

Can a Unitarian Universalist Lead a "Godly" Life?

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When I visit other churches or hear a prayer at a public gathering, I have to put a lot of effort, and quickly, into translating the language of "God" to the understanding I have of that word as a mystical Unitarian Universalist. I'm not a believer in the mainstream of most religions, or the version of God that they evoke for me. I think of myself as a mystic. I believe that everything in the universe is wondrous and worthy of awe. When I say "God" that's what I'm pointing toward.

I don't feel alone here at UUFRC.

A mystic is one who learns from direct experience. In my case, what I experience is given words and context by the study of physics and the mystical traditions within Hinduism and Taoism and Buddhism and Sufism. I flirt with the existence of dimensional realities beyond what we can see, and I believe that our actual capacity to know is constantly growing. As our species evolves, we will actually be able to perceive more and more. Homo Noeticus, some call our descendants.

Every time I go to the Museum of Modern Art and spend time with an exhibit like Ólafur Elíasson's work -- which is there now -- what I notice about the world changes and grows. For me, as a visual learner, what I actually see is particularly powerful.

I also learn from poetry. The more accessible poets of the natural world, like Mary Oliver, help me to anchor what I see and feel, enough that I can examine it as well as relish it. Here are a few words from "The Leaf and the Cloud," which won her a Pulitzer:

It is easy to fall down on your knees when the shining rain begins to happen.
It is easy to be thankful for the bundles of wild roses ledged along the dunes.
It is as easy as if you were yourself a flower in the field.

The rain tossing you and tossing you until you are that flower,
as torn as muddy as golden as that.

"As torn as muddy as golden as that."

How we learn shapes us, as well as what we learn.

As little children, we learned from direct personal experience and we were taught by those around us. Grownups were teaching us "how the world is" and "what is true" and "how things work." Soon, what we came to believe, limited what we could see. Our perceptions of the world are always limited -- or expanded -- by what others tell us we should see, and what we have noticed before.

All along the way, we are deciding how much we trust what we are being taught, and we choose our path from all of the variations and possibilities of our living.

That's the important point: ultimately, we choose. We choose. And, however we come to our decision, we can find ample proof that it is so. There is something at the very root of our beliefs, at the very bottom, which is about choosing which way we are going to go.

Do we agree with our parents? Do we seek out different teachers? What do we read and study? All along the way we are choosing.

When we are awake enough and we choose our belief about what it is to be human, we build a philosophy or a theology that is more systematic. That is, we decide what fits with what we already believe and discard what doesn't fit . . . Mostly we don't even see what we don't believe in. That's how we get so stuck in our familiar patterns.

When we were very young, we noticed that things dropped from up high fall toward the earth. We noticed that a big heavy thing rolling into a smaller lighter thing pushed the lighter thing away or broke it into little pieces. How fast things were moving had something to do with what happened. When really big things hit really small things, especially if the big thing was moving really fast, the small things were fundamentally changed. We know these things even if we never knew we were paying attention.

That's important to be aware of. Our idea of "how things are" is formed without us being particularly awake. What our caregivers told us shaped us. Who we put trust in is always a very important element in what we learn.

Humans are really good at finding the answers they set out to find -- those that are consistent with what we've already chosen to believe. If we're biased, and of course we are all biased, we see what fits with what we already believe. It is a closed loop. Around and around and around. How do we step outside of that loop? My short answer is, when we really try to understand another person's point of view.

As toddlers, we were busy doing experiments in general science. We learned all of Newton's laws by our direct experience. We knew the basic laws of physics by the time we were three years old and we could move around in the world without constantly bumping into things or dropping and breaking things. We knew that two objects can't occupy the same space at the same time. We could predict the immediate future. We knew such things from our experience.

Of course, we were not very organized about our explorations. We didn't decide to drop big balls and small balls from the table to the floor and chart them to see if they descended at the same rate. Our accidental discoveries were not put into our consciousness as rules for how things are with any sort of method, but we were learning in every moment.

Systematic explorations of the world don't begin until perhaps something like eighth grade science, and a systematic study of our belief systems comes in even later, perhaps introductory philosophy in college. We were also asking theological questions all along the way. We were asking "Why."

In my world, physics and philosophy and theology are all balled up together. I mean, I can't see where one stops and the other begins. I'm not sure there is a fundamental difference between philosophy and theology and physics.

(About now you might be saying I just am a sloppy scholar.) But here is my point:

A physicist studies matter and motion and space and time. It is an experimental science conducted to understand the universe and how it works.

A philosopher is concerned with what sorts of things exist . . . and the ethics of how we live.

A philosopher of religion is curious about whether there is any meaning in existence, for which some might use the shorthand word "God."

A theologian presumes that there is meaning, and wrestles with ultimate concerns. I could say, "wrestles with God."

Therefore, a theologian is merely a philosopher who believes that there is "meaning" in those things that cannot be seen or measured.

What's the difference between a physicist and a philosopher? Sometimes, not very much. A physicist wrestles with the laws that govern space, time, and matter and energy, and when a physicist supposes something that can't be proved, like say string theory, she is more accurately called a philosopher. And if she gets swept away with notions about directionality or purpose, she's tripped over into theology.

