

G - D

AND A
VOCABULARY OF REVERENCE

A sermon by F. Jay Deacon

Preached at Unity Church of North Easton
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What you're about to hear is not what I learned as a kid, not what I was taught in the fundamentalist college and evangelical seminary of my previous religious life.

In that world we talked about a god *out there* — wholly separate than me (the neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth called it “wholly Other”) — some kind of super-person out there who created everything and who could draw near to me or abandon me because it, or as they said, *he*, — is separate from me, a God out there somewhere.

I lived with that for a long time but in my gut it didn't feel right, didn't ring true. And then I read Emerson.

I came to sense that these cells and neurons and tissue, and this mind, give expression to something, they make manifest something infinite and unmanifest, and a palpable expression of something that is everywhere and that lies beyond the capacity of our science to detect or measure, but it's here, closer than your breath, and, as the Hindu Kena Upanishad declares, *Thou Art That*, you're it.

It wasn't long before I applied for a transfer of ministerial credentials from my former denomination and became a Unitarian Universalist. My friends were baffled. How can this be a religion, they asked? It didn't deal in the traditional religious language, the categories in which traditional religious people think and speak. It didn't have saviors and miracles and heavens and hells. It was about spiritual experience, first-hand spiritual experience of

THE READINGS

William James Potter

of New Bedford was one of those great 19th-century radicals who had had enough of the old language and the old assumptions that went along with it. And he wrote — No definition of religion, I think, will satisfy the philosophy of the subject which does not in some way denote a contact which the finite mind has with the vitalizing and sustaining Energy of the universe. It is not necessary that the definition should embrace the idea of a personal Deity, not necessary that it should attempt the impossible problem, which most theological systems do attempt, of defining the Infinite; but it must . . . recognize that the human soul is conscious of a life that is not bounded by its material organism nor by any limits which itself can measure, but opens outward into the whole infinity and eternity of things, and is a natural, inherent part of the universal order.⁷

From *J. Krishnamurti*,
On God

p. 51

At the end of a lecture about God, someone asks Krishnamurti a question:

QUESTIONER: “You never mention God. Has he no place in your teachings?”


KRISHNAMURTI: “You talk a great deal about God, don't you? Your books are full of it. You build churches, temples, you make sacrifices, you do rituals, perform ceremonies, and you are full of ideas about God, are you not? You repeat the word, but your acts are not godly, are they? Though you worship what you call God, your ways, your thoughts, your existence, are not godly, are they? Though you repeat the word God, you exploit others, do you not? . . .

So you are very familiar with God, at least with the word; but the word is not God. . . . I don't use that word for the very simple reason that you know it.”

And on another occasion, a questioner asks,

Q: “Tell us of God.”

K: “Instead of my telling you what God is, let us find out whether you can realize that extraordinary state, not tomorrow or in some distant future, but

Continued next page 

your own, and it was about the life of this world. But what about Christ and Satan and salvation and God and all?



It's supposed to be clear tonight. What if you go out tonight and you look up and you see that the stars have rearranged themselves before your very eyes so that they spell out "G-O-D?" And millions of people are seeing this before their very eyes. If they could be sure this was not some form of mass hallucination — ah! at last! the final definitive proof for the existence of God!

But not so fast. Proof of *what?* They still would be without a clue as to what could be meant by speaking of "God." And no matter how many people saw it, and no matter how thoroughly documented, the sighting of the stars rearranging themselves to spell God couldn't *define that troublesome word*. Nobody knows precisely what they are talking about in speaking of such a transcendent reality. All that throng of people out there under the stars would know is that something pretty darn weird had happened.

You come to hear about God. In one of Krishnamurti's little books of lectures, the one called *On God*, at the end of the lecture about God, somebody asks him, "You never mention God. Has he no place in your teachings?" And you heard what he said to that.

When the mind is full of belief . . . it is burdened, and a burdened mind can never find out what is true. . . . You yourself must see the importance of relinquishing . . . all the accumulations of centuries, the superstitions, knowledge, beliefs . . .



Once, in that previous religious life of mine, I was working with an ever-so-slightly progressive evangelical minister in Brooklyn in a pretty conservative Swedish church. He said to me: you can say anything you want so long as you get enough Gods and Christs and Salvation and other essential buzzwords in. They won't notice what you're actually saying.

