

THIS I BELIEVE  
FIRST OF A FOUR-PERSON SERMON  
March 13, 2010

MICHELLE LAGRAVE

FIRST PARISH IN FRAMINGHAM UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

I experience God. I experience a Source of life which is greater than myself; greater than all of humanity; greater even than this beautiful home we call Earth. I experience a Source of life and inspiration which I choose to name "God"; a Source without which life can not exist; and a Source which is meaningless without the existence of life.

I experience a living, moving, growing, changing, ever self-surpassing, always imperfect, and powerless God; a God that is life and death; creation and destruction; male and female; yin and yang. I see God's power as a collective power which moves through all living things; a power which influences; a power which calls; a power which does not and can not dictate; a powerless power.

I experience God as simply one; as perfectly whole; as moving through every life and yet greater than all of life. I understand God as that which connects all of life; therefore, I consider all of life to be holy. An injury to any single life is also an injustice to God. I believe that idolatry is one of humanity's greatest tragedies and so I use many names when I refer to my ideas of God: Holy One, Great Mystery, Adonai Elohenu, the Tao, Spirit of Life and Love, Yah. God is all of this and much more. God is ultimately indescribable.

I find ultimate meaning in human life by willfully choosing to engage with the divine in a process of mutual co creation; a process I can understand as evolution; as the imposition of order over chaos; and within the natural eco-cycles of creation and destruction; a process of which I make religious meaning when I speak of life's blessings mixed with life's tragedies.

I experience humans as naturally driven to wonder, to explore, to create and to understand that which is greater than us. I believe that the divine is within all of us in the form of inspiration. Stories of God come from us and are of us. All of art, music, literature, and science is revelation. All of the world's religions and sciences are equally valid paths to discovering greater truths.

For myself, I find the greatest meaning in my study of the Hebrew Scriptures. I recite the Sh'ma most every day and then I say thank you: "Toda, toda, toda; for all of the blessings of my life, both those known and those yet to be known; thank you, thank you, thank you, Hallelujah and Amen!"

THIS I BELIEVE  
SECOND OF A FOUR-PERSON SERMON  
March 13, 2010

CHARLES GLAZIER

My mom taught me to do what people ask me to do. So I believe that when Reverend Hepler called me last night to ask if I would join you this morning with a description of my belief system, it was actually my mother who said yes.

I believe, by the way, that although the clock says it is about 9.30 now, that it is actually more like 8.30. I suppose a good deal of our existence is occupied with puzzling out the difference between the way things are and the way we believe them to be.

Now that I'm 55 and raising three about-to-toddle girls, I am much more hopeful than I was when I was 25 and was single, childless and free to do just about whatever I wanted.

Back in my twenties I read a lot of philosophy and psychology. A lot of my deep thinking was gloomy. I remember reading Carl Jung's memoir. One of his arguments is that people don't really change much, and that everything positive and progressive in human behavior is quite quickly balanced by something negative and regressive. He gave the example that for tens of thousands of years humans had dreamed of flying like the birds. We finally started flying in the early 1900s, and by 1915 we were using airplanes as a neat way to drop explosives on other humans. This kind of observation made a big impression on me in my twenties. I believed the human enterprise was running on a circular track. I was annoyed and derisive when my buddies came up with ways to improve the world and make a lot of money in the process. I believed there is no progress, just human nature repeating itself like an endless series of gingerbread men.

Too bad I felt that way. Turns out that guy down the hall from me, Bill Gates, had some ideas that actually would change the world, and incidentally make him and a number of other classmates very rich.

Fortunately for my day to day experience, and fortunately for my family's day to day experience, I have shifted from my youthful beliefs and become a more hopeful and cheerful person. I must admit, I don't think much about my beliefs. In trying to draw closer to them this morning it occurred to me that I could observe what I believe best by noting what I spend my time doing.

Mostly, I spend my days from sitting in an office with people who come and go every hour, paying attention to them by talking and listening, or by playing. I'm trying to help them heal from emotional trauma. I have all sorts of complicated ideas about what is going on with people and their emotional trauma; ideas about how the past is pressing on the present, and how the present moment is shaping the future. I have lots of ideas about neurobiology and about childhood development, and about the vicissitudes of instinctual drives in the context of the digital-age family. You can tell all this complicated thinking is very

important when I tell you that generally the most therapeutic thing I do with people is fifteen minutes of pillow-fight followed by twenty minutes of legomania.

Then I go home and spend the rest of the day paying attention to my wonderful wife and my amazing little girls, by talking and listening, and by playing. Also by changing diapers, sweeping the floor, washing dishes and paying bills.

Based on this observation I have to conclude that I don't at this time have any ultimate beliefs. I have a ton of preferences - for instance, XBox 360 is a better system than PlayStation 3. But no ultimate beliefs about the meaning of life. Rather, I seem to have a faith in the business of waking up, showing up, paying attention, and responding in a way that is seriously playful, or playfully serious.

