

The Body of God

A Sermon by the Rev. Ann Marie Alderman

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I was sitting in my office the other day. It was a Tuesday or a Thursday evening. I know it was had to be one of those, because it is on those nights that the Tai Chi Society rents this worship space of ours. During those late afternoons people I don't know walk by my office window.

So, I am sitting there and a woman walks up to the very large oak tree that grows through the deck just outside of my office. She walks over to that tree and she embraces it like you would a family member or a long lost friend.

I am watching. I'm thinking ... have heard of people doing that. I like trees. I've even admired the few activists in recent years that have planted themselves in trees for months out west trying to keep old growth forests from being cut down. Her embrace seemed so...almost romantic. I felt a little voyeuristic just sitting there watching her.

I thought, "OK, a tree hugger."

But after reflecting on her embrace of the tree, I realized it didn't serve me to discount what I had witnessed. There was something intriguing, maybe even quite profound in her simple act. It appeared to me to be an act of worship. Certainly, it seemed fitting that that embrace occurred in this sacred space of ours.

After all, I had been thinking about worship that afternoon and what it might mean for us as Unitarian Universalists. I have been wanting to explore with you a particular model of God, a way of understanding God, of using god language that might inform our worship, our common spiritual practice. This model I have in mind could help all of us recognize and embrace the sacred.

“Worship” is what we do that honors what holds ultimate meaning and purpose for us. Worship can be said to be our embrace of what it is we understand to have ultimate worth. I suspect that we don’t talk much about it because worship implies an acknowledgement of God. As many of you might have observed God and god-talk are somewhat taboo around here!

I have been reading a book that was published ten years ago, entitled, The Body of God: an Ecological Theology, by Sallie McFague. Well known for her work on metaphors, in this book she offers a lens for perceiving God that might be useful for addressing the ecological crisis from a religious perspective. I think she also offers us a way to re-claim god-talk that will help us worship.

Her theme is that if we are able to understand that all being, all of creation, the entire universe has equal worth, that worth could elicit a new embrace of the universe, a new understanding of being at home in the world, a new ethic of what the house rules are in our home/the world. It might be useful for us to perceive all manner of life forms as the embodiment of God. This way of perceiving God would re-figure our place in the world in relation to other life in the world. We would understand we are not the masters of other life but bodies among bodies all comprising the body of God.

Her theme relies on what science calls “the common creation story.” It is a story of the common beginning and history of all living beings. We are related to all that is because our common beginning and our common history. Included is the evolutionary story, detailing the infinite differentiations, the highly complex networks of interrelationships and interdependencies. We are all radically and profoundly related to each other.

What McFague is talking about is much more than tree hugging, but let’s go back to that for a minute ...

For many of us simple tree hugging, a simple embrace of a non-human relative, may seem to fall far short of what our UU faith demands. We tend to skip over the simple parts of

expressing connection with all that is, and favor sustained liberal activism. In fact sustained liberal activism has become for many of us our primary act of worship. There is no doubt we have an activist heritage. Certainly, activism is a good thing and integral to what we are.

Yet, it troubles me when activism is held out as the only, or the primary form of our spiritual practice/our worship. That narrows all that we can and should be. And if we as a faith community are only activists, how are we different from a justice coalition or The Sierra Club? Perhaps a case can be made that these and other activist organizations do a better job than us with their more focused activities.

Then there are those among us who believe that our primary mode of worship is not activism but the result of our efforts for freedom and justice. Thus, our primary act of worship becomes our unfettered ability to exercise free inquiry, to be rational, to be seekers of truth. Tree hugging falls far short of a UU faith that promotes the exercise of reason and critical inquiry. Yet if our worship is primarily about sharpening our rational abilities, I dare say the intellect is far better nurtured in the academy or the graduate school than here.

Even our best efforts to care for each other, to create the covenantal community, to be bound to each other by standards of loving behavior, can be carried too far. Trying to be the perfect family can become an end in and of itself that isolates us, setting us apart from the non-human world. In these efforts we tend to leave out concern for all the other living bodies around us. We probably aren't the best at providing individual or group therapy any way. Like activism, like seeking truth with refined intelligence, creating good human relationships with each other may be better done in a setting other than within the congregation.

