

Classical theology, with its heaven, hell, sin and salvation, can be pretty troubling for most UUs. Yet some of us still yearn for a nuanced understanding of God that fits with who we are as people who care for the environment, equal rights for women, the GLBT community and modern science. Process theology is an interpretation of God that has emerged in recent years, capturing the imagination and faith of many liberal religious people.

Is There A God Worthy of Your Worship?

Service led by Rev. Susan Maginn, October 18, 2009

[Susan Maginn](#)

Presented by Roger Sanders, February 20, 2011

Many of us have stories about God.

A college student once told me how he asked questions about God in his childhood church and the leaders did not know how to answer. He decided that God must not be real.

A woman told me that all she knew about God was the passages that her mother would quote from Leviticus and Romans—passages meant to shame her for being a lesbian.

A friend from high school had a grandfather who was in a concentration camp during the Holocaust. He could never fully answer: How could there be a God who would allow this to happen to my family and millions of others?

I feel confident that these or similar wounds are real for many of us in this room and I would never encourage someone to ignore such wounds.

Whether we have a direct understanding of God or not, we all have the right to a religious life. That is why I am a UU [Unitarian Universalist] minister, because I know that religious life is bigger than any one scripture, any one culture and certainly religious life is bigger than any one word.

Today I am going to share with you my own spiritual biography which starts with a childhood understanding of God, goes to an adolescent, teen and young adult abhorrence of God, and how just in the past year, I have been surprised to have a life-changing experience of God.

What do I mean by God? For me, God is Love—all acts of Love are the stuff of God and all acts of bigotry and violence have nothing to do with God.

Process theology affirms how God is in process, how God is a force that is ever-present, that evolves, grows, mourns and even suffers losses. How God can honor all that I know to be true about modern science, protecting the earth and the right to equality for people who are gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered. How God is not a force that controls the world like a puppet on a string, but rather God only has the power to call us toward Love.

That is it. Without our partnership, without our agreement, God is powerless. If we do not respond to the call and walk in the ways of Love, God is waiting and calling and waiting and calling.

When I was a child, I knew God to be a being that walked to school with me whenever I asked for company. I knew God to be awake before anyone else in the earliest minutes of dawn.

I knew God to be a being that liked beautiful places. Every Sunday we went to God's house, and it was very beautiful. The exalted ceiling, the echoing minor chords, the colors that seemed to project from a window and

dance on my hand, the painted faces whose expression told the story of something that could somehow be wild and comforting all at once.

The mystical faith of my childhood ended rather abruptly during my adolescent years when a series of tragedies happened in my family. Within a couple of weeks, the innocent magic of my childhood seemed far away.

God was not in any houses. Wondering about God seemed like a luxury and a waste of time compared to the desperate needs of the moment, especially since my understanding of God had not matured beyond seeing God as a superpower who was in control of everything. I mean, if God was in control of everything, why was my life such a mess?

I was on my own, whether I wanted company or not.

As a young adult, I was drawn toward religious communities and religious practices—although they were almost always connected with Buddhism or Hinduism. I had a growing distain for anyone who had superstitions about God's power to control events and condemn certain people. Much of religion just seemed like a construction used to empower the worst of human nature: our self-righteous ignorance and childish xenophobia.

I found what I understood to be the best of religious life: Facing reality and finding a way to live gracefully. I found a home in Unitarian Universalism, went to seminary, started my family, started working as a minister and then, when I least expected it, it happened.

God showed up in my life like a stray dog, sweet and determined, begging for food every morning, noon and night until I finally put a bowl of food on the porch.

I did not call it God at first. Long before it was a word, it was just a powerful experience—an experience like I was being accompanied through every moment of every day, into my dreams and as sleep faded into awakening, it was still there. I was full to overflowing with elation and with fear of the power of this force sitting close to me, comforting me, watching me, and even holding me.

What I noticed over the months is that this presence was not passive. I noticed that it had (for lack of a better word) an intelligence, a direction. I sought understanding in ancient prayers and psalms. It seemed to me that the people who wrote these prayers must have had the same delightful and yet disorienting experience that I was having. I began to see a spiritual director who helped me to understand that while what I was experiencing was sacred, it was far from unique.

And then, slowly, the presence faded. It was not gone for good, but it did feel farther away. When I pray or meditate, I can still feel that presence, but instead of feeling immersed in the presence and even overwhelmed by it, I find that I need to remember to notice it.

God is a practice for me now. I think this is true for so many people. Occasionally God dumps awakening down upon us. But more often than not, knowing God is a daily practice of remembering the loving center within us, a daily practice of returning to our source armed with questions, reverence, praise, and yearning.

Unitarians and Universalists have always had a healthy skepticism of the humans who would use the word God to justify judgment of other people or use the word God to justify violence. Both Unitarian and Universalist traditions were created in the shadow of the oppressive Calvinist theology of the 18th century, which was so sure that God was hateful and ready to send most people into the eternal fires of hell.

We can be proud and inspired that in this oppressive climate, our religious ancestors were asking very brave questions about God.

Early Universalists wondered if God was actually a force whose very nature is Love, who has the power to eventually restore us, each and every one of us, with happiness and holiness.

Early Unitarians wondered if God can really be contained—whether in a church, or in a ritual like communion, or even in a singular religion. Maybe God transcends all of these man-made constructions, they wondered.

