

**Atheism: Who Needs God, Anyway?**  
**The Rev. Suzelle Lynch**  
**Unitarian Universalist Church West**  
**June 5, 2005**

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**MEDITATION**

Our words for meditation come from James Kavanaugh, a Catholic priest and poet. It is part of his poem called *My Easy God is Gone*. So let us breathe deeply now and join our hearts and minds in a meditative spirit:

I have lost my easy God - the one whose name  
I knew since childhood.  
I knew his temper, his sullen outrage,  
his ritual forgiveness.  
I knew the strength of his arm, the sound  
of his insistent voice.  
His beard bristling...  
His eyes clear and piercing...  
His face too unwrinkled to feel my  
child's pain.  
He was a good God - so he told me -  
a long suffering and manageable one.  
I knelt at his feet and kissed them.  
I felt the smooth countenance of his forgiveness.

I never told him how he frightened me,  
How he followed me as a child,  
When I played with friends or begged  
for candy on Halloween.  
He was a predictable God, I was the  
unpredictable one.  
He was unchanging, omnipotent, all-seeing,  
I was volatile and helpless.

He taught me to thank him for the concern  
which gave me no chance to breathe,  
For the love which demanded only love in  
return - and obedience.  
He made pain sensible and patience possible  
and the future foreseeable.  
He, the mysterious, took all mystery away,  
corroded my imagination,

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Controlled the stars and would not let  
them speak for themselves.

Now he haunts me seldom: some fierce  
umbilical is broken,  
I live with my own fragile hopes and  
sudden rising despair.  
Now I do not weep for my sins; I have  
learned to love them.  
And to know that they are the wounds that  
make love real.

...

I walk alone, but not so terrified as when  
he held my hand.

...

Now my easy God is gone - he knew too  
much to be real,  
He talked too much to listen, he knew  
my words before I spoke.  
But I knew his answers as well - computerized  
and turned to dogma.  
His stamp was on my soul, his law locked  
cross-like on my heart,  
His imperatives tattooed on my breast, his  
aloofness canonized in ritual.

... Now the world is mine with all its pain and  
warmth, with its every color and sound;  
... A dog barks and I weep to be alive, a  
cat studies me and my joy is boundless.  
I lie on the grass and boy-like, search the sky.  
The clouds do not turn to angels, the winds  
do not whisper of heaven or hell.

Perhaps I have no God - what does it matter?  
I have beauty and joy and transcending loneliness,  
I have the beginning of love - as beautiful as it  
is feeble - as free as it is human.  
I have the mountains that whisper secrets  
held before men could speak,  
I have the ocean that belches life on  
the beach and caresses it in the sand,  
I have a friend who smiles when he sees  
me, who weeps when he hears my pain,  
I have a future of wonder.

I have no past - the steps have disappeared  
the wind has blown them away.

...

I sense the call of creation, I feel its  
swelling in my hands.  
I can lust and love, eat and drink, sleep  
and rise,  
But my easy God is gone - and in his stead  
The mystery of loneliness and love!

(Amen.)

## READINGS

### 1. From Robert Fulghum:

In the credo I wrote at twenty-one, the longest part was devoted to God.

It was a Supreme Court appeal against the existence of the Sunday-school version of the deity imposed on me in childhood. On reading my fiercely argued case, one professor said that not only had I thrown the baby out with the bath water, but I had thrown out the soap and towel and bath tub as well - and then tried to burn down the bathroom while I was at it.

Was there nothing, he asked, that might replace what I had so thoroughly rejected? At the time, the answer was NO, absolutely not.

### 2. From Greek writer and philosopher Nikos Kazantzakis:

We have seen the highest circle of spiraling powers. We have named this circle God. We might have given it any name we wished: Abyss, Absolute Darkness, Absolute Light, Matter, Spirit, Ultimate Hope, Ultimate Despair, Silence. But never forget, it is we who give it a name.

