

A Humanist's Encounter with the Goddess
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May 4, 2008

Good morning. It's good to be here with you today. On Friday night, we had the Jackson Interfaith Peacekeeper's annual convocation, with Bishop Gumbleton speaking. I asked him a question about the social gospel and how he handles criticism, which led him to comment on how he believes you can't talk about the sorts of things he was talking about that night from the pulpit, like state-sponsored terrorism and, well, becoming a nation of peace. It was a moment of irony for me, because of course we talk about peace issues and anti-war issues a lot in this church. Our Unitarian Universalist Service Committee declared this year's justice Sunday to be on the theme "The Cost of the War in Iraq," and Jon Hart led a service on that.

For me, preaching on social justice issues is easy. What is harder is giving the sort of sermon that I'm going to be giving today, both because it's very personal, but because it touches on tricky theological boundaries, in a way that could be just as controversial as war to some people. And so I have given this sermon twice already, in different UU churches, in order to have time to work out the kinks, and work up my nerve.

Another major difference between our tradition and Bishop Gumbleton's that was very evident in his response to me was the tradition we have of the free church. He spoke of his audience at church as a "captive audience." And I think it is, in a way, true for him in a way that it's not true for us. First of all, we don't tell you you're going to Hell if you go to another church and stop going to this one. But more than that, this isn't the captive church. We are part of the free church. And part of that is freedom of the pulpit, where I have in my letter of covenant with you that I can speak my truth, without fear of censor. And you have a corresponding freedom of the pew. You can believe anything I say or not, at your will. You can choose not to come. You are not expected to believe what I say without testing it with your own reason and logic. And so, with that in mind, let me tell you my own story.

For a long time, I've considered myself a humanist and an agnostic. And I want to begin by saying, I still do. But what I want to share today is a very personal story about several experiences which made me realize that I had been limiting my understanding based on childish views of God. So, as I said, I consider myself a humanist and an agnostic. And I do, every so often, pray to God. I've called it, "keeping the lines of communication open, just in case he's up there." About four and a half years ago, I said a prayer that has become a memorable, and some would say mystical, experience for me.

I was at a UU camp in New England, Rowe Camp, and I went on a walk to find a Goddess statue that I had heard about. I had the idea that I would climb into her lap and pray or reflect and it would be oh-so-spiritual. When I got there, her lap was small, she wasn't the Goddess image I had pictured, and her lap was full of snow and leaves and mud. I looked at her, then turned around and walked back. Halfway down to camp, I decided to pray. I put my hands against a large tree, and looked up, and started in my customary way: "Dear God, if you're up there..." I prayed and asked to be able to have a child. I said my amens, and stepped back, and promptly fell to the earth. I felt like I had been pushed to the earth. And it seemed like it was a response to my prayer, to me, at the time.

What did it mean? My first thoughts were that it was definitely negative. I thought maybe God was saying I was praying in the wrong way, or that the answer was no. But I wasn't sure.

Four years later, I figured it out. It took a trip across the world, a walk in a labyrinth, coming back, waiting a few months, another walk in a labyrinth, and a conversation with a friend to figure it out.

I was being dope-slapped by the Goddess. Now, I don't mean that literally, but I'll explain.

Ultimately, the answer to the prayer I spoke of earlier couldn't have been a simple "no," since I did have a child, but I worried about that up until her birth. But after she was born, I put the experience behind me, and stopped really thinking about it very much. It was just one of those things, those indescribable, inexplicable moments, and it had no real impact on my theology.

So last June I went to Transylvania for a conference for women ministers—American Unitarian Universalist, Transylvanian and British Unitarian, Dutch Remonstrant, and a couple of Hungarian reform women ministers, and one of the things we did was walk in a labyrinth that was marked out on the floor with rope in the same room we worshipped in. We did different exercises, such as just walking in silence, walking while singing, dancing through the labyrinth. Every morning and every evening there was also a dancing time where we did these sort of spiritual circle dances. My back was not up to so much dancing, so I often did a couple and then sat out. One day, near the end, I decided to walk the labyrinth while everyone else was dancing. I knew that the previous day the whole group had walked the labyrinth while asking a specific question as they walked. I had missed that exercise, since I had gone out with my sister's mother-in-law, who lives in Koloszvar, Romania, to see the town.

