

Simple Gifts

Dec. 2007 *The All Souls Journal*
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If you have stopped believing in God, you replaced it with something. Theologian Paul Tillich talks of God as one's "Ultimate concern" – whatever it might be. Therefore, everyone has a god or gods. If a person's ultimate concern is success, or money, or fame, or if they see one of these as the thing which holds their highest allegiance and that to which they devote their time, their loyalty, and their best efforts, then this has become their god.

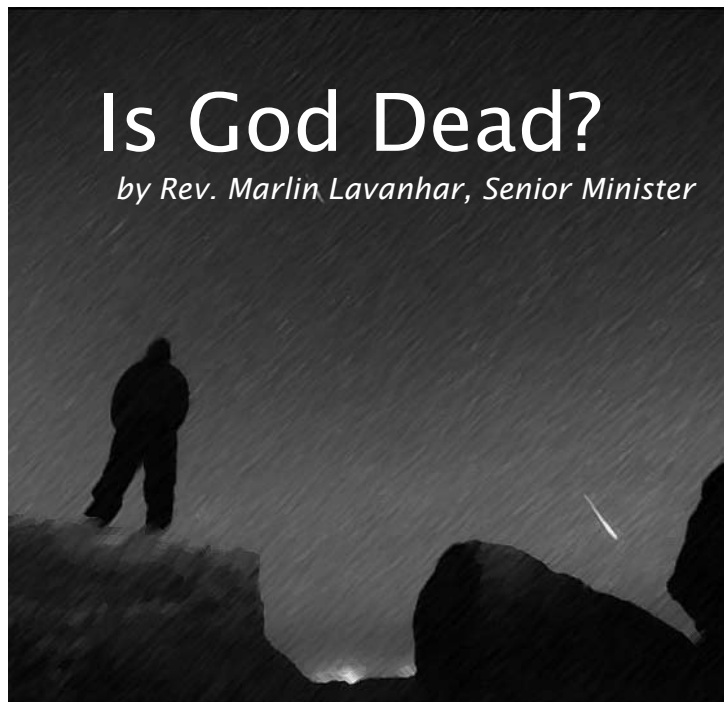
One of our most important religious tasks is to make sure that that with which we replaced our God, is worthy of our allegiance. Freud said that God was a creation of the human imagination and that it was a childish fairy tale for ignorant people. Without a doubt, such a God is unworthy of one's allegiance.

Bertrand Russell and other brilliant minds have told us that the concept of God is no longer credible considering all that we have learned from science and philos-

ophy. I agree that any concept of God worthy of our allegiance cannot be utterly inconsistent with what we now know from science and other academic pursuits.

Karl Marx told us that God is a tool of the wealthy and powerful used as an opiate to keep people oppressed and poor. I agree that religious belief can be used this way and has been used this way, and any idea of God that is worthy of allegiance cannot be one that is used to justify oppression or any other unjust use of power.

Nietzsche announced that God is dead. And he was half right. The concept of God that many of us had when we were children has died, for us. Even the God of children's Sunday school must die in order for a more complex and sophisticated notion of God to be born. As people's experience changes and their ability to understand complex ideas develops, their concepts of God change. The problem I see is that for some people,



Continued page 2...

**December:
God**

My History with "god" † The Holidays at All Souls † Cowboy God



when the juvenile concept of God they believed in as a child no longer seems plausible, they give up trying to understand God altogether. When this happens, a person's spiritual

development is arrested with a childish concept of God.

When I talk of God, I'm not talking about a man in the clouds with a beard. I'm not talking about a God who, like Santa Claus, watches over us, keeping tabs on whether we've been naughty or nice. I'm not talking about a God who ordered the Israelites to murder other tribes as they made their way to Canaan. I'm not talking about a God with nostrils that liked the smell of burning animal flesh. I'm not talking about a God who performs miracles to convince people to believe. I'm not talking about a God who thinks that only men can be priests or one who thinks woman need to cover

their heads or submit to their husbands.

I'm talking about the love that is the source of all love. I'm talking about that spirit which allows the parent who has lost a child to get up in the morning and continue to live a life of meaning. I'm talking about that power within us and around us that helps us realize that loving our neighbors is the right thing to do. I'm talking about that mysterious source of encouragement that helps us believe that forgiveness is possible. I'm talking about that unimaginable force that allows us to gain stronger character from adversity.

What, which is not of your own making, is calling you to a life of courage and possibility and hope? What is it that calls you to do and be and become more than you are right now? Call it what you like – I call it God. And I believe it is a source of love and strength that is available always – and to everyone. †

A B C D E F God...

Our church program-year (September-May) is fashioned around nine theological themes. Each theme plays a part in the development of a well-grounded religious and spiritual life. The church's offerings each month are by no means limited to the themes. However, these topics provide an axis around which many elements of church life gain more meaning and depth. They provide us with a set of common stories and ideas that become elements of an ongoing community conversation. Be warned: Seriously engaging these themes could transform your life!

