



*A sermon by Stephen Atkinson, Ministerial Candidate*

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## SEEKING SPIRIT

When I was seven years old, one night as I was trying to fall asleep, I got thinking about Jesus; about Jesus as a boy my own age. I wondered if Jesus knew who He was when He was seven. I figured He didn't. Then I thought that if a seven year old Jesus didn't know who He was, then I might just be Jesus and not know who I was. Maybe I was Jesus! I guess one of my earliest conceptions of God was... myself! Some would say I've never changed my mind.

Our family attended worship weekly, so church school for us boys and singing in the age-appropriate choirs were what we did every Sunday. I was confirmed at 13 as is done in the United Church. In the high school youth group, though, I began to question Christianity; it made no sense to me that God would save some people but not everyone. What would happen to my Hindu friends? I wanted God to behave more reasonably than that! My search for spiritual truth had begun.

Away from home at university, I found a circle of close friends: we lived in residence, eating together and talking for hours. After a disagreement early in second term, my best friend stopped talking to me, and so did everyone else. I tail-spinned into depression, but the gift from this episode is that it led me into a *conscious* search for spirit. If I couldn't rely on human beings anymore, it was time to figure out if there were a God I could believe in. I set out to read the whole Bible, the Koran, the Bhagavad-Gita, and soon found the Bahá'í Writings.

Well, I *have* over time discovered a reasonable God; a God of grace Who doesn't pick and choose who is worthy to be saved; a wise God Who recognizes that people's experiences and spiritual needs differ; a God not pushy or demanding, but patiently available to all. Since age 18, I've been in relationship with a God of my understanding, so I must tell you, at this first opportunity, the story of my theology. Parts of it may be difficult for you, so I ask you to "listen with the ears of your heart."

I assure you I'm not out to convince you of anything about God; I'm not concerned with whether you believe as I do or not. I've come to see that a good spiritual life does not *require* a belief in God. It's more important how we behave than how we believe; what we feel for each other here in this world is more crucial than what we feel towards any idea of divinity.

I'm not one who enjoys debating beliefs, though discussing them together is an essential part of church life. Wanting to *win* a debate about belief, though, is one of the least Unitarian motives I can imagine; it goes against so many of our principles and disrespects our traditions, which honour many sources of truth. We can, however, 'argue' fruitfully and respectfully; to disagree as a *growing* process; to explore with open minds the innumerable meanings of words: whether they label a belief, or act as a metaphor, or seem to be of no use at all.

There are those, and some no doubt are among us, who would prefer never to hear certain words, like God. I promise *not* to comfort you by avoiding such terms. The way to a robust spiritual life individually and communally is rather like psychotherapy; emotionally-laden images, ideas and memories can be healed by gently and gradually confronting what triggers us. It's not enough for a Unitarian church to be a refuge from theology we'd like to avoid; it must offer a kind of treatment for the pain and anger that ideas have caused. Such healing empowers us spiritually, and deeply roots all of our efforts.

I know that some people have been bashed in the name of God; I have been, too. But I refuse to let the bashers claim ownership or wield God as a weapon of judgment and condemnation. Rather, I declare the full-blooded reality that I am Unitarian Universalist, and I have a deep faith in God.

I admit, my faith has wandered far and wide. At first I clung to God like a raft in a stormy sea; the only cost for being saved was utter obedience. By 'saved', I mean from *myself*, particularly from homosexuality, for my search for the Divine was wrapped up in a desire to escape the sordid life of shame, fear and isolation that I thought was my only other choice. I was so perfectionistic that reading God's expectations as impossibly high seemed reasonable. Failing to be pure, I felt like a spiritual pollutant, tarring those around me. What else could happen but that a raft built of such straw as all that would eventually break apart. To risk drowning was far better than to continue wrestling with that intolerable God.

Time passed and that *previous* God became irrelevant as I came to accept my sexuality. Still I longed to believe in some *other* God, and to my great fortune, I stumbled upon One. As life taught me to be more forgiving of myself and others, so was this God merciful. As I let go of ridiculous standards of purity, so did this God accept failure and rejoice in small achievements. I learned these qualities of God from a number of life-changing epiphanies. Be as skeptical as you want, but I must tell you what set me on the path that brings me here. Just "keep listening."

After the end of my committed relationship with my ex-partner, I was angry! At him. Myself. But most of all, at God. I'd believed that my partner was God's gift. It seemed then that I was *supposed* to be in this relationship,

although now I understand it was a convenient excuse to ignore my misgivings and avoid making a tough decision. But back then, once it ended, I felt tricked and betrayed. I shook my little fist at the sky, turned my back and stopped communicating with God in any way. Still, I knew that, like a lover's quarrel, someday, somehow it would be resolved, but not until I'd shown God how furious I was. Ridiculous, of course, but these are the kind of things almost any of us can do in growing into an intimate relationship.

Anyway, one day, two long grudge-filled years later, a very ordinary Tuesday, I decided it was time to resume talking to God. It was lunch hour at my office in Toronto; I had probably 40 minutes left after eating before the next patient would arrive; lots of time for a quick, little, bitter prayer. All I did was shut my eyes and think, "Well, here I am." *Instantly*, I felt enveloped in an aura as warm as a shawl, and I burst into tears. This warmth felt *physical*, palpable, a radiant energy swirling around my head and upper body.

The tears and the warm sensation went on for what felt like a long time. When I clearly had to get hold of myself to be ready for the next patient, the thought occurred to me to ask if there was some reason I should keep going. That's when the ceiling opened up.