### 3. From Stephen Mitchell, in "The Gospel According to Jesus"

The Buddha said, "A man walking along a highroad sees a great river, its near bank dangerous and frightening, its far bank safe. He collects sticks and foliage, makes a raft, paddles across the river, and safely reaches the other shore. Now suppose that, after he reaches the other shore, he takes the raft and puts it on his head and walks with it on his head wherever he goes because of the important role that raft once played in his life. Would he be using the raft in an appropriate way? No; a reasonable man will realize that the raft has been very useful to him in crossing the river and arriving safely on the other shore, but that

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once he has arrived, it is proper to leave the raft behind and walk on without it. This is using the raft appropriately.

"In the same way, all truths should be used to cross over; they should not be held on to once you have arrived. You should let go of even the most profound insight or the most wholesome teaching; all the more so, unwholesome teachings."

## SERMON

Year after year, the Gallup poll reports that more than 90% of Americans believe in God. Do they all believe in the same way in the same God? Of course not. But still, it's a pretty impressive figure. More than two hundred sixty-six million, six hundred fifty six thousand, one hundred twenty six people in the United States believe in God.

But what about the remaining less-than-ten percent? What do they believe? I would wager that some of them might consider themselves Buddhists, or Taoists, or agnostics or perhaps even Unitarian Universalists. And some of them, no doubt are atheists.

As you know, Unitarian Universalism is a non-creedal religion, which means that we do not have to avow a belief in any particular god or scripture to be a member of this church. We Unitarian Universalists treasure freedom of belief, and we know that truth comes in more forms than we could possibly contain in a creed.

And so we strive to understand and respect one another's beliefs. That's our purpose today regarding atheism.

(Let me say first that while I meant to be provocative with the title of this sermon, I didn't quite realize how flip it sounded. I did not mean to offend atheists or anyone else, but I want to recognize that I may have, and for that I am sorry.)

And right up front, here, I want to give you my answer to the question my title poses. Who needs god? Well, I do, for one. I am not an atheist.

Or perhaps I should say I do not call myself an atheist, though I share many of the same ideas and convictions.

Many of you have heard me say that I grew up as a Unitarian Universalist humanist, and was never really offered the opportunity to believe in God or Jesus or heaven or hell or any of the other traditional Christian or Jewish ideas that my friends took for granted. I am aware that this may seem very strange to those of

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you who grew up with the kind of God James Kavanaugh spoke of so eloquently in his poem, the long-suffering, bristly-bearded, all-seeing God who demanded love and obedience. But that's how it was for me. God was not required; god wasn't even an option.

So when I say I need God now, I need to be clear about what I mean, for Kavanaugh's God did not leave him one day and show up on my doorstep the next.

I tend to agree with my colleague the Rev. Susan Manker Seale who says that for her, rationally and logically, there is no god. But emotionally and intuitively, there is something, even though she hesitates to name it "god." I don't hesitate on that one. And even as I try to explain what I mean by god, beyond the personal, as I have studied different religions and had conversations with many different people of faith, I have learned that for most people, God is not an omniscient being, a father in the sky who charts the course of football teams, drops earthquakes into the lives of the wicked, or blesses some children with abundance while cursing others with starvation.

It's harder to define what God is. There's a Buddhist thought that "the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon." For me words fall short in describing god, but I like the way UU minister Forrest Church put it, "God is not God's name. God is our name for the highest power we can imagine. (For some," he continues, "the highest imaginable power will be a petty and angry tribal baron ensconced high above the clouds on a golden throne, visiting punishment on all who don't believe in him.

"But for others, the highest power is love, goodness, justice, or the spirit of life itself. Each of us projects our limited experience on a cosmic screen in letters as big as our minds can fashion.") He echoes Nikos Kazantzakis:

We have seen the highest circle of spiraling powers. We have named this circle God. We might have given it any name we wished: ...But never forget, it is we who give it a name.

I need that which I name God for a whole host of reasons that don't bear going into at the moment, save one. And that one is something I have in common with the atheists. My belief in god comes as a result of my lived experience.

A study by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, located just up the road in Madison, found that more than 90% of the atheists who responded to their survey became atheists because religion just did not work for them. Through their lived experience, they found that religious beliefs were fundamentally incompatible with what they observed around them.