For Aristotle, "God," or the first cause, or the Unmoved Mover, was the answer to why we have something instead of nothing. I mean, why do we have anything at all? And, has it existed forever? That doesn't compute . . . does it? But having nothing and then having something out of that nothing . . . isn't that just plain crazy talk too?

Which origin story do you choose? The "nothing and then something" version? Or the "always has been" version?

A few more definitions:

Pantheists say that God is the natural universe. God and the universe are the same thing.

Panentheists -- that's Pan•en•theists -- say God is the universe and more. Many Christian mystics and Sufis and Jewish Kabbalists fall into the "Panentheist" category. "God" for Panentheists is the term for both things and the meaning of things.

The concept of "Meaning" stirs up many juicy questions, doesn't it? Is there any meaning in things, outside what we give them? Are there rules outside of us for what makes things beautiful? What about music? Or art? Some of you will remember the book Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. It is about trying to find rules that govern aesthetics and other things we can't calibrate.

I come closest to being a Panentheist because I am astonished, awed and reverent before all of creation. And, I choose to believe that life has meaning.

I love the darkness and the light. The seen and unseen. The form and the mystery.

Here's a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke, translated by one of my professors, Joanna Macy:

You, darkness, of whom I am born --

I love you more than the flame
that limits the world
to the circle it illumines
and excludes all the rest.

But the darkness embraces everything:
shapes and shadows, creatures and me,
people, nations -- just as they are.

It lets me imagine
a great presence stirring beside me.

I believe in the night.

I feel something when I read Rilke's work and I choose -- I choose -- to believe that this experience of awe that I experience has importance.

It is because I am deeply stirred by this kind of poetry, especially the Persian mystics like Rumi and Hafiz, and Mary Oliver and Rilke, that I find myself a minister. I am still astonished that I wound up here. My brand of theology is equally stirred by physics and philosophy and poetry.

I believe that there is directionality to creation, and that's the piece that leads me to conclude that there is meaning. Things seem to become more and more complex. They seem to build. I ascribe meaning to that. I'm not sure what . . . it just feels as if it is terribly important.

Like all of us, I am influenced profoundly by the teachers I have had and trusted. I have sometimes even felt that something important was being transmitted. Using a word like "transmitted" has significance. It is not random. It evokes centuries of Buddhist tradition. I felt it in my studies with Joanna Macy. I sat in her class that first day and almost could not stop crying. It was not what she said, it was how I felt in her presence.

Huston Smith, a radiant being who once blew me a kiss, believes in the Perennial Philosophy. And I love Huston Smith. I absolutely feel awe around him. So, I spent more time thinking about the mathematician and philosopher Gottfried Leibniz, who used the term "Perennial Philosophy" to designate the common, eternal images that underlie all religions and the mystical streams within them. The term was made popular in my time by Aldous Huxley. Huxley wrote that the Perennial Philosophy is expressed most succinctly in the Sanskrit formula, *tat tvam asi*, "Thou art that."

In Hinduism, the Atman, or eternal Self, is one with everything, or Brahman. Brahman is the Absolute Principle of all existence. In other words, we are small parts of the great whole. And, our small part is not different than the great whole. We are something like droplets of Brahman, or god energy. In Hinduism the goal of every human being is to discover that fact for him- or herself.

That works for me. I have always been asking who I am and "Why?"

I can't resist part of another poem by Rilke: Those of you who were here probably remember that I built the theme of my ordination around his poem, "To praise is the whole thing. Those who can praise come toward us like ore from the silences of rock."

Here is the Macy translation of another one:

God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night.

These are the words we dimly hear:

You, sent out beyond your recall,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.

Flare up like flame
and make big shadows I can move in.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.

Give me your hand.

I choose this path for my explorations. Like the moral in the book Life of Pi, for me it makes a better story. Simple as that. And it gives me access to a whole wide realm of celebrating life that I might miss without it. It offers me access to language that stirs me. When I read Mary Oliver, I know I am not alone in my experience of the world. I know many of us here feel the same way. We are pleased if someone tells us we are leading godly lives.

I can use the word "God" but I am careful. It is a word that has caused a huge amount of oppression. Clearly my "God" doesn't live outside the world or wait at the end to judge or

punish. If I use the word "God" I mean, like T.S. Eliot, the very dance of everything and the still point where the dance takes place.

Such ideas save me from feeling that nothing matters. In my view, everything matters. There is a word for that in theology: soteriology. Salvation. What saves us. That's why I began with Rebecca Parker's poem about "Blessing the World." It is her answer to what will save us all now.

My social justice work and environmental activism and everything I love comes out of this sense of belonging and reverence.

Of course sometimes I forget and I act very selfishly. I forget my connections. I forget that who I am is stardust and energy and a dancer in Shiva's eternal dance. I forget in those times that everything I do shapes, in small ways, and forever, the rest of creation.

I want to tell you about how all of this is being discussed by physicists. I want to tell you about string theory and how it gives new language for what mystics already know. But time, which does bend in space, does not bend far enough here this morning, so I must wait for another day.

Can a Unitarian Universalist lead a "Godly" life? The way I understand "Godly" the answer is "absolutely." And, absolutely every one of us and absolutely all the time.

Blessed be.