

“Imagining God”
Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
Meriden, CT

September 23, 2012

“Oh my God!” We’ve all said it! There’s even a twitter-friendly acronym for it: OMG! As an expression of astonishment, it was the response of my colleagues at a recent meeting, when I shared with them my topic for this morning. “You’re going to talk about *that* and you’ve just arrived there?”

They weren’t revealing their theology so much as they were registering their good-humored astonishment that I would broach this lightning rod concept so early in my ministry here. So why am I doing so? Because I think this community has a low tolerance for boredom and a laudable gift for questioning and wondering and imagining around matters that evoke questions and wonder and imagination. So...how do our religious imaginations connect with the ultimately sacred, the ineffable, the transcendent, Love, aka God?

A nine-year-old boy is out playing with his dog. Tau, the dog, runs off into high grass. Matthew Berger, the boy, chases him. Matthew runs hard, and then he trips. Probably a log, he thinks; but he stops, looks down, and is suddenly wild with excitement. “Dad, I found a fossil!” he yells to his father. It was August 15, 2008. The setting was South Africa, just north of Johannesburg, in a town called Cradle of Humankind, honest! Matthew’s father is Dr. Lee Berger, an American paleoanthropologist, who had been searching for hominid bones “just a hill and a half away for two decades.” What Matthew had found was a clavicle of a new species of hominid, a prehistoric form of mammals who were erect and bipedal and yes, one of our ancestors. Dr. Berger was ecstatic. I trust that Matthew’s dog, Tau, turned around to see what all the fuss was about.

Matthew had found the partial remains of a young boy, perhaps a year older than he. Since then, Dr. Berger and his colleagues at the Institute for Human Evolution at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, have found more of the boy’s skeleton, including his remarkably preserved skull. And they’ve found the remains of three other hominids. All lived close to two million years ago.

As reported in the journal *Science*, shortly after the discovery:

“Dr. Berger...and a team of scientists said the fossils from the boy and a woman were a surprising and distinctive mixture of primitive and advanced anatomy and thus qualified as a new species of hominid, the ancestors and other close relatives of humans.”

As for the ancient child, the children of South Africa were invited to enter a contest to name him. The Standard Bank of South Africa offered prizes in the form of generous funds for the winner’s education and for science education at that child’s school. Fifteen thousand children submitted their entries. Young Matthew Berger sat on the judging panel. Omphemetse Keepile, a 17-year-old student from Waverly, Johannesburg, received the honor of naming this ancient child. He would be called *Karabo*. In the languages of Setswana and Sotho, it means “answer.” Karabo was the answer to so many mysteries. A child had discovered a child who would be named by a child.

In Cradle of Humankind on a sunny August morning just a few years ago, a boy chased his dog. If young Matthew could have leapt roughly two million years into the past, he may have met a strange counterpart to himself, standing upright on two legs, but with features that would have startled Matthew and his dog. Rarely do we as humans see and touch our beginnings as did Matthew. For his father, it was a moment of spiritual ecstasy.

Why call it *spiritual*? Wouldn't we more accurately describe it as a moment of *scientific* ecstasy? Hold this thought for a few moments. We'll return to it.

Now imagine yourself snuggled into a seat at a familiar cinema. You're intrigued by a new film that's come out—"God, the Movie." Reviews have been mixed, but reviews on God anything have always been mixed. Popcorn in hand, you're ready to see for yourself. The theatre darkens; you survive the previews. You are about to see an image of God projected. You are about to witness yet another imagining of God.

In a clear legible script, the film is announced with the names of producer, director, and a few of the actors. God is missing from the credits. The background graphic is a scene of tall wind-blown grasses under a morning sun. Wind suffices for the initial soundtrack. The film begins. A dog appears, barking playfully. A boy appears, chasing his dog.

You get the picture. It is with this story of Matthew and Tau and their romp in the grass and what comes of it that I would begin "God, the Movie!"—a quite literal projection of one image of God.

Why? Because this story embodies transcendence in the everyday. There are no miracles. There is nothing supernatural about it. It recounts the chance discovery of something extraordinary by a child at play, albeit a child who tripped over what he was savvy enough to recognize for what it was and a father whose professional passion was the search for hominid remains. Dr. Berger had even written his doctoral dissertation on "hominid shoulder bones," of which one is the clavicle, precisely the specimen found by his son.

I suppose we could see it as an episode of "The Twilight Zone" in the light of day. But this story is no more twilight zone than God or whatever or however we imagine God to be. One doesn't have to be an avowed deist or theist to understand that there is a life force at play in the universe. God is a name common to what much of humankind calls this life force. I like the way my late friend and mentor, Forrest Church, referred to God as "that which is greater than all and present in each." Is this supernatural? I don't think so. Is it extraordinarily natural? I believe it is, as natural as the extraordinary epiphanies of life, as natural as breath—"breath," a translation for the Hebrew *ruach*, spoken in the second verse of the first chapter of the biblical book of Genesis:

"...and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters."

which could also be read:

"...and the breath of God..." or "the wind of God,"

like the wind moving through the tall grasses in the opening scene of what I imagine as "God, the Movie."

Such an opening scene confounds popular notions of God as supernatural—that is, non-natural. Such notions give rise to the definitive proclamation that there is no God, that it's all nonsense. Nature is; God isn't. What I can breathe and touch and smell and taste and think and feel is real; God isn't. Theology and literature and often cinematography commonly play into this supernatural, non-natural notion of God, a small God in the vastness of what is even imaginable.

According to the late Unitarian preacher, A. Powell Davies, such a notion is resisted because the wrong question is asked, implicitly or explicitly—that is, “Is there a God?” And in Davies' words, folks who ask it “bring before their minds the image of a majestic personage...an image...which prevents them from seeing the reality at which they should be looking.” Such an image suggests a far different “God, the Movie,” but indeed one that is a projection of an image wrought by the mind, though a radically different image than that of a boy chasing his dog amid wind-blown grasses.