*September - Vision
October - Creation
November - Democracy
December - God
January - Evil
February - Religious Authority
March - Freedom
April - Redemption
May - Mercy*

The Holidays at All Souls

-by Kathy Keith, Executive Director

The season of light is upon us, and whether it's Hanukkah, Solstice, Christmas and/or Kwanzaa you celebrate, All Souls is ready to play a part in your holidays.

Holiday cards are already on sale in Emerson Hall on Sunday mornings and in the front office during the week. Created by the 85th Anniversary Committee, the color cards are reproduced from past Christmas Eve orders of service. The All Souls artists represented are P.S. Gordon, Laura Shafer, Alice Price, and Barbara Glass. Either all of one kind or in an assortment, they sell for \$15.00 per dozen cards. The cards are blank inside and packaged flat so they can be run through a copier or printer or handwritten with your own custom message. They are especially meaningful this year, as this Christmas Eve we'll celebrate our 50th year of candle-lighting services in this sanctuary.

Mark your calendars with these important dates:

Dec. 1 The World AIDS Day Community Worship Service is at 5:00 pm in the Sanctuary.

Dec. 2 The Arts and Crafts Fair in Emerson Hall, hosted this year by the Youth Department, opens at 9:00 am. In addition to the annual offering of gift-worthy wares and lunch, a table will be available where you can craft your own contributions for the Hanging of the Greens Party, which will commence immediately following the 11:30 service. Plan to stay, have lunch, and deck our halls with fresh greenery and natural materials in the Williamsburg Colonial spirit.

Dec. 7 The annual intergenerational Tree Trimming Party, hosted by the Children's Religious Education Board, begins at 5:30 pm. A soup supper will be served, and there'll be ornament-mak-

ing materials aplenty to decorate the tree provided by the Quarter Souls Youth. We'll adjourn at 7:00 for Soulful Sundown, then move back into Emerson Hall to end the evening with the customary cocoa, cookies, and carols. Each family is asked to bring one dozen cookies to share.

Dec. 16 The All-Choir Concert at 6:00 pm will showcase our music program. Choirs under the direction of Rick Fortner, Eric Gibson, and Shannon Boston will present an array of sacred and secular songs of the season

Dec. 19 Our Holiday Memorial Chapel at 6:30 pm is an opportunity to honor the memories of loved ones who are no longer with us in this life. The names of those who have died in the past year will be read aloud during the service.

Dec. 23 Family Worship services are at 10:00 and 11:30 am. At 10:00 in Emerson Hall the traditional College Panel will report on current campus life. Welcome home students.

Dec. 24 Christmas Eve Candlelighting Services are at 4:30, 6:00, and 7:30 pm with the traditional readings and carols. The Adult Choir performs at all three services, with anthems at 4:30 by the Junior Choir, 6:00 by the Children's Choir, and 7:30 by the Youth Choir. As is customary, alumni choir members who wish to join the Youth Choir for *Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming* should meet in the choir room at 7:00 pm to warm up.

Dec. 26 Quarter Souls (7th -8th grades) will celebrate their holiday time with a Lock Out, 6:00 pm to midnight.

Dec. 28 The annual YRUU (9th-12th grades) Broomball Lock-In begins at 6:00 pm. †



Cowboy God

-by Jill Webb and Rev. Tamara Lebak, Assistant Minister



I want to share a story that my partner Jill and I co-wrote while I was in seminary. May your image of God fill you with comfort and grow to meet your needs.

Sarah wasn't the loneliest person who ever was lonely, but she was lonelier than she looked. Sarah had a mom and a dad and a brother and a dog. She had a mountain of stuffed animals on her bed, but sometimes Sarah still felt lonely. She didn't like being lonely, so one day Sarah decided to ask for help.

"What can I do to feel less lonely?" Sarah asked her older brother, Jeff.

"Go be around people," he said, in the matter-of-fact way older brothers often have. "Being around people will make you feel less alone."

"That makes sense," Sarah said.

So, Sarah went to a big shopping mall where there were lots of people, but she still felt lonely, even in a crowd.

The next day at school, Sarah asked her teacher Mrs. Jordan, "How can I feel less lonely?"

"Read a book," Mrs. Jordan said, in the matter-of-fact way teachers sometimes have.

So the next time Sarah felt lonely, she sat down with a book. While she was reading, Sarah forgot all about being lonely but when she finished the book she felt lonely all over again.

On Saturday, Sarah went to visit her grandmother. Sarah liked to be with her Gimma, who always

baked Sarah's favorite pie. Sarah sat down to a big piece of pie and forgot all about being lonely. Though, when the pie was gone, Sarah felt lonely all over again.

Sarah was staring at her empty plate when her grandmother said, "Everyone feels lonely sometimes, Sarah."

Sarah was surprised that Gimma could tell. "Even you, Gimma?" Sarah asked

"Even me," Gimma said.

Then, Sarah asked her grandmother, "Gimma, how can I feel less lonely?"

Her grandmother took in a long deep breath and said, in the matter-of-fact way grandmothers sometimes have, "Be quiet and be still."

"That doesn't make any sense," Sarah said.

Sometimes feelings don't make sense, so the next time Sarah felt lonely she tried to be quiet and still. Sarah sat on her bed and closed her eyes. She was quiet for at least a minute. Nothing happened, except she noticed she was hungry.

