

Dreaming God or God Dreaming?
Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker
UU Church of Meadville
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In the Spring of 2002, 14-year-old Tim Sullivan and his Coming of Age (COA) classmates, stood in the pulpit at the UU Church of Reading, MA (where I was serving as Minister) and delivered their individual credo statements. They shared what they believe about the sacred and the secular; this world we live in, their place in it, and their visions for its future and their own. Earlier this morning, we heard Tim's thought-provoking presentation.

No, it isn't your Uncle Maury's Bar Mitzvah Torah portion or Aunt Tillie's Confirmation speech. To be sure, the COA program, found in many of our congregations, offers our youth a unique opportunity to explore and question and challenge and grow.

In Tim's case, it gave one young, profound Unitarian Universalist (UU) a forum for posing questions that have consumed philosophers and theologians for centuries – Is there one true or Supreme God? Does God even exist or have we concocted God to satisfy our human needs? Who is responsible for our earthbound choices – God or us? Who cares? And, the most provocative question of all: “Are we dreaming God during our waking hours or God dreaming us while He is asleep?”

Tim's credo statement intrigued and impressed some folks in attendance that morning and it annoyed, threatened and downright offended others. One woman in particular had her knickers in a tourniquet-tight twist as she stormed at me in coffee hour and wagged her finger in my face, demanding to know just how Tim, who had grown up in this congregation, had come to the sorry state of troubling himself musing about God (of all things). With as little snark as possible, I responded that he had been practicing the free and responsible search for truth and meaning since he was 4 years old in RE classes with names like “Hide and Seek with God,” Holidays and Holy Days,” “UU History,” “ I, The Creator” and of course, the Coming of Age program.

For good measure and with a smile, I threw in that his parents must be really proud of him. This same woman suggested, not so subtly, during my candidating week there that words like pray, God, and Amen could get a minister fired, and besides, no one in this “humanist” congregation uses those words anyway. Forewarned.

I wondered how she had found that secret passageway into the theological musings, heart, soul, and mind of everyone around her in the pews. But her comments reflect a common tension in our movement. There are those, who despite their intellectual grasp of the “free church,” the “free pulpit,” and the “free pew,” want their churches to look and sound like them, believe like them, use

their language and symbols of belief...all along the spectrum from atheist to UU Christian.

But that's not how to be truly freethinker friendly. Freethinkers are not just humanists or theists, or pagans or any other permutation of belief. Freethinkers are those who freely and responsibly search for and shape truth and meaning in their lives, in step with our principles, and with our sources as tools of exploration.

That's what makes a UU congregation a place of dreamable dreams and genuine possibilities. We espouse many different concepts of God and religious thought (or none at all). One could say we dream many sweet dreams for a multitude of personal reasons. To these pews and pulpit we occupy, we bring many names. "Strong mother God; Young, growing God, Warm, Father God." "Ground of Being, Baal, Yahweh, Shiva, Rock, Fantasy, Nameless One Beyond All Naming, Spirit of Life."

Individuals who have found Unitarian Universalism will tell us that they've awoken from a variety of fitful religious nightmare, too. As a result, UUs (like the finger wagging woman at coffee hour) can be skittish about any "God talk" at all. This common aversion may be due to early wounding religious educations that taught us that God is a wizened bearded white man, a moral accountant who sits on a throne and coolly decides our fate with a disregard for suffering or justice.

Someone akin to the judgmental Deity in a classic *Far Side* cartoon depicting God at his computer. On the screen, a hapless, googly-eyed victim strolls under a dangled piano. God's finger is poised expectantly and omnipotently over the keyboard's "SMITE" button. Will he or won't he and why? He's God. Does it even need a "reason?"

We may have been taught that God is all powerful, but then could not grasp or accept that a God like that would allow children to die of abuse or starvation or allow humankind to inflict wanton violence on one another. We may avoid "God talk" because the word is just too amorphous to serve as a very effective or descriptive term. In a religiously diverse denomination like ours, identifying the source of meaning or ground of being as "God" is like identifying every item on a cheese plate merely as "cheese."

In setting out on the "free and responsible search for truth and meaning," many of us UUs have discovered how tricky it can be to explain succinctly and articulately our personal or congregational concept of God or the sacred or the holy or...well, you get my drift. I'm reminded of a story in which two men are standing on the front lawn of a church. One man is leaning on the church sign and the other is looking at it from the front, scratching his head.

