



## WHAT DO ATHEISTS BELIEVE?

A Sermon by Reverend Fritz Hudson

Presented April 9, 2017 - First Unitarian Universalist Church of Rochester, MN

This month brings the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my ordination into the ministry. It recalls for me the first sermon I ever preached in a UU church, as a student minister in the First Church of Boston. My title was "Never Discuss Religion." My introduction (children were not present for introductions in those days) was a dialogue from the classic novel *Catch 22* by Joseph Heller.

The speakers are Yossarian, a WW II bomber pilot, and his lover, named only as Lieutenant Schiesskopf's wife. It's Thanksgiving Day. The lieutenant's wife begins.

LSW: I'm probably just as good an atheist as you are, but even I feel that we all have a great deal to be thankful for and that we shouldn't be ashamed to show it.

YOS: Name one thing I've got to be thankful for ... I'll bet I can name two things to be miserable about for every one you can name to be thankful for.

LSW: Be thankful you're healthy.

YOS: Be bitter you're not going to stay that way.

LSW: Be glad you're even alive.

YOS: Be furious you're going to die.

LSW: Things could be much worse.

YOS: Things could be one hell of a lot better.

LSW: You're naming only one thing. You said you could name two.

YOS: Good God(?) how much reverence can you have for a Supreme Being who finds it necessary to include such phenomena as phlegm and tooth decay in His divine system of creation? What in the world was running through that warped, evil scatological mind of His when He robbed old people of the power to control their bowel movements? Why in the world did He ever create pain?

LSW: Pain? Pain is a useful symptom. Pain is a warning to us of bodily dangers.

YOS: And who created the dangers? Oh, He was really being charitable to us when He gave us pain. Why couldn't He have used a doorbell instead to notify us, or one of his celestial choirs? Or a system of blue-and-red neon tubes in the middle of each person's forehead. Any jukebox manufacturer worth his salt could have done that. Why couldn't He?

LSW: People would certainly look silly walking around with red neon tubes in middle of their



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foreheads.

YOS: They certainly look beautiful now writhing in agony or stupefied with morphine, don't they? What a colossal, immortal blunderer! When you consider the opportunity and power He had to really do a job, and then look at the stupid, ugly little mess He made of it instead. His sheer incompetence is almost staggering.

LSW: You'd better not talk that way about Him, honey. He might punish you.

YOS: Isn't He punishing me enough? You know, we mustn't let Him get away with it. Someday I'm going to make Him pay. I know when. On Judgement Day. Yes, that's the day I'll be close enough to reach out and grab that little yokel by His neck and....

LSW: Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!

YOS: What the hell are you getting so upset about? I thought you didn't believe in God.

LSW: I don't. But the God I don't believe in is a good God, a just God, a merciful God. He's not the mean and stupid God you make Him out to be.

YOS: Well, then let's have a little more religious freedom between us. You don't believe in the God you want to, and I won't believe in the God I want to. Is that a deal? (pp.183-185)

So, who here thinks our children could have benefited from hearing this introduction?  
And who thinks, "maybe not quite yet?"

Joyce, our Director of Religious Education, and I and the Unitarian Universalist Association think you're both right, depending on what age children you have in mind.

Our older children today, are exploring atheism directly.

- Our seventh and eighth graders are hearing Mary McCarthy, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century essayist and novelist, tell her story of "losing faith" at the age of 12.

- Our ninth graders, in their Coming of Age Class, are working on the credo statements, the "I Believe" statements, they will present in our May 21 service.

Last year, every year, some of our young people tell us forthrightly that they hold to something they understand as atheism. Others testify to God or gods they hold close to their hearts.

- Our younger children this morning are not talking about God or atheism directly. As we help them touch Christian resources for faith as Easter approaches

- Our 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> graders are hearing Jesus' story of the prodigal son;

- Our 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders are hearing his story of the shepherd and the lost sheep.

In Christianity, atheists are prodigal children or lost sheep. We're helping our children think about what leads people to stray from their homes, and how those from whom they've strayed might respond.