Sarah called her grandmother. "Gimma, I was quiet and still and nothing happened."

"Try again, Sarah-Bear. Be quiet and be still," Gimma repeated.

The next day, Sarah sat on her bed, closed her eyes, and was quiet for a few minutes. The whole time all she could do was think, "Here I am, sitting." Sarah called her grandmother again, "Gimma, I tried again and I still feel the same."

"Keep trying, Sarah-Bear. Be quiet and be still.

Listen deeply, so deeply that you might even hear your own heart beat,” Gimma said.

So, Sarah sat on her bed again, closed her eyes again, and was quiet again, this time listening to her heartbeat for a long time. Even though her eyes were closed Sarah began to see a picture in her mind. Sarah saw herself on the porch of a big house. She opened the front door, saw some stairs, and began to climb them. At the top of the stairs was a long hallway with many doors on both sides. She turned to the first door and opened it. Inside that room was an outside. An outside! There were mountains and trees and bushes and flowers and deer. And there was a stream that flowed into a still pond.

Sarah went to sit by the pond. And while she was sitting there by the pond (and also on the bed) she saw something in the distance. It was a bright light. There was someone in that light, coming towards her. Her eyes got real big (but they were still closed). At first she thought it looked like Jesus.

“But I’m not Christian,” she thought, a little disappointed. Sarah rubbed her eyes and looked again. She thought the person in the light began to look like Buddha. “But I’m not Buddhist,” she thought, disappointed.

Then the figure changed again and it became a little girl. “I don’t know if she’ll even like me,” she thought, even more disappointed. Just then the girl clearly became a handsome cowboy with a big beaming smile.

Sarah loved cowboys and she knew in her heart and in her mind and in her gut and in her whole being that this cowboy was a cowboy with a message just for her. He sat down beside her. She noticed that he was wearing boots exactly like hers.

Sarah said, “I’m lonely.”

The cowboy said, “I know.”

He touched her face gently and said, “Everything you need is already inside you, and I am always here when you need me.”

Then the cowboy smiled at her and he laughed and laughed the kind of laugh you laugh when you know something is true all the way down to your bones, the kind of laugh that let Sarah know that everything would be OK.

Sarah knew and could even feel that the cowboy was right. She already was everything she needed to be even though she still had a lot to learn and do. Sarah smiled and started to laugh from her belly just like the cowboy.

Then she opened her eyes and was still on her bed, smiling. She was alone, but she didn’t feel lonely. Sarah knew that she would always have a friend and she knew where to find him. He would be inside when she is quiet and still and listening to her heartbeat. †



God

-by Rev. Debra Garfinkel, Minister of Pastoral Care



When our world grows dark, we look for light. It's scary when we can't see. Many people would say that, for them, that which is God (the Most Holy, the Ultimate Concern, the Eternal, the Compassionate) shines like the tiniest star during the darkest,

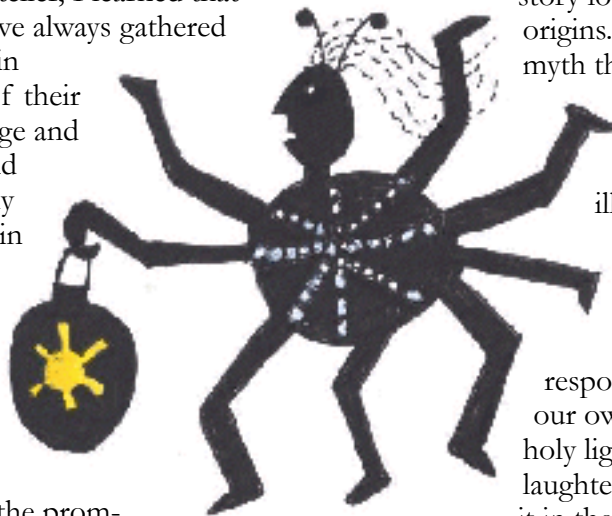
longest night. As a storyteller, I learned that people the world over have always gathered together to share stories in order to make meaning of their lives and to inspire courage and hope during the long, cold nights of winter. In many traditions, there are tales in which a bright star lights the way toward a special child or to a path that brings illumination to those who seek it. Or, if not a star, there is somewhere distant a pinpoint of light that holds the promise of a better life.

For those of you who are of Cherokee lineage, you are probably aware of the story of how Grandmother Spider brought light to the world. This story has been told and retold and then published. Essentially, this tale comes from the beginning time when the animals talked. Half the world had light and the other half – the half in which the animals dwelled – did not. The beings who had light would not share it. All the animals complained and suffered from the cold and the inability to see what or who they bumped up against. (That could be a prickly proposition!) They knew where the light was but they couldn't imagine how to obtain even the tiniest piece of it.

This is a wonderful tale that gives us ideas of many different ways to pursue the light and who is capable of making the journey. In the end (and I encourage you to find and read the entire story or listen to a teller yourself) it is the least likely, the

smallest, the oldest, the weakest animal who succeeds. Grandmother Spider travels alone, confronts huge dangers alone, and alone carries the heavy, burning burden of light back to the other animals.

