

“god(goddess)”

**A Sermon by the Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, April 8, 2007
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, VA**

I am a religious naturalist. I have to tell you as I begin this series of three sermons on god/goddess (I do not capitalize them), that you need to be aware of my starting place as I speak of god. Inevitably it will have an effect upon where I wind up. There are four basic features of religious naturalism according to Charley Hardwick of Meadville/Lombard Theological School—our seminary in Chicago: These are

- (1) that only the world of nature is real;
- (2) that nature itself is necessary in the sense of requiring no sufficient reason beyond itself to account either for its origin or ontological ground [that means its being];
- (3) that nature as a whole may be understood without appeal to any kind of intelligence or purposive agent, and;
- (4) that all causes are natural causes so that every natural event is itself a product of other natural events.

The term “nature” (I don’t capitalize it either) includes the worlds of culture and human history. Some people would call me an “atheist.” I don’t use that word about myself simply because it doesn’t tell you anything significant about me except what I am not. There are a lot of things that I am not—a nationalist, a male chauvinist, a feminist, gay, young, elderly, handicapped—the list goes on and on and it only tells you things about me in reverse order, like an onion being peeled. When you get to the center, what will be there?

One thing that you will find there is a skeptic about all claims of ultimate and absolute truth. A second thing you will find there is a person in awe of the universe and of love. This means that when I speak of god I am speaking about someone else’s value system, something I see from the outside. That means I cannot feel it from the inside, and I think that means that I really cannot understand it. That’s my warning about me, to you.

I have a bias as does everyone. I’ll try to balance it in this three part series on god/goddess, no god, and why god won’t go away. But even more, you need to be aware of it in trying to understand what is useful in what I am saying. Some of what I say may be nonsense to you—that is, something you don’t sense with your own senses. Beware.

In his book Bringing God Home; A Traveller’s Guide, The Rev. Forrest Church (I do capitalize those four words) says “When God [he capitalizes it] dwells in my heart, I abide in God’s presence.... My experience of God is personal also; not that God is a person but that I am... The Trinity [he capitalizes it and that’s the last time I’ll mention capitalization in this sermon—it’s a way of separating one word from others as if it were qualitatively different and more important than other words; the Trinity] works nicely for me in this way [he said]:

God above us, God within us, God among us. Unitarianism being a nondoctrinal faith, I am one Unitarian who finds the Trinity more suggestive of God’s possible nature than is undifferentiated oneness. This particular aspect of the orthodox Christian mythos liberates my mind to explore the creation more poetically.... [p. 208] If wary of superstition, I am not at all convinced that by dint of sheer rationality we can come close to apprehending the mystery of being alive and having to die. *Life is a miracle that can’t be explained without explaining it away.* [p.214]

Reminiscing about growing up, Forrest, who today is the minister of the largest Unitarian Universalist church in the world, New York City's Church of All Souls, says

When I was a child, my parents were more godlike than was the little God I prayed to at suppertime and before bed.... Etched in my soul, and by far the most haunting memory of my childhood, is a fantasy of death.... I was eight years old. I can't remember how often I succumbed to this fantasy, but I do recall what prompted it (a brutal argument with my mother), the time of day when these battles took place (right before bed), and the thing that triggered them (always a lie). When my mother caught me lying, not content to leave bad enough alone, I would fabricate more lies to cover up the first one.... More vivid in my memory than the struggle itself is its after-math. After sobbing uncontrollably for a few minutes, I would launch my mind into a sea of self-pity. Into this wine-red sea sailed my fantasy of death.

In his fantasy Forrest would run away from home wearing only pajamas, fall into a snowdrift, die, and be found by a schoolmate the next morning. His parents would be summoned and his mother would be overcome by grief. His father would be distant.

He would play the fantasy over and over until Mom actually came into the darkened room, caught him up in her arms, confess that she was sorry about the conflict and cry with him, telling him that she loved him as she cradled him in her arms. He would drift off to sleep and when he woke in the morning, the fantasy of death would be a distant dream.

"In this childhood drama my mother assumes the role of a traditional Judeo-Christian God," he said. "She punishes me for my wrongdoing and then forgives me, each an act of love. I play the part of a two-bit Jonah. I sin, run away from God, cast myself into the deep, and—at the moment when everything seems lost—am saved." [p. 39]

Perhaps one reason that I (Dick Weston-Jones) am a naturalist is that my parents never taught me to pray. I don't remember ever being terrified of death, or as a child even conceiving of it at all. My earliest memory of death was the hollowness I felt one day when the father of a close friend at church died. I attended the memorial service, and at the end walked away by myself. I was an adolescent, perhaps 14 or 15. I walked around the very long city blocks surrounding our church and finally returned, if not healed at least numbed by the presence not of a loving mother or loving God, but by the continuous flow of city traffic, of people continuing their lives with no awareness that death had just intruded into the life of the boy walking by.

