

“Where is God in This?”

by Bill Graves Jan. 2007

Readings with sermon: “Where Is God in This?”

***God Is a Three-Letter Word* by Rev. Richard S. Gilbert**

God is...

A three letter word,
Partner in profanity,
Companion of the sublime,
The deepest down darkness in me,
The rainbow wrapped around my shoulder,
The mystery beyond all knowing
or wanting to know,
The poet’s literary friend,
The justifier of a thousand horrible deeds
and the why of a million-billion acts of love.
The question as inescapable
As it is unanswerable,
The macro-cosmic mystery
and the micro-cosmic explanation,
The word when there is a desert
with nothing to say,
And the subject of a jungle of books.
The without which nothing
and with which what?
God is the atheist’s foil,
The agnostic’s doubt.
God is simple
 deep
 dark
 light
 bright
up-tight
 three letter word.

From: *The Oversoul* (1841) by Ralph Waldo Emerson

If a man has not found his home in God, his manners, his forms of speech, the turn of his sentence, the build, shall I say, of all his opinions will involuntarily confess it, let him brave it out how he will. If we have found his centre, the Deity will shine through him, through all the disguises of ignorance, of ungenial temperament, of unfavorable circumstance. The tone of seeking is one, and the tone of having is another. Genius is religious. It is a larger imbibing of the common heart.

Sermon:

Have you ever heard the traditional exclamation at the start of a prize fight: “Let’s get ready to rumble”? It seems almost an appropriate metaphor for introducing God-talk in a post-modern world. I’m recalling radically incompatible books coexisting on the best-seller list such as *The Purpose Driven Life* and *The God Delusion*. Hopefully, my topic may at least warm up any of us still without power. Speaking from the liberal side of the spectrum that nevertheless still finds value in religion, I am endlessly fascinated by God talk, speculation, theorizing, whatever. It is one of the main reasons that I am also enrolled in Seattle U School of Theology and Ministry even as I draw my monthly social security check.

For some of us “theology”, or the study of God, could just as well be termed “ultimology” because embedded in it are the ultimate questions. What is the meaning of my life? How should I relate to myself, others, the universe? I confess to a perverse joy in weighing insights of great theologians and in deepening my own faith, even if such “faith” only means a 51% commitment to a particular side of the equation open to weekly fluctuation; in other words: a thoroughly UU sort of faith.

My main aim in this sermon is to give you who have supported and encouraged me something of a report back from theology school. However,

let me start with a major diversion, an event that occurred over 50 years ago and has to do, believe it or not, with baseball. An historical event of significance, only to me and perhaps to my mother, occurred one afternoon in a little league baseball game in my home town of Walla Walla when I was 11 years old. I played for Pete's Sport Shop and we were facing the league's best team, the feared: Donald Duck Bread Co. I was batting against an older boy, Patrick Lambert, easily the best pitcher in the league. Needless to say the bases were loaded. While on deck it occurred to me that I should do something I had never done before. I should be bold, hold nothing back on my swing as if I were the most devastating batter in town, even though I had never come close to hitting a home run, let alone catch up to Patrick's fast ball. So, I swung with all my might at the first pitch and fouled it straight up into the backstop. At that moment an unknown, elderly man sitting behind the backstop called to me: "Nice swing kid. Do that again and you'll hit it out of here." The rest of the story is that I mustered the confidence to do it again, and I honestly can still see the ball hitting my bat as if time were frozen. There is a line in the movie *Field of Dreams*, to the effect that part of the mystique of baseball is that players never forget the exquisite sweetness of a perfectly hit ball. This was such a hit and the ball sailed far, far over the center field fence. I don't think

anyone present, least of all myself, could believe it. I can also well remember being embarrassed by the wet kisses of Mrs. McKinney and several other moms after I crossed home plate. And, I've always wondered who that stranger was—the angel that planted the seed of confidence, or whatever,—and what he thought.

