

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist

**“Searching for the Divine”**

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**Introduction**

One of my favorite jokes about Unitarians is that we believe in “one God at most.” This is a take-off of a historical definition of one half of our faith. If you look in the encyclopedia under the word Unitarian it will probably say, “A religious organization affirming a belief in one God, as opposed to the Trinity.” I questioned the western view of God, the old man in the sky, many decades ago. I have never questioned a belief in the divine. The purpose of this sermon is to share my conclusions about the divine.

Yes, there is the possibility that the divine does not exist. The world may be a random collection of events with no ultimate meaning. I can’t accept this notion. If you believe there is no ultimate design, no ultimate meaning to life, no ultimate goodness, then my arguments may seem worthless. I agree with Paul Tillich when he wrote: “God disappears, divinity remains.”

**Definitions**

First, let’s look at some definitions. There are different meanings to the word divine. As a noun Webster says it pertains to a deity, it is the characteristic of God—the divine nature. It is appropriated to God as in divine worship. It is that which is holy, sacred as in “divine songs.” To be divine is to be devoted to God as a religious person—a person skilled in divinity; a clergy. Divine can also be a verb—to divine, to foresee, to guess or conjecture, to forbode. Finally, divine can be an adjective: to be excellent or perfect—as in that divine food.

**The Death of God**

There are many reasons to reject God and the divine. We all know about the God who disappeared, the male god that dominated Western religion for so long. Nietzsche declared that God died in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even many Christian theologians confirmed that death in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I know because I was in my formative years of college when I learned of that death.

My colleague, Jacqueline Collins, learned of this death before I did. She grew up in France during WWII. She writes:

My earliest recollections, as a child, are the images, sounds and smells of war: the noise of airplanes overhead, canons firing, sirens whining, the tanks rolling down the street. Memories of being awoken in the middle of the night to go down to the cellars where we spent untold hours waiting for bombs to fall. Images of the darkness of the streets at night. God, for me, (she writes) died in the conflagration of Europe in the late 30’s and early 40’s.

I didn’t experience WWII. Born in 1946, among the earliest of the “Baby Boomers” I was a product of that war. Unlike my father, I didn’t see the death of fellow soldiers on the battlefield. I would, however, feel the experience of loss, to another war—the Vietnam War. Some of my school buddies would go off to war and never come back. My brother, Larry, spent six years in Vietnam and came back a different person. He would die in the 1990’s as a result of his war injuries and illnesses, especially “agent orange.”

I would feel the loss of war. I would also read about the deaths of Americans who were fighting for justice, followers of Martin Luther King, Jr.—blacks and whites who risked their lives for equality, and paid the price.

The notion that God is in control was something I could never accept. I read about Paul Tillich who interrupted his academic career to fight in WWII, filled with nationalistic fervor, and belief in a “nice god who would make everything turn out for the best.” Like Tillich and the existentialists who witnessed the horrors of war, I could not believe in the benevolence of God in the face of the horrors of trench warfare.

We are now spreading a similar doubt in the minds of small children in Iraq who must question the existence of God when they witness the terror of war firsthand. The methods of war have changed, but the horrors of war have not. Now it is high tech bombs coming from airplanes or from the back seat of a jeep.

It should be no surprise that young Iraqians will question the existence of God now as our culture did after WWII. Collins concludes: “The 20<sup>th</sup> century experience in Europe made it difficult for the head and the heart to hold to the reality of suffering and to the goodness and power of god at the same time.” This is my belief now. For me as with Paul Tillich, god is dead, but divinity lives on. How can I say that?

1. First, I believe in the divine because I believe in the power of goodness. This is the primary calling that we as ministers are called to do, and in so doing, we ask of the people who are kind enough to listen.
2. Second, I believe in the divine because I believe in the miracles that occur everyday in nature. Albert Einstein writes about his experience as a five-year-old child when he saw a simple magnetic compass and became fascinated that the needle of the compass would always turn to the north. Einstein saw this force as a mystery. It couldn't be seen or felt by our normal senses, but still was very real. Einstein concluded, “I experienced a miracle.” To me this mystery is part of what I see as divinity and what others see as God.
3. Third, I believe in the divine because I believe in the power of the human community.

We all know the divine exists when we feel tired, and down, drifting through the waters of no direction, and somehow we find a way to get through another day.

We all know the divine exists when we are in conflict with another person and somehow we find a way to talk to them and work our way through it.

