

As best I can tell, in one form or another, god has existed in every culture ever documented. Just like every culture, has a story that speaks to its own creation. The form or forms, god takes is highly variable. Some cultures speak of a single overarching deity, others have multiple gods whose sphere of influence is limited. Perhaps the pantheon of Greek and Roman gods are the ones we know best: Apollo, Ares, Poseidon, Zeus, Dionysus, Cupid, Mars, Neptune, and the rest.

The point is, god, gods and goddesses have been around for a very long time. These gods, like most significant reference points, are cultural and time and space dependent. Before we understood planetary alignments, it was thought the sun was pulled across the sky in a chariot. Before we understood science better, our western world God was the explanation for earthquakes and floods.

I suspect, the more things change the more they stay the same. We still have culturally based definitions of god and expectations of the work of god. Most of us in the western world simply can't comprehend the notion that people could be upset by the depiction of god and see it as disrespectful of their faith (a view held by a percentage of Muslims). One of the Ten Commandments in Judaism forbids "graven images". In the 8th century, Byzantine Christianity forbade visual images of sacred figures. The commonality between these viewpoints is a fear of idolatry, that the image will become more important than what it represents.

The Westboro Baptist Church seeks to make sure America understands that God has become their enemy, because of the US's general acceptance of "the fag lifestyle of soul-damning, nation destroying filth". They claim the death of soldiers, oil spills and the high national debt are examples of God's wrath.

Then there is the so-called fox-hole conversion to faith. It's said that everyone in a foxhole believes in God. And it may well be, because there are numerous examples of people who say they do not believe in god until a particular event enters their lives. You might hear them say, "God Almighty", "Oh my God!!!", "Dear God", "God forgive me", "God bless you", even "God bless America" and with a hand on a bible, "so help me God".

For so many people, god is seen as omni-present, always available to hear our prayers, to offer help, guidance, even rescue. For others, god can not and should not be visualized. They believe god is beyond our comprehension and no image of god can adequately represent god's greatness. There are theories of god as never changing, being separate and distinct, wholly otherworldly. There are theories that say god changes as we change and that the nature of god is mutable, ever changing; that god hurts when we hurt and is pained by oppression.

Through it all, there is one thing that seems clear to me. Nobody knows for sure. And it seems the concept of god, gods and goddesses, the function of god and the role god plays in our lives changes based on culture, beliefs and circumstance. God and gods seem to always serve, to at least, answer the unknown, explain the mystery of the unknowable and to be responsible for, care for and handle that which is outside our control.

But all this is preliminary, a precursor to what I really want to talk about this morning. What I really want to talk to you about is captured in the song “Do Nothing Til You Hear From Me”, a jazz classic. As I was thinking about this material, a line in that song kept reverberating in my head. The line says: “Why people tear the seams of anyone’s dream is over my head.”

For eons, the concept of god, the function of god, has served a purpose, or it would have atrophied and gone extinct long ago. The concept of god, the manifestation of god in human life, lives on for a reason. People find it useful. It answers fundamental questions. It soothes human pain, it comforts and heals human souls. Maybe not in your life, but for very many people in the world. Maybe most importantly, the concept of god, the entity called god, the manifestation of god, offers hope. This is no small matter.

So, “Why people tear the seams of anyone’s dream is over my head.” It seems to me, there is an arrogance to those who claim to know god’s intent and will. And there is an arrogance to those who claim to know for sure there is no god. I find I have little patience these days for arguments about god. Why should we waste our time debating something that can not be proven, one way or the other? Why should we spend time and emotional energy trying to convince someone else of the correctness of our opinion? Mere opinion.

Ultimately, god is about belief, god exists by faith. Either you believe or you don’t. Maybe there’s a third grouping: questioning. But here, is the sticky part and the sticky part has two pieces. Everyone believes in something fundamental, so fundamental that we build our lives around it. Maybe it’s success. So many of us have such a high need to be seen as successful, we feel worthless when we are not.

Maybe it’s money. Many of us believe the world will not value us unless we have money---and there is ample evidence to support the belief. For some people, a belief in god is fundamental to their construction of life and the way they live their lives. So everyone builds their lives around some important fundamental belief. We can argue about what that something should be, but everyone builds their lives around some fundamental belief.