What gives us distinction; makes us a church, a religious faith, if it is not our activism, our seeking after truth, or our caring for each other? It is all these things, but perhaps it is also our worship, our simple recognition, our simple embrace of the holy/the sacred. Shouldn't we be expert at recognizing the sacred when we see it, feel it, sense it? Shouldn't we be expert at the simple embrace of the sacred, at embracing this wonderful life, this world, our bodies and the bodies of all forms of life that are all around us?

The historical answer, of course, to the question of what distinguishes a church for a faith community from a social activist organization, an academy, group therapy, is the worship of God. Reverence, devotion, a sense of the sacred takes infinite varieties of form, yet is the ingredient of worship, an intentional honoring of what we hold sacred that distinguishes a religious community from those groups gathered solely for purposes of social reform, or intellectual stimulation or movement toward more personal or group wholeness.

We have, in the past fifty years or so, known many reasons to move away from, to outright reject an understanding of worship that includes a god or god-concept that was uncomfortable, exclusive, unworkable and ultimately unbelievable. If the God we have previously known is no longer worthy of our devotion or reverence, can we do without God? For many years I have thought the answer was a resounding yes. We have each other. We have the beauty of the earth. We have work to do. Yet, I am beginning to wonder if a new model of God could do us some good. Without a working model of God that is believable, I fear we are without focus as a faith community. Without worship can we even be called a faith? I think there is a void. What is missing we try to fill with activism, with intellectualizing, with attention to self-awareness and right relationship. I dare say, that what is missing can only be filled with an embrace, with worship, with a simple act of faith.

A new and different sense of the sacred/for God, that "works" for us, other than the ones we may have left behind, may have value for us. Many of us have moved away from imposed religious authority, moved away from proscribed creeds and doctrines, from the abuses of god-concepts that didn't work, that didn't ring true, that didn't bring justice and love. How is it that we will continue our journey as people of liberal religious faith, people who value goodness and the community of each other, who value this world and look for practical ways to be of help? Whatever our future journey as UUs will be, I suspect it will include a re-claiming of God.

McFague takes as her starting point the current ecological crisis. She suggests that changing how we have talked about God, imagined God, will give us a clue about how to understand how we might better embrace the universe. She suggests; that "the goal is not utopia, but

sustainability and livability...not the kingdom of God, but a decent life in community for all life-forms and the ecosystem on which we rely.” (p. 68)

We don't need convincing that we are a part of the interdependent web of all existence. We acknowledge that. We know that our lives are connected to all other beings. We know that the flutter of a butterfly's wings in the Amazon can affect the weather in Kansas City. We know our relationships with each other and with all of creation are deep and complex. We acknowledge that the western "fix-it" mentality will not work when it comes to the ecological crisis and other manifestations of evil. Post modern science suggests that perceiving the universe as a machine has not worked for sustainability or livability. The universe is better thought of as an organism.

We probably don't need convincing that the common creation story is a workable metaphor for our time. Enlightened scientists and theologians alike are hopeful that all human beings can know and subscribe to this common story, moving past perceiving God as Lord over a kingdom with particular human groups as his primary servants commissioned to carry forth his will. Most of us are convinced that that model no longer works. We know we are one form of life amidst many others. We understand our original unity and our immense diversity and we know that our mission as a church is to work to increase this understanding.

Yet, we have not yet recognized or adopted the implications of this understanding for our worship, for our embrace of the miracle of life in all its splendid forms. I think that is our primary "job", as a religious community...to be also expert at embracing the miracle of all life and that that is worship.

When I was a child I learned to think of my body as the temple of God. By the time I had grown into adulthood ...I believed this teaching was a function of institutional religion trying to control immoral behavior. I rejected the teaching.

I pursued gluttony and pleasure and the thrill of wanton consumption until my body seemed more of a thing, separate and apart from my intellect, my emotion, and my soul. Recently, a desire to integrate my more mature beliefs with my consumption practices has been

awakened. And, I have returned to a simple embrace of my own body including a recognition of the "house rules", ethics for consumption that promote the sustainability and livability of all life. My body needs what all bodies need...not perfection, or glory, just simple nutrition and exercise and to be accepted and recognized with an embrace.

Sometimes we let our religious practice become too complicated, too much work, too much thinking. What we may need in these days is just simple recognition and embrace of what is sacred.

When awe and wonder about the miracle of life appears, may you worship with a simple act of embracing that which life, body to body.

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