That's as far as I've gotten this far. Thanks for listening.

THIS I BELIEVE  
THIRD OF A FOUR-PERSON SERMON  
March 13, 2010

VICKIE KARIAN

When Kathleen asked me to speak on the subject of my beliefs, I really had to think hard about what I believe now. My spiritual beliefs and my belief in a higher spiritual power have gone through an enormous change over the past 30 years. It has been a journey.

I grew up largely unchurched, though nominally Christian, in a town that was overwhelmingly Catholic. Then I went to Boston College. All of this exposure to the Catholic Church was very uncomfortable and really left me feeling as an outsider. Having studied the faith, I also could not find the truth in it. It reinforced a paternalistic outlook that for me was not something I could accept. Along the way to rejecting 'religion', I also rejected 'God'.

In my early 20's, I joined the Peace Corps and went to live in Jamaica, a country that is very 'Christian', with churches on every corner. Folks were always trying to get me to their church. I saw so much hypocrisy in the society among the 'Christians' in the way they treated each other that I rejected religion completely.

Then I fell in love with a man, who was a fundamentalist Christian. And I tried really hard to be a part of his religion, but it never rang true. I couldn't accept myself as a second class citizen as a woman, nor after reading the Bible 'a chapter a day', could I accept its tenets as the rulebook for my life. The marriage fell apart for many reasons and my inability to bend myself to his religion was part of it.

Along the way, one of my Peace Corps friends mentioned being a UU and that I should check it out when I got home- there is no UU presence in Jamaica. When I moved to Miami, I did just that. I started attending the UU church and very quickly I felt that the minister was speaking directly to me, addressing my concerns and connecting to my spirit. I was amazed that after all those years and fighting against God, that here I was in a church and happy to be there.

When Ben and I moved back to Natick, one of the first things I did was look for a church, and we landed here at First Parish. This has been our spiritual home ever since.

But what about God? What were my beliefs about God? Having been an agnostic at best for many years, I have come to some different and personal beliefs about the concept of God. And the UU principle of respecting the inherent worth and dignity of all living things played a big part in my evolution.

I now do believe in God or at least a higher spiritual energy or power. This is not God, the old man in the clouds, who smites those who oppose him. My God doesn't play favorites among the organized religions. My God doesn't control the weather, natural disasters or world events. My God doesn't decide who will live or die, who will be rich or poor, happy or sad. My God didn't have a hand in Obama winning the election. My God doesn't even care if the Red Sox win another World Series.

So who is my God?

God is the life spirit that resides in every living thing, connects us all and is manifested by humanity as goodness, kindness and compassion. God is energy, a life force from the Universe. I see God in all of our humanity, in the kindness we show to others and in our interconnectedness with each other.

I look for that life spirit in everyone and often find it.

I see it in my colleagues at work who are patient and kind with stressed out families, showing compassion and support.

I see it in friends and family who treat one another with love and care, in both good and bad times.

I see it in this congregation, where people really do respect and care for one another.

When my son had his terrible motorcycle accident almost 2 years ago, in spite of all the stress, worry, and trauma, I had the feeling that there were many people here who were sending their good wishes and prayers. I felt like I was wrapped in a blanket of caring and compassion, sent by the people in this congregation as well as my friends, colleagues and family and that we were all connected.

As a UU, I respect the inherent worth and dignity of all living things. But I also recognize the inherent capacity for love and compassion in all of us and I call that God.

THIS I BELIEVE  
FOURTH OF A FOUR-PERSON SERMON  
March 13, 2010

REV. KATHLEEN HEPLER

READINGS

Humming To Snails

On a lazy Sunday afternoon in July, I sat with my ten-year-old cousin on the rocky shore of the Damariscotta River in Maine. I watched as he patiently held a snail that he had plucked from the rocks-and hummed to it! I didn't know whom to watch, the boy or the snail, but soon I saw two antennae appear from the shell and the snail began to dance! Of course, I had to try it. It wasn't long before all the other adults had moved from the porch down to the rocks, each one holding a snail and humming to it. A dance troupe of snails.

Two things struck me about the experience. One was the quiet power of that youngster in teaching us something about our world. He didn't tell us anything but allowed us to discover it for ourselves. We forgot our adult anxieties about looking silly and abandoned ourselves to humming.

The other was in the form of a theological question. Is there something out there in the universe humming for us to come out of our shells, urging us to dance? Trying to understand what moves us is one of the reasons we come together in religious community.<sup>1</sup>

.....an excerpt from *An Altar in the World*

By Barbara Brown Taylor

Although I have spent a lot of my life in jobs that require me to speak for God, I am still reluctant to do it for all kinds of reasons. In the first place, I have discovered that people who want to speak to me about God generally have an agenda. However well-intentioned they may be, their speech tends to serve as a means to their own ends. They have a clear idea about how I should respond to what they are saying. They have a clear destination in mind for me, and nine times out of ten it is not someplace I want to go.