As Forrest grew up and then as a young adult, he says he continued his search for freedom. "Not only by chasing rainbows but by seeking freedom from my feelings as well, I would purchase tickets to almost anywhere advertising itself to my fickle affections as a getaway from life's daily responsibilities. I lived *for* today," he said, "not *in* today. Finally, to myself I prayed, obliterate today. Feel sorry for yourself and curse your mother. I spent years of my life either running away from home or burrowed deep in hiding there. I fled myself ostensibly to find myself; in search of God, I ran away from God," said Forrest. [p.48]

"Escape fantasies promote the mistaken belief that our dreams of fulfillment cannot be met right here and now. That we first must look elsewhere to discover this belief to be false makes it no more true." [p. 47]

My quest was not for the God of my childhood. Losing such a God was no more tragic than losing a favorite toy that one has outgrown. Nonetheless I longed for the sense of place I had known as a little boy, both within myself and within my world.... My initial interest in religion had little to do with the 'idea' of God and with questions of meaning.... I continued to be attracted by spiritual renegades, particularly heretics.... At the outset of my ministry, realizing how spare my personal experience of God actually was, I did everything I could to avoid preaching on the subject. In a Unitarian Universalist church, this is not difficult," he said. "I'm not sure that anyone noticed." [pp. 5, 6]

I've had the same experience as Forrest. This is the first sermon I've preached in four decades on the existence and meaning of god, though I've used the word [non-capitalized—oops, I said I wouldn't mention capitalization, didn't I?] frequently while speaking about the Judeo-Christian heritage or someone else's beliefs, or metaphorically about the mystery that no other word fully conveys. Forrest went on:

My career continued to thrive. By outward appearances, my life prospered. But it was hollow at the core. Delving into this hollowness taught me...that when we don't believe in God, it's not that we believe in nothing; rather we believe in almost anything. Having out-grown my childhood God, I awakened to the realization that for years I had persisted in worshiping a string of much smaller gods, all of which failed me. As they did, I failed others, especially the people I loved best. I was lost in the desert of self. [p. 6]

So who is the God whom Forrest sought and found in his spiritual wanderings? He says

I recognize that for many people the word God has shrunk from repeated use. But we can always re-stretch it.... By my definition, *God is our name for a power that is greater than all and yet present in each: the life force; the Holy; Being itself....* In my experience, only by positing the existence of a power beyond our comprehension can we begin to account for the miracle of being with an appropriate measure of humility and awe...." [p. 20]

We find evidence for the divine first within ordinary things and daily encounters. The surest way to find God (the Sacred or the Holy) is to share our deepest experiences not only of joy but also of sorrow. Everyone suffers. We are all broken and in need of healing. We struggle to accept ourselves and forgive others. To adopt the old language, we are all sinners.... Since truth in religion is like truth in poetry, by its very nature the language of religion is poetic language: words like God, soul, angels, spirit; Heaven, Hell and Purgatory; salvation and sin.... [p. 22] Only something as large as God encompasses the mystery and wonder of my being. [he said. p. 18]

I have let Forrest speak for himself in his own words, because I would be suspicious of the transliterations a naturalist might make of the words of a theist. Still Forest is only one kind of theist, and I'm not sure he would even use the word to speak of himself. His views are what are often referred to as "Process Theology." He experiences God in the stuff of his life, in what he calls the transrational realm. This is not irrational. He says

In a principled flight from irrationality, rationalists betray reason by losing sight of the transrational realm (the world of myth and parable, of poetry and paradox), where rationalism is not rejected, but transcended.

The danger of excluding the transrational realm from our field of contemplation is that, when we sophisticate our minds against mystery, each irrational straw man we kill may clear a place for an equally insidious self-delusion. Presuming to understand, even to control, powers so beyond our control and understanding as to be in fact unimaginable, we lose our sense of humility and awe. We take the creation for granted rather than receiving it with fitting gratitude as an undeserved, unfathomable gift. When rationalism supplants mystery, our imagination and sense of wonder are just as likely to die as are the gods we pride ourselves for having killed. [p. 216]

Given how hard it is to love ourselves sometimes, we are fortunate that love (like grace) is something we receive not because we deserve it but by opening our hearts to make room for it... [p. 115] Rather than a reward for good behavior, love, like home, is something we somehow haven't to deserve. [pp. 124-125]

This is something that is open to all of us, from the most foolish to the wisest among us, from the most innocent to the most sophisticated, from the theists to the naturalists. Forrest recounts a story one of his parishioners told him about telling his seven-year-old what the “seven wonders of the world” referred to—you know, the pyramids in Egypt, and the hanging gardens of Babylon and all the other great monuments of the middle east once considered the most remarkable creations of the ancient world. As the two stood looking at the stars above them, the man described each of the seven man-made wonders to his son in detail. Minutes passed in silence.

The man lost himself in the heavens. The boy pondered his father's words. “Daddy?” “Yes, son?” “Those things you told me about. They aren't the real seven Wonders of the World.” “What do you mean, son?” “The first wonder of the world is a baby being born. Don't you think so, Dad? The second is being able to see. Then comes being able to talk and walk. That's four. Hearing makes five. Then either touch or smell, maybe both?” Looking upon the creation with new eyes, his father said “How about love?” “Love,” his son repeated. “You got it, Dad. That's the eighth wonder of the world.”

I don't know if that child was a theist or a naturalist. Everything he knew was very real, very natural, very sacred to him. And to Forrest Church.

The eighth wonder is a mystery open to us all, whether we are theists or naturalists, Christians or Pagans, artists or scientists, or anything else. It took both the child and his father together to think of it and do it. You can do it too and I know you do, whatever you are.

Dick Weston-Jones

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough

1710 Old NC 10, Hillsborough, NC 27278, www.uuchnc.org, 919-644--0567