

## **“The God I Don’t Believe In”**

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I believe in God. I haven’t always believed in God, but I do now. I believe in God because of my direct experiences of God -- it’s a mystical, transcendental sort of thing.

I do not expect anyone else to believe in God because of my experiences of God. I don’t think it is necessary to believe in God in order to be a good person and do good work in the world.

Forrest Church, the late minister of All Souls UU Church in New York City, wrote that, whenever someone told him they didn’t believe in God, he would ask them what God they didn’t believe in, because he probably didn’t believe in that God, either.

Like Forrest Church, the God I don’t believe in is a little God. This little God can be found in the Bible, although that’s not the only God described there. He is mean and petty, jealous, cruel on both grand and small scales, capricious, unjust, and unkind. The God I don’t believe in is all-powerful.

Forrest Church wrote that he used to be afraid to mention God in church, because he didn’t want anyone to assume he was referring to the “tiny, judgmental, anthropomorphic God of so many true believers.”

~Forrest Church, *Love & Death*, page 121

If I believed in the Bible as the literal word of God, it would be difficult to dispute that God is indeed that bad. But I don’t. I believe the Bible was written by men, some of whom may have felt inspired at the time, I don’t know. The Bible includes some great wisdom, beauty, and poetry, a good God, some dubious history, and a great deal of justification for a theologically bad God.

The Book of Job is the best example of this. To refresh your memories...

Job is a good and faithful man who has prospered under God’s patronage. Then the devil comes along and challenges God to see how devoted Job is if all the benefits of his good life are taken from him. The devil bets that Job will curse God. So God causes a long series of calamities to befall Job,

including the loss of his crops and cattle, the death of all his children, and finally, a wretched skin condition that covers him with boils. Job is reduced to sitting naked in the ashes and scraping himself with a potshard. Still, Job will not curse God.

Three friends come and sit with Job, keeping him company in his misery. For three days they sit, providing all the comfort they can. Then they start to talk. And Job's comforters turn into God's defenders, at which point they are no comfort at all.

First, they are sure that poor Job must have done something to anger God. When Job steadfastly protests his innocence, they change their tactics and argue that bad is good and evil is necessary.

Job's three friends make three assumptions...

The first, that God is all powerful and causes everything that happens in the world. Nothing happens without His willing it.

The second, that God is just and fair, and stands for people getting what they deserve, so that the good prosper and the wicked are punished.

And the third, is that Job is a good person.

They want all three of these things to be true. God is all powerful, God is just and Fair, and Job is a good man.

Finally they go away and Job makes his impassioned plea to God – why are you doing this to me? To which God responds with something along the lines of - I'm bigger than you are and, you wouldn't understand.

In what is probably a later addition to the story, God wins his bet and restores Job's health and possessions, and he and his wife have more children to replace the ones who died.

The God of this story is a small God. He is capricious in his deal with the devil. He is without conscience in his killing of people and animals, and utterly cruel in inflicting misery on both Job and his wife. I don't believe in this God.

Three years ago I had thyroid cancer and went through two surgeries and radiation treatment. It wasn't any fun. But I never thought that God had given me cancer – that my cancer was some part of God's great plan. Did I

learn anything from having cancer? I think I did, and I acted on it to improve my life, but even if there is a greater good in the outcome, I don't believe God caused this to happen.

Because if God caused my cancer, then he also caused the cancer of the little child down the block who is losing her hair and her happiness, and probably her life. My God doesn't do that.

I have heard many times that God doesn't give us more than we can deal with. Many people, perhaps most people, can deal with the trials and tribulations of life. But not everyone. People can be broken by life. Think of all the Vietnam veterans living on the street, addicted to drugs and alcohol. Broken by their experiences. The veterans who came back from Iraq or Afghanistan, and killed themselves. I don't believe that God never gives us more than we can handle, because I don't believe that God gives us those experiences.

Some friends of mine had a son in college, who overdosed on methadone several years ago. He's still alive, technically, but in a vegetative state. His mother is totally devoted to his care and recovery. And his father is sad, so sad, and very tired. Perhaps not totally broken, but much too close. He is trapped by his son's broken life and his wife's denial.

I think it is perfectly alright to question God. Get angry. Scream and shout and rage. It won't hurt God, and it won't hurt your relationship with God. God is bigger than that.

But, ultimately, I don't believe that God causes any of those bad things to happen.

My God is not all-powerful. My God wants the best for me, and for everyone.

My God does not cause "Acts of God," as defined by insurance companies. The earthquake in Haiti . Hundreds of thousands of dead and injured. Cities destroyed. Not enough food, water, shelter, medical care. Orphans, widows, homeless...

The earthquake was a natural disaster, an act of nature, and nature has no conscience. Yet people cry out to God for help. So where is God in all this?

God is in the Haitian people's will to live, their courage to keep going, and in the people who respond with compassion to help as much they can.

The social infrastructure of Haiti, or lack thereof, is a product of humankind. Human choices. Human will.

Because we have free will. Whether it is God-given or not, we have it. We make our choices, for better or worse, and we live with the consequences, both seen and unforeseen. We have free will as individuals, and we exercise that free will individually *and* collectively.