In the second place, too much speech about God strikes me as disrespectful. In the Upanishads, God is described as "Thou Before Whom All Words Recoil." This sounds right to me. Anything I say about God will be inadequate. No matter how hard I try to say something true about God, the reality of God will eclipse my best words. The only reality I can describe with any accuracy is my own limited experience of what I think God may be: the More, the Really Real, the Luminous Web that Holds Everything in Place.

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Midge Skwire, From *All That Is Our Life*, (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2005) p.31-32.

If there is a switch to flip, I have never found it. . . .most of my visions of the divine have happened while I was busy doing something else. I did nothing to make them happen. They happened to me the same way a thunderstorm happens to me, or a bad cold, or the sudden awareness that I am desperately in love. I play no apparent part in their genesis. My only part is to decide how I will respond, since there is plenty I can do to make them go away, namely: 1) I can figure that I have had too much caffeine again; 2) I can remind myself that visions are not true in the same ways that taxes and the evening news are true; or 3) I can return my attention to everything I need to get done today. These are only a few of the things I can do to talk myself out of living in the House of God.<sup>2</sup>

## SERMON

Rev. Kathleen Hepler

Being here in this space on Sunday with you... and the light.... and the singing... and the history...and the common speaking... and the possibility that more care and justice will reside on the earth because of it, is one of the main holding places of my beliefs. That we gather on this rainy day to praise love and expect freedom and help one another stay focused on that which is larger than any one thing, any one person alone... surely the divine is in this place.

Anyplace where love transcends parochialism, and also, for me, any natural place that causes me to gasp in awe are also containers for the beliefs I hold.

For me, God is a mystery always being revealed, not a fact to be proven...more of a process toward the good, a flow in which to reside, than a formed being awaiting my prayer and counting on my obedience. God is a word I choose to retain to describe the best of my being aligned with the love that will not let us go.

I believe that the more true spiritual freedom one has, the more mystery becomes attached to the experience of the sacred.

I believe that our purpose in life is to release our ego as much as we can so as to get out of our own way and to become more and more clear about the fact that we are co-creators with each other and the holy in the process of life. I know that I have a long, long way to go in this endeavor; therefore I affirm that asking for forgiveness and being willing to give it is an essential path of the spirit.

I believe that to be alive is a blessing, but that it is not always easy to see it as a blessing, because....

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, (New York: Harper One, 2009) p. 14-15.

...things don't always go as we plan...  
...life is not fair...  
... we humans can do terrible things to one another...  
... suffering exists for every human at one time or another, and for some much more

No matter what, life is always a blessing, but life is never always easy for anyone and it can be mostly brutal for some. The pearl at the center of it all is come to know it as a blessing in any case. This I believe.

I have no idea what happens after death. I do know that since I have considered all of the possibilities, especially since I have been free to consider that this one life is all that we each have, life has become more and more precious to me. I have a sense that cannot be proven, that there is a continuation of the part of our consciousness that belongs to the divine energetic pattern of life...but I do not count on it. Increasingly, today and this very moment is enough.

I think that the best prayer is “thank you”, and that the best response to life just as it is, is “Yes”.

We close our “This I Believe” five person sermon with the words of Rev. Mark Belletini:<sup>3</sup>

I open my mouth in astonishment.  
Praise fall forth with my every breath.  
I bless that I am not the first,  
nor shall I be the last,  
to wonder under the stars that everything is,  
and that I am part of it all.  
I bless that no one has any final answers,  
and that no name  
can be the final name for ultimacy.  
I bless that it's possible to let fresh insight  
displace convention.  
I bless that it will still be possible on my deathbed to  
grow deeper.  
I bless that only the painful work of forgiveness  
allows for any real joy in life.  
I bless that what is fractured  
still dares to dream of wholeness.  
I bless that there is enough to go around  
if we give, not grab.  
I bless that distance

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Belletini, *A Sonata for Voice and Silence: Meditations*, (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2008).

can usually give way to intimacy.  
I bless that justice is only just  
if it transforms me  
as well as the world outside me.  
I bless that the good  
are not those who strive to do good,  
but those who allow their hearts to be vulnerable  
to the inherent dignity of others.  
I bless that peace  
can never be declared impossible,  
even in the Middle East.  
I bless that ruined cities and ruined lives  
can often be rebuilt.  
I bless that prayers like this  
are not foolish incantations,  
but invitations to bless, question, and praise  
as often as possible.  
I bless that there is no place in the whole universe  
that is not as sacred as any temple.  
I bless that my breathing  
can be a kind of thanking.  
I bless the peace that takes nourishment  
at the breast of justice.  
I bless that both singing and silence are possible.