So I walked the labyrinth while the dancing was going on, and with each step I said a word of my question, rhythmically, over and over again, until I got to the center. The question was, "Is there a God?"

As background, I should say that periodically for the last, oh, say twenty-five years, I have prayed a prayer to God, asking if God is there, to give me some sort of sign and help me believe. I've never gotten a sign. But, as I say, "I try to keep the channels of communication open."

As I walked the labyrinth, I was completely absorbed in my question, in the rhythm of my question and my footsteps. The rest of the room, with the dancing, blurred out. So I got to the center of the labyrinth, paused, still asking my question, and turned around, and walked out, still asking the same question.

As I got towards the end stretch exiting, the room and the dancers came back into view. And the women were all singing along with the song they were dancing to, "Ancient Mother, I hear you calling. Ancient Mother, I hear your song."

I realized it was an answer of sorts, and I had been asking the wrong question. I had long ago rejected my childhood image of God, the God who answers petitionary prayers, plays favorites in football games, saves some children and not others. I had long ago rejected the idea that there was an old man with a beard in the sky who looks down and watches and listens and reaches down and stirs things up every so often. But I had been continuing, whenever I prayed, to pray to that God. Even though I've studied theology, and I've preached on the subject, and I've led classes and written about feminist theology, in particular, and explored Pagan ritual—

even though I've done all these things, I was still back in my childhood concept of prayer, doing the same kind of "Our father, who art in heaven" kind of prayer.

Sometimes our childhood ideas of God are hard to let go of. Other times, we rebel against that concept, but we don't replace it with anything else. I had broken down the theology, deconstructed the idea of God and patriarchy, but I had never reconstructed. Specifically, I have often said, "I don't know if there is a God, but I do have very specific ideas about what God is like if there is a God." I had said this, and believed it, and I still believe it's very true. But what I hadn't done is reconstructed my ritual, my prayer life, based on my understanding of theology. I was still doing petitionary prayer, still waiting for a literal, concrete answer from God.

So I went to a minister's retreat this past October at the Grailville retreat center. It's a Catholic retreat center in Loveland, Ohio, that our UU minister's chapter meets at every year. It was also the site (coincidentally?) of the first conference for women ministers across the denomination.

They have a labyrinth in back of the building I was staying in. The paths are dirt paths dug through the tall grass. I decided to walk it one day. It was hot, so I carried my water bottle. And I decided to walk the labyrinth singing the song that I heard the women singing as I exited the labyrinth in Transylvania. "Ancient Mother, I hear you calling. Ancient Mother, I hear your song." Despite the water bottle in my hands, I held my hands in ritual position, palms down for walking in, letting go of things; palms up for walking out, receiving wisdom.

I walked the labyrinth while singing, stopping every so often for a swig of water. I wasn't watching my feet the whole time, and I almost stepped on a field mouse. He scurried away just in time. I think I saw a snake at one point, as well. The bugs and butterflies were all around. The grass was tall. I was sweating in the sun. I kept singing, very softly, almost like breathing, as my breath got harder and I got warmer.

I got to the center, and paused a moment in reflection, and then started out, still singing. As I came out, it came to me that I had been looking up, and looking around, and this labyrinth was calling me to look at the earth, to pay attention to the ground, to feel my connection to the world around me. All the sweat, my breathlessness, the field mouse, the butterflies, they were all telling me that I was part of the earth, it was part of me, and that the connection to the Ancient Mother, the way to hear her calling was not formal meditation or prayer, but living itself.

I thought back and put this together with a conversation I had had with a friend a week or two before, and it all came together.

Shortly before I went to Grailville, I had lunch with my friend, Ameena. Ameena had recently stopped wearing the hijab, the head veil commonly worn by Muslim women. She had undergone a spiritual transformation of sorts. She realized that the hijab represented dogma, and she no longer needed the dogma to be faithful. I had had conversations with her about the hijab before, and she had said, as I've heard other women say, that it isn't restrictive or oppressive, and that it's a choice. So as she came out from behind the veil, it was interesting to hear her say the opposite, and to hear her experience of what it was like, after so many years of wearing it, to take it off, and the Muslim community's reaction. In the course of this conversation, I felt that she would be a sympathetic person to talk to about what I had experienced. I, too, was undergoing a spiritual transformation that was making me realize that what I had been doing was about dogma, and I didn't need that dogma anymore. She had cast off the veil. I was casting off childhood rituals related to a childhood views of God.

