

A God You Can Believe In

A Sermon preached at the First Unitarian Church, Albuquerque, New Mexico

By Christine Robinson October 17, 2015

Isn't that Lone Wild Bird a lovely hymn? Beautiful tune and..I have to admit, that when I sing those words about being in and of and sheltered by the Divine, I experience a longing that sometimes brings tears to my eyes. And as a matter of fact, I have experienced being held in that way...loved and protected by a force outside of myself that I can barely dare to name.

It was a wonderous experience, absolutely real, but it was a fleeting experience, and a long time ago, and of course I wonder, if it was just wishful thinking or if it could have possibly been a brief and fleeting connection to what is deeply and ultimately real...God.

I'll never know, but ever since I have believed in a God that I could somehow have a relationship with, which is a pretty traditional idea about god . It exists, I can only imagine, because many people have had that relationship and it seemed to them and to those around them that it was a force for good in their lives.

You, of course, are not only welcome to believe in whatever type of God your own experiences and wisdom suggest is real, or to not to believe in any sort of God at all, you are encouraged, even expected, as a UU, to work that out yourself. This is a No Dogma Zone. What we offer here is not answers but space, discussion, and ideas to ponder.

UU's have, as a matter of fact, a very wide range of beliefs about God, from "father", to Spirit, or Love (like the second hymn) to absent, to higher power to balderdash. And not a proof of any particular theory in sight.

What UU's tend not to believe in is Gods who stray very far from what we think of as the laws of nature. Gods who stop the earth from spinning momentarily, or who are born of virgins or rise from the dead....all attributes of one or more of humanity's divinities. Most UU's want their divinity to work within the laws of nature, at least mostly, and while their theological ideas may be non-scientific, they are rarely contra-scientific. And modern science, the science most of us know about but don't really understand, the science of relativity and quarks and uncertainty, has enough mystery woven into it to allow the possibility of some kinds of divinity and even some kinds of miracles; a god who works through our minds and hearts, for instance, nudging probabilities for good, or inspiring people to change and grow. What makes our spirits long to be made whole, after all, when we're so often aware of how silly, wasteful, and foolish we are.

The sort of traditional gods who sit in the clouds...you've known for a long time that that kind of god couldn't exist. And you've probably long ago sorted through the stories told ABOUT god and called some of those tales, "tall." It's likely that the more you understood about how the world works, the less willing you were to take the old stories literally. That's the way it is for most people, and for the human race as a whole.

One of the biggest clashes between faith and science happened in the western world over the discovery that the earth is not the center of the observable universe, which is the cosmology of the Bible, and the relationship between science and faith got progressively more tense for four centuries. During those years and even today, most people of faith, if you get right down to it, believe that there are two realms in our universe, the spiritual and the physical, and that it is science's job to explain the physical realm and faith's job to explain the spiritual realm, and the twain don't actually meet very often, except in the minds and hearts of humanity.

For some people that works pretty well, but others want only one realm where all things work the same way, where everything we can say about God arises from what we know about our physical universe. This quest for essential unity leads many people to atheism; to the belief that there is only one world, this observable universe with its various laws, there is one life, this one we are now living, and the meaning of our lives is to live well and make it possible for others to live well.

Most people, however, seem to want a divinity in the world, an organizing principle other than chance, and they want that principle to work with science as it is best understood. Every new scientific discovery has gotten some people thinking this way. For instance, when we thought that the universe as a whole behaved like a well-made clock, we called God the clock-maker. When it turned out that only the stuff at about our size in the universe behaves like a well-made clock, and the much smaller stuff, like atoms, and the much larger stuff, like interstellar space, is subject to very non-clock-like rules like relativity and the weak force, and very non-clock-like stuff like dark matter, the clock maker god was superseded by those who want unity by a higher power, or spirit, by process theology and theologies of emergence....which is what we are going to focus on for the rest of this sermon...the divinity, the god, which emerges from the increasing complexity of human consciousness.

This emergent God is, as one science writer, Nancy Ellis Abrams, said, "a God that arises from the principles that govern reality." That is to say, a god that is not out on the sidelines of the physical world, looking in from another reality, but who is part and parcel of this world...this whole world, as it really is. She writes in her book, *A God that Could Be Real*, of such a god, the god which arises out of and is a product of the process of emergence. Emergence is a principle of modern science, So let us adjourn to a brief science lesson.

Science tells us that when the complexity of any interacting system increases enough, something completely new emerges...a new system which uses the individual parts in such a new way that something completely new is born into the universe. This is not a matter of creation, this happens naturally. It is one of several ways in which the fundamentally new comes into our world.

The big bang spewed hydrogen, helium and energy into the newly created time and space which is our universe, but as those things bumped into each other, they began to condense and eventually, the stars emerged. Stars consist of hydrogen and helium but are something more; much more, and within that much more, other elements, heavier and more complex emerge, and when the stars explode, those elements...lets call them stardust, just to be poetic, are cast into the universe. Stardust is about $1/100^{\text{th}}$ of one percent of the output of a star, by the way...the tiniest of things in the vastness of the universe. Our human bodies, on the other hand, consist of almost 90% stardust: elements like oxygen and iron and calcium. The other 10% is hydrogen, mostly in the water molecules in our bodies. How many stars did it take to make you? Molecules emerged from the increasingly complex elements and how they interacted and their gathering created planets. Life emerged on at least one planet; something utterly new, from the increasingly complex interactions of linked molecules.

All these new things are considered emergent phenomena.

