

Bring Many Names

First Unitarian of Saint Louis, August 21, 2011

© 2011 By Rev. Thomas Perchlik

STORY

– *In God's Name*, adapted from Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso

In the beginning when the world was created and the First People walked the earth, all living things were given a name. The plants and the trees, the animals and the fish, and each person, young and old, had a special name.

But no one knew the name for God. So each person searched for God's name. The Farmer, who's skin was dark like the rich brown earth from which all things grew called God *Source of Life*. A sculptor, who's arms were strong from cutting stone, called God *My Foundation*. A loving father with his child in his arms said *Foundation* was too impersonal and called God *Great Mother*, because God loves us. Still another person said that when God was present then there was a deep peace, connecting all things, and he used the Sanskrit word for deep peace, Shanti, as the name of God.

Each person thought "my name is the best". They began to argue that one name was better than all the others, which were wrong names or bad names. Eventually someone called someone else's name "stupid" which was not a good thing to do. Some began to yell at others. The stone cutter grabbed her hammer and held it, ready to strike.

Then one old Rabbi said, "There is a lake". Everyone became quiet to hear what he was to say. He continued, "The lake is known as *The Mirror of God*. It is said that if one waits till the wind stops and the water becomes perfectly still and then looks into the water, there one will see the face of God reflected back.

So all the people went up, talking and arguing, into the mountains where the lake was. When they came there the breeze was blowing, but each person went to the lake to wait and soon they surrounded the lake in a great ring. As the breeze died down the people became quiet. Finally, the water was perfectly still. The people held their breaths and leaned over.

Each saw their own faces and thought at first, "My name is the right one". But then they saw another face to the left and another to the right. Everyone saw the faces all around the lake; and above it all was the deep blue sky. At that moment the people know that all the names for God were good and no name was better than another. Then they had another name for God and they called God *One*. Then there was deep peace, and it lasted a very long time.

SERMON

Today I speak of God, but, I will not be like the little girl who once was energetically drawing a picture. Her teacher came up and asked what she was drawing. "God" the girl answered. "But no one knows what God looks like," the teacher corrected. Without looking up the girl said, "They will in a minute." What is more, you all know that I have no authority over what you believe. In Christian theology, belief is called "a gift of the spirit" and cannot be imposed on anyone but must arise from within. As a result our church and its heritage can seem unsettled about the idea of God. Our opinions range from "imaginary being" to "Lord and Creator of the universe." Some of us speak only of a mysterious "spirit of life" or "mystery"; others will speak of the source of moral order; some can speak joyfully about a loving God offering the hope of universal salvation; others, in this very room, find most talk about God to be as useful as discussing whether fairies have endocrine systems. As a result the UU movement, at its worst, seems chaotic in its God talk, and at best, looks like institutionalized agnosticism.

Over the years, I have uncovered hundreds of definitions of God, and many different opinions on God's character. People argue about these differences of opinion and even go to war because of them. Paul Tillich, a great theologian of the 20th century, once suggested that we stop using the word God for 100 years. It is a nice idea, but impractical. The word is too pervasive, stamped on coins, written in great books, carved in stone. What is more, I think it is essential that we be able to speak of God, for if the liberally religious stop talking of God then the only voices to capture the popular imagination on this topic will be those who amplify their own prejudice and small-mindedness by saying they speak of God's hate and God's judgment and their oppression and unjust acts will be defended as God's will.

So, on occasion, in sermons and speech, I will refer to God. That is, the one God with a capital 'G' and I thought it would be of value to explain what I mean by that term. More importantly, I would like to tell you the story of how I came to my current opinions. I once heard of a boy who proclaimed to his parents at their regular Sunday dinner that he was going to be a minister when he grew up. They told him that was fine but he wondered why. He replied, "Because it is a lot more fun to stand and yell than just sit and listen."

I do plan to have fun but I don't plan to yell today. What I am really doing is introducing myself. It has been said that all theology is biography; meaning that in the end our response to the most basic questions of life grows essentially from the experiences we have lived, the stories we tell of ourselves, and from the people we have known. Perhaps my sharing will bring some light and clarity to your own journey. At the very least I hope it will help you understand better who I am and what I mean by God. I am new, not just to visitors and guests today, and so I want you to know about my way of thinking. But beyond that I want to say this: God has many names.

I have long believed that the most important question is never "Does God Exist?" That is a question for sophists and fools because it cannot be answered until one has answered a different question, "What do we mean by God?" I love the story about a UU

child I knew, Chelsea, who was asked by one of her classmates in public school “Do you believe in God?” Chelsea responded, “Which one?” Is God Creator and Judge, or Spirit of Life? Do we think of God as transcendent mystery beyond knowing, or companion closer than one’s own heart? So the real challenge is finding the right name.

My childhood gave to me two different names of God. The first I call Father God. This is the great old man in the sky, the one who often appears as a big human being; a God who is described in the stories of the Bible and invoked in the faith of some pious people. As a child the only person I knew who had anything to do with this God was my Czech grandmother and we visited her only occasionally. My parents never talked about this God at all. My mother had a presentation bible from her childhood for several years of perfect attendance at her Anglican Sunday School. When I asked her about this she said she could remember not one single thing from all they told her.