Language is a funny thing: so essential to communication, so apt to get in the way of com-

right now as we are quietly sitting here together. Surely that is much more important. But to find out what God is, all belief must go. The mind that would discover what is true cannot believe in truth, cannot have theories or hypotheses about God. . . . When the mind is full of belief . . . it is burdened, and a burdened mind can never find out what is true. . . . You yourself must see the importance of relinquishing . . . all the accumulations of centuries, the superstitions, knowledge, beliefs; you must see the truth that any form of burden . . . dissipates energy. For the mind to be quiet there must be an abundance of energy, and that energy must be still. . . . Because the mind has abundant energy that is still and silent, the mind itself becomes that which is sublime. . . . When the mind is completely still, . . . then that energy is love."

23:

"Are you going to accept what another says about God? It does not matter who it is, Krishna, Buddha, or Christ, because they may all be mistaken — and so may your own particular guru be mistaken. Surely, to find out what is true, your mind must be free to inquire, which means that it cannot merely accept or believe. I can give you a description of the truth, but it will not be the same thing as your experiencing the truth for yourself. All the sacred books describe what God is, but those descriptions are not God. The word **God** is not God, is it?"

And from the ancient Tao te Ching:

There is a thing inherent and natural,
Which existed before heaven and earth.

Motionless and fathomless,

It pervades everywhere and never becomes exhausted.

It may be regarded as the Mother of the universe.

I do not know its name.

If I am forced to give it a name,

I call it Tao, and I name it as supreme.

The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao;

The name that can be defined is not the unchanging name . . .

munication. Gustave Flaubert nailed it when he wrote:

The truth is that fullness of soul can sometimes overflow in utter vapidness of language, for none of us can ever express the exact measure of his needs or his thoughts or his sorrows; and human speech is like a cracked kettle on which we tap crude rhythms for bears to dance to, while we long to make music that will melt the stars.¹

In 2002 the new president of the UUA, Bill Sinkford, stirred up a controversy about religious language. In the *Boston Globe*, the headline was “Words of ‘reverence’ roil a church;”² and in the *New York Times*, it was “A Heated Debate Flares in Unitarian Universalism.”³ It seems to have started with a sermon in which he said, among other things:

[W]e have in our Principles an affirmation of our faith which uses not one single piece of religious language. Not one. Not even one word that would be considered traditionally religious. And that is a wonderment to me . . .

Well no, our Principles and Purposes, adopted in 1984 and periodically revised, are simply these:

- § The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- § Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- § Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- § A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- § The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- § The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- § Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

These are followed by a six-point statement of the sources from which we draw — it mentions words and deeds of prophetic men and women, wisdom from the world’s reli-

gions, Jewish, Christian, humanist, and earth-centered traditions, and so on. None of the traditional religious words. This bothers Bill, but it doesn’t bother me. And it starts, significantly, with this:

“*Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.*” Well now, that I call religious language.



But Bill raised an important question. How do we talk about our religious, our spiritual, experience and community? I’ve read a number of sermons that colleagues have preached in response to all this. Most of them say we really need to start using the traditional religious language again, just investing the words with new meaning.



You might find it useful to do that for yourself. But I’ve seen so many people, certainly many gay people, so severely injured and traumatized by that language. I once saw a sign at a Pride march that said “Pat Robertson uses the Bible the way Hitler used gas.” Same applies to the latest abusive statements from the Vatican and the bishops. The words are *loaded*, and with all the freight and terrifying weight of the vaunted authority of church and bible and hierarchy and creed, the words hit like missiles. And these missiles are real, unlike certain alleged weapons that turned out not to be real.

Look. You say the word “God” and a raucous jangle of pandemonium goes off in the heads of your hearers — alarm bells ring, red lights flash — it’s really something. For some it’s a matter of dread and fear.

Those words began to have another kind of effect on *me*. During an intensive period of education at evangelical institutions and deep involvement in their churches, the constant repetition of those words came to have a *numbing* effect. The mechanical repetition may as well have been profanity. And this

mind-numbing repetition of special religious lingo simply shut down the thought processes and — worse — shut down any transcendent resonance in the gut, locked you in a tiny room already so fully defined that there was no way out.

