



Reading

“The Idea of God” Henry Nelson Wieman

Before I can talk about the idea of God and the significance of it, I’ve got to clear away some things.

The vulgar usage of the idea of God, the way it is tossed around, takes away the significance that it has had for great thinkers and devoted souls who have lived by it. That’s true of every idea that points to the highest attainments of human life, precisely because these ideas have this majesty and significance. They are taken over by demagogues who try to get people to do what they want them to do.

That is especially true today. It is said that if we do not have Bible readings in the school, we’ll put almighty God out of the classroom. If God is almighty, you can’t put him out of the classroom! And when anybody thinks that God is something you can push around by religious ceremony, you have this degraded idea of God, or when a platform is denounced because it doesn’t include a reference to God, God is a political utility. We have to push that aside if we’re going to deal with this question seriously.

There’s another distinction that I need to make. This is between two kinds of meaning that words carry – there’s designated meaning, and evaluative meaning. If I speak of the house on the corner, that’s a designated meaning, but if I say my home is on the corner, that is an evaluative meaning.

The word God has both these meanings. To give a good illustration by what I mean by an evaluative meaning of the word that leads up to God: When my daughter was little and got hurt and cried, I’d pick her up and carry her in my arms and say, “Well well well.” One day when she was hurt and crying I didn’t say those words. She stopped crying long enough to say, “Well well well.” Those words had an evaluative meaning. In a very simple childlike way, she wanted her life to have meaning and be worth living when she was badly hurt.

What is the evaluative meaning of the word God? When I cast out all illusions, when I face up to the frustration and futility and fragmentariness of life, to the cruelty and the horror of history, when I am badly hurt, what could make life worth living? That is the evaluative meaning of the word God.



"Unitarian Universalist Theologians VII
Henry Nelson Wieman "
Rev. Krista Taves
March 21, 2010

Emerson UU Chapel, Ellisville MO

Sermon

One of the things we Unitarian Universalists say about ourselves is that we are a theologically diverse people. Some of us have a personal God. Some of us believe in an impersonal presence that is in everything. Some of us believe that God has many faces but is ultimately one. Some of us believe the idea of God to be pure superstition. Our diversity makes us strong because it means there is a lot of spiritual room and freedom. Acceptance is deeply moral and religious practice for us. It is a corner of pure love.

But sometimes we're better at saying we're diverse than we are in living our diversity. Far too often, Unitarian Universalists are afraid to talk about their beliefs because they're afraid they're going to offend someone, or that they won't be seen as good enough Unitarian Universalists, or that they will be judged and discover that this isn't where they fit. Sometimes we're fine talking about our beliefs but if we get too close to experiencing them, or living them, others get nervous. Those beliefs suddenly get a bit too real. So we live our diversity as though our own beliefs are dangerous to the unity of our community. And what we really get is a deadening silence passing for unity and acceptance, and that silence reassures us that we are one community and we are all getting along, when really we're kind of in a bubble. We're not really living our mission, which is offering our beloved communities as places to truly live and express our spirituality. The sad thing is, that nobody knows what anybody else believes! So how are we accepting each other?

We need to speak of our beliefs and our religious experiences. We need to live the fullness of our spiritualities in our religious home. If we have experienced a divine presence in our lives, we should be able to talk about it, and we should be able to listen to others beliefs, even if it's hard. It can be hard for an atheist to listen to a theist talk about their relationship to their personal God. I can be hard for a theist to listen to an atheist talk about why they think God can't or doesn't exist. But if we can't listen to each other here and sit with the challenging feelings that come up in us, how is this world supposed to change, and how are we supposed to grow?

So I'm going to break a little bit of the silence, and tell you a story about the first time I experienced God in a direct way. I was taught to believe in a personal God who was always there for me. In Sunday School I sang Jesus loves the little children. My grandparents told me their stories of war and starvation and said that their trust in God is what brought them to Canada. To use Wieman's understanding of language, that was my evaluative understanding of God.



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I was nine years old and I was at Mennonite summer camp, away from my parents for the first time. I was so lonely, but as the week wore on, I warmed up and made friends and went canoeing and every night we sang around the campfire. I loved it. For those of you who know me, know that singing is one of my spiritual practices. On the final night, we sang every song we had learned. My heart got brighter and brighter. It felt like we were so connected. And then, we started singing Kum Ba Yah, and I looked up at the stars, and suddenly I felt this presence entering my body, and in the theology I had at that time, there was only one word I could use to explain what was happening. Just like Wieman’s daughter could only say, “Well well well” I could only understand that it was Jesus who had come into my body and was seeing, feeling, and hearing what I did. It was pure love and ecstasy, and I didn’t want him to leave. Childishly wanting to hold onto that feeling, I closed my mouth so he couldn’t fly away. And I walked back to my tent and went to bed without brushing my teeth so that Jesus would have no way to leave my body. The next morning, he was gone.

For the next two years, I begged to go back. When I got there, I waited for Jesus to come into my body. I sang my heart out every evening and stared at the stars, and nothing happened. I was heartbroken. When I got home, I yelled at the night sky: “Jesus, I wish you had never come because I was fine before, when I didn’t know what you felt like inside me, but now all I do is wait for you.” In those two years, my evaluative understanding of God changed from a constant presence outside of me, to a momentary presence inside of me, to an absence separate from me. It took some years before I stopped waiting.

What is your story? Has your heart been broken like this? When did it open up again, and what did it open up to?

Henry Nelson Wieman dedicated his life to understanding these evaluative experiences of the idea of God. Henry was born to Presbyterian parents in Parksville Missouri in 1885. He completed high school in California but came back to Parksville to go to college. He wanted to be a journalist but when he took religion and philosophy, something came alive in him. He had his moment one evening overlooking the Missouri River. As the sun set he made the decision to devote his life to religious inquiry. To use his words, “I never had a more ecstatic experience. I could not sleep all night and walked in that ecstasy for days.”

