

Who Needs God?

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In my dual role at the Sacramento VA Medical Center as a chaplain and a teacher and supervisor of students in Clinical Pastoral Education, I have a lot of opportunity and need to think about God: who God is for the people I serve and teach and, indeed, who God is for me.

In my certification process to become a full supervisor of Clinical Pastoral Education, I have recently reached a major milestone, which is completing and submitting three theory papers, one on my personality theory, one on my educational theory and one on my theological position. The theology paper was by far the hardest one for me to write. Here are the questions I had to answer:

- How do I understand persons as creatures of God?
- How does that understanding inform my supervision?
- How do I think theologically about interpersonal relationships, human suffering and relationship with the transcendent?
- What theologian or theological resources inform my theological stance?
- How do I understand the interplay between my cultural context and theological formation?

Even this didn't seem too daunting until I realized that within these questions were other unwritten questions, such as: What is the nature of sin? And Where do I find critical purchase with my theoretical sources? Fun stuff like that. But the biggest challenge was what might seem like the simplest part. At the very heart of the paper, in the midst of the heady theoretical stuff, was the question, who is God for me and how am I in relationship with God? I must admit that as a Unitarian Universalist, I really had avoided this question for many years.

I think of myself as a fairly "typical" Unitarian Universalist. I come from a relatively moderate Christian background, and I tend not to talk much about God. Somewhere lurking in the childhood section of my psyche is an image of God as a white-bearded old man looking down on me – usually benignly, though he is unpredictable. Intellectually, I understand that no such God exists and that, as a woman, this image excludes me in many ways. My theology has matured. The old man in the clouds has gone the way of Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. Actually, I like Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny and I still believe in the spirit of joy and generosity that they represent. So what about God?

I grew up in the United Methodist tradition because my mother expected her family to go with her to church and Sunday school every Sunday. While my dad sat out in the car and read the paper, my mother listened to the sermon and my sister and I took the stubby little pencils from the backs of the pews and meticulously filled in all the o's, b's, d's, p's, a's, e's and occasional q's in the order of service. I don't recall our ever talking about God

outside of church. In fact, God seemed vaguely like an embarrassment, something or someone you believed in and aimed to please, but in a private way.

My mother was ill with a progressive lung disease that killed her in her mid-40's, when I was 12. I remember that many years later, when I was going through my dad's basement in preparation for him to move to a retirement community, I saw some pamphlets in the bookshelf stuffed in next to the 1963 Encyclopedia Britannica volumes. They were about faith and healing and trusting in Jesus, and I realized for the first time how deep my mother's need for God had been and, indeed, how very personal. Saying this now even seems like a small invasion of her privacy.

My need for God during those years of my mother's illness and death were also very deep and personal. I needed for my suffering and grief and anger to be witnessed and understood in a world where I felt hardly noticed. I needed to be comforted, and my mother wasn't able to do that. I needed to be loved – in an intimate and unconditional way that every child longs to be loved by their mother and many of us are not because of our human limitations. I have never outgrown that need. Is the need for my mother's love the same as my need for God's love? I don't know. I just know that longing is familiar to me, as I think it is for many people. Perhaps you recognize this kind of longing too.

Somewhere along the line my theology shifted from a personified God to a sense of spirit – a connection within myself, between myself and others, and beyond the known and familiar into mystery and transcendence. I don't know when I stopped referring to this as "God," but until I began working as a hospice chaplain about 10 years ago and later as a hospital chaplain, I hadn't spoken of or to *God* in a very long time. At first, I would pray for or with sick or dying patients and their loved ones because they asked me to or because I sensed that they desired prayer and asked *them*. I didn't really think *I* needed prayer. I was merely fulfilling my function as a chaplain, addressing the spiritual needs of patients and their families. I've discovered, though, that when I pray with others, I feel a deeper connection with them – intimate, even sacred. Who am I addressing when I pray? The patient? Myself? God?

Yes.

There's something I recognize in that request for prayer from a person who is living with illness, whether they are feeling peace or dread, acceptance or rage, hope or despair. It's a desire for connection with something or someone that can hold them and love them as they are. It's a plea not to be isolated but to be seen and known, deeply and intimately. And I don't care how healthy we are or how sophisticated we imagine ourselves to be in our belief systems, I really believe almost all people share this desire. This realization has played havoc with my understanding – a common UU understanding – of the divine as a vast spirit that is present in all things at all times. To my surprise, I have discovered that I don't just need an all-encompassing spirit, I need a personal God – that I can recognize and feel recognized by.

Some time ago I had a dream in which the world had been destroyed by nuclear war. I was alive and unharmed in a building that was still intact, but I knew that I would be dead within two days. My first inclination was to go to the hospital to be with people who were imminently dying, but this would mean that I would be exposed to all the radiation in the atmosphere and would die sooner. My dilemma was whether to isolate myself in order to live as long as possible or to connect with others and cut the time I had left on earth to a matter of hours. I woke up feeling lonely and sad and afraid. And while feeling lonely and sad and afraid is part of being human, I realized that I needed a spiritual connection that went beyond an intellectual theology of the nature of spirit – and I didn't have it.

I wonder, if you had this dream, or your equivalent nightmare, where would you turn for connection or comfort when you woke up? Some of you are probably thinking of your partner or spouse, and I would agree that the people we love are probably our most vital spiritual connections. But what if your intimate partner wasn't there? Do you ever need to be held at such a deep level that it goes beyond what is humanly possible? I do. I think a lot of my patients do. And their loved ones do when they are faced with loss.

