

Story for All Ages

Playing Hide and Seek with God by Mary Ann Moore

Reading

From *Catch 22* by Joseph Heller

Lieutenant Scheisskopf's wife had turned ashen in disbelief and was ogling [Yossarian] with alarm. "You'd better not talk that way about Him, honey," she warned him reprovngly in a low and hostile voice. "He might punish you."

"Isn't he punishing me enough?" Yossarian snorted resentfully. "You know, we mustn't let him get away with it. Oh no, we certainly mustn't let Him get away scot-free for all the sorrow He's caused us. Someday I'm going to make Him pay. I know when. On the Judgment Day. Yes, that's the day I'll be close enough to reach out and grab that little yokel by His neck and --"

"Stop it! Stop it!" Lieutenant Scheisskopf's wife screamed suddenly, and began beating him ineffectually about the head with both fists. "Stop it!"

Yossarian ducked behind his arm for protection while she slammed away at him in feminine fury for a few seconds, and then he caught her determinedly by the wrists and forced her gently back down on the bed. "What the hell are you getting so upset about?" he asked her bewilderedly in a tone of contrite amusement. "I thought you didn't believe in God."

"I don't," she sobbed, bursting violently into tears. "But the God I don't believe in is a good God, a just God, a merciful God. He's not the mean and stupid God you make Him out to be."

Yossarian laughed and turned her arms loose. "Let's have a little more religious freedom between us," he proposed obligingly. "You don't believe in the God you want to, and I won't believe in the God I want to. Is that a deal?"

Sermon

As a kid, I never played Hide & Seek with God. I was sure there was nothing to find. I had spun my parents' rejection of Catholicism into a rejection of religion in general. Before long, I had also rejected religious people – and God along with them. A militant atheist by the age of 10, I felt a belief in God was only for those too weak to believe in themselves. I was arrogant, and, I'm sure, obnoxious.

Obviously, I have mellowed with age. I now have a deep curiosity about religion, and even *gasp* joined a church. I no longer reject religious people, so long as they are respectful – that is, they don't tell me I'm going to hell, and they don't try to “save me.” The God part, however, is still a struggle.

My grandmother used to send my brother and me Bible Story books, hoping to save us from our heathen upbringing. In the stories, God was a crabby old white man in the clouds. I didn't believe in that guy. He seemed to play favorites, and I did not approve.

By the time I found Unitarian Universalism in my late 20s, I'd broadened my rejection to include several versions of God I definitely did not believe in, which, oddly enough, left the door open for maybe one day discovering a kind of God I COULD believe in. I figured that made me an agnostic, of some stripe or another. While researching agnosticism, I found the word “agnosticism,” with an “i”: Agnosticism posits that it is impossible to have any meaningful discourse about the existence or nonexistence of God until you define the term. “God” means different things to different people, and unless all involved parties are talking about the same thing, the discussion is pointless.

Yes. Of course!

It's been over three decades since I first read Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, but that scene where Yossarian and Lt. Scheisskopf's wife argue about the kind of God they don't believe in stuck with me. It taught me that an atheist must have a firm idea of what “God” means in order to reject it. These days, that passage speaks to me about agnosticism. The characters can't even talk about their atheism without first defining “God.”

Eventually, I realized that when someone asks “Do you believe in God?” they usually mean, “Do you believe in the same God I believe in?” As a kid, I would have answered with a definite “No.” In my adulthood, my answer became “Probably not.” I conceded that maybe someone, somewhere, believed in a God I might recognize as mine.

I love Unitarian Universalism's lack of dogma. You won't get booted out of UU-ism for theism, atheism, or anything in between. Such freedom! Since whatever I believe or don't believe is acceptable, I didn't think it mattered that I never bothered to interpret the term “God” for myself.

Then, last year, I started attending Overeaters Anonymous meetings. OA is a 12-step program, modeled after Alcoholics Anonymous. In the 2nd and 3rd steps, members are asked to "come to believe that a power greater than themselves can restore them to sanity" and to "make a decision to turn their will and their lives over to the care of God, as they understand him." That's the spiritual core of OA – the foundation for the whole thing. I've been in OA for 17 months and I'm STILL stuck on step 3. Since joining, I'm far less likely to binge on trigger foods or succumb to emotional eating, but I do a fair bit of white-knuckling. If I could work the remaining 9 steps, how much more freedom might I have? Sadly, the God question is a tough one. I'm not alone, there. Some twelve-steppers prefer the term "Higher Power" or even "HP" (which to me sounds like Harry Potter, and though I love Harry, he's not my god). Some people use the acronym G.O.D. To mean "good orderly direction," and use that as their compass. If things are not going in a good orderly direction, they need to pay more attention to their spiritual needs. But most members talk about God: a male, personal God. And not all, but most, program literature seems to assume a personal God.

