

## What is God's Name?

By Amy Andrews 2/6/2011

As a young child, being born and raised here in this amazingly homogeneous community, I was not aware that people were different. When I was four or five, my grandparents, in Milwaukee, WI, were neighbors to girls who had the most beautiful hair I could imagine. Their shiny black braids, more than you could count, had colorful beads in them that would click and clack as they shook their heads. I wanted a million braids with clickity, clackity beads, too, but when I asked Mom to fix my hair like theirs she said no. She said I didn't have the right kind of hair, so I got my regular two braids, one on either side of my head, with a part down the middle prone to burning in the summer sun.

This baffled me. If I could have two boring braids, certainly I could have multiple clickity, clackity braids. What was wrong with my hair? A good thirteen years later, when I had my first real experience with diversity, I learned why Mom would not give me those coveted clickity, clackity braids. In the group of thirteen students I traveled Mexico with I was the lightest and the only one with blue eyes. My roommates introduced me to weaves, extensions, spray-on coconut oil and dry kinky hair. I watched as they braided their hair and it stayed braided, without a rubber band! And then I got it.

So, Mom had been right all those years ago, or sort of right. My fine straight hair would slip right out of a braid if I didn't keep a death grip on it before it was tied off. If she had had the skill to braid and I had had the patience to sit for three hours I could have had those coveted braids. It wasn't that I had the WRONG hair, it was that I had DIFFERENT hair. Still, the stuff

growing out of their heads and the stuff growing out of my head was the same stuff. HAIR.

This whole hair confusion was probably one of the reasons I loved this book, People, so much. I remember returning to this book again and again looking at the drawings and wondering about all of the differences between people. Let me share a bit of it with you. There is the page with drawings eyes. All different shapes and colors, but they all have the same purpose and we call them all eyes. There is the page with drawings of noses. All different shapes and colors, but they all have the same purpose and we call them all noses. Then there is the page with drawings of all different types of adornment. All different shapes and colors, but they all have the same purpose and we call them all beauty.

Now here is where things get tricky. It is hard to argue that an eye is an eye or a nose is a nose, but calling a clay plate the size of a saucer lodged in your lower lip beautiful, some people have a hard time with that. I know what Professor Evans would have to say about it. Paul Evans was one of my psychology professors in undergraduate school. I don't remember much that he taught about psychology, but he did teach me one very important lesson. He taught me that operational definitions are key in the successful communication of ideas. He would say that before labeling something beautiful, you would need an operational definition of beauty. In other words, what does the term beauty mean in the context in which it is used.

There is one time in particular I would love to have had not only an operational definition, but a common vocabulary. I had a conversation once, with a man who was studying his own form of Judaism. It was one of the most

exhausting conversations that I have ever had. I wanted desperately to understand his ideas, but I was terribly distracted. He referred to God by some term that I had never heard and couldn't pronounce. He felt that this term was the original name for God and he refused to accept any other term than his. I did get to the point of understanding that what he was referring to was the God that is referred to in the Torah. Even after discovering the definition of the word, the actual term, being so unfamiliar to me, threw me for a loop every time he said it. What I learned from that conversation was not new theological ideas, but a very old idea. You need a common language to communicate effectively.

Have you ever noticed how many different names we have come up with to use instead of the term "god"? Spirit of Life, Eternal Power, Source of All, Great Compassion, Mother Earth. Then there are all of the nouns we turn proper and personify such as Love and Truth. Now none of these terms are the *wrong* terms, just *different* terms.

To those new to Unitarian Universalism this variety may be confusing. Imagine taking your child to the doctor and your child tells the doctor that his codo is hurting. The doctor looks to you for greater understanding and you say "His Ellbogen is hurting". Baffled the doctor finally asks, "Show me where it hurts," and you and your child both point to your child's elbow. Now, neither of the terms you nor your child used were wrong, they were just different from the term the doctor understood, but wouldn't it have been less frustrating and more productive if you all had a common vocabulary?