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Last Sunday, I suggested that the fundamental question of faith is not "Who am I?" It is "Whose Am I?" Jesus himself, on the cross, cried out to question if he were truly God's. If "Cherish Your Doubts" as Bob Weston urged in the reading, "If Atheism," or Agnosticism, or Secular Humanism feels close to your calling, I want to recommend a book to you. The title is *Living the Secular Life*. The author is Phil Zuckerman, a professor of sociology at Pitzer College in Claremont, California, home of the nation's first major in Secular Studies. *Living the Secular Life* was published in 2014. It is not heavily academic. It includes many stories of Zuckerman's own journey as a "non-believer," along with the stories of many he has interviewed. In several places he also traces the development, and names the heroes, of secular thought in all of human culture. Near the end, Phil talks about the struggle for the best answer when people learn of his work and ask him, so "What are you?" He says,

Am I an atheist? . . . Yeah, I'm lacking in theism. (I definitely do not believe that God - or any of the gods that have ever been created, concocted, or imagined by humans - actually exist. It's simply a matter of lack of evidence.) I am an atheist.

But . . . I am hesitant to use the label . . . because it is essentially a term of negation . . . when people ask me "what I am," I prefer to offer a positive designation.

Agnostic . . . also has its shortcomings . . . It is more like the absence of a position . . . essentially nothing more than an admitted indecisiveness or embraced fence-sitting. . . . I do believe that there are probably just some eternal unknowns out there . . . but I prefer not to use the label too often . . . because it's . . . too heady. . . . When I ponder . . . existential questions and cosmic mysteries . . . I *feel* something.

Secular humanist declares what I'm for. . . (It) signals an optimistic belief in the potential of humans to solve problems and make the world a better, safer and more just place . . . someone who believes in reason, science, . . . is committed to democracy, tolerance, open debate, human rights. . . . But secularism is more accurately as a position or agenda I support.

. . . When describing what I am, I want to capture something more personal . . . what I feel and experience. (T)he word that comes closest to describing that feeling is awe. . It can come from being in nature. It can come from interacting with people. . (I)t can be kindled by reading Walt Whitman, or by picking my kids up at school . . . At root, I'm an 'aweist'). . . Aweism humbly, happily rests on the belief that no one will ever really know why we are here or how the universe came into being, or why, and this insight renders us weak in the knees while simultaneously spurring us to dance." (p.204-210) . . . One need not have God to feel and experience awe. One just needs life. (p.212)

Phil's self-description resonates in me. I separate from his spirit only when he says "I don't believe that any of the gods that have ever been created, concocted, or imagined by humans - actually exist." Like him, I sense no evidence for many Gods worshipped by human communities: no evidence for conscious creator; no evidence for a savior from death.



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But I do sense evidence of Gods that have been created by a few humans, by inspired individuals. I see evidence for both the Gods that Joseph Heller lets Yossarian and Lieutenant Scheisskopf's wife invoke. I see evil in the fabric of creation and I see benevolence as well, always contending with one another, beyond us and within us. About halfway through my four decades in ministry, I was pulled into another literary dialogue which gave birth to a God I could embrace. It's in the classic novel, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. The speakers here are Celie and Shug, black women and lovers in the American South in the 1930s. Celie has been writing letters to God. But she finds she can't any more. Now writing to her sister, Celie gives this account of her talk with Shug.

What happen to God? ast Shug.

Who that? I say.

She look at me serious.

Big a devil as you is, I say, you not worried 'bout no God, surely.

She say, Hold on just a minute here. Just because I don't harrass it like some peoples us know don't mean I ain't got religion.

What God do for me? I ast.

She say, Celie! Like she shock. He gave you life, good health, and a good woman that love you to death.

Yeah, I say, and he give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again. Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown.

She say, Miss Celie, You better hush. God might hear you.

Let 'im hear me, I say. All my life I never care what people thought bout nothing I did. I say. But deep in my heart I care about God. What he going to think. And come to find out, he don't think. Just sit up there glorying in being deaf, I reckon. But it ain't easy, trying to do without God. Even if you know he ain't there, trying to do without him is a strain.