My father never talked about this God either. He took us to Catholic Mass when we were little, but my father’s faith as he lived it was expressed clearly in a love of nature and in working for good through democracy. He was a political Science professor, an active politician and political activist. However, near the end of his life he told me he was glad I was going into religion. He said he knew how to make democracy work well. But, he said, “a democracy is only as good as the people who use it, and I do not know how to make people good. Maybe you can figure out that one.” That is what he hoped I would do with religion. But he said nothing about God. America in the 1960s was a very non-theistic society, so much so that in 1966 Time magazine asked if God was dead.

However religion, and ideas of God, always fascinated me. One of my favorite books, which I checked out from the library over and over again, was the D’Aulaire’s *Norse Gods and Giants*. At the end of that book they place the story of the creation of human beings after Ragnarok, the war that destroys Odin, and Freya, Sif and Thor. I knew, even in second grade, that the Daulaire’s were trying to say that the Bible creation story was the most true, but it could fit with other stories and other religions; they were trying to allow for many names of God. The interesting thing is that since the idea of God was never forced on me I never had to reject it. Thus, I have never doubted that God exists; I have only doubted that God was anything like that guy in the stories. According to some I am an atheist. If God has to be an All Father like the one in Nordic or Jewish or Christian myth, then I am an atheist. But there are many views of God that are very different than Father God.

It has been said that most Unitarians are not atheists but bad spellers. We spell the word ‘God’ with two ‘O’s and ‘devil’ without the ‘D.’ I think this is true for many people and for some while it was true for me. Usually, when people speak of something coming from God they are speaking of what they know to be most true or good, the opposite of good is evil. In Robert Walsh’s poem “Fault Line” He speaks of the trouble the destruction that can come into our lives and then says, “Trust the tensile strands of love that bend and stretch to hold you.” It is a rather vague and subjective definition but important nonetheless. Love is another one of the most common Unitarian and Universalist names for God, drawing from the epistle of John when he wrote: “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been

born of God and knows God... because God is Love.” I have been in love, and loved my children, and loved the people of my church and so I affirm what John wrote.

I have long believed that the word God pointed through the Father God of story to something else, more real, more powerful. Thus that word referred both to what was true and what was not, to a God of many names. Sometimes I would think it meant Unity, or Integrity, or the wholeness of the universe, or the source of morality and goodness. It was, to use Thomas Merton’s line, “reality at its ultimate root.” When I was in high school I came across a copy of the ancient Chinese classic, the *Tao Te Ching*. Its opening lines appeared to me as scripture, a revelation of the truth, perfect and complete: *The way that can be told is not the eternal way, the name that can be spoken is not the eternal name. Named It is the mother of then thousand things. Nameless It is the beginning of heaven and earth... these two spring from the same source but differ in name... This is the truth within truth; the gate to mystery.*” This is still one of my favorite scriptures.

More important to my understanding of God were certain experiences of great wholeness and peace. One time I backpacked with a group of friends up into the Colorado Rockies. We camped at the edge of the timberline, beside a jewel-blue lake, just a few hundred feet from the continental divide. That night was cold, but perfectly clear. As others were getting into bed, I went up out of the camp to look at the stars, wrapped in my sleeping bag. I was so overwhelmed by the number of stars that I sat looking up, until I lost awareness of my separateness, and the cold. All my awareness was filled with awe, and a feeling that I was floating, one with the universe, millions of stars beyond stars, all of it bound by a singular, indivisible unity. I was transported by that numinous night. That experience of wholeness has remained with me, and has been repeated and echoed over the years until it is an unshakable part of who I am. To quote Rev. Mark Morrison Reed, “There is a connectedness felt among our particulars that binds each to all...” I place my faith in that reality, and in the power of that reality to change human hearts, minds and action.

In college and seminary I studied many philosophical ideas of spirituality, of spirit worlds and Emerson’s Ocean of Light, the Oversoul. Yet always the stories kept coming back. My study of Hindu religion began with Advita Vedanta and higher philosophy, but eventually I came to learn about and appreciate their story gods, Shiva the dancer, Vishnu the warrior lord, or Kali, the black mother. I enjoyed the stories of Krishna and Arjuna, and listened to the chants and songs in the names of God, Krishna and Rama, and Kali. One day, after many years of learning about pagan worship and Shinto reverence for kami, I went to a Christian prayer meeting as part of my anti-racism work. After scripture reading, prayers of concern for the sick and ailing, and a lesson, we stood in a circle and the leader said “now let us pray”. I thought it would be as I had experienced my whole life, one man speaking out loud, everyone else with heads bowed. Instead, everyone began to speak in rising and falling voices, full of praise and calling out the name of Jesus, over and over. I went many times to their meetings and I realized that their devotion was very much like that of Hindus and Pagans that I had known. I have begun to see how those stories and images of God can serve the larger

and more universal faith in the progress of humanity, and how people are social beings and want to love even God as we love one another.

I have never experienced God as a person. It still seems an odd idea to me. Yet, my faith is not, to paraphrase Rev. Walsh, in cantilevered arguments, or the poured cement of theologies. I used to search for the one true understanding of God and try to decide if I agreed with it or rejected it. Now I say, with hymnwriter Brian Wren “bring many names”. If you are talking to someone with ideas of God with which you don’t agree, or if you love God and are talking to someone who calls themselves an atheist, then use a different name. Speak of Peace, or Beauty, Harmony or Wholeness, Ultimate Reality or Love, and you may find that you are talking about the same thing as those who call it God.