But what is atheism? What might atheists believe or experience? In my former church, a young science teacher who was a member of the congregation and an atheist gave a sermon that I thought defined atheism quite nicely. He said, "What does it mean to be an atheist? Obviously it means that I don't believe in god, or any manifestation of god. I'm also quite sure it means that under no conceivable circumstances could I ever be elected president of the United States. It means that I can never let my mother, who is devoutly Catholic, know who her son really is. It means that when my students ask me what religion I belong to, I find it easier to say I'm a Unitarian than to say I'm an atheist. It means that when I stand with my students each morning and recite the Pledge of Allegiance, I either feel awkward for omitting the 'under God' part, or hypocritical for saying it. It's not that I am in any way ashamed or embarrassed about my beliefs. But I am afraid that my students' misconceptions about atheism would undermine my ability to teach them the principles of science, and would give them cause to distance themselves from me. I like to refer to myself as a 'devout atheist', by which I mean that I am every bit as firm in my belief that there is no god, as the Pope is in his belief that there is a god. I wouldn't want anyone to think that my atheism is just a passing stage, a youthful rejection of my parents faith, something that time and maturity will cause me to discard, like my Nirvana tapes. My belief is quite unshakable. It has withstood tests that most people will, thankfully, never have to endure. It is my faith. I am proud of it. I do not ask anyone to share it. I do not feel that it gives me license to feel superior to those who embrace other faiths. It is simply a part of who I am,..." (from Eric Samson, "Atheism: Spirituality of the Self.")

Douglas Krueger, in his book "What Is Atheism?" narrows it down a bit more. He says the term "atheism" is from the Greek *atheos*. The prefix "a" means "without," and the Greek *theos* means "god," so atheism means simply "being without god." Theism asserts that there is a god, so atheism is the view that does not assert that there is a god.

Historically, atheists have been around for a long time. In the Hebrew Scriptures, for example, Psalm 14 says, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" This passage is about three thousand years old, and is one of the first pieces of written evidence that record of the existence of atheists. Two thousand five hundred years ago atheist views began appearing in China, India, and Greece. In China, Confucius taught a philosophy that did not lean on any kind of God. In India, Buddha taught a philosophy that omitted any belief in God. The root word *atheos* or "no god" was of Greek origin, and it was in Greece, that the philosophy of materialism emerged, which taught that everything in the universe was composed of tiny units of matter called atoms, and that all the movements of life and nature were accounted for in the movements of atoms. (*From a sermon by the Rev. Roger Fritts.*)

Atheism, by the way, should not be confused with agnosticism, which argues that there is not enough evidence to state either belief or disbelief in god.

Atheists take the lack of evidence as partial proof that there is no god, combining that with what they interpret as 'good reasons to think that the claim that there are no gods is warranted,' and either content themselves with not asserting that there is a god, or taking an active stand and denying that there is a god." (Adapted from Douglas Krueger.) Cliff Walker, and others associated with Positive Atheism magazine define atheism as the lack of a god-belief, the absence of theism, to whatever degree and for whatever reason. This is often called the "weak atheist" position. (Or sometimes called "non-theism." Find out more at [www.positiveatheism.org](http://www.positiveatheism.org))

Douglas Krueger takes the active stand, and denies that there is a god and asserts that god or gods cannot exist, a position known as "strong atheism."

Strong atheists frequently hold that the concept of god was created by humanity to make us dependent, especially upon the institutions of the church. In this view, God is a crutch that keeps us from taking responsibility for our own lives. A strong atheist might also say that "When you look at what people have done in the name of God throughout history, it's amazing that anyone can still believe.... Millions of people have been ... butchered in the name of God. ...The concept of God encourages this madness and murder in the human race, and if we can rid ourselves of this mythology the world would be a more peaceful place." (Adapted from a sermon by the Rev. Michael McGee.)

And a strong atheist would say, "If we rely on the revelations of science and modern thought, then the concept of god cannot be taken seriously." What's real is what we can see and hear and touch. There is no supernatural world beyond this one, there is nothing in the natural world that can validly be described as God. And there is no deep or hidden meaning in life, but simply the fact of our existence.