I think you can give those words new meaning for yourself but I'm not so sure you can give them new meaning for our time and culture. These words have long-established meanings. Be very, very careful. And we're going to have to give to our time and culture a new spiritual vision.



Bill is right about this: we *do* need a way to talk about all this. But do we really think there are, or ever could be, words adequate to what we mean? We'll have to struggle with our language to say what we mean.



Maybe that's why, among the ecstatic and mystical religions, there is glossolalia, tongue-speaking. Maybe *that* is the only legitimate vocabulary of reverence. Not one word of it can be found in a dictionary, can be translated into any propositional concepts. But American Pentecostalism wasn't satisfied with that — they figured these ecstatic utterances had to be translated out into standard religious concepts. So they followed St. Paul's teachings about the *interpretation* of tongues and supplied an interpretation — usually consisting of memorized King James Bible verses. About as fresh, immediate, and original as the Apostles' Creed. Oh well.

Those with the most acute consciousness of the Divine Life know that no word is adequate to describe what it is they have touched, and out of which they live.

"Of that ineffable essence which we call Spirit," Emerson wrote, "he that thinks most, will say least. . . . when we try to define and describe [God], both language and thought desert us, and we are as helpless as fools and savages. That essence refuses to be recorded

in propositions."²



So note the Kabbalistic spelling, *G-dash-D*. In an earlier time, Jews were forbidden to pronounce the Divine Name, since any attempt to speak of the Divine was bound to be inadequate, because it is too high, too holy. The divine name was written as four consonants — Yod, Hay, Vav, Hay, Y, H, W, H — no vowels, not pronounceable and never pronounced in any reading of scripture. The only place where it was permissible to pronouncing The Name was the Temple, and by now the Temple was gone, destroyed. Now, no one spoke The Name. For a few generations, scholars did pass down the pronunciation, but eventually it was lost, and we no longer know it with any certainty. Among Orthodox Jews you can still find those who reverence the Unutterable Name *by not uttering it*; and who write the Name the way I did in the title, *G dash D*. I think they've got it right.

It's a dangerous word. Once speak it, and our mental memory-banks are at once filled with all the things we think we know about God, have been taught about God, believe about God, and I am sure that nearly everything we think we know about God stands squarely in the way of our knowing God, or *whatever it is that there is to be known*.

So many ancient accounts of *God!* As often as not, they are national epics created and repeated in a world quite unlike ours, for created and repeated for political reasons, to give stability and strength to that political entity. Oh, where did we ever see anything like *that?*

And these stories, and the people who tell them, are always marked by special words — shibboleths — by which you can tell who belongs to the "in"-group and who doesn't — and we repeat those words because they make us feel that we're insiders instead of outsiders, we're saved instead of lost; knowers of the true doctrine.

What meaning do those ancient stories hold for us? We live in another universe.

Slowly we penetrate the depth of reality and find not gods and dragons of the deep and angels and archangels but Leptons and Muons held together by Gluons, and we find the Universe pervaded with Light that we cannot see, and we marvel at dark matter, or is it dark *energy*, that keeps it from flying apart.

When I hit this pulpit, it goes thunk. We like that. We think we have made contact with the essential brass tacks of life — *matter*.

Not really. Not the way ages and generations before us thought. This pulpit, and the microphone, and you and I are made of cells and the cells are made of atoms and, in the subatomic realm — mysterious patterns of energy, and no solid matter at all. Right now, bazillions of protons and leptons are flying *right through* you!

We penetrate reality and find mysterious communication across the abyss between things, and things we thought *things* vanish with our seeing them. There is more than meets the eye.

But what is this Life that evolves, and what is this All of which everything we know is a part? and what are the ethical implications of *that*, and what might it mean in our living? and what does it have to do with our loves and our hurts and our hopes? and what is this Universe that goes forth in a moment from an infinitely small, infinitely dense darkness and void and creates worlds and gives us life?



Maybe you haven't got a doubt in the world about the existence, or nonexistence, or whatever, of God. Or —

Maybe you find yourself speaking of God with a ringing . . . *ambivalence*.

Maybe you are a theist, which means you believe in a God who is some kind of person or cosmic super-person.