Part of the burden is the responsibility for sharing the story. I am very grateful to the Cherokee Nation and its people for being willing to turn this story loose so that it may live beyond its origins. There are ways of knowing this myth that are closed to me and anyone else who is not Cherokee. The wisdom of such generosity is in itself a form of illumination.



I believe that each one of us carries a divine spark; each one of us bears the burden of responsibility to share our story of our own sacred journey. I witness this holy light in all children: I hear it in their laughter and their excited speech; I feel it in their jumping, stomping, clapping energy; and I see it especially in their shining eyes. However, because of my particular life experiences, there are some people (any age) in whom it is more difficult for me to see God. This is not because the divine spark is not there; it is because of my own doubts and fears that cloud my perception. When I acknowledge my own light then the light within me recognizes the light within others. Such times are so precious – all the more reason to notice and celebrate when this occurs.

So, during this time of growing darkness and increasingly cold weather, I wish for you and all those dear to you moments of wonder and surprise. Certainly, these are glimpses of the Holy within yourself and others. May you discover evidence of compassion, love, hope, and joy in unexpected situations. And may you return to tell your story so that all souls may grow toward a community of justice, mercy, and peace. ✦

Stories for All Ages: God

-by Linda Arnett

Where Does God Sleep? by Nancy Bestmann, illustrated by Gini Bunnell, 1996. Author dedicated book "To our Heavenly Father for vision" and "To Mom and Dad for wings." Easy picture book for the very young.

A Boot Fell from Heaven, by Kare Bluitgen, illustrated by Chiara Carrer, 2001. Inspiring, contemplative and deceptively simple easy picture book.

The Berenstain Bears and the Big Question, by Stan & Jan Berenstain, 1999.

All the Way to God, by Katie & Michael Giuliano, illustrated by the Giuliano Children, 1999.

Sing Praise, by Rhonda Greene, illustrated by Janet Broxon, 2005. An easy picture book with text based on Psalm 148 and Psalm 150.

Cat Heaven, 1997 and *Dog Heaven*, 1995, written and illustrated by Cynthia Rylant. If you have ever been lucky enough to have a special cat or dog in your life, then you know there is a place called...

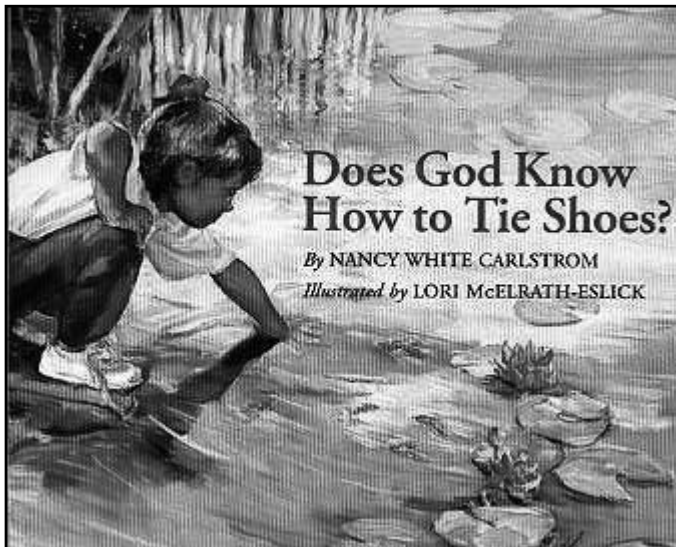
Then I Think of God, by Martha Whitmore, illustrated by Higgins Bond, 2003. An easy picture book in which children describe the moments in their lives when their thoughts turn to God.

Forest of Dreams, by Rosemary Wells, paintings by Susan Jeffers, 1988. An easy picture book in which a child praises God for the beauty of nature.

Old Turtle, by Douglas Wood, watercolors by Cheng-Khee Chee, 1993. Easy picture book and winner of a Children's Book Award, it is a fable with a message of peace for children and adults.

The Little Soul and the Sun; A Children's Metaphysical Parable Adapted from Conversations with God, by Neal Donald Walsch, illustrated by Frank Riccio. Juvenile fiction story that offers children a new way of looking at why bad things sometimes happen.

Does God Know How to Tie Shoes? by Nancy White Carlstrom, illustrated by Lori McElrath-Eslick, 1993. Her parents' responses, based on the Psalms, help Katrina to know God in ways that are very real to her.



On Morning Wings, by Reeve Lindbergh and Holly Meade, 2002. A gentle adaptation of Psalm 129 to express the sense that we're all held in the embrace of God and the universe.

God, Can You Hear Me? by Justine Simmons, paintings by Robert Papp, 2007. Features the spiritual concerns of a diverse cast of children.