If this makes all atheists seem dull and life-denying, with no sense of awe and mystery, I invite you again to hear from the young man from my former church. He wrote, "I sense that many people view Atheism as somehow a bit extreme, somewhat sterile and devoid of joy, that without some underlying spiritual force to unite us to our fellow humans, to our past, our future and the world around us, life must be somewhat empty and lacking in mystery. I don't find this to be the case at all. Just because I don't believe in spirits or supernatural forces doesn't mean that there isn't any mystery left for me to enjoy. In fact, the more I learn about the observable forces in nature, the more amazed I am. I take great pleasure in learning how the universe works – think of it as scientific spirituality. Here's an example. My wife thought I was kind of weird when I told her this, but this really is something I often ponder ... I look out at the trees and I think about the zillions of atoms that have passed between me and those lovely trees. By breathing the same air and drinking the same water those trees and I have shared a lot of ourselves with each other. I've shared a lot with you too. In fact one breath of air from my lungs has enough atoms to share with

all the people in the world. These atoms are so abundant, so old, and so permanent, that I am quite confident that there isn't a single person in the history of this planet who hasn't shared some of themselves with me. And ... long after my time on this Earth has passed, these atoms will find their way into every living creature yet to come. To me, the vastness and complexity of these interactions is every bit as awe inspiring and mysterious as anything god has to offer." (Eric Samson, from "Atheism: Spirituality of the Self.")

Like this natural sense of reverence, there are many important teachings we share with or can learn from our atheist brothers and sisters.

For one, we can remember that whether or not we believe in any kind of God, that each of us, as an individual, is ultimately responsible for finding meaning in our own life, for creating and living by an ethical system, and for making peace and justice in this world.

We can learn to search for what is true, even if it makes us uncomfortable, and to make the most of our life, even if we believe we'll have another life after death.

We can let our understanding of the oppression atheists experience lead us to a continual action so that all voices might be heard in our Society.

remember to be open to the ideas of those who are in the minority, and finally (and most importantly) we can remember that in a free search for truth, all beliefs should be open to question, even those most closely held.

For as we heard from Sophia Lyon Fahs in our chalice lighting, it matters what we believe. And we know that in our faith tradition we encourage people to make room in their lives for expansive beliefs. For just as Unitarian Universalism grew out of the historical affirmations that God is a unity, not a trinity, and that God's love is universal, not reserved only for a few, and has expanded and adapted many times since then, we know that as growing human beings, our beliefs will grow and change over the course of our lives. While I do not doubt the convictions of the young science teacher from my former congregation, I do hope that he, and all of us, will heed the wisdom Stephen Mitchell presents in the reading from "The Gospel According to Jesus," that no matter how important a role the rafts we construct play in our lives, we should not carry them around on top of our heads forever. Remember his words, "In the same way, all truths should be used to cross over; they should not be held on to once you have arrived. You should let go of even the most profound insight or the most wholesome teaching; all the more so, unwholesome teachings."

Robert Fulghum, many years after he wrote the credo that his professor claimed threw out the baby and the bath water and burned down the bathhouse, did just this kind of letting go of previous closely-held truths.

Asked what he believes now, he writes:

... where do I stand? Can I provide a working definition of the nature of God as I express it now? No. And I decline to try. Not because I am unsure of my position. To the contrary. I realize that what has separated me from God is not doubt but beliefs and creeds and formulas.

My feelings and thoughts have passed over into that place where words cannot go - into namelessness. Beyond theology, scripture, and church. And beyond expression.

I cannot take you there. Nor would I insist you go my way -- or even go at all. It's a hard trip, through brambles and over barren ground, in storm and darkness. I only say you may go if you must. And you may take heart in knowing that others have gone before you.

Who needs god? Some of us do, some of us don't. Some of us did, and some of us will. No matter where we are on our life's deepening road, atheism provides us with an excellent challenge, a goad to growth, an opportunity to learn from our own comforts and discomforts. And it provides us an opening to counter bigotry and intolerance as we continue the ever-important work of holding open a place for religious freedom, compassion and justice in our world.

Amen.

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