For OTHERS new to UU, this variety of terms may be refreshing. Some people are very uncomfortable in the use of the term “god”. Some UU’s attach a great deal of spiritual baggage to the three letter word and don’t want to use the word at all. I wonder if, because we don’t have a doctrine defining for us what god is, it makes it more even difficult for some to use the term.

I met a young woman in a covenant circle in my former congregation who had every right to reject the term god. We were doing an exercise where we paired up and shared the spiritual time lines of our lives. Thank goodness I went first, or I may not have shared a thing. Next to hers, my spiritual timeline sounded like “Tra, la, la, la and fiddle deedee.” Ruth was the daughter of a FLDS leader and his eleventh wife, written about in books such as Under the Banner of Heaven by John Krakauer. Her mother had escaped with her and several siblings when Ruth was about 12. She doesn’t remember much about her father, but she was told that he gave her her name. When she was 21 she returned to visit him and asked him one question. “Why did you choose Ruth for my name?” He had no recollection of naming her.

Upon leaving the FLDS Ruth had no birth certificate, no social security number, no record of existence according to the government and you would think, no faith in a god that supposedly created this life of hers. Yet, she did believe in a god and she used the term god. One of the elements in her spiritual healing was to reject the god of her father and reclaim the term with her own definition. Not only did this empower her, but it allowed her to connect with greater depth to a spiritual community that welcomed her no matter how she defined god.

Unitarian Universalists “affirm and promote acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth.” Ruth found that in her UU community. I have to be honest when I say that I wasn’t sure what I would find in my new UU community. I know that, at one point in this fellowship’s evolution, there were members who felt strongly against using the term god. I also know that in the short time I have attended this fellowship I have rarely heard anyone use the term god in reference to their personal spirituality or faith. I *have* heard people comment about reading the words of the hymns ahead of time to see if they agree with the terms used. I myself have been hesitant to use the term god and have chosen hymns in hoping that no one would be offended by them. This seems to be a great deal of caution to take in a faith that is based on acceptance of others and learning from others.

With very little caution and much confidence, Marilyn Sewell, in “Raw Faith” a documentary about her transition from UU ministry into retirement, said this, “I don’t know if there is a god, but I choose to believe there is.” How UU is that?! We don’t have to believe in a god, we can *choose* to believe in a god. And if we are among those who chose to believe in a god, then it is our responsibility to define what god symbolizes to us personally.

I believe in god. God to me symbolizes a power greater than myself, a power of goodness that connects all things and leads me toward doing the best I can for myself, for others and for the world. In my own reflections I refer to it as Spirit of Life or the Universe. But when I am having a conversation with friends, I use the term god. I know what it means to me and using the term makes our communication so much easier and in turn, our connections much stronger.

Yes, I know I am opening a big can of worms here, but as I speak, I am searching for my own personal truth, which is after all, one of my responsibilities as a Unitarian Universalist. I'm not here to tell you what you should believe "god" to be. If you wanted to hear that you would have chosen to go somewhere else in town this morning. What I AM suggesting is that we not shy away from the use of the word "god".

Here is where Prof. Evans and his operational definitions come back into play. What if we as a fellowship were to have an understanding that, when used in the context of our discussions, the term god, as the author Karen Armstrong states, is a symbol for something transcendent and beyond our capacity as human beings to comprehend? What if, those of us who had painful connections to this three letter word in the past, released the negative connotations and reclaimed the term, as Ruth did, empowering our spiritual selves through our personal definition?

This is what I think might happen. I think that by using a common vocabulary in combination with an operational definition for the context of our fellowship, we could have a greater exchange of ideas, a deeper understanding of our individual spirituality and a stronger connection within the fellowship as a whole.

So what is god's name? I don't know if it matters. What I do believe matters is that the symbol of god is recognized, pondered, and spoken of within our faith community as a part of our spiritual journey, whether we believe in god or not.