Now, rather than simply exercising my penchant for nostalgia, I tell you this story hopefully for a somewhat more sublime purpose. That is, to posit a subject upon which to practice *theological reflection*. I have learned in seminary school that the key question in theological reflection as well as in Christian spiritual direction is the title of this sermon: “Where Is God in This”? In fact, professors are fond of asking us to write essays applying that very question to whatever event or experience is at hand. And we UU's are survivors. We know that simply beginning and ending the essay with something like an atheistic “what doesn't exist couldn't have been present”, or an agnostic “I haven't a clue”, won't earn many points, let alone an “A”. We know we have to dig a little deeper—and, at the same time, be intellectually and morally honest with ourselves.

Ultimately, I will get back to hitting home runs but first I want to make some observations about the environment at my liberal Christian,

trying-hard-to-be-post-modernly-relevant, theological school and how it is influencing my efforts at theological reflection.

Of course it is a generalization but it seems to me that the easy, but fierce, father-master God of my 1950's youth is no longer thriving here. He was the supernatural, monarchial being "out there", the God of Western, Christian theism that a Catholic nun/professor I had, declared to be dead without a blink or sigh from a classroom of Christian ministers-to-be. It seems what many of us are doing is holding onto the *word* yet reframing its content to be compatible with our 21st Century world-views. Implicitly, all who enter into this enterprise are beyond defining God as an objective, immutable noun/being. And we learn that this is as it always has been: The God(s) recorded in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures fit like gloves onto the hands of the societies from which the descriptions of Him/Her emerged. In this time-honored tradition I am going to venture to list eight major influences upon the post-modern God I have detected lurking around the halls of Seattle U. Each of these could be the subject of its own sermon.

First, such a God is no longer one shepherding his or her flock towards unending progress and infinite consumer delight for we now know this is often built on the backs of oppressed and our natural environment which are equally of God.

Second, reason in a post-modern world is deemed relative rather than universal, embodied and intuitive as well as cerebral, spiritual as well as intellectual. Indeed, these may be problematic concepts for some UU's due to our enlightenment roots in so-called pure intellectual rationalism.

Third, communitarian values are at least or more important than rights of the self-contained individual. This is a sense that the self is not just connected to the other but *completed* in the other. Again, this challenges UU's who hallow individual experience and self-reliance above all.

Fourth, the gospel of human ascendancy over nature necessarily must yield to an honoring of a larger relationship. I like to think we UU's are in tune with this intellectually though our actions may lag.

Fifth, this post-modern God tends to stand in compassion and solidarity with the suffering of the marginalized of the world as informed by liberation theologians. Here is another challenge for UU's. Might our grounding in the head more than the heart, and our long association with the middle-class social and economic establishment, inhibit our ability to engage social justice issues at a deep level.

Sixth, this new God incorporates female as well as male metaphors as informed by feminist theologians. It is largely these theologians that we can

thank for concepts I previously mentioned such as embodied spirituality and communitarian values.

Seventh, this God is enriched by the discoveries of contemporary science, particularly in the areas of evolutionary biology, cosmology and quantum physics. We UU's might smugly ask: What took you so long?

Eighth, this God is informed by inter-religious dialogue, particularly wisdom of Eastern religions--as our own Ralph Waldo Emerson noticed 150 years ago. Hopefully, at last, we are glimpsing a narrowing of chasms between religions and denominations. It is the budding of a simple ethos: "My concept of the divine does not exhaust the possibilities." It stands in contrast to the ethos of fundamentalism be it from the right or from the left which holds that truth shines through only one window of the cathedral: Mine. One ethos offers salvation to the world the other a shattering and on that we need not shy from absolutist pronouncements.

The question remains, where have all these values and influences left me, Bill Graves, at least 51% of me on this particular day. Ironically, I have arrived at something of a trinitarian outlook, though its hardly traditional. Theology professors are fond of warning of the pitfalls of trying to put God in a box. So, I have put my ideas in three boxes, which I label the objective, the subjective and the extra-rational. My objective box holds the pantheistic

God similar to the God Chris Highland spoke about this past Fall. It is the spirit imminent in all the natural world which includes me and you, and I can experience it to the extent I pay attention. And, it is the law and order within and behind the universe, operationally best explained by science. Nature is, moreover, a set of scriptures that can endlessly inform.