It reads: "OAK ROAD CONGREGATION – A Bible Believing, Hand Clapping, Foot Stomping, Hemlines Below the Knees, Tie Wearing, Blood Washed, Coffee and Donuts During Sunday School Eating, Council of Nicea Appreciating, Non-Denominational Church." The man leaning on the sign says "When you believe in written creeds, you sure have to squeeze a lot of doctrine into your name.

If we were to draft such a sign here, it might read: "Unitarian Universalist

Church of Meadville— A Non-creedal, Non-doctrinal, Atheist welcoming, theist accepting, goddess greeting, transcendently appreciative, Buddhist meditation hosting, humanitarian Jesus accepting, Kirtan chanting, coffee and donuts eating whenever possible, Feng Shui savvy, ever-questing, fun-loving, guitar strumming, rainbow-wrapped, just us humans, heart-warming church.”

One might say of us: “When you don’t believe in a single concept of the Sacred, you have to squeeze a lot of possibilities into your name!” Uh huh. That’s the whole idea! (and exactly why I have had conversations in every church I’ve served with folks wanting a stronger voice for humanism AND those who want to start a chapter of the UU Christian Fellowship).

To get us started and provide some signposts, the UUA has fashioned a collection of eclectic sources that inform our spiritual dreaming. You’ll find them listed in their entirety in the front of our hymnal. Briefly, these sources include: Humanist, Jewish and Christian teachings, words and deeds of prophetic men and women, and perhaps most notably, “Direct experience of that transcendent mystery and wonder ,affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life.” Transcendence, mystery, wonder, spirit, forces, openness, renewal, life...these are the descriptive, active words that describe for us UUs what others refer to simply as “God.”

Sallie McFague, a Christian theologian trying to make sense of Christian metaphors , writes about the need to “try out different models and metaphors in an attempt to talk about what we do not know how to talk about.” Many of us seekers can relate to her claim.

Yet, given our penchant for *zigging* when others *zag*, and because we are bombarded with concepts about what GOD *is*, we tend as a group to frame our religious beliefs as DO NOTS. I’m not typically a fan of this model because it frames who we are as the rejection of ideas rather than an embrace of heartfelt, bone-deep ones we’ve discovered in the sweat and toil of the free and responsible search process.

That said, my UU colleague, the Rev. Kenn Hurto, a former Lutheran, has compiled a bang-up list of these negations over the span of his 40-plus-year ministry. I’d say they reflect a mature view of the sacred and are worth sharing, and I’d wager he speaks for a good number of us when he writes:

“I don’t believe in...

- < The god of first and last resort, the catch-all explanation for things we don’t understand;
- < Or the god of any chosen people, who, being elected, feel they have a right to condemn or convert those who believe otherwise.
- < I don’t believe in a personal god who walks with me or talks to me like some kind of ethics coach sitting on my shoulder.
- < Or a god of final exams and foxholes to deliver us from our own lack of preparedness or courage.
- < I don’t believe in any god that can be manipulated into serving our wants by the utterance of prayers, ritual sacrifice, or attendance at

religious events.

- < Or a jealous, fickle god, who cannot tolerate other loyalties.
- < Or God the straight man who would carry a placard reading “Fags Burn in Hell”
- < I don’t believe in God the fixer who, upon appeal, redirects the outcome of war, sickness, or sporting events.
- < Or a god of punishment who wracks bodies with disease as the consequence of some moral failing.
- < I don’t believe in any god of final judgment that rewards some with an endless supply of goodies while damning others to unspeakable eternal torture.
- < And, I don’t believe there is a god responsible for all those things insurance companies refuse to cover.

Kenn gives us all the conceptions of God has been used through the centuries to disempower or diminish us, rather than enlarge us or call us to some evolved, loving, higher purpose. So, I ask: why *dream* God at all? Why not abandon the project all together? Well, some of you are nodding because you have abandoned it and consider yourselves humanists or atheists. Fair enough. Take a seat. However, others remain in the hunt and in a freethinker friendly church, that quest should be met with support rather than scorn.

If we listen to the voices of traditional religion, we hear that we *need* God to bless us, to keep us on the straight and narrow, to curse us when we sin, to help us grow in devotion and goodness, and ultimately, to save us. If we listen to the existential philosophers, we hear that since there is no absolute truth, a “leap of faith” to some arbitrarily chosen source of meaning, makes us feel that it is worthwhile to be alive.

This is a question for you to ask yourself in your own private reverie...why do I dream “God?” What do I need or seek? What is it that I am dreaming, and does this dream wake me up or keep me asleep? Or, why have I moved on to other dreams that have no relationship to these questions.