On a cosmic level, aside from most natural disasters, we are responsible for poverty and hunger and homelessness and environmental degradation and any number of social ills because we, collectively, made the decisions that brought those conditions into being. Or, we have *not* made the individual and collective choice to change those conditions. I am preaching to the choir here, for most of you are working to change those things. But I think you understand that it was the exercise of free will, collectively, that created those problems.

Examined theologically, here is how I think this works. Say we are God's creations in the loosest, most mystical sense, and God gave us free will. Having given us free will, he does not then punish us for using it. There may be negative consequences to many of our choices, but those consequences are not from God. Some of them are natural consequences, like burning your finger when you touch a hot stove. Some of them are unforeseeable, like being hit by a drunk driver on your way home from church. God does not make these things happen.

The classic bad theology story here is of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. God created this couple, with free will, and placed them in this marvelous garden, and told them that could eat anything they wanted to except the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Doesn't this imply that they did not, at this stage of their new and innocent lives, know the difference between good and evil? Like the difference between obedience and disobedience, or the consequences of wrong choices?

What kind of God would leave them free to make their decisions and then punish them, and all subsequent humankind, for making the wrong choice? Not my God.

But I don't think this story is really about God at all. Like the story of Job, it's about why bad things happen to good people. For thousands of years, people have been trying to understand why life is not fair. We seem to have an innate sense of justice. Perhaps that is from God.

But life is not fair. My father told me that, often, when I was a child. I didn't believe him. Life was supposed to be fair. We had learned this from our parents and teachers. My siblings and I were supposed to have equal-sized pieces of birthday cake. Our turns on the swing were supposed to be of equal length. When my brother had a special day with Daddy, my sister and I should each get one, too. And we weren't all to be punished for something only one of us did.

Ensuring fairness may be a responsibility of parents and teachers. But fairness is not in Life's vocabulary. Things happen. Good things happen to bad people, bad things happen to good people. Good and bad things happen to everyone.

And why? Buddhists say that life is suffering. There will be suffering in virtually every life. True. But most lives will also include love and joy, compassion and tenderness. Is life therefore, love, or any of those things?

Life isn't fair. Since I believe in the process of evolution rather than the Biblical story of creation, I find that I have to believe in chaos, chance, and randomness.

Without chaos, we wouldn't be here. The primordial soup from which we evolved was chaotic. Every step along the way to the evolution of human beings was a product of chance. From single celled organisms, we have evolved and are here on this earth through the chance, at each evolutionary stage, of being in the right niche at the right time. Other evolved species have died out, as may human beings and a great many other animals and plants.

It is hard to see the extinction of God's created species as part of God's plan.

There is a very short poem by Mary Oliver, in *Red Bird*, called:

Watching a Documentary About Polar Bears  
 Trying to Survive on the Melting Ice Flows  
 That God had a plan, I do not doubt.  
 But what if His plan was, that we would do better?

In *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Rabbi Harold Kushner attributes this seeming randomness to the second law of thermodynamics – the law of entropy: every system, left to itself, will change in such a way as to approach equilibrium.

~When Bad Things Happen, page 54

A hurricane develops off the coast and blows itself out in the ocean.  
 A hurricane develops off the coast and blows inland, destroying lives and communities. Equilibrium. These are random occurrences. Not planned. Not pre-ordained by God.

I can understand why a person will carry a homemade bomb onto a plane and blow it up. I don't agree with the act, but I can understand it. What doesn't make any sense is why *that* airplane, and not a different one? Why those 250 people? How could those 250 people, and the loved ones who will mourn them, be part of anyone's plan?

Why doesn't God stop the terrorist from blowing up the plane? Because God is *not* all-powerful. God *is* everywhere. God *may* be all-knowing. But God does not have the power to stop bad things from happening.

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There are those who believe in a "clockmaker" God. This God created everything, set all the cogs and wheels into motion, and then disappeared. Perhaps he's watching us destroy the planet from heaven. That's not my God, either.

My God is the God of Liberation Theology. God with us. An active, living God. My God cries when I cry. Rages with me when I encounter injustice. Perhaps it is God's anger at injustice that makes me feel indignant – that pushes me to act instead of passively accepting that which I know is wrong. My God is a God of compassion, guiding me to reach out to those in need.

I always find truth in the question from Micah, “What doth the Lord require of thee but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God?”

Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God.

Most Unitarian Universalists are involved in doing justice and being merciful. Some have a real problem with the H word. Humbly.

Remember the old joke by Thomas Starr King? Universalists believe God is too good to damn them to hell, and Unitarians believe they are too good for God to damn them to hell.

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Here’s a little more of what I believe about God.  
 When we’re born we are coming from God.  
 Life is a process of remembering that we are one with God.  
 When we die, we return to God.

Coming from God: I don’t know what heaven is, but for me it is a good-enough name for the place where our spirits reside with God.

Some people believe that when we are born we forget everything we knew and have to learn, or remember, it all over again. Some people believe that babies know, and lose the knowledge by the age of one or so. I would swear that my daughter knew her god-nature when she was a baby.

