

The Faith of a Theist There Must Be a God Somewhere

Rosemary Bray McNatt

Early in my ministerial internship, I was responsible one Sunday for leading the congregation in a period of prayer and meditation. After the service ended, one of the long-time members pulled me aside. "When you were praying this morning, you were addressing your prayers to someone, weren't you?" she asked. "Yes, I was," I said. The woman looked slightly incredulous. "You don't think there's really someone there, do you?"

"Yes," I answered, "I really do."

Becoming a Unitarian Universalist more than a decade ago was the path that led me back to God. Brought up in an African American Roman Catholic home, I measured my childhood days by the feast of the saints and the holy days of obligation. By the time I was ten, I found my youthful devotion challenged by the rigidity of the church and deeply damaged by its rejection of women's gifts, even when those gifts were as small as my desire to serve Mass as my younger brother did several times each week. My spirit crushed, I tossed aside both the church and all thoughts of God before I reached my teens.

Not that God wasn't due for some serious criticism from me by that time. It was the 1960s after all, and questioning authority was more than a slogan to millions of us. The unfairness of life, the poverty and racism I knew from personal experience, the violence that was present all around me—including in my own home—had me asking tough questions about the God my mother clung to with such fervor. I informed her by the time I reached my teens that whatever God she thought she knew had done her precious little good and that I was fed up with all this religious mythology.

My mother, bless her, was more than used to her oldest girl; she had great experience with my periodic pronouncements of cynicism and rage. With her usual aplomb, she simply looked at me and said, "Just keep on living, baby. You'll find out."

I did keep on living, stepping out into the world of college and work, a thousand miles from my mother's watchful gaze. I resolutely stayed away from churches—and yet I found myself always in search of something. In my late twenties, I married my college sweetheart, an African American Unitarian Universalist by birthright. He and his parents had introduced me to this religious movement a decade earlier, while he and I were both in college.

Before meeting them, I had no clue what a UU was. As I walked down the aisle of the First Unitarian Church of Chicago on my wedding day, I didn't know a whole lot more—

only that this faith mattered to the man I loved and to his parents. How could I know that my gesture of goodwill toward my new in-laws would lead me to a new faith—indeed, a new life?

I started attending the Community Church of New York to live out the fantasy of being a dutiful young wife. It was a fantasy fueled by my own love of tradition and heritage. I loved going to the church my husband grew up in and meeting the members who remembered him as a little boy in Sunday School. I basked in the affirmation of my husband's parents and the church's long-time members.

After a time, I began to pay attention, not just to coffee hour, but to the hour before that, when the community gathered amid the banners representing the great religions of the world. I sat beneath those banners and heard from the pulpit and the pews the deepest longings of my heart. I learned about the similarities among the great religions of the world, about their common hopes and aspirations for humanity. I heard about the beloved community—the gathered people hungry to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with God. I heard about people who had risked all they had—even their own lives—in order to speak out loud the longings of their hearts, longings so much like mine.

And I heard about all these things in the context of freedom, the freedom to think for myself about God and about the world, the freedom to decide how I might live so that one day "righteousness and peace would kiss one another," even if I would not live to see that day.

No one required me to make promises I could not keep. There was no list of beliefs that determined whether I was in or out of favor. And most importantly, there were no gatekeepers who decided on my worthiness or unworthiness. Everyone in the sanctuary, including me, was part of a glorious creation. Just by being alive, I was good, I was worthwhile, I was sacred. It was a revelation. For a long time, it was enough—this freedom to think for myself, to embrace the spirit of skepticism and the rejection of doctrine. I reveled in the community of like-minded people, all of us fleeing the excess and rigidity of our childhood beliefs, the blind and unquestioning faith of our fathers and mothers.

But as my mother told me earlier, I kept on living. I kept on living in a world filled with tears and tragic events that had no easy explanations. I kept on facing great joy and deep disappointment. I kept on being confronted by hopeless situations that unexpectedly came to amazing conclusions. And thanks to the freedom I found as a Unitarian Universalist, I continued to ask what it was that I was experiencing.

The answer came slowly. Bit by bit, I learned to acknowledge grace, came to believe the irrational idea that, amid everything, there was a knowing, loving presence that abides in all things, even in me. I knew that I could not explain what was gradually becoming clear to me. I only knew the truth of the mystic Julian of Norwich's proclamation that "all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well."

At the same time I was comforted by this notion, I remained suspicious of it. How could all be well when I myself had spent a childhood in which all was definitely not well? How could it all be well as long as people cried out for justice and bread? How could it be well when millions lived out their lives without one moment of ease or pleasure while others knew nothing else? I had no answers to the questions—only the continuing sense that there is so much more to our lives here than the horrors we inflict on one another and the blessings we bestow too rarely.

And then, one day, God spoke. On retreat at a women's conference in Wisconsin, I joined with other participants in a sacred spiral dance led by a noted member of the women's spirituality movement. Asked as part of the dance to speak to the divine and listen for an answer, I joined in, impatient, skeptical, and freezing cold. As I made a perfunctory list of my concerns, I could suddenly feel a Presence in me. It was a Presence that made itself felt in every cell of my body, and it was followed by a Voice, neither male nor female, and utterly unlike anything I had ever felt. The Voice made itself heard in my body, and it told me clearly, lovingly, "Don't worry, my child, don't worry." When I spoke to the Voice about the hopes and dreams of my life, the secret desires I carried with me everywhere, it promised me "all these things and more." And then the Voice and Presence left me, and left me changed forever.

Most of the great Western theologians agree at least on this: God is beyond naming or full understanding, yet we human beings, created in God's image, nonetheless are called to make the attempt. It is the free faith of Unitarian Universalism that makes my attempts worthwhile. Because of this faith, I can be confident that my search for the Divine is structured, not by static institutions or individuals, but by the God who continues to call me and whom I continue to question. Because of this powerful freedom to believe—and to doubt—I live in trust, believing all manner of things will be well.

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