Or, maybe, like so many mystics, or like the theologian Paul Tillich, or like our own Tran-

scendentalists, or like some kinds of Eastern religions, you believe in something, some central Life of the Universe, but you are not a theist because what you mean by God is not some super Somebody-out-there but rather something in which all the universe, and you and I ourselves, *are a part*. Tillich called it the *Ground of Being*.

Maybe mostly you figure you don't believe any of this stuff, and you think life and the universe are some kind of mechanism and all reducible to mathematical formulas.

Maybe you are troubled by your own contradictions.



Maybe we need to talk more immediately about our own firsthand experience, our own emptiness and ecstasies, with less embarrassment, with more poetry — talk about (in the words of the UU Principles)

“Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.”

Direct experience. So let me add this. We can speak of the Ground of Being, or God — or whatever your language — in the *first* person, or the *second*, or the *third* person. Maybe that distinction can bring some clarity to your own spiritual experience. Here's what I mean.

We can speak in the *first* person, as the Kena Upanishad does, when it declares, *“Thou art That!”* I am that! It's what most truly, authentically, we are. It's the message of Emerson's essay “The Over-soul.” It's our truest identity. The Divine is not something out there, remote from our selves. It isn't Karl Barth's “Wholly Other.” It's right here, always, already, here, and we are its expressions, manifestations of what many Eastern religious traditions call the Unmanifest. We are one and we can feel each others' existence as part of our own. It's what we are, look at from within.

We can speak in the *third* person, of a

process, looking as if from without. The evolutionary process, the life-process, perhaps God.

And there's the *second* person: *Thou*. When you speak in the *second* person, you *address this Mystery*, you stand before it in wonder, or gratitude, or worship (or, sometimes maybe anger, or bewilderment). You don't have to see yourself as standing before some personal deity, some super-person in a cosmic control-room, to do that. Yet now there you are, face-to-face — this is not something cerebral. Now something you can truly call *worship* is possible.



Not so long ago, at night, the dog and I stood in silence for a long time, out on the hill in back of the house, in the great quiet and darkness of Westhampton, watching as our tiny planet shaded entirely our tiny moon, and in the dark, through the crystal-clear skies, looked — at least *I* did, Scooby was likely smelling things — I looked into the depth of space.

What language could I offer? But the vocabulary is quite secondary to the reverence and it has to rise naturally from it. And *that*, I am certain, will communicate far more than outworn, tired words and shibboleths.

The Reality I am attempting to speak of — isn't the ancient Tao te Ching about right when it says:

There is a thing inherent and natural,
Which existed before heaven and earth.
Motionless and fathomless,
It pervades everywhere and never becomes
exhausted.
It may be regarded as the Mother of the
universe.
I do not know its name.
If I am forced to give it a name,
I call it Tao, and I name it as supreme.

And there is another line that says

*The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao;
The name that can be defined is not the unchang-
ing name . . .*



I am pretty sure that religious language *should* be a struggle, *should always* be a struggle. If it can be repeated mechanically, it isn't helping us get to the real thing.

Holding on to familiar shibboleths about God only seals us into an outmoded universe with its Bibles of unquestioned authority, its heathen tribes versus godly warriors, its dragons in the sea, its angels and archangels; and its God, who is always too small, too neatly wrapped.

We have to let it go.

We have to set our minds free to think, see, perceive.

Whatever there is to be known — the point is not to have opinions about it, dogma about it — but to come into direct relationship with it.

And then it comes to us again
that it is not so simple
that behind and beyond our everyday experi-
ence
there is this mysterious energy (some have
called it Spirit);
there is Life Itself

and we awaken to a world that is not
dead as we had thought, lifeless rock and soil
but a living organism with fire at its heart
and this living earth ceaselessly turning
with the stars and planets in that immensity
too vast to measure or comprehend

and all this community of the Universe: the
artwork of Life Itself,

And there: human speech is like a cracked
kettle on which we tap crude rhythms for
bears to dance to, while we long to make
music that will melt the stars.



The great mystic Hildegard of Bingen gave us
the words to our hymn. It's number 27.

¹ Madame Bovary.

² By Michael Paulson, June 28.

³ May 17, 2003.

⁴ *Nature*. In LOA, 40.

⁵ From Tintern Abbey.

⁶ Excursion 1141-7.

⁷ "Religious Sentiment in the Light of Science," 1871, pp. 19-20, in Peden, 105.