Some people think Unitarian Universalism is a religion of convenience. *Au contraire*. UUism isn't the religion where we believe what we want – it's the religion where we believe what we must, given our reason and our experience. I don't think that had quite hit home for me until my participation in a 12-step program forced me to really grapple with my beliefs.

How convenient it would be if only I COULD believe in an old man in the sky who keeps a close eye on me and answers my prayers if I behave the way he wants. But I can't. That God doesn't work for me at all, though I gather he works quite well for lots of folks. In OA, we are advised to act "as if." Pray to God, even if we don't believe in him. Well, I'm sorry. I can't do that, either. My spiritual beliefs may still be evolving, but whatever they are, and whatever they've been, it's always been important to me to be true to them. As a militant atheist 5th grader, I refused to pledge allegiance to anything Under God. As a questioning adult, I'm not hypocritical enough to pray to a God I don't believe in, either.

I watch OA members navigate terrible times – divorces, layoffs, deaths of parents – without looking for solace in a carton of ice cream. I want that recovery, rather than my historical tendency to scarf down a Snickers bar for comfort if I so much as stub a toe. But IF the program is going to work for me, it has to be on my own terms, and that means a God of MY understanding. So I dutifully did my homework, spending months reading and journaling about God, trying to figure out what, if anything, the term means to me, and getting nowhere.

Finally, I gave up trying to make sense of what anybody else said about God and just tried to find a stillness. And in that stillness I realized that if I have any sense of the divine, it's that it is something INNER. In a yoga

class in 1998, I encountered the concept of *namaste*, and it really resonated with my experience. A Hindi word with no direct English translation, “namaste” roughly means, “The divine in me honors the divine in you.” But more than that: in honoring the divine in others, you honor it in yourself too: it's the same thing. At that deep level, we are one. When I make the effort to really see a person, past external differences to who they are inside, I do find something “holy,” for lack of a better word. Something holy inside them, that mirrors something in me. Some people find the holy in nature. I find it in other people, which helps me to recognize it in myself.

I believe there is some spark of divinity in me that is in everyone - and all those sparks taken together are as close as I have been able to come to an understanding of a higher power. It is present in my intuition, my highest and best self. And since it's not just in me, but in everyone, it's like uber-conscience, ultra-love, super-compassion, mega-wisdom. I believe that regular meditation can help me tune in better to this great love/compassion/wisdom, thereby helping me live my life better.

At first, I was at least half worried that OA was a religious cult. That if I let down my guard, I'd soon be enthusing about my relationship with my male, external, personal God. It isn't, and I'm not. In fact, I don't feel like I have adopted any new religious belief. I've merely brought my beliefs out into the light for closer inspection, and found some language that begins to express the vague notions I've developed over the years.

Last January, our junior youth religious education class took an informal congregational poll on our beliefs about God. You may remember that we were each instructed to pick three statements that we agreed with the most. In true UU fashion, we had several write-ins, and one statement getting 3.5 votes... The results of the survey: “There are as many ideas about God as there are people,” got 12 votes. “We can use science and reason to understand our Universe”: 13 votes. “God and the Universe are the same – God is in everything”: 14 votes. And in first place with 15 votes: “There is a spark of divinity in each of us.” Top response? Seriously? It blew my mind to discover that HERE, at least, I'm not the theological freak I always thought I was.

I still struggle with the 12-step program language, but I'm doing better. I make a conscious effort now to let that spark of divinity shine forth more freely. I feel more at peace, more centered. Could I finally have found a concept of the divine that really works in my life?

What does that mean, anyway? “A concept of the divine that really works in my life.” I mean, yes, being more attuned to my highest and best self does help me refrain from downing an entire bag of Chips Ahoy cookies in one sitting. But beyond that: Do I face difficulties alone? Or can my sense of the divine help me in times of trouble? All my life, I've seen that “Footprints” thing. You know the one. It's a poem about walking on the

beach with God, leaving two sets of footprints in the sand. And you complain that it always seems, when times have been hardest, there was only one set of footprints, and why, God, did you abandon me when I needed you most? And God answers, those are the times when I've carried you. A lovely, comforting thought, if you can believe in that kind of God. And it forces me to ask: What good is an inner spark of divinity? A spark can't carry you when things get rough.