A World of Faith, by Peggy Fletcher Stack & Kathleen Paterson, 1998. A creative introduction to the great diversity of faith in our nation. †

Saturday, Dec. 1

Fundamentally, there is only one Great Ultimate, yet each of the myriad things has been endowed with it and each in itself possesses the Great Ultimate in its entirety. This is similar to the fact that there is only one moon in the sky, but when its light is scattered upon rivers and lakes, it can be seen everywhere. It cannot be said that the moon has been split. -Chu Hsi

Sunday, Dec. 2

God is a circle whose center is everywhere, and its circumference nowhere. -Empedocles

Monday, Dec. 3

God cannot be shaken out nor strained through a sieve by human argument. -Hildegard of Bingen

Tuesday, Dec. 4

The best way to know God is to love many things. -Vincent van Gogh

Wednesday, Dec. 5

These eyes through which I hoped to see God, are the eyes through which God sees me. -Meister Eckhart

Thursday, Dec. 6

A person is not a thing or a process, but an opening through which the absolute manifests. -Martin Heidegger

Friday, Dec. 7

Ain't no way to read the bible and not think God white, she say. Then she sigh. When I found out God was white, and a man, I lost interest... God ain't he or she, but a it... don't look like anything else, including you. I believe God is everything. -Alice Walker

Saturday, Dec. 8

God, to me, it seems, is a verb not a noun, proper or improper. -R. Buckminster Fuller

Sunday, Dec. 9

I am a little pencil in the hand of a writing God who is sending a love letter to the world. -Mother Teresa

Monday, Dec. 10

God is subtle, but not malicious. -Albert Einstein

Tuesday, Dec. 11

God is the I of the universe. -A.R. Orage

Wednesday, Dec. 12

God is creatively present in everyone in every moment whether we are aware of it or not. But when we are in the state of silent gratefulness we are aware of his presence. -Paul Tillich

Thursday, Dec. 13

We and God have business with each other; and in opening ourselves to his influence our deepest destiny is fulfilled. -William James

Friday, Dec. 14

All That Is is composed of each and every pigeon and wren and cardinal and bird and dog and leaf. And All That Is speaks to Itself constantly through growing worlds and realities and those whispers and those murmurs are lonely only in that they yearn for further creativity. -Jane Roberts

Saturday, Dec. 15

God writes straight with crooked lines. -Charles Peguy

Sunday, Dec. 16

Tell me what God you don't believe in and I'm sure we will find that I do not believe in that god either. -Karl Barth

Monday, Dec. 17

God is not body ... is not soul, intelligence, imagination, opinion, thought, word, number, order, size... Try to understand, Baudolino: God is a lamp without a flame, a flame without a fire, a fire without heat, a dark light, a silent rumble, a blind flash, a luminous soot, a ray of his own darkness, a circle that expands concentrating on its own center, a solitary multiplicity... God in his fullness, is also the place, or non-place, where the opposites are confounded.

-Umberto Eco

Tuesday, Dec. 18

God is the perfect, unique mirror without boundaries, containing all faces, all images, and joining all opposites.

-Sabine Melchior-Bonnet

Wednesday, Dec. 19

If God were living on earth, people would break his windows.

-Yiddish proverb

Thursday, Dec. 20

The further you go into the desert, the closer you come to God.

-Arabic proverb

Friday, Dec. 21

Our search for a God who looks like us begins in our own lives. She will be found there.

-Patricia Lynn Reilly

Saturday, Dec. 22

Earth's crammed with heaven, / And every common bush afire with God.

-Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Sunday, Dec. 23

God is universal; confined to no spot, defined by no dogma, appropriated by no sect.

-Mary Baker Eddy

Monday, Dec. 24

O my Lord, the stars are shining and the eyes of men are closed, and kings have shut their doors and every lover is alone with his beloved, and here am I alone with Thee.

-Rabi'a the Mystic

Tuesday, Dec. 25

I cannot walk an inch / without trying to walk to God.

-Anne Sexton

Wednesday, Dec. 26

I met God. "What," he said, "you already?" "What," I said, "you still?"

-Laura Riding

Thursday, Dec. 27

God is not in the vastness of greatness. He is hid in the vastness of smallness. He is not in the general. He is in the particular.

-Pearl S. Buck

Friday, Dec. 28

In God's sight we do not fall: in our own we do not stand.

-Julian of Norwich

Saturday, Dec. 29

Home is the definition of God.

-Emily Dickinson

Sunday, Dec. 30

For god is nothing other than the eternally creative source of our relational power, our common strength, a god whose movement is to empower, bringing us into our own together, a god whose name in history is love.

-Carter Heyward

Monday, Dec. 31

God's gifts put man's best dreams to shame.

-Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Spiritual Exercise: God

“You pray in your distress and in your need; would that you might pray also in the fullness of your joy and in your days of abundance...if it is for your comfort to pour your darkness into space, it is also for your delight to pour forth the dawning of your heart.” -The Prophet, by Kahlil Gibran

Prayer is at the heart of most religious traditions. Mahatma Gandhi said prayer is not asking; it is a “longing of the soul.” It is a longing of the soul to touch the Divine and to be touched by God. Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Pagans, Humanists, and many others find meaning, power, and transformation in this ancient spiritual practice.