My second box is subjective because like any word “God” is only a symbol. Disliking the symbolic attachments of others hardly precludes contemplation of what to *me* is sacred and holy. In that spirit, I have adapted, and I praise God with Catholics and Lutherans at Seattle U and do so with tears in my eyes. My subjective symbology of God includes such concepts as: the horizon and ultimate fulfillment of life; the creative impulses and the “still, small voice” of conscience that mysteriously rises to the surface from somewhere; that which fills me with awe and/or gratitude; moral imperatives that govern my life, however imperfectly. In sum, it is all that gives point and poignancy to my existence.

My third box I have labeled the extra-rational because it really can't be explained. It contains ways of knowing Kit Ketchum calls *Mythos* as compared to *Logos*. It involves connections with the sacred and acceptance of mystery. For some people a sustaining and supporting presence inside and beyond themselves just *is*, and respectable, rational dissections are utterly

unimportant. In the poets words they would construct the velvet bridge of connection whether or not there is something on the other side. Some people hear beauty in a particularly piece of music where others do not. But neither is right or wrong.

You may or may not have noticed, but it is quite possible to have this entire discussion without even using the term “God”. Or, one might use substitute terms such as “Spirit of Life”, or “Ultimate Reality” although for me they lack the potency, emotional appeal, call to sacredness and ready recognition that the term “God” evokes.

So now, let me return to my 11 year-old Grand Salami (or “home run” to some of you). Actually, I used that vignette in a paper last Spring where the assignment was to reflect on a moment where I sensed the presence of God. Here is some of what I wrote: I reflect that as I walked to the plate inspiration came from somewhere, the concentration and determination of my psyche was total, and the physical execution by my body was beyond assumed capabilities. The story evokes, I hope, for each of you those times when something deep inside or outside you inspired you to create something truly good, honest, special and you wondered: “Where did that come from.” There may be wonderful scientific explanations about my neurology or endocrine system but the sacredness of the moment remains. Paul Tillich,

the extraordinary theologian that every 1st year student in divinity school has to suffer through uses the term “being itself” as synonymous with God and famously describes human spirituality as those moments when “being itself” (i.e., God) manifests itself in finite beings (i.e., humans) in our infinite drive to transcend our finitude and be co-creators of the universe.

What about the stranger behind the plate? Surely, he was not literally an angel sent from above, but I can say with a straight face that he mediated a moment of grace, which I define in the Christian tradition to be an experience that is (1) transcendent, (2) transformative, and (3) inspires the recipient to give back.

Another aspect of the home run that is sobering. I am aware that the significance of “my golden moment” is partly a function of the human society who witnessed it, applauded it, and devised such games so little boys (and their parents) could affirm their worthiness...or not. Is this merely feeding my false self, my pride, rather than turning toward God and love? Yet, can any human really say that applause doesn't matter? The issue is crucial and timely as I ponder why I am subjecting myself to this rigorous course of instruction at Seattle University. Am I merely seeking applause as some sort of Holy Man, perhaps compensating for the realization that no amount of grace could make me Mickey Mantle? Or, is there a part of me

that wishes to follow the lead of the stranger behind the plate and give back. And, if at divinity school I can learn ways to comfort and inspire others on their own religious journeys and in worship, am I meeting God under my triune definition? Again, big questions for another sermon.

And this brings me full circle to the reason why I am trying so desperately to apply words about religion, spirituality, and God to a mundane event. Viewing life through whatever lenses you hold sacred is the core of worship. It invites contemplation; contemplation of the meaning of our existence before it is over; contemplation on how I spent the past week, on what I am doing worthwhile, or not, on how I am treating the people that matter the most; contemplation of the lilies of the field. When we do that we are honoring the unique evolutionary gift reserved to humans. And so, I agree with Michael Dowd that a major purpose of my life is “To honor and celebrate the Whole with conscious reflection,” which is but a rephrasing of The Westminster Catechism stating that the chief end of humans is “To Glorify God and enjoy Her forever”.....Amen and Blessed Be.