And then, things got rough in my neighborhood. On Good Friday, a tornado ripped through Maryland Heights. I was lucky. I just had an inconvenient power outage for less than a day. Half a mile away, things were very different. Some homes were reduced to piles of lumber.

On Easter, the cashier at Walgreens related how close things had been for her family. Her subdivision was flattened, but her family was unhurt. The woman behind me in line said, "God really blessed you."

I KNOW!

I KNOW she was trying to say something nice to the cashier, but the implication of her statement is... what? That God likes me more than those whose homes were damaged? That God was only warning St. Louis – where no one died in the Good Friday tornadoes – but really punishing Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where hundreds died in tornadoes less than a week later? That, holy crap, the people in Joplin, Missouri, must have really pissed God off? I'm sorry: a tornado might be called an "Act of God" on an insurance claim, but I can't believe that God has anything to do with tornadoes, and who gets hit and who doesn't.

But let me tell you where I DID see acts of God.

I saw Acts of God in people's generosity after the storm. In people – not just neighbors, but strangers, too – rushing in to help. In the school district calling every single one of its families to ask if we were okay, and if we needed anything. In the stacks of donated clothes, food, cleaning supplies, toiletries and bedding so big that the Red Cross needed places for the overflow. And that's the part I keep forgetting to factor in: I'm not just one little light in the darkness. My community shone brightly in the days following the tornado – and still shines as Maryland Heights continues, even now, to rebuild.

In the days following the Good Friday tornado, I struggled with guilt that my home was spared when others, so close, were destroyed. But now, I see that I don't need to feel guilty about random meteorological phenomena. I didn't get hit. Doesn't make me any better than anyone else, just luckier – this time. This time, I helped carry my

neighbors. I donated money, clothing, cleaning supplies, school supplies for the kids. Some other time, I have no doubt, I'll be the one being carried.

As our own Rev. Krista Taves has said, Unitarian Universalism may not have dogma, but we do have some core values that anchor us as a faith tradition: equality, freedom, responsibility and unconditional love. I am totally down with the unconditional love, the equality, and the freedom. I've been slower with the responsibility part, but I'm getting there. I see now that I have a responsibility to do the spiritual work of examining my personal theology. That responsibility is necessary to balance the freedom inherent in a noncreedal religion. But Unitarian Universalism is more challenging than that. I also have the responsibility of LIVING my personal theology. I don't need to feel guilty that the tornado missed my house. It WOULD be appropriate to feel guilty if I could have helped the tornado victims, but didn't.

I still don't like the word God. It's got too much baggage. It's too loaded. Outside of this sermon, I'll probably only use it in expressions like "Oh my God!" and "For God's sake!" Still, I seem to have arrived at a reasonably comfortable understanding of the divine, at least for now. Am I now a theist, rather than the atheist I used to be? I don't know.

I do know that all this soul searching has not had much of an effect on the way I treat other people. Had a tornado torn through my hometown of Indian Harbour Beach, Florida – or, fine, a hurricane – and had people been in need, I would have had the same immediate impulse to help. My instinct to stand against injustice is similarly unchanged. I may not have been raised with God or religion, but I was raised right, and I have always known that the way to treat others is the way you'd like to be treated yourself. I still have every faith that a good humanist upbringing is a perfectly sound way to raise moral and ethical children. In that regard, God is, in my opinion, optional.

All this soul searching HAS however had an effect on the way I treat myself, and in the way I allow others to treat me. You will, no doubt, remember the arrogance of my youth: my belief that the only people who believed in God were people too weak to believe in themselves. It was a ridiculously self-reliant – self-important – approach to life. I always felt I had to go it alone, do everything myself, not depend on anyone. In those instances when I did have to accept help from someone else, I saw it as a great failure on my part.

I have always known I am connected to other people, but I've understood that connection in fairly prosaic terms. We're connected genetically. Economically. Socially. Ecologically. And nowadays, electronically. It's a relatively new thing to me to consider that we're connected spiritually. Not that what I do affects you, and what

you do affects me, though that is certainly true, but more: that we are at some deep level one and the same. I think this deeper understanding is allowing me to be more trusting and more vulnerable, and to see relationships as more reciprocal – that I can receive as well as give, and that accepting help does not mean I have failed.

What good is God? I can't answer for you – only for myself. And I think that for me, intentionally cultivating a connection to the great wisdom, love, and compassion we share will not just lead me to healthier food behaviors, but will also lead me to more open and authentic and less self-centered relationships with the people in my life. More humility. Less ego. More peace. Less fear. And I've got to tell you, that sounds pretty good to me.