In *Mary Poppins*, by P.L. Travers, Jane and Michael’s baby brother and sister, who are twins and less than a year old, have a conversation with a starling who perches outside their window. They can understand each other perfectly. The twins want to know why Jane and Michael can’t speak the language of the trees and the wind, the stars and the sunlight. The starling explains that children forget as they get older. “You’ll forget because you just can’t help it. There never was a human being that remembered after the age of one – at the latest – except, of course, Her.” And he jerked his head over his shoulder at Mary Poppins.

Speaking the language of the stars is a part of God-nature.

Knowing that we are one with God...

My most frequently used method for feeling God in me is prayer. Prayer is sometimes described as talking to God, and it may be that, although it may take many other forms as well.

I give thanks every morning and every evening for my life, and this day. I am here, I am alive, I say thank you. I say thank you, not because I think that God needs or demands my thanks. I say thank you in gratitude, and humility, for the gift of life and this day, whatever it may hold.

God has not promised us a life without pain, hurt, loss, or disappointment. God promises to be with us as we deal with these things.

Sometimes I ask for things when I pray. I pray for others all the time.

When I trained as a hospital chaplain, I was cautioned not to pray for what might not be possible – it could cause someone to lose their faith. If I pray for a successful operation, or a full return to health for someone, what happens when that prayer isn't answered? So my pre-surgical prayers for patients are something like this: Spirit of Life and Healing, be with us today. May your presence be felt by everyone in the operating room. Guide the doctors and nurses in their work of healing. Be with them while they use your skills. May this person feel your presence, and be held and supported by your strength and love. And may every hand that touches him be a hand of healing. Amen.

You can pray for a new car if you need one. It won't hurt. But it probably won't produce a car. Your prayer for a new car, however, may open up your mind to ways to get one. It may give you the courage you need to apply for a new job, the mindfulness needed to save your money, or the creativity to barter your way into a new car.

I prefer to pray for strength, wisdom, courage, insight, healing for my spirit...

I pray each time before I step into a pulpit. I pray for wisdom and guidance, to find the right words for your ears to hear, to respond to your signals with wisdom and respect, to be a light.

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We live, and then we die back to God's presence.

When I was just starting on my journey into ministry, my husband's Aunt Pat was dying of cancer of the throat. We flew to her bedside so she wouldn't die alone, and arrived just hours before she passed. She lay on the bed, her breathing slowing as the morphine took effect, and I sat beside her, holding her hand. I closed my eyes for a minute, and saw Pat standing beside the bed, looking down on her body, smiling and at peace. I believe her spirit left her body at that time, and returned to God. It was a gift, as I began my ministry to others, to be able to share that vision.

When my sister was dying, hours after the chemical cocktail she chose instead of the final pain of breast and lung cancer, she suddenly opened her eyes and sat up, looking around for the flowers she smelled. No one else could smell them.

I have witnessed sudden death, too. An accident on the highway; I was first to the smashed car. Seconds after life was gone. And while there may have been surprise lingering in the air, there was no fear. There was no pain.

None of those incidents are proof that we return to God when we die. I don't expect to be able to prove that. Forrest Church wrote, "Theology is poetry, not science."

For me, each of those times with death was a moment of grace. A gift from God, allowing me a glimpse into what comes after life. Offering hope and comfort, so that I could share it with you.

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My God is not a person. Not a father or mother, though I sometimes use that imagery – theology is poetry, after all. When the first Star Wars movie came out in 1977, I was fascinated with the idea of the Force. I did not believe in God at that time, but even then, the Force seemed like an obvious metaphor for God. It still does.

Spirit of Life works for me, as a form of address, Source of Being, All that Is, Spirit of Love. I don't have a problem with the word God, though, like

Forrest Church, I have sometimes hesitated to use it in church for fear of pushing buttons and being misunderstood. But I have learned that I need to use the word God; we need to use the word God. More and more people come to Unitarian Universalist churches today seeking something spiritual, something religious. If they don't hear the word God, how will they know that God is welcome here?

God is good and God is great. I am thankful for God's presence in my life.

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There is a God I don't believe in. And there is a God who has my faith. My God is not petty, or mean, or arbitrary. My God is not judgmental or vindictive or punishing. My God does not inflict children with cancer, does not kill thousands of people with earthquakes. Does not allow children to starve to death, or get run over, or permit young parents to die in automobile accidents.

My God walks with me always; sometimes I'm not aware of this. But any time I ask for God's help, and often when I don't ask, I feel God's presence. God walks with me even into the valley of the shadow of death, and comforts and sustains me, gives me strength and guidance, fills me with love and compassion. From time to time, God reminds me, unbidden, that I am here to remember my own god-nature.

Forrest Church wrote, *"I once decided I was not religious, simply because I rejected the first God I was introduced to. How incredibly unimaginative, to let someone else define God for you and, then, having outgrown their definition, never to unshutter and look out a larger window."*

If the God you don't believe in is a little God, cruel, punishing, irrational, I invite you to open your heart to a big God - a God of love and compassion, courage, strength, wisdom, and hope. A God who will be with you during the worst times of your life, and the best, and any time you invite this great God into your life.