Whether we believe in God or not, most of us need meaning and connection in our lives. That, to me, is the definition of spirituality, and that is the world a chaplain inhabits. I recall my encounter with the mother of a young man who was dying of cancer. She was sitting at her son's bedside with her back to the door. I knocked on the door, entered the room and quietly introduced myself as the chaplain. She turned to look at me with utter disdain and asked me why God was allowing her son to suffer so greatly. That "why" is one of the greatest spiritual questions of the meaning of illness, suffering and death. I knew that, and I knew my *own* theological answer: that God does not have power over what happens to us or whether or not we suffer. The power of God is to be with us, wherever we are and however we feel. That is not what I said to that young man's mother at that moment. She didn't want an answer – she wanted to tell me, as a representative for God, that she hated God. And that hatred showed me her deep spiritual connection. She was in honest relationship with God. My answer to her question "why" was, "I don't know." She was furious at me, "No, you don't know. You have no idea what my life is like. There is nothing you can do for me." This could have been a dismissal, but tempting as it was to take it as such and leave, I took it as an invitation. "You're right. I have no idea what your life must be like. Can you tell me?" And she did. And she cried, and I cried. And that's what a chaplain does. A chaplain mirrors God's power to be with, to witness, to hear, to see and, if I'm fortunate, to be that connection with the spirit for another.

I am in the process of becoming a full supervisor of Clinical Pastoral Education. CPE, as it is more commonly known, is a nationally accredited program that trains seminary students, professional chaplains and ministers, and people who are exploring their life's calling in the art of pastoral care. Students often come into the program equating spirituality with religion. Their theologies, their understanding of the nature of God, are where they often begin to approach pastoral care. They learn to get out of their heads and into their hearts by going onto the units and being present with patients, family and staff.

I often share with my students my most painful experience of learning to be a chaplain. Shortly after beginning my residency as a CPE student, I received an emergency call to come and baptize a 10-day-old baby who was about to be taken off life support. I anxiously walked into the pediatric ICU waiting room and found a silent and grieving young man, a nearly catatonic young woman who could not look at me or speak, and a large group of extended family members. They were an African American family and they were Baptists, and I was terrified of not knowing how to help them in their grief. I was so focused on this that I forgot to *be* with them. I was thinking about what African American Baptists would expect a white Unitarian Universalist to know about their faith and cultural traditions. I was not *feeling* what a mom and dad, scarcely past being children themselves, would need in order to say goodbye to their son.

We were all herded quickly to the baby's crib so that I could perform the baptism, then we were herded out again so that the medical crew could turn off the machines and remove the tubes that were keeping the child alive. If you can imagine being in this situation, what would you most need as the parents of this child? In my anxiety, I didn't allow myself to imagine, and I missed the most crucial human element: giving the mother and father one last opportunity to hold their son, to speak to him and call him by name and tell him not to be afraid.

Intellectual understanding can inform us in important ways. My understanding that Baptists would want to pray in Jesus' name was helpful in my being a chaplain to this family. But intellectual understanding also distances. Because I led with my head and not with my heart, this family didn't have the opportunity to fully acknowledge that *their* hearts were broken. Of course, their hearts would have been broken whether I was the best chaplain in the world or the worst, and I may still have helped them in some way by being there with them. I will never know that for sure. But I do know that I learned something important from this experience: that I need to allow God to be present and not be so concerned with being in control.

Surrender. That's what I learned in CPE. The most important learning I gained from my experience with this family happened when I brought it back to my group of peers and supervisors. I was critiqued and supported, I heard how I might have done this visit differently, I was acknowledged for what I did well as well as what I did poorly, and I discovered that my peers and supervisors knew what it was like to be me at that moment because they had been there too. By surrendering to the pain of being a flawed and broken person, I was able to connect with the other flawed and broken people with me in that room and back in the pediatric ICU.

I will dare to say here, in a room full of Unitarian Universalists, that I believe in surrendering to God. My theological skepticism ripples down my spine just a little when I say this. I don't believe in the concept of surrendering to God's will; I find this theology damaging to those who do not enjoy the power of privilege, and I see it as an excuse for those who *do* to abdicate responsibility.

There. I've made my disclaimer. Now. I will repeat: Intellectual understanding can create distance. Skepticism can be exhausting. To me, surrendering to God means engaging in relationship with the spirit, with the God that does not and cannot control my life but, rather, is the power that connects through the heart, with that personal God that sees and hears and loves me – as I am and as I am becoming.

I recognize that not everyone here may believe in God. But I imagine that everyone here believes in spirit, in the importance of making personal connections with what has meaning in our lives. I'd like to call you back to that sense of waking from a nightmare and feeling alone and afraid. Sometimes we experience that in our waking lives too. Being told you have incurable cancer, losing a child, or helplessly watching your mother suffer through a long illness and die. When we need to find comfort and hope, we find it in connection – within ourselves, with others who care about us, with the loving spirit that embraces us, with whatever it is that creates meaning and makes our lives matter. And this isn't found in some vague spirit floating around somewhere out there. It's within you; it's right next to you, so very close to you, so very, very personal, holding you in the deepest love

Our closing hymn, "Be Thou My Vision," is one that I have loved all my life. It speaks to that desire for connection and love, for that personal God that will be with us when we wake from a nightmare or have to live through a nightmare. I invite you, if you wish, to surrender to this hymn, to take in the beauty of its tune, to momentarily suspend any intellectual skepticism you may have about God and embrace whichever words have meaning for you. We need and deserve to be loved, as we are, in both our power and our weakness.