

First Unitarian Church

January 3, 2021

The other day, I was telling my husband about a dream I'd had. One of those dreams that on the surface, is purely fantastical. It was not a report of real life. And yet, it was absolutely true in the sense that it was a perfect metaphor. Have you had dreams like that?

What a peculiar thing, don't you think? That when we are asleep, our minds spin stories that illustrate deeper aspects of our lives.

I once shared with you one of my favorite dreams. It took place when I was new to First Unitarian. I had been the assistant minister for just five months when, as planned, the senior minister at the time, Christine Robinson, left for a sabbatical. With such little experience, I was now going to be the minister in charge of this big church for four months. Everything went great. But at the time, I did feel nervous.

One night, I dreamed I had taken Christine's place leading a memorial service. I was at the pulpit in our sanctuary, but instead of standing on my little step, I was on top of a twenty-foot-high, wobbling, tower of square throw pillows. Trying to keep my balance while I sorted my pages. Some of which were missing, of course.

Wow! What a perfect metaphor. The dream was right, without being literally true.

When we are awake, in art and music and literature, we do the same thing, putting our imaginations to work. We are such imaginative, story telling creatures. It's truly an endearing characteristic of humans. But what gets me is... why?

What kind of universe births creatures that love stories so much? Why did it do that? And why did it make creatures that want things to be meaningful? What does that have to do with anything?

Sometimes I think about how we and everything around us are all expressions of the same vast universe, made of common elements that combine and are sometimes mysteriously sparked to life, and it looking at it that way, it is as though we are the universe experiencing itself. Awe. Love. Suffering. That, too, is imaginative, isn't it?

There is so much we do not have language for. What we do not have language for we struggle to imagine. Things like: the edge of space, if you just kept traveling and traveling straight out from earth. How can there be an end? How can there *not* be one? Or, what does it mean that the atoms we are made of, are themselves made mostly of space?

And in this universe, what came first? And from where? Ultimately these questions point to the first religious questions: What are we? And what does this mean?

So we imagine.

The neuro-scientist and neuro-theologian Andrew Newberg says, “The power of myth lies beneath its literal interpretations, in the ability of its universal symbols and themes to connect us with the most essential parts of ourselves in ways that logic and reason alone cannot.” Myths, of course, are imaginative stories. The word myth has gotten a bad rap in popular culture. It is synonymous with something that is not factual. Like on myth-busters. But in the anthropological and historical sense, myths are stories that may convey profound truths through symbols rather than facts.

Since there are “essential parts” of ourselves that logic and reason alone cannot address, Newberg explains, then it follows that “religions *must* be based in myth if they are to have anything meaningful to say to us... even if the extraordinary events that myths chronicle never happened, and the beings they portray never walked the earth, the lasting myths of past cultures all contain psychological and spiritual truths that resonate with the psyches and spirits of readers today.”ⁱ

Our imaginations are essential to religion and spirituality.

When asked what I mean by spirituality, I’ve often spoken of the part of us that is not made up of parts. And I’ve said that in the most basic sense, if you are alive and will one day die, and you are capable of contemplating those facts, then you are of a spiritual nature. There’s a part of you, which is more than the sum of its parts, that is processing or trying to make sense of your situation. There is one more aspect of spirituality, one that is certainly connected to how we make sense of that situation. It’s the belief or experience of being one with, or ultimately part of, something larger than ourselves.

Religion is what happens when we organize ourselves around spirituality, and share rituals and stories, some of which have been handed down from our ancestors.

(Next time someone asks you whether Unitarian Universalism is a religion, now you know what to say! It is.)

Humans have been religious creatures ever since we began acting like humans. In fact, Neanderthals buried their dead with special objects, suggesting a sense of the sacred or a belief in the afterlife.

The religious historian Karen Armstrong suggests *Homo sapiens* might just as well be called *Homo religiosus*, too.ⁱⁱ Religion is natural to humankind.

Drawing on studies in neuro-science, Andrew Newberg says our brains appear to be actually wired for that. Brain scans show that at the moment a person feels a sense of one-ness and profound connection with God or the universe, it shows up as a pattern of activity in the brain—or rather, of reduced activity.

There is a part of our brain that tells us where our bodies end and other objects begin. It helps us locate ourselves in the space around us, and to navigate rooms without bumping into furniture (usually), or make our way down the sidewalk without colliding with telephone poles (most days). In other words, that part of the brain perceives our separateness. And when brain

scans are done on people experiencing spiritual oneness, that area of the brain has, well, seems to have gotten out of the way. It stops offering conflicting information.

One way to interpret this would be to say, well, that must mean a feeling of spiritual oneness is a kind of brain activity, not evidence of a higher reality, right? Another way to interpret it would be to say, we aren't as separate from everything as our brains usually make us think, are we?

And it may well be that those interpretations are not mutually exclusive.

In the words of theologian Sally McFague, "... we are 'not our own:' we belong, from the cells of our bodies to the finest reactions of our minds, to the intricate, constantly changing cosmos." In Unitarian Universalism, we name that in our first principle, as "the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."

The interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.

The world's mystics have been speaking of oneness for a long time. Mystics from diverse religious traditions— Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and others— approach the ultimate through the particular stories of their tradition, but collectively arrive at the sense, irrefutably and profoundly felt by each, that the ultimate—whether called God, or Brahma, or the cosmos— is beyond the images, personages, and names we give it. It may be experienced simultaneously as something intimate, personal, and caring, and also as "being" itself, abstract, incomprehensible, vast.