### **To Be A Divine**

This week I experienced the divine after my accident. I returned home on Thursday and immediately began receiving emails and calls from my colleagues, church members and friends. By the end of the week I had received love and support from close to 100 individuals and families. Even when I was alone in my recliner with my foot in the air, with no one in the house, I knew I was not alone. Individuals have shared their love and support, their positive energy, as well as their anguish and concern for my pain. Divinity surrounded me.

I have received special inspiration from my colleagues. One of those divine who has often inspired me is the Rev. Dr. Patrick O'Neil. Patrick and I began our ministry alike, as Unitarian Universalists are required to do, college and then divinity school. He describes the beginning of his ministry this way:

I gave away the life I knew,  
And took myself to school, to that graduate desert place  
They said I had to cross before my ministry could begin.

I served my full sentence among the Divines,  
I did my time with all the desert saints,  
And with all desert writings I would rarely read again.  
I mastered the ritual tongues required:  
I was conversant in Emersonian, Neibuhrian,  
Bonhoefferian, and Von Harnackian.  
I could say Good Morning in Whiteheadian,  
And Good Evening in Hartshornian.

After five years, when I could demonstrate  
The difference between “Theoria” and “Praxis,”  
They said that was worth a D.Min. right there,

Young man. Go Forth and preach the word.

Patrick O'Neill would learn what all good ministers learn--that training for ministry begins when you serve a congregation. Ordination in our Association is something done by a congregation for a reason. He writes:

Hands were laid upon me a quarter-century ago.  
I have been ordained many times since.  
I know, that's heresy to say, but like the best heresies,  
it's mostly true.

In fact, hands are laid upon me every Sunday.  
They touch my head, they brace my shoulders,  
They pat me on the back; grab me by the lapels,  
They clutch me in desperation.  
Hands squeeze mine in tight-fisted thanks for sermons  
That sometimes confirm their own confusion.

While other hands are offered with the limp-wristed critique of faint praise  
For preaching that has my blood on every page.

These were words meant for the person in the pew. Patrick spoke to the ministers when he said:

One does what the work requires.  
Like you, I have poured out my heart, poured out my brain,  
Poured out the stuff of my life into a river of sermons,  
Twenty minutes a week . . .

Twenty minutes a week, forty Sundays a year,  
For twenty-five years (for me it's 33 years).  
Poured out my tears, too, in eulogies too many to count.

To be a Divine is to be part of a Living Tradition of ministers who speak the word to those in need. Patrick says:

As predecessors in our pulpits once pastored and preached through World Wars, or Great  
Depressions, or walked in Selma, or gave Sanctuary in times of protest,  
We too have given voice to the issues of our day.  
We, too, know what it is to comfort the afflicted,  
To make plain the face of sorrows,  
To keep watch and keep faith with those in need.

Let it be said of us, we served our times  
As it was given us to serve.  
It was our pulpits and our counsel that people turned September 12<sup>th</sup> in search of sanity and  
courage.  
Columbine and Oklahoma City, Afghanistan and two Gulf Wars,  
Bosnia and Rwanda and Somalia and El Salvador.  
All were ours to theologize, explain, bemoan, and decry.

Yes, I agree, Patrick, we are Divines, and we have a calling. That is what we do. We hope that people are moved and stirred by what we say. Our goal as Divines is to enliven the Liberal Faith,

to call us out from our sanctuaries on Walden Pond to re-engage with liberal fire still-unworn battles for religious freedom, still-unfinished campaigns for civil liberties and human rights, even as our proud legacy of humanist principle has been maintained.

This is what it is to be called to ministry in our liberal religious tradition.

To be a Divine, is to recognize the almost impossible challenges before us, moving people who will not be moved, afflicting the comfortable, and comforting the afflicted. In the end we know our job is never done, and we don't have enough hours in the day to do all that we dream.

To be a Divine is to spend sleepless nights wondering what we could have done, and how we will do it differently tomorrow. Fortunately, we wake up the next day, carrying forward more than we thought we could.

To believe in Divinity is to believe in the surprises that come our way.

To be a Divine is to know that our "life's work announces itself,

An unexpected guest, in the doorway of (our) soul (s)."

I told Patrick on that hot summer day in Long Beach, California, that was the best sermon I had heard. He seemed to be moved by my words of praise. Another quality of the best Divines is humility. Patrick has that quality. We Divines are grateful for the congregation that will have us and to the colleagues who have inspired us and told us what we needed to hear even when we didn't want to listen.