I is a sinner, say Shug.

Sinner have more good times, I say.

You know why? she ast.



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Cause you ain't all the time worrying bout God, I say.

Naw, Us worry bout God a lot. But once us feel loved by God, us do the best us can to please him with what us like.

You telling me God love you, and you ain't never done nothing for him? I mean, not go to church, sing in the choir, feed the preacher and all like that?

But if God love me, Celie, I don't have to do all that. There's a lot of other things I can do that I speck God likes.

Like what? I ast.

Oh, she say. I can lay back and just admire stuff. Be happy. Have a good time.

Well, this sound like blasphemy sure nuff.

She say, Celie, tell the truth, have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God.

Then she say: Tell me what your God look like, Celie.

Nobody ever ast me this before, so I'm sort of took by surprise. Okay, I say. He big and old and tall and gray-bearded and white. He wear robes and go barefooted.

She laugh.

Why you laugh? I ast.

Then she tell me this old white man is the same God she used to see when she prayed. If you wait to find God in church, Celie, she say, that's who's bound to show up, cause that's where he live. Ain't no way to read the bible and not think God white, she say. When I found out I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest. You mad cause he don't seem to listen to your prayers. Humph! Do the mayor listen to anything colored say?

I know white people never listen to colored, period. If they do, they only listen long enough to be able to tell you what to do.

Here's the thing, say Shug. The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you're not looking, or don't know what you looking for. Trouble do it for



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most folks, I think. Sorrow, lord. Feeling like shit.

It? I ast?

Yeah, It. God ain't a he or a she, but a It.

But what do it look like? I ast.

Don't look like nothing, she say. It ain't a picture show. I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found It.

Shug a beautiful something, let me tell you. She frown a little, look out cross the yard, lean back in her chair, look like a big rose.

She say, My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and cried and I run around the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it. It sort of like you know what, she say, grinning and rubbing high up on my thigh."

Shug! I say.

Oh, she say. God love all them feelings. That some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves 'em you enjoys 'em a lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that's going, and praise God by liking what you like.

God don't think it dirty? I ast.

Naw she say. God made it. Listen, God love everything you love -- and a mess of stuff you don't. But more than anything else, God love admiration.

You saying God vain? I ast.

Naw, she say. Not vain, just wanting to share a good thing. I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it.

What it do when it pissed off? I ast.

Oh, it make something else.

It always making little surprises and springing them on us when we least expect.



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You mean it want to be loved, just like the bible say.

Yes, Celie, she say. Everything want to be loved.

So, Atheists, Agnostics, Secular Humanist: "What are you so grumpy about?" "Cherish your doubts, yes." But, even more "Revel in Your Life." It can be your God.

When you look in your dictionary, to assure yourself that you know what we mean when we speak of God, don't go rushing to the definitions. Plumb the etymology, the root of the word. In ancient Indo-European, *ghawa* meant "to call out to, or to invoke." God, at root, was an action, not a person or even a thing; it was a verb, not a noun. The root is still vibrant, even the trees that grew from it have died. To God - God-ing, "ghawa-ing" - to cry out, to name, to seek intimacy with power and value beyond our own is still the quest of life.

H. Richard Niebuhr, a mid-twentieth century theologian, wrote "To deny the reality of a supernatural being called God is one thing; to live without confidence in some center of value and without loyalty to a cause is another."

If you stop Goding - skepticism slides toward cynicism, freedom becomes flightiness, contentment curdles into condescension, self-direction perverts into self-absorption. Goding, for me - calling out (as William Blake saw us) "in human form divine" - God-ing is atheism's (dare I say it) salvation.

With Ralph Waldo Emerson, "I count these to be low, sleepy dark ages of the soul only redeemed by the unceasing affirmation at the bottom of the heart - like the nightingale's song heard all night - that the powers of the (human) soul are commensurate with its needs...."

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