Davies claimed that thinking of God as outside “ordinary experience” assumes an external reality that we could not possibly know anything about, because our minds function within the reality that is nature. “...how can we imagine,” he asked, “anything that is not known to us in the natural world?” What we should be asking, he contended, “is not whether there is a God, as though God could be something outside everything else, but what it is of which we have experience when we feel the power of truth, or the claim of justice, or the sense of beauty.”

Now let's return to what I promised we would get back to...Matthew's father in his moment of recognition, the moment that he knew the import of what his son had discovered, a moment of *spiritual ecstasy* and yes, a moment of *scientific ecstasy*. Do we doubt that Dr. Berger might have cried an instinctive, “Oh my God!”—not in deference to some “majestic personage,” but in wonder, in awe, in over-the-top delight. His spirit was moved within the embrace of his mind. His mind was moved within the embrace of his spirit.

“The spiritual,” proclaimed Davies, “is completely real.”

There are countless notions of God and spirit, countless notions that counter what I'm suggesting, what Davies suggested, and what my dear friend Forrest suggested. “God, the Movie” holds the possibility of the countless projections humans have cast onto the screens of our thought and imagination since we could think and imagine.

In my meeting with colleagues this past Thursday, our guest of honor was yet another colleague, Rev. Mark Kiyimba, pastor of New Life Kampala, a Unitarian Universalist congregation in the capital of Uganda. Our conversation turned to our concepts of God. “Within the Unitarian Universalist faith, God is big!” observed Mark. “My imagination of God is ‘Which God?’ I can't understand God in only one context.” Mark, by the way, was not among my colleagues who expressed astonishment at my chosen topic for this morning!

Karen Armstrong, one of the most original scholars of our time, challenges assumptions of all kinds, including the religious. In her arresting work, *A History of God*, she remarks, in the same tenor as Davies and my friend, Mark, that

“the statement ‘I believe in God’ has no objective meaning, as such, but like any other statement only means something in context, when proclaimed by a particular community.”

The notion of “God” varies across communities and changes across history. Without this “flexibility,” observed Armstrong, “it would not have survived to become one of the great human ideas.” She continues:

“...throughout history, men and women have experienced a dimension of the spirit that seems to transcend the mundane world. Indeed, it is an arresting characteristic of the human mind to be able to conceive concepts that go beyond it in this way.”

Transcendence is a *human* notion, a *natural* notion. It is our experience of the extraordinary, fully within the scope of the real, the natural. Some call it God, but even in the Judeo-Christian Bible there are many names, so many names. In the lyrics of Brian Wren that we sang earlier, we “bring many names.” In the poetry of Nancy Shaffer that we spoke earlier, she who prayed

“wanted everyone to feel included in her prayer,” so “she said right at the beginning several names for the Holy: *Spirit...Holy One, Mystery, God...Spirit of Life, Spirit of Love, Ancient Holy One, ..and also Spirit of This Earth...*” and my favorite, “*One Who Is an Entire Ocean of Compassion.*”

Onto the screens of our wonder, our imagination, our hopes and fears, our dreams, our beliefs and our disbeliefs, we each project our very own version of “God, the Movie.” Netflix couldn’t possibly carry them all.

Imagine that you’re back at your local cinema, tucked into your seat, watching my version. You know the opening scene, but a couple of hours have passed, or so you imagine. You’ve long since forgotten your popcorn. Up on the screen you’re watching what might be a young child running through tall grasses, chasing what might be a dog. But this child doesn’t look any more like the young boy we met in the opening scene than the young boy of the opening scene looked like the child who was once far more than a clavicle. After all, *two million years have passed*. As this new boy-form runs through tall grasses in pursuit of something resembling a dog, he suddenly trips. He is face to face with an ancient counterpart, the remains of a child whom the children of his time will name *Karabo*, “answer.”

May the wind, the breath, the spirit of life, the God of many names never cease to astound us in the endless bounty that is Life, with its countless questions and astonishing “answers.”

Amen.

Sources:

Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1993, xx-xxi.

Michael Balter, "Candidate Human Ancestor from South Africa Sparks Praise and Debate," *Science*, April 9, 2010, Vol. 328 no. 5975, pp. 154-155.

The Book of Genesis in the Bible (Revised Standard Version)

Rev. A. Powell Davies, "People Ask About God," January 13, 1957,
<http://www.dmuuc.org/Davies/PeopleAskAboutGod.Sermon.html>.

Celia W. Dugger and John Noble Wilford (New York Times), "Fossil find may link humans with apes," *The Boston Globe*, April 9, 2010, A10.

Celia W. Dugger and John Noble Wilford, "New Hominoid Species Discovered in South Africa," *The New York Times*, April 9, 2010, A1, 10.

Mark Kiyimba, Pastor, New Life Kampala Unitarian Universalist, Kampala, Uganda, conversation of September 20, 1912. Quoted by permission.

"Name the Sediba Child Fossil and You Could Win R75,000!"
<http://www.cradleofhumankind.co.za/news/Pages/RecentArticles.aspx>

"New Hominid Child Is Named," June 2010, <http://www.mogalecity.gov.za/news/2011/197-new-hominid-child-is-nam>

Nancy Shaffer, "That Which Holds All," *Instructions in Joy: Meditations*, Skinner House Books, Boston, 2002.

The Unitarian Universalist Association of Uganda, <http://ugandaunitarian.org/>

Brian Wren, "Bring Many Names," in *Singing the Living Tradition*, The Unitarian Universalist Association, Beacon Press, Boston, 1993, 23.