Greg Epstein, who serves as the Humanist chaplain at Harvard, is quick to supply an answer⁴ on behalf of “the nonreligious, atheists, [and] Humanists”: “We... believe that God is the most important, influential literary character human beings have ever created.”

It’s easy to make fun of God as a fictional superhero; it doesn’t take much imagination to look down your nose at God as a bunch of hooey. In doing so, the so-called New Atheists like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris strike me as even more fundamentalist than the most fervent, in-your-face Christian evangelicals. Most of them take arrogant, disrespectful swipes at religion, rather than contributing to a constructive dialogue.

If you believe that God is a human invention, both empty and impotent, that doesn’t automatically make you a Humanist. (That just makes you an atheist, or secular.⁵) You have to reach further than that to articulate meaning and purpose —

² Sermon unavailable but quoted here: http://www.kensington-unitarians.org.uk/images/KensingtonUnitarians_Feb2009.pdf.

³ In *Fluent in Faith: A Unitarian Universalist Embrace of Religious Language*.

⁴ p. 14.

⁵ p. 74: “A secular culture is not the same as a Humanist culture... sometimes the former falls short of the latter.”

what theologian Paul Tillich called “ultimate concern.” What is your ultimate concern, if not God, and how will you use your life to point towards it?⁶

What I admire about Greg Epstein is that — unlike certain humanists and atheists I’ve known — he bypasses reactivity and the land of “not-believe,” and fearlessly engages the questions left in the theological vacuum. Questions like:

- Without God and the promise of a celestial afterlife, why should we live ethical and moral lives?
- Without the comfort of God, how do we make sense of tragedy and crisis?
- Where does our meaning come from? What’s our purpose? What values are worth building a life around?

if you can’t put “God” in any of the answers, that’s as demanding a task as cooking Thanksgiving dinner without putting in meat, eggs, dairy, sugar, or gluten. But it’s possible.

The Humanist answers to those questions come down to the phrase I used two weeks ago: “There is no good except between people.”⁷

Humanism arises from this conscious choice: our purpose, as a human beings, is our relationship “to other human beings in this world, for the sake of this world.”⁸ (Our term *interdependence* comes to mind.) It’s not enough to be passionate about our own happiness or self-actualization or individual amazingness: self-sufficiency isn’t the point — although, again, I’ve known an angry atheist or two who seems to have decided that, since there is no God, *they* could take God’s place! Humanism isn’t about how strong we are by ourselves; it’s about making manifest a belief that strong is what we make each other.

“By ourselves we are not enough,” Epstein reminds us.⁹

All of us know what it feels like to realize “I am a person.” But it takes a little more awareness to realize, “You are also a a person.” And it takes

⁶ I love Epstein’s brief reflection on Tillich’s phrase, p. 15.

⁷ p. 108.

⁸ p. 67.

⁹ p. 93.

even greater awareness still to recognize that I am more of a person when I am helping you to be more of a person.

Along with this awareness, the Humanist lifestance¹⁰ takes courage — especially in the face of confusion or grief. I like to think of myself as a brave person, spiritually and emotionally — but this is where I fall short of being able to call myself, with full honesty, a Humanist. “We,” says Epstein, talking about full-fledged Humanists, “do not have to make more or less of our human experiences than what they are.” If there are no invisible levers and gears moving us through the cosmos, then what appears to be randomness or chaos or coincidence is exactly that.

But: we human beings tend to reach for certainty when we feel weak or afraid, and that usually looks like connecting cosmic dots to assure ourselves of order in the chaos. Many of us (like me) would rather not chalk our greatest joys and sorrows up to sheer randomness. Many of us (like me? or like you?) would prefer instead to find “little ‘signs’ that the mysteries in the universe have a purpose.”¹¹

Sifting through these questions, ideas, and identities is complicated, rewarding, and strangely soothing. For me, following one idea into the next question is like untangling tails of soft, jewel-colored, wooly yarn back onto their skeins.

There is a gift, in addition to the pleasure of rubbing these questions between our palms: the fact that in Unitarian Universalist community, we can arrive at different answers. We can arrive at our separate truths, or identities, without dimming someone else’s truth, or negating their identity.

What values are worth building a life around?

How do you make sense of your world turned upside-down?

What do you believe about God?

May we live the questions, and towards their answers, together.

¹⁰ p. xv: “meaning more than a philosophy but not a divine or revealed religion.”

¹¹ p. 27, I love this: “I’ve known countless people who might check off ‘none’ on a survey of their religious preferences but will still tell you with a straight face that ‘everything happens for a reason.’”