The other piece that is sticky is that beliefs have a way of creating experience. I experience optimism if I believe the glass is half full. I experience pessimism if I see it as half empty. Either viewpoint creates the prism through which I perceive and experience the world. People who believe in god, generally have an identifiable experience of god. They have an awareness of god’s manifestation in their lives. They have a reference point, that for them, goes beyond mere belief.

So, “Why people tear the seams of anyone’s dream is over my head.” Why people who question the existence of god or who believe there is no god feel justified or comfortable raining on someone else’s parade, is over my head. In the same way someone who believes in meditation as THE path to spiritual development has no right to push it on everyone they meet, as THE answer.

Different people get fed differently. Different people have different appetites, different affinities, different fundamental beliefs. Different needs. Some folks go to the gym...religiously. They may be convinced it’s one of the more important things in their lives; it benefits them physically and mentally, they’d argue. They sacrifice money and time on behalf of getting to the gym. It can become a ritual.

Some folks have a fundamental commitment to drugs, alcohol or sex, as the elixir in their lives. And some folks are committed to meditation and yoga. If we step back and take a 10,000 foot view, I suspect we’d all be hard pressed to see the difference between those who sit in a yoga position, seek to quiet their minds and focus on breathing and those people, who with closed eyes and bent knees, pray to a god for health, healing and comfort.

I do not intend to be harsh, nor judgmental. My sole intent is to argue for acceptance. I think it is essential that we remind ourselves now and again that our beliefs are not necessarily the same as truth. Especially, as Unitarian Universalist, I think it’s important to remind ourselves, one of our basic tenets is different strokes for different folks.

This too, is structural foundation, to my real and central point this morning. No, I haven’t gotten there yet. This is Black History Month and I want to hold up issues that I believe are pertinent to a celebration of Black History and the black experience in our society and I want to broaden it to include the experience of the downtrodden and the oppressed.

Here’s the point: I know for a fact, there are any number of black people and people of color, who do not feel they can bring their full selves to our faith communities. There are those who have left our ranks and those who have stayed and feel isolated and alone because they do not perceive themselves to be accepted as they are and for who they are.

Part of this is no doubt cultural. Many people of color miss a worship experience that moves them emotinally. One that has a visceral experience of the divine or spirit rather than a primary focus on the spoken word and concept of spirit or spiritual, the divine if you will. That might come in the form of music that touches the soul, or a feeling of being part of the worship experience as opposed to the receivers there of.

But maybe more importantly, people of color may not feel at home in our collective midst, not just this congregation, because, like Martin Luther King Jr and Coretta, they determined there was not enough room in our faith tradition for their god. A god they depended on and gave them sustenance.

I come back to the notion that the concept of god, the function of god has a purpose in people's lives. For many, god plays an active role in their lives as clarifier, coach, sustainer and as the basis for hope. To the extent that god exists, its for a purpose, it meets a need. Where do you turn for sustenance and hope? Where do I turn? It strikes me as an important question.

For many who are oppressed, downtrodden and marginalized, god may be their only and sole safety net. They may lack an aurora of success to pull them through life. They may lack money and status. They may have so much pain in their lives that turning to a god for answers, sustenance and resilience is a no-brainer. And even if this is not the case in their individual lives it may well be a cultural perspective and touchstone. To separate from that touchstone may be to separate from a cultural definition of self. There are many Jews who do not see themselves as religious Jews but who identify culturally as Jewish.

I believe Unitarian Universalism has a message that's important for the world to hear. I believe we have a faith tradition that should have a natural appeal to those who have not experienced an environment that proclaims a belief, a commitment moreover, to the inherent worth and dignity of every human being. And believes in the interconnectedness of all existence. This is a message that should be very sellable to so many people.

Yet, a very small percentage of our faith community are people of color. And the changing demographics of our society suggest we had better figure out how to reach those who are seen as minorities. They will soon be the majority, in our society, as they are already in the rest of the world. It seems to me, the survival, certainly the thriving, of our faith communities depends on it.

Maybe it's a cultural issue that we've got to grapple with. Then again, maybe it's because ...people sometimes tear the seams of another's dream.

Ashee and Amen