Why pray? For many Unitarians, it is an exercise which reminds us that we did not create this day. We are participants in the mystery of life, and we seek a relationship with that which is larger than ourselves. Prayer is often used to center oneself, to put the fullness of our lives in perspective. Like meditation, prayer is often used for calm and comfort. It can also be a process of letting go, of emptying oneself. Many saints simply prayed to “stay out of the way of God.” Why? There are as many reasons to pray as there are prayers.

How? The forms of prayer across the globe are diverse and numerous. Muslims kneel and touch their heads to the ground as an act of absolute surrender. Christians bow, sit, dance and sing. Buddhists and Hindus chant. Wiccans raise their palms to the sky. Prayers can be silent or spoken, written or sung. Some have words, others don’t. Some are formal, others aren’t. Pay attention to your attitude when you pray; it is what gives shape to the longing of your soul. Is your attitude one of reverence, humility, sincerity, compassion, and love? How? Your frame of mind may matter more than your words.

When? In the Christian tradition, it is appropriate to pray in times of praise, thanksgiving, confes-

-by Jeremy Elliott, Intern Minister

sion, contemplation, or powerlessness. We can praise the rising of the sun, the coolness of the wind on our faces, or the touch of snowflakes on our skin. We can offer thanksgiving for all of the wonders of life. We can express gratitude for the small things that give our life meaning and worth. We can confess our shortcomings and seek healing for our brokenness. We can pray in contemplation to seek wisdom and understanding. We can pray in times of powerlessness, asking for strength, courage, and love. When? Right now and always.

To Whom? When Gandhi was asked if he knew to whom he prayed, he responded, “No, I don’t.” Yet, he prayed everyday. Gandhi didn’t presume to think he could comprehend or define God; that would be like trying to define life. God is greater than words or descriptions, greater than the limits of human experience. It doesn’t matter if you pray to God, Jesus, Allah, or life itself. Pray to whom you feel most comfortable, and then try praying to what makes you feel uncomfortable. You can learn a lot about yourself in the process. As Gibran put it, prayer is “an expansion of yourself into the living ether...” To whom? To that which is larger than yourself.

Prayer connects us to ourselves, to each other, to everything around us, and most important, to the Divine. It isn’t important why, how, when or to whom you pray – just that you pray. †



God Objectified

-by Kate Starr and Rev. Tamara Lebak

You'll have to use every form of transportation to get there – a plane, a train, cars and buses, and something that floats. The last few hours you'll spend on foot following the directions of country people speaking languages that are difficult to understand using hand signals and maps drawn with sticks in dirt – turn left at a certain cedar that looks like a man, make a right at the rock formation of mother and child, go through the valley, cross over a bridge, go until you come to the crossroads ... Then, if you are looking carefully, stairs will appear underfoot leading you to a door that looks very much like your own front door, into a foyer with multiple mirrors and countless corridors.

Lining every hall are rows and rows endless rows of card catalogs, sky-high shelves of dusty books, stone tablets, papyrus scrolls, oral traditions preserved on vinyl and cassettes, 8-tracks, CDs, and DVDs. Down one corridor is a portrait room. There you will find an ornately framed painting of each and every person who has ever lived. Or ever will. Down another passage you enter an audio library where the thoughts of every man, woman and child are audible. There is a also a video room, with screen upon screen and holographic images of unspeakable horrors and moments of unbridled elation. People of every sort are here

looking for something: their origin, their genealogy, a connection, Hope, Justice, Love. Occasionally you will see those who have taken up residence in the hallways and sitting areas and have no other home but here. You might find them sleeping under newspaper or silk calligraphy banners, grumbling about the chatter and having to share the space.

Animals of all kinds lope and slither and fly throughout the halls around you. Some creatures require a microscope to see, others a microfiche to remember.

In one room, children slide down a giant Plexiglas replica of the human body. When you glide behind the eyes you catch glimpses of the infinite and the minute. Pass through the heart and you experience the incredible capacity for love and hate. Slipping through the intestines you intuitively feel empathy and fear. Make your way through the birth canal and, just for an instant, you truly understand all the paradoxes of life.

And somewhere in the bowels of this modern steel and glass marvel, in the turret of this medieval stone and mortar castle, somewhere in this igloo, this condo, this mansion, this hut, sits the sole proprietor, the archivist, the docent, the librarian meticulously, systematically, analytically and very, very lovingly, counting the hairs on yet another head. †



My History with “god”

-by Barry Wilder



“It is obvious to me that the god you don’t believe in isn’t the same god that I don’t believe in!”

- Two atheists arguing in Joseph Heller’s novel *Catch- 22*, written in 1961.

The year 1961 was a monumental year in my life. I graduated from college, was married a week later, and started down the road of life trying to understand who I was and what I wanted to become. I was also dealing with a new understanding and concept of “god,” which is still changing even today. The idea that even atheists could not agree on the god they did not believe in meant that I had much to decide about my own personal god. That there are so many different types and kinds of churches, mosques, synagogues, etc., saying that their religion/church is the only true way, said to me that there was no way that only one belief about god was the only way.

But to better understand my history with god, I have to start well before 1961.

I was born and reared in a conservative town in South Texas, the child of good parents who had survived the Great Depression and were faced with bringing up a young family during and after World War II. Our family was very active in a small, conservative Methodist church. The god of my family and that church was the traditional old man with a white beard, sending lightning bolts down from the clouds, in other words, a powerful, vengeful, fearful god.