In his credo, Tim flips these questions on their head and gives us an entirely different way to look at the problem. He gives us a God who dreams us! And Tim is astute enough to note that we are both God’s sweet dream *and* his harrowing nightmare. Tim even suggests with delicious subversiveness that we may actually be, not *God’s* dream, but another creature’s dream (or nightmare, as the case may be)! A fascinating and disturbing idea, isn’t it?

In this anthropocentric world – where we presume that humankind resides at the center of all things as God’s special creation -- what a mind-boggling notion it is that we may be just the figment of a ferret’s imagination or the musing of a muskrat or the specter of a single-celled amoeba! Certainly knocks us down a peg or two, doesn’t it!?

Whether he intended to or not, Tim captures the very essence of a Humanist understanding of divinity, when he writes: “We choose to be good and

we choose to be bad. No God decides this for us.” Tim’s thesis is also classically Unitarian. Back in the early 1800’s, one of the founding Unitarian prophets, William Ellery Channing, dreamed the dream of a loving, benevolent God at a time when the Calvinist paradigm offered a more vengeful model.

Channing put forth the idea that we embody what he calls a “likeness to God,” and that we are inherently decent, not inherently depraved as his Calvinist counterparts proposed. Channing held a deep and abiding faith in the greatness of the human soul. He perceived human nature as a glorious gift from God and a perpetually perfectible aspect of the lived life. As such, he elevated living a virtuous life, and placed his emphasis on the inherent moral attributes of conscience, prudence, reason, duty, goodness and character.

He wrote: “God becomes real to us, in proportion, as his own nature unfolds within us, and he reveals himself in his work to a kindred mind.” Tim appears to be practically channeling Rev. Channing when he writes: “Our spirits are like messengers who were sent on a mission to study the big dream”

Yes, Tim - we learn how to build the dream of a civil and compassionate society within the earthly, human realm. We must roll up our sleeves, literally and figuratively, in order to bring our religious values or “God” alive in the here and now.

To pick up Tim’s humanist thread and tweak it a bit, God (or divine principles) are asleep within us when we make negative choices that deflate the world; yet, these same attributes are awake within us when we choose to activate our reason and inherent moral attributes in order to build up or repair the world.

Would it be a better world, as Tim suggest, if we just had “ideas” instead of religions? Possibly. I can envision such a world with less religiously-motivated hatred, division, violence and hubris. Consider this joke: “One day the Pope got a phone call from God. God told him that he had some good news and some bad news. “The good news,” said God, “is that I’ve decided there is one true religion. The bad news is that I am calling long distance from Salt Lake City!”

In my view, even if the punch line suggested that God was calling long distance from UUA headquarters in Boston, the very concept of ‘one true religion’ (be it Islam, Christianity, UUism, or Scientology) remains an absurd and shallow paradigm with less and less relevance in the modern world.

In fact, it is this endless squabbling over the unnamable, purely subjective “immortal, invisible” that continues to serve as twisted justification for a world-wide nightmare of murder and mayhem. Let us pray or at least, stop and ponder.

If Tim is right that when we die “our knowledge goes back to God so he can dream new thing,” I hope this cognitive *boomerang* encompasses the Great Commandment “Love thy neighbor as thyself” as well the age-old aphorism, “To thine own self be true” especially in the way Channing meant it – awakened to our inherently loving, morally-attuned human natures.

Tim Sullivan had the first word this morning and he has the last word, as well. In true UU style, he concludes his credo with these thoughts: “This might

not be true. But I believe it is. And to me that's all that matters." Tim recognizes that his dream is his alone to savor in slumber, or to awaken from, either tortured or refreshed. He acknowledges, and we should to, that we make our own choices – deciding whether to sleep walk through this life or to awaken to our higher selves.

Whether we resonate with dancing goddesses or with Jesus, with Transcendentalism or Tarot, Kali or the Koran, Adonai or rational atheism, Bahai or Burning Shrubbery, we are *all* freethinking dreamers dreaming; our dreams as individualistic as the unique imprint left on our pillows upon waking. And we are all welcome here.

May our dreams of a loving, healing and benevolent presence in the world, regardless of its substance or name, whether human or divine, arise from slumber within us and around us, so that we may awaken to our highest spiritual aspirations. This is no pipe dream. It is our very purpose.

As far as the likelihood that someday one of us may dream the "one true God?" Well, as Tim might say with adolescent snark, "Dream on."

Amen and Blessed be.

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