Some scientists have also named a feeling of oneness. Albert Einstein called it the "cosmic religious feeling." It reminds me of the time I met someone at a party who said he was a postdoctoral research fellow in astrophysics. At Harvard. (Well, I was the one who asked.) Then I asked what had led him into that field of study, and he replied, "I guess I wanted to figure out where God lives." I think he meant that honestly, but not literally. You know?

That's the thing about this oneness: it's rather ineffable. It's hard for people to put into words. And this is also where the line between atheism and theism gets blurry. Belief in God is one form religion takes, but it is not inherent to religion. And so we have this similar experience of oneness across cultures, religions, and eras. And then we have all the colorful, imaginative images and stories that religious traditions employ.

Our images and stories take many forms, any of which may be quite true, in the sense that they convey something meaningful and important, whether or not they are rational or empirical.

That's what I like about our reading today, *God found God*, by Cynthia Rylant.ⁱⁱⁱ In the poem, God walks into a church and gets "all religious on Himself." He is not so sure about the literal veracity of a particular story— "God knew better than to look / at any of the crosses," she says. "He was still trying to figure / that all out." But he knew he had found a holy place.

Sally McFague argues that "a good theological metaphor is one that evokes both shock and recognition. It is not true and it is true at the same time. It disorients and reorients."^{iv} I think

this poem's depiction of God is like that. Shocking and charming. Clearly not factual, yet conveying something that is perhaps true.

Human understandings of the ultimate have always been imaginative. They are like pictures we have painted. Where we get into trouble is when we forgot they are pictures, and begin to think the thing we have conveyed is ultimate reality itself, and truer than everyone else's pictures and stories.

The Hebrew Bible tries to head off this all-too-human tendency. In it the people of Israel are instructed not to try to create any images of God, because they might become idols that distract people from the real God. And when Moses asks the real God's name, God simply says something to the effect of "my name is Being." But we are story creatures! So before long, God has been depicted in many different ways, not only the burning bush, but as a storm, a still small voice, a terrifying angel. In in one passage of the Book of Isaiah, God is described five different ways, including as:

- A demolition squad
- A safe place for poor people who have no other safe place
- The giver of the biggest dinner party you ever heard of
- A powerful sea-monster who will swallow up death forever
- And as a gentle nursemaid who will wipe away every tear from all faces.

The trouble begins when we become stuck on one image, without discerning its appropriateness for our own times.

McFague's book, *Models of God*, is about reimagining Christian theology for an ecological, nuclear age. She argues that the all-powerful, king-like image of god, one who is in control of everything is not the right model of god for our age. In an age in which humans play at extinction—through nuclear arms and through wrecking the balance of life on this planet—to believe that God has ultimate say is to fail to take responsibility for what we are and what we have done.

Not only that, belief in a god who is all-powerful logically leads to another belief: that those in power are favored by God. How else would they have gotten there? Our imaginations of the divine shape our lives, and in turn, our world.

In these services, we embrace many names and images, as well as namelessness, for that which is ultimate.

In the prayers I have shared with you on these Sundays over the years, I have referred to the earth as our mother, who gave us sunrises and sunsets, back and forth, like the rocking of your grandmother's chair, and life coming and going, rising and falling, droning and beating like ancient music, her song. I have addressed prayers to the Spirit of Life, the Spirit of Love, Holy One, our Ancestor, and to the ground of being, the mover, the fire, and the place of rest.

Sometimes one prayer lists many names for the divine. Just as often, though, they do not directly address the divine at all, but are humanist, and seek to acknowledge other truths about our existence, our love, and our longings, often in poetic language.

What images or stories make you feel most connected, or spiritually moved, inside or outside of church? There's a conversation prompt for your day. What spiritual images or stories resonate with you?

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I'm going to wrap this sermon up in a minute. Before I do I want to draw your attention to something: one month from now, I'll begin a sabbatical. That means for four months, from February through May, I'll be away. Ministerial sabbaticals are periods of rest, renewal, and study. Congregations grant them in recognition that ministry can be pretty all-consuming work. And that periods of renewal are an important part of a long, fruitful ministry and a well-balanced minister.

In our congregation, ministers usually take a four-month sabbatical every four years. It has now been six years since my last full sabbatical. So it's time, and I know our church is in great hands with Bob LaVallee. I'm also excited that because we will still be gathering on Zoom for a while, you're going to get to experience some fantastic visiting preachers from all over the country. This is an awesome opportunity to welcome ministers and leaders of color into this virtual pulpit, folks who would otherwise have to travel many miles to join us. You won't want to miss it. And I'm really proud that Bob saw this as an opportunity, and extended these invitations.

Now, I hope Bob will not feel like *he* is standing on a wobbly twenty-foot tower of throw pillows. He brings a lot of experience to this, including in non-profit management. And he has been a minister for two and a half years, not five months like I had. But he is still a fairly new minister, and he is only one minister. So I'm counting on you to go easy on him and support him. Just like you did for me, when I covered Christine's sabbaticals.

I know our pastoral care team, staff, and board of directors will also have his back, and they will be there for you while I'm gone. And, rest assured, if the Board and Bob need to reach me in an emergency, they know I'm just a phone call away.

ⁱ Newberg, Andrew B., Eugene G. D'Aquili, and Vince Rause. *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief*. New York: Ballantine, 2001. Print. (56) Note: This book names three authors but as Newberg is the principle voice, with the second author having died before the book was written and the third author in a supporting (non-science) journalistic role, I'm citing Newberg's name here.

ⁱⁱ Armstrong, Karen. *A History of God: The 4000-year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1993. Print. (Introduction)

ⁱⁱⁱ Rylant, Cynthia. *God Went to Beauty School*. HarperTempest, 2006. An adorable book!

^{iv} (63)