I don't mean the real ceiling, of course, though I did at one point open my eyes to be sure. For all I knew, maybe an angel was in the room. There wasn't, but an even stronger sensation of absolute Love and Acceptance poured down in a torrent from a certain angle above my head – right there. At the same time, this outpouring implanted *certainty* in me. I realized that my life had gone just as it was supposed to; I had always been OK, and my choices had always been right, even at the darkest or most shameful moments. Mercy and an almost laughing sense of delight *about* me rained down, and I 'knew' that it had always been there waiting. Only with a great effort of will did I 'say' to all this that I *had* to get back to work, and it receded, leaving behind a man with a changed soul, an expanded heart, and a renewed commitment to life.

I don't remember the rest of that afternoon, though I know I didn't just lay hands on my patients to cure them all. As I left my office building that evening, I wanted to give some money and speak for the first time to the young, homeless man who was always outside the door. I walked home, wanting to be in touch with everyone. Instead of watching the sidewalk, the store windows or... just air, I looked into people's eyes to see them for just a moment. Surprisingly, many strangers on that crowded street looked right back and seemed glad to see me. For those of you familiar with Toronto behavior, this itself was a miracle! For some time after, I prayed at every opportunity, and each time this powerful Grace reached down to touch me.

I can almost see some of you going down the checklist: hallucination, delusion, manic attack, temporal lobe seizure, brain tumor, endocrine imbalance

– rotten peanut, *something!* But I assure you that physical malfunctions don't make you *more* in touch with the world and more focused on lucid, planned, constructive actions. And they almost never save your soul. I've had other powerful, inexplicable moments of contact with what feels to be a Divine Guide, but It never comes when  $\neq$  most want or need It, another indication to me that I don't conjure It up myself.

Now that God has my full attention, I don't need the special effects. I've come to feel a Benevolent Presence in simple moments of contact with human beings, or random decisions that end up taking me to exactly the right place – especially when it's somewhere I never thought I wanted to be – like standing in a pulpit!

Now, besides testifying today that God is a Unitarian Universalist, I want you to note something. As you hear, I go back and forth between God-as-Being and God-as-Conception. Whatever the reality is hasn't changed during my little lifetime; only my perception has. I look back to times when I saw God as a specific 'being', and realize that I was unready to see more clearly That God could be greater; my *conceptions* were limited. I'm the first to admit that my understanding may evolve in the future as it's done before, and I welcome the possibility. If I'd held onto some earlier sense of the divine, I believe I'd have been stagnated. I'd have prevented finding room for spiritual expansion. So I don't waste time debating with myself as to whether I'm finally *right*; it's always the current sense which is right.

Likewise, we each conceive God differently; even those for whom God is... inconceivable! We evolve as people; our personal faiths evolve. This is why theological diversity is so powerful, creative and crucial for Unitarian Universalism. You here at North Shore embrace diversity; those who enter here with different beliefs and those who come seeking something to believe in are all welcomed. Whether you've thought of it this way or not, it means that you understand that belief can change over time, and not just from what they used to be to what they are now, but also to what they might evolve into as we go on growing.

Now, there is another angle on my theology which I want you to know about too, humanism, though perhaps a different kind than many of you already espouse. Faith, in my view, wells up from deep within our humanness. Faith is the drive to find some governing principle, some grounded meaning, so it can be sustained by family, tribe, culture, state, ethnicity, philosophy – any number of sources of principle and meaning. Faith is part of human nature, and I mean *nature*; it is of this world. An extension of this is the longing in some to find a groundedness that both emerges from what is essential within us and transcends all that we can know about this world. This drive to find meaning is essentially human.

Humanism, in my sense, governs even experiences of the spirit, changeable as they can be over time. If a person's nature is to find meaning grounded in tradition, then spiritual experience will *conform* to what is taught. We must be careful not to condescend to those who approach life in this way. If another person's nature is to find meaning grounded in transformation, then spiritual experience will *confirm* what is taught, or reject it. We Unitarian Universalists tend to be transformers, but we must be careful not to elevate ourselves above those who are by nature different from us. Humanism demands that we respect different expressions of human nature.

What's most important about humanism is that the ultimate responsibility to develop the new consciousness that can bring about a future society that some call Heaven on Earth: that responsibility rests in our own hands. The construction of that world requires that the human imagination can envision and design it. The transformation of spirit and character required to achieve this vision is primarily accomplished by the touching of one human heart by another. When the prophet Amos in the Hebrew Bible says, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream," he's counseling human action, not predicting some future when God takes over and cleans the place up. The salvation of our future is a co-production, and it matters not whether you see your work as entirely material or entirely spiritual as long as we're working towards the same end.

This church, your congregation, *you* have had your times of crisis and loss, like I have, and you've had periods of dizzying awakening. You are on the cusp of your next spiritual transformation. You're working to put behind you the struggles of the past and you're building new church frameworks to help you face the new struggles that will come as you clarify your vision and rejuvenate your sense of purpose. You want to continue and deepen the unfolding of your humanity, and you want to move out into your community and onward from there to touch the world with your hearts.

My story shows you that I know something about transformation, and about wading into unknown water. I never knew what was going to happen next, but if I'd not let it happen, I wouldn't be here, so happy to finally meet you.

I know you are able to discern what you want to be and then to set about becoming that. This church will strengthen and move forward. I hope to help you make that happen.

Shalom. Blessed be. Amen.