We were at the church at least three times each week and sometimes more. The church and its activities were my family’s primary social network, except for school and neighborhood friends.

Sometimes one of my best friends was the son of

the current minister of the church. My parents were the proverbial multi-tasking stalwarts of the church – Sunday school teacher, board member, choir member, youth leader, etc.

I was quite happy to be a part of that tradition, because that was all I knew, both socially and theologically. By the time I was in high school, my group of friends and I were participating in Bible study before school and fundamentalist church youth functions, in addition to our Methodist church youth functions.

The first time I can remember questioning my conservative church concepts of god was on a Saturday night at a youth meeting sponsored by a youth club operated by a non-denominational, fundamentalist church. The program was science-based, with displays of electrostatic lightning and other “magic” tricks intended to get our attention. I was very impressed by the program, and had a strong, positive feeling about it being presented in a church. After the program, we were asked to bow our heads and close our eyes, and raise a hand if we had been “touched by god” during the program. I raised my hand. All youth who raised a hand were asked to come to a separate room after the service for further discussion with the presenter. We were told that the reason we were in that room was because we had been “saved” by our reaction to the program we had just witnessed. We were then asked how we knew we had been saved, to which I responded, “Because I feel it.” The presenter then said forcefully “No! Not because you feel it, but because it says so in the Bible! What you feel has nothing to do with it!”

I remember feeling very confused as I left the room after having my feelings negated in such a forceful way. This was one of the first times I had experienced my feelings to such an extent, because the atmosphere in my family was very level, with

Continued page 13...

few emotional ups and downs. So, the put-down of my emotions by that presenter gave me a subconscious warning about expressing my emotions. This carried through my entire high school years, and I became proud of the nickname “stoneface” given to me by some of my friends.

In college, I was active in the Methodist campus ministry, the Wesley Foundation. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the ministerial leadership of the Wesley Foundation was predominantly young, dynamic men (and a few women) who were very liberal, both socially and theologically. My being exposed to liberal theology for the first time resulted in rapid change in my own theological position and understanding of a supreme being.

Looking back, I am surprised that I did not experience any negative reaction to my early theology being torn apart. But learning for the first time that the Bible was not necessarily divinely inspired, and that there existed many other concepts of a supreme being than an old man with a long white beard, made sense to me. I was easily able to refine my early concepts and develop a more modern theology without feeling that something had been taken from me. It was very refreshing and satisfying, and not destructive at all. In fact, I became angry that I had not been exposed to the history of the Bible and church earlier in my life, although I may not have been able to deal with it earlier. I remained angry about fundamentalism for many years, until I realized that most people have different concepts anyway. I became more accepting of ‘other folks’ theology, as long as they did not demand that I follow it.

One very formative experience in my thinking about god was when I attended a conference of the World Student Christian Federation. There I was introduced for the first time to people from other countries and people of non-white skin color. I attended a workshop led by a professor of theology from a liberal seminary. He started out by asking us to take a few minutes to write down something

about our understanding of “God.” After everyone in the room had written feverishly for a few minutes, he asked for comments and wrote those comments on a blackboard, circling each one as he wrote. Then he said, “Whenever you can define what God is to you, it is no longer God, but becomes a figment of your imagination, and is not an unlimited, all knowing, undefinable spiritual being that pervades our world. If you can put him or her in a box, it cannot be God.”

Soon after college, I read *Honest to God*, by John A. T. Robinson, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller. These books and others were very important in my ongoing development of a concept of “the Ground of our being,” “the Beyond in the midst of us,” and “Spirit of Life” as modern theologians were saying at the time. These and other readings helped me come to the realization that there cannot be only one way of understanding God, as evidenced by the very large number of different religions, denominations, and churches around the world.

It soon became clear to me that churches that split over theological disagreements were, in reality, actually splitting over personality differences, and that people who demanded that their view was the only right view were actually insecure in their own faith. Non-acceptance of anyone who did not believe the way they did was their reaction to beliefs that were very threatening to them, and typically resulted in their belief that the other person would go to hell. This usually meant that a friendship was not possible between such others and me.

After college, I stayed active in the Methodist church, teaching Sunday school, singing in the choir, and leading the youth group in various churches that I attended as I moved around the

country during my early career. In each church I gravitated to other people who shared my developing liberal theology, who made it more comfortable for me to be in a place that did not really speak my personal theological language, and who did not demand that I accept their particular beliefs. There were times when I could not find other like-minded people, that I did not attend a church, but I continued to look for a church home that met my spiritual needs.

At this time in my life, I knew nothing about any Unitarian Church or what it stood for. Finally, in the late 1990s, I attended *Christian Believer*, a church-sponsored study which met weekly for six months about the doctrines of the Methodist church. There were individual homework readings and a three-hour group discussion every week. The study had a few liberal ideas, but was mostly a rehash of the orthodoxy and creeds of the Methodist church. After completing the course, I accepted that I believed very little of what I had just studied, and had only been going through the motions for years, using church primarily as a social outlet. When the creeds were said during the church service, I would just be silent, rationalizing that it was OK for me to continue at that church, as long as I did not say the creeds. Suddenly, I realized that I could not, in good conscience, continue in any church that professed creeds and doctrines that I did not accept or agree with. When my wife called the minister of that church to advise him that we were leaving his church to find a place without creeds or doctrines, and that our departure was nothing personal, he lamented that he did not think the *Christian Believer* course was supposed to have such an outcome.