Over the decades and centuries, wondering about the nature of God has all but been lost in Unitarian Universalist pulpits. Why don't we want to talk about God? I bet many of you saw the title for today's sermon and thought, "Wow. She is going to talk about God." Why is that a big deal?

Perhaps the wounds are really that bad and digging around just causes more trouble than it is worth. Perhaps rather than reinterpret the old theologies that once hurt us, we would rather just forget it altogether. Perhaps we have so valued our sense reason that we have become suspicious of anything else.

It is a good question: Why even bother with God?

Certainly there is a compelling argument to be made that a religious life can look like many things and ultimately comes down to that we serve our neighbors and that we are saved by creating hell into heaven—right here and now.

Do we really need an understanding of a divine force to make sense of it all? Perhaps we just need to face reality and live as gracefully as possible. After all, it really is far more important to ease the suffering in the world and to preserve the planet than it is to ask heady questions about the nature of God.

But given that our view of God can affect how and why and if we are compelled to act for justice in the world, it seems worthy of consideration—especially at church.

I yearn for a liberal religious understanding of a divine force to make sense of the world and my place in it mainly because of one simple conviction:

I'm sure that I do not make my own goodness.

Love comes from a source that is certainly larger than my petty ego that is always getting in the way. Yes, there is love in my family, love in my congregation, but the Love that is present in all these places is much larger than I am. It had momentum before I was born and I have faith that it will reverberate in other directions long after I am gone. This Love has an intelligence and a direction, if I can just get out of the way and let it live.

When I was going through this experience with God, I was really going through a crisis of faith. And during that time, I was not sure if I could turn to my religious home, to Unitarian Universalism. As a minister I have the ability to work through these things and eventually bring them to the pulpit and talk about it. But I wonder how many people have had similar experiences and felt that they were not able to share these experiences and so they have just silently faded away from our congregations.

I want our congregations to be places where people can ask brave questions about faith, even if it means asking questions about God. I want our congregations to be places where people never need to feel embarrassed by their faith, especially when it is grounded in Love.

I have changed. After years of surrendering "God talk" to other pulpits in other traditions, I now see that the work of blessing the world with Love could be well served by Unitarian Universalists reclaiming our roots and not just entering the American culture war to debate—there are plenty of people doing this perfectly well from a political and intellectual perspective.

We can claim our own religious heritage and listen for the God that is waiting and calling and waiting and calling—us—toward Love.

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<http://www.wyeastuu.org/worship/there-god-worthy-your-worship>

Background information on Process Theology from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Process_theology

History

The original ideas of process thought are found in the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. Various theological and philosophical aspects have been expanded and developed by Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000), John B. Cobb, Jr., and David Ray Griffin. A characteristic of process theology each of these thinkers shared was a rejection of metaphysics that privilege "being" over "becoming," particularly those of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. Hartshorne was deeply influenced by French philosopher Jules Lequier and by Swiss philosopher Charles Secrétan who were probably the first ones to claim that in God liberty of becoming is above his substantiality.

Process theology soon influenced a number of Jewish theologians including Rabbis Max Kadushin, Milton Steinberg and Levi A. Olan, Harry Slominsky and, to a lesser degree, Abraham Joshua Heschel. Today some rabbis who advocate some form of process theology include Bradley Shavit Artson, Lawrence A. Englander, William E. Kaufman, Harold Kushner, Anton Laytner, Michael Lerner, Gilbert S. Rosenthal, Lawrence Troster, Donald B. Rossoff, Burton Mindick, and Nahum Ward.

Alan Anderson and Deb Whitehouse have attempted to integrate process theology with the New Thought variant of Christianity.

The work of Richard Stadelmann has been to preserve the uniqueness of Jesus in process theology.

Major concepts:

- God is not omnipotent (possessed of unlimited power) in the sense of being coercive. The divine has a power of persuasion rather than coercion. Process theologians interpret the classical doctrine of omnipotence as involving force, and suggest instead a forbearance in divine power. "Persuasion" in the causal sense means that God does not exert unilateral control.
- Reality is not made up of material substances that endure through time, but serially-ordered events, which are experiential in nature. These events have both a physical and mental aspect. All experience (male, female, atomic, and botanical) is important and contributes to the ongoing and interrelated process of reality.
- The universe is characterized by process and change carried out by the agents of free will. Self-determination characterizes everything in the universe, not just human beings. God cannot totally control any series of events or any individual, but God influences the creaturely exercise of this universal free will by offering possibilities. To say it another way, God has a will in everything, but not everything that occurs is God's will.
- God contains the universe but is not identical with it (panentheism, not pantheism or pandeism). (*Briefly put, in pantheism, "God is the whole"; in panentheism, "The whole is in God." In Pandeism, the Creator of the Universe actually became the Universe, and so ceased to exist as a separate and conscious entity.*)
- Because God interacts with the changing universe, God is changeable (that is to say, God is affected by the actions that take place in the universe) over the course of time. However, the abstract elements of God (goodness, wisdom, etc.) remain eternally solid.

- Charles Hartshorne believes that people do not experience subjective (or personal) immortality, but they do have objective immortality because their experiences live on forever in God, who contains all that was. Other process theologians believe that people do have subjective experience after bodily death.