I talked with her about what I was processing from Transylvania, about how I had realized that when I've prayed to God in the past, I've prayed to exactly the sort of God that I

know, even in true agnosticism, that I don't believe in. I don't believe that God/dess answers petitionary prayer. With both sides of the football team praying so hard, no game would ever end. I don't believe in a God/dess who interferes in human existence in that way. Yet that was the way I had still been praying to God. And when I prayed to God, I was praying to that same sort of Sistine Chapel old father God that I've even preached against. And so, when I asked, "Is there a God," and I heard "Ancient Mother, I hear you calling," it was telling me that prayer isn't supposed to be about me asking God/dess. Prayer is supposed to be about my listening to God/dess. And God/dess isn't going to give me a direct call. I know enough to know that. The song was saying I do hear the calling, even though it isn't literally God/dess saying, "Cindy, I want you to build an ark." In the course of that conversation, I had realized that, of course, calling, doesn't mean that, and of course, I do feel called.

I still don't know, after all this, if there is a God/dess or not. But I do know that it was time for me to revisit my understanding of God/dess, my understanding of prayer, my understanding of calling, of vocation.

What I believe, which is to say, not what I know, but what I think holds truth for me, is that if there is a God or Goddess, I believe that these words refer more to energy and connection than to a personality, a figurehead. God, or Goddess, really is something we and the world create together. I use the term Goddess, rather than God, not because I see God as inherently gendered. The Venus of Willendorf is no more my idea of the image of God than the God of the Sistine Chapel. I say Goddess because it helps me to remember that it is not this image. It is still too easy to think I mean something different by God, but when using that word to slip into the same old God who roots for the football teams. And what I experience that might be termed God or Goddess has come to me through symbols, images, connections that are traditionally termed feminine and are associated with feminist theology, like the labyrinth, like the image of the earth, or Gaia, like the web woven by Grandmother spider.

And what I know about prayer is that prayer isn't me talking, me asking for things, or even for connection, to God. Prayer, I've learned, at least for me, in my understanding, is about listening. And what it's about specifically listening for is listening for an understanding of my connection to the earth, to each of you, to society, and to all living things. It's also about listening for my vocation, my calling. What is it that I am meant to do? By which I mean, not, again, that God will call me up and say, "Cindy, I want you to build me an ark. It should measure this many cubits wide by this many long, and this many deep." Rather, it is a way of knowing when I am on my path because I am in balance, what the Taoist might call in harmony with the Tao.

I've known this for a long time. I've been talking about what my spiritual model is for seven years and more. I take my model from my mentor, the UU minister in Milwaukee, Drew Kennedy. He talks about his spiritual practice of being in right relationship, and that this right relationship functions on several levels. He outlines this in his article in the book *Everyday Spiritual Practice*. In a nutshell, the idea is that one should be in right relationship first with oneself, knowing yourself and having integrity, next to one's family and close circle of friends, neighbors, co-workers, etc.—love your neighbor as yourself. Then, widening the circle, to be in right relationship with society. And then, to be in right relationship with the earth and it's creatures, to walk lightly across her back. And, finally, to be in right relationship with the cosmos, or God. So I've known, abstractly, that I had this model.

But what I hadn't known, until these walks in the labyrinth, was that I wasn't living it. I wasn't living my spirituality—I was still living the spiritual practice I had been taught as a child.

Preachers learn to preach their message, but sometimes we, or at least I, can forget to live it. It's easy, as I said in the beginning, to preach social justice, because I know I live it, to the best of my ability. It's harder to preach spirituality, because I haven't been living what I have known to be true. And each of us must find that balance, of knowing and doing, in order to be on our spiritual path. Perhaps I finally am.

Ancient Mother, I hear you calling. Ancient Mother, I hear your call.