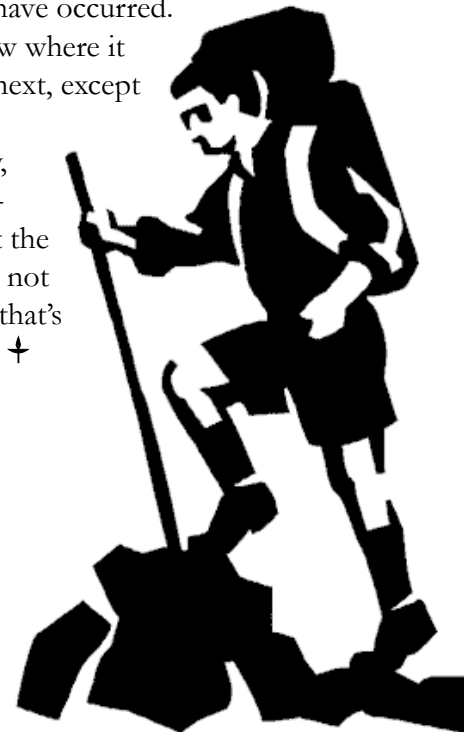
About that time, a friend suggested I visit All Souls Unitarian Church. I had visited All Souls a couple of times through the years, when I was disgruntled with another church, but had never felt that it was a place where I would be comfortable. This time, however, it stuck, for whatever reason. This time, I could recognize that everyone has his/her own “god” concept, and that’s OK. This time, there were no creeds to recite, or need to be silent while

others recited them. This time, there was an understanding that the Bible is not the only written book that could/should be read during a church service. This time I found many accepting people who made no demand whatsoever that I accept creeds invented long ago, in another age when the common ideas of the world were so very limited. This time, the programs of the church were specifically focused on peace and love, and were positive about the condition of mankind, rather than negative and guilt-ridden. This time, I recognized a force that can counteract the conservative orthodoxy of most churches I know anything about.

I have been comfortable and content as a Unitarian, participating in many activities and programs available at All Souls. I have found that the worship services at All Souls help me get in touch with my emotions about the human condition, more so than at any other church, and I am grateful for that.

So, my history with god continues as a journey. I know where I have been in the journey, and can pinpoint where and when changes in my thoughts and feelings have occurred.

I cannot know where it will take me next, except to know that it is a journey, not a destination, and that the road ahead is not known. And that’s OK with me. †



Dec. 26, 2007

Dear God,

Source of All, Light of Eternal Hope, Font of Divine Inspiration,
Great Comforter, Loyal Confidant, Counselor, Compassionate One,
Sacred Synergy, Positive Energy, Synchronicity,
Great and Powerful Osmosis,
Oh Omniscient, Omnipotent, Omni Presence,
Everlasting Epiphany, Awakened One, Creator,
Master Potter, Invisible Director, Wizard of Wisdom,
Ancient Androgen, Holy Father-Mother, Earth and Sky,
Spirit that dwells within and beyond and connects us all,
Alpha and Omega, Mystery beyond all our naming
(but not beyond our trying to name):

*Thank you for the thoughtful gifts. They are so unique! Both
fun and functional – just the combination I like. To be honest,
though, I haven't figured out how to use all of them and could
use some insight when you have time.*

Thanks again for thinking of me. You're awesome!

All my love,

Kathryn (Kate, Kathy) Elizabeth
Martin Sanford Gaspard-Starr,
Wife, Mother, Daughter, Sister,
Aunt, Friend, Neighbor,
Youth Director, Emerging Elder, Spiritual Pilgrim,
Wounded Healer, Flawed Perfectionist, Serious Humorist,
and Complex Person beyond all our labels
(but not beyond our trying to label)

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- 1) Submit your text electronically via email. Plain text is best.
- 2) Include your name and daytime number.
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Questions?
Call Heather
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at 743-2363.

Dec. Highlights

Dec. 1	World AIDS Day Worship Service
Dec. 2	KISS Sunday Holiday Crafts Fair Hanging of the Greens
Dec. 6	Rick Fortner CD Release Party Betty Notter Art Gallery Showing
Dec. 7	Soup Supper and Tree Trimming Soulful Sundown
Dec. 8	All Soul Acoustic Coffeehouse
Dec. 16	All-Choir Holiday Concert
Dec. 19	Holiday Memorial Chapel
Dec. 24	Christmas Eve Candlelighting Services 4:30, 6:00, & 7:30 pm

Sunday Service Times:
10:00, 11:30 am

Soulful Sundown:
7:00 pm, First Friday

Wednesday Connections:
Supper 5:15, Chapel 6:30, Classes 7:00 pm