He immersed himself in the cutting edge of Presbyterian theology. This meant he was exposed to that Calvinist idea of absolute human sinfulness. He once wrote, “this is not a nice world and God is not a nice God. God is too awful and terrible, too destructive to our foolish little plans, to be nice.” Clearly, in his early



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years Henry understood God in that traditional way, as a personal being who was all powerful and as much if not more about punishment than about love. And then, between World War I and the end of World War II his theology changed and evolved. Was it because of the massive loss of life and the sobering reality of how quickly a whole world could go to war? Was it the Depression of the 1930s and the way it brought so many to their knees? Was it the horrors of Hitler and the Holocaust and the bombs that leveled Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Traditional theology would see the hand of God in all these horrible things and ask, “What was God’s intent in bringing these horrible things to pass?” But Wieman and others were growing very uneasy with this way of looking at God. They saw not the presence but the absence of God in these horrible events. They were asking: “If God is all powerful and all good, God would have the power to stop this unnecessary suffering, and obviously he chose not to, which makes God pretty terrible. Or, the way we understand God is flawed and we have to move away from this all powerful master of the universe idea because it’s not working and it’s not healthy.” Wieman came to the second conclusion. The way we understand God is flawed. He devoted his life to taking apart the idea of an all powerful God and rebuilding it into something more life affirming. This is when it became clear that there was very little room for him in orthodox Christianity and that’s when he became a Unitarian.

Henry was part of a movement called process theology which questioned the whole idea of God as a separate being that has the power to intervene in the course of history. Some process theologians believe that God is still a person but that God is changed by every single action of humanity. It all becomes part of God’s consciousness. So God isn’t some unchangeable thing that we have to obey. God is a process. Wieman liked this, but he didn’t think it went far enough. Wieman didn’t see God as a person at all. Wieman was a humanist deist and he believed that God is the creative impulse that is unique to humanity. Every experience, every thought, every choice, every moment of pain and joy has the mystical spiritual potential for a breaking in of that creative spirit so that collective experience of the whole of humanity is the manifestation of God. God is the “well well well.” Here’s quote from a speech he made late in his life:

[The Idea of God] is creativity in a sense of an ever expanding vision of all existence and possibility by means of science and philosophy and religion and art, politics and government and education. [It] is the way in which the vision of man is expanded indefinitely beyond any known limit we can comprehend. That Creativity expands the inner known limit, the community between all. This way man achieves a cooperation, an understanding, a realization, of the potentialities of human existence. Those potentialities are the indefinite expansion of value and knowledge whereby the universe is endowed with a kind of value you get from no other source so far as our knowledge goes.



So Henry would look at the experience of a nine year old feeling Jesus in her body, and ask, what is the evaluative meaning of God in this experience? Where does she find joy, where does she experience pain, what was her connection to the other children or the adult leaders? What was the meaning of the singing given that her extended family gathered to sing almost every Saturday night? When had she gazed into the night sky before, how was that sky explained to her? He would see her experience as a mystical humanist experience of ultimacy that communicated a vision of interconnectedness and possibility. And then he would ask, what now? What will this nine year old do with what she has experienced? Sadly, because I was raised with the understanding of God as an all powerful person separate from me who could leave me, it meant that I felt helpless and abandoned. I believed I had to wait for God to come back. If I had understood God as a process, as being the in between, then perhaps I would have awoken the next morning and known that the presence remained and perhaps there might have been others who could have guided me on a more creative life-affirming path that would have continued to expand the possibilities that entered me so beautifully on that special night.

Did you know that 70% of our youth group identify as atheist? I don't say this because I have an issue with atheism. Some of the most religious people I know are atheists. When I asked our youth to tell me why they were atheist, the most common response was that they couldn't believe in God. When I asked what kind of God they couldn't believe in, it was the all powerful personal God, the same God I experienced leaving me behind. Somehow we have taught them that it is an either/or. You either believe in that all powerful God or you believe in nothing. In our fear that speaking our beliefs will damage the unity of our community, we aren't teaching our children the possibilities of belief or the profound mysticism in our religious tradition. Wieman himself said that he was embarrassed to use the word God in a Unitarian setting even though it held so much meaning for him, even as he proclaimed himself a humanist. His exploration of the mystical creativity of humanity which he saw as God was silenced. Our children aren't being given what they need to truly choose their beliefs. We tell our kids they can choose, but then don't offer them our stories or the richness of our tradition. If 70% of our youth chose atheism after they had learned of all the ways we experience reverence, I would believe that to be a true choice and would celebrate that choice. I don't know that they can't do that with what we are offering them now.

I know I'm not the only one worried about this. I've had parents ask, "So when do our kids actually get to experience faith and God? We came here because we wanted more truthful conversations about God and believed that would happen here. Why isn't it?" And when the only reason I can give them is that it would



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make some people uncomfortable, I don't feel very good about it. Because their response is, well, you said you're about diversity, why are you silencing it?

For Wieman, this silence was the absolute opposite of that spirit of human creativity. In his theology, every single individual's uniqueness and vision must be shared so that it can become part of the movement of God. Keeping silent is not only denying each other, it is denying God itself. I'm over the silence. I think many of us want a deeper engagement with what we are thinking and feeling and experiencing so that when a nine year old girl comes to us and says she experienced Jesus, we can celebrate with her and help her to feel that presence in her life always. The workings of that mystical creativity are properly restless within us. Let's walk into the restlessness. We need this for ourselves, for our children, and for our precious religious movement.

Amen and blessed be.