### **Conclusions**

Do I believe in the god of religions? No. Do I believe in the divine? Yes. Henry Nelson Wieman, probably the preeminent UU theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, saw God or the Divine as the source of human good. That source is seen in creativity and transformation in this life. It is this creativity that gives us hope for the future. Wieman wrote:

Every human capacity has its noble and indispensable task to fulfill, namely, to search out the nature of this creativity and to meet the condition it may demand.

This creative power is part of human nature but it goes beyond human beings. It can be aided by worship only when we commit ourselves to the values received from many sources. Divinity came to Jesus in the wilderness, Buddha under the Bo tree, Paul in the desert of Damascus, Augustine as he committed himself to a new life, Martin Luther King, jr, in a jail cell. This creative power is seen in literature, philosophy and science. It comes to us as we are alone and within community. In the end it transforms the world.

We experience divinity when we see the beauty in a flower, the resourcefulness of an animal, the wonder of a starry night, the love between two people. I experienced divinity this week as I witnessed my wife, Marti, changing the dressing on my foot, a foot I could not stand to see. I knew I was loved and would be cared for if I needed.

Yes, there is divinity in the commonplace or in the majestic. It is creativity and it is inter-relationship. There is divinity in over-coming illness, and in the acceptance of death as a part of life. The creative good can be seen in science and technology, art and literature, in politics and in business. Divinity is seen in the life of a devoted nun in India, or in the laboratory as a scientist searches for treatments for cancer or AIDS, or Alzheimer's.

We have many sources for believing in the divine in our liberal religious tradition. Ralph Waldo Emerson has been my source of inspiration for many decades now. When I question my purpose as a minister, or a divine, I would remember his words. The goal of the minister he is "to convert life into truth; life through the fire of thought."

It was the father of American Unitarianism, William Ellery Channing, who said that humans are created in God's likeness. God is infinite justice, goodness and holiness. We are the true Christians, he said. Jesus' mission was the recovery of men and women to virtue and holiness; to a sense of duty. God is essential goodness, holiness, justice, and virtue; sustainer of virtue in the human soul.

According to Channing if you believe in the benevolence of God, you will love and serve your neighbor. If you believe in his justice, you will live an upright life; if you believe in God's purity, you will regulate your thoughts, imagination and desires;

Emerson said a divine person is to combine thought and virtue, to be a standard of goodness in society. Science and religion shall be one. "The world will be the mirror of the soul . . . the law of gravitation with purity of heart . . . Ought, Duty is one with Science, with Beauty, and with Joy." (Divinity School Address)

Theodore Parker said that Christianity is not a set of doctrines but a matter of attaining oneness with God. The light of God is seen within the human soul.

As I close this morning I encourage you to look around you and you will find divinity there—it is beauty, it is wholeness, it is perfection; it is peace. It is seen in the eyes of a child or the voice of a bird. Divinity is witnessed when one sacrifices oneself for a larger cause, a greater good.

I close with the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his famous, and appropriately names, "Divinity School Address." You will have to use your imagination and place yourself in the middle of summer:

In this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life. The grass grows, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of flowers. The air is full of birds, and sweet with the breath of the pine, the balm-of-Gilead, and the new hay. Night brings no gloom to the heart with its welcome shade. Through the transparent darkness the stars pour their almost spiritual rays. Humans under them seem as a young child, and the huge globe a toy. The cool night bathes the world as with a river, and prepares our eyes again for the crimson dawn. The mystery of nature was never displayed more happily. The corn and the wine have been freely dealt to all creatures, and the never-broken silence with which the old bounty goes forward, has not yielded yet one word of explanation. One is constrained to respect the perfection of this world, in which our sense converse. How wide; how rich; what invitation from every property it gives to every faculty of humanity! In its fruitful soils; in its navigable sea; in its mountains of meal and stone; in its forests of all woods; in its animals; in its chemical ingredients; in the powers and path of light, heat, attraction, and life, it is well worth the pith and heart of great humans to subdue and enjoy it. The planters, the mechanics, the inventors, the astronomers, the builders of cities, and the captains, history delights to honor.

When someone asks me what I mean by divinity, I point them to Emerson, and his Divinity School Address. These words have inspired me to appreciate life, and give all that I can to its betterment. I give thanks to all the sources of human good, creativity, love, sacrifice, and service. They are to me the divine found in nature, in individuals and in community. Thank you.