Consider, for instance my bee hive. I have one in my back yard and it is endlessly fascinating. Individual bees are beautiful, and also interesting...how they gather nectar, how they secrete wax in just the right form to make honeycomb, how they care for the baby bees and the drones and the queen, but a honey bee can't really be understood alone, because long ago, in the evolution of bees, the hive emerged. The hive, a matter of 10,000 to 30,000 bees lives for years although most bees live only about 6 weeks. In very real ways, the hive is the organism, not the individual bees. The hive has ways of collecting information from individual bees and acts with enormous competence. A swarm of honeybees, out looking for a new place to live, will actually find and choose the best available cavity in the area, even though no one bee, not to mention all 10,000 bees, will have examined more than one or two potential spaces. You could study one honeybee for the rest of your life and never be able to predict how this happens. The hive is something completely different from the bees which make it up, and much more effective at long term survival. The complexity of the hive has emerged from the organism of the honey bee.

Another example. Humans have been trading articles of value ever since we became human; my basket for your pot, or my dried meat for you beads, and when that started to get too complicated, money emerged... a completely new thing, and when transactions about money got complicated something even newer; a market emerged. Now, we say, the market rules.

The market determines the values of things and it is a force unto itself that we all agree is real and don't completely understand. It is an emergent phenomena. Nobody invented it or created it. It emerged.

There are some theologian/scientists, who tell us that one kind of god we could believe in is the god that is emerging from human consciousness. One such thinker is Ursula Goodenough, spelled like it sounds, and if you remember that a theory would be good enough for you, you'll remember her name. Nancy Abrams is another theologian/scientist.

Back to theology, then.

What's a God? Whatever else, a God is something bigger and better than we are, an entity more connected to the whole, more conscious. More moral, more able. That's how God got to be the creator of this beautiful world, so long ago, as sensible human beings looked around and thought, "wow! I could never have done this in a million years."

But scientists tell us that that sort of God, the one who existed before the beginning of the world and was big enough and smart enough create everything that now exists, and did so via the big bang and the laws of evolution.. is just not possible. For one thing, they doubt that there was a "before the beginning." Nor was there any "place", before the beginning, for a creative force to be. That initial bang...which made no sound, of course, because there was no air to carry sound waves and no listeners to hear, so maybe we should call it the great emergence, rather than the big bang...that initial event created not only matter and energy but space and time.

And anyway, for those who want God to operate by the rules the rest of the universe seems to operate by, how our universe seems to work is that ever more complex, conscious, connected things seem to emerge over immense time. The idea that there is a creator before the beginning, before time, before complexity... to some science minded folks, that just doesn't scan. It doesn't mean that such a thing is impossible. Science is but a philosophy, although an elegant one, and there are many things that it doesn't explain or know about. But we who live our lives by science might want to ask ourselves, "So what kind of God would be congruent with the story science tells? "

That would be the god who emerges out of what we value most, what is most precious to us as humans; our aspiring, loving, progressing consciousness.

This idea is a little different than the idea that humans create god out of their longings for comfort or meaning...something we invent. The Emerging God emerges naturally, like hives and markets and life itself, out of a naturally occurring process that begins when systems get increasingly complex. We didn't CREATE this idea of God, like we created the idea of unicorns.

Rather we named what is happening to us as we become more intricate, more connected, more conscious and wise. In other words, in this theology, God did not create the universe, God is an emergent property OF the universe. The human being is to God as the bee is to the hive.

I was captivated by the reading Angela chose for last week's sermon. That author, a UU minister, pointed out that in the Hopi language, the universe is not called "the creation", but "the creating". That gets us closer, doesn't it, to naming the reality of a universe which is emerging into greater complexity over time. The passage goes on, (The human part of the story) is the laughing part of the story, the sorrowful part, the evil part, the compassionate part, the noticing part, the reverent part, the irreverent part, the conscious part."¹

So, this kind of a God didn't create the universe, but this kind of God points us to the meaning of our lives, which is to take part in the continuing emergence of wisdom, love, and creativity. Whatever we do that connects us to others, that joins us in compassion, in problem solving, in learning, in joy is a part of the emergence of God. Whatever we do to master our anxieties, to focus our energy, to deal with our anger is a part of the emergence of God. That puts a new spin on your therapy, doesn't, or your yoga class or your caregiving? It's all nudging the emergence of God.

Nancy Abrams believes that there are ways to be in some kind of contact with this sort of a god...to pray. Of course prayers for new bicycles or even world peace to be imposed by divine fiat don't match this sort of a God, but it does seem reasonable to imagine that when feel in touch with this greater consciousness that is emerging from human consciousness, we may be in touch with not only our own best, wisest, and most loving selves, but in touch with more than that. Like how a bee might come home after a day of foraging to the safety and intelligence of her hive and relax into its great rhythm, maybe. Like we come here, perhaps, and sink into these chairs and relax in this company and feel somehow strengthened in what we know is good and deep and wise. Maybe "all that is our lives" is just a little bit more than meets the eye, like money is just a little bit more than trading, and a living cell just a little bit more than the molecules which make it up.

Only you know if this seems wise to you. But if you are the kind of person who wants the kind of God that matches modern science...maybe its this one.

How do we know what's true in this world of meaning and connection? Only by our intuition, and by the fruits of faith in our lives. If thinking about God this way helps you to be a better person, that's good fruit. If it just kind of makes sense, maybe this is your kind of god.

¹ *Walking Towards Morning* by Victoria Stafford p. 5