

Rev. Linda Simmons  
Bravery Muscles  
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As a Unitarian Universalist I have been content to find god in nature, in loving hearts, in unexpected and unrequired places. My theology is one that allows god lots of room to grow.

I have noticed that my god has grown up as I have. Have you notice that? I am aware that I am more capable of a mature god as I age, one that does not exist to affirm or respond to my personal ego and needs but a mystery that is unnamable, ineffable.

I have not needed a god for a long time that I had to question, whose allusiveness taunted me, whose presence or lack of presence, response or lack or response, will or lack of will played in my mind.

For me god has been for a long time what happens between us when we lives of compassion. And in seeing god there, here, between us, as love, grace, compassion, hope inside of suffering, I know there is no place this god of love cannot be if only we open ourselves, live into the question, show up with right action. God is always right here.

Speaking of compassion, I heard a story the other day of a man who shop lifted a can of peaches from a grocery store. When he approached the judge, who was compassionate, the judge asked if he stole the can of peaches, Yes you honor, I did. And how many peaches were in the can then? Well, your honor, there were 9. Okay then, 9 hours of detention for you. And then from the back his wife yelled, your honor, he stole a can of peas too!

When I started working as a chaplain in hospitals, my ability to let god exist between us when we show up with our whole selves and do the work of love, weakened. I wanted more.

I want a Zeus god who could throw lightning bolts at injustice and cure illness with only a quiet request. Over time, I joined the ranks of those whose voices silently populate the ether of the hospital, calling out, begging to be heard.

God, I suddenly asked, how is it possible that you exist and this extent of human suffering exists? How is it possible that you are a god of love (and I cannot seem to bother with a god who is anything less) and do not interfere in this pain?

These questions walked beside me in the long halls of the several hospitals I worked, and the halls are always long aren't they, no matter if the hospital is Brigham and Women's or Nantucket Cottage Hospital. I imagined all the feet that had paced those halls asking what I had asked, Why?

At Brigham and Women's, when I went to the small, windowless room where we chaplains slept at night in between emergencies, I lay my head down without comfort. I never slept there, waiting for my pager to go off for an emergency call.

Awake, I heard the prayers in my ears of all those hoping, accepting, begging for mercy who were awake with me in all those many rooms with beeping machines monitoring their ability to go on.

As a chaplain, I would enter the room of someone who would be having open heart surgery the next day or who was going into labor and was told her baby may not make it, or who was having a cancer taken out or a limb amputated, or who had been shot or beaten so badly they could not see, and I would pray with these patients, mostly Christian, some Jewish, some Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu or atheist, and there are atheists in hospitals unlike fox holes, but even atheists tremble in the wake of the darkness and ask for a prayer to help row them over the river between life and death.

I would pray in whatever way people could hear prayer with whatever god name they needed to hear. And as I walked away, down those halls I would pray so hard, so hard, dear god, dear god, be with Beth now or Mary or A'ishah or Hannah or Cassandra or Diane and see her here, hoping, praying, a heart full of love, a body full of courage, and hold her so she can feel you holding her, hold her with arms of grace and mercy and love Steven, Joe, Adam, Muhammed, Jorge, or David and be his heart while his heart is opened and be his limb while his limb is taken and guide the hands of the surgeons and their minds and hearts too and bring him back to us, bring her back to us to love and be loved, to live and give one more day, and if it must be that they cannot return, make it easy please Dear Lord, have mercy.

And my prayers would be added to the prayers of all the mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters and daughters and sons and partners and life long friends: Dear Lord, Allah, Buddha, Krishna, Yahweh have mercy and the night sky would be filled with these prayers as I walked from building to building and room to room with towers that reached 16 floors into the sky.

As I left on my bike each morning, the sun burning my questions into my skin, I would ask: who is this god that haunts these floors days and nights? Who is this god that is prayed to without end so that if I could hear the prayers to god emanating from the enormous hospital complex, I would be deafened by the sound? Who is this god that some say they are being punished by, others that they are being saved by, and others that they are being mothered by, nurtured by, called home by, cast out by, made strong enough to face the unacceptable by? Who is this exacting, angry, mothering, forgiving, vengeful, loving god that haunts the halls of the hospitals?

I would seek out others who have walked this road before me and ask them, who is god for you? I would ask chaplains who were Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Unitarian Universalist and the answers I received did not satisfy me.

I had a friend who is a chaplain at Brigham and Woman's and a Rabbi who finally stopped me in my tracks and said, more or less, Hey, Linda, why do you think you should be able to figure this out when thousands have been asking before you and as many answers have been proposed?

Why should you get to know the truth with your little human mind and heart? Maybe you are asking the wrong question! Why bother asking Who is God? That only takes you further from being able to experience Where God is! It is a distraction from life, from showing up. Tell me, she said, where do you find god?

And then I told her and told her and told her until I was weeping with the stories and the love and the beauty of all the hearts and souls and minds of people I had met at the hospital and she said, What do you have to give up in order to let that be enough?

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And these days dear friends, these days when I hear your voices and fears and loves and hopes, these days when politics haunt us and we scream, How can anyone not see how at risk we all are? These days I am tempted again by this answer: What do you have to give up to let the beauty of this moment, the love between us, the goodness we nurture, the commitments we make, the beauty we make...what do you have to give up to let that be enough? Because no matter what happens out there, who we are and how we show up will still matter.

I heard a minister say once: Becoming whole is not about adding something, it's about taking something away.

The questions I was asking and the life of the answers I was living at the hospital are most clearly visible in the story of a young woman I will call Beth. Beth had a cancer that was brutalizing her body. She was struggling to eat again amidst chemo and radiation and the 20 pills she had to take everyday to subdue her leukemia and accept the stem cell transplant she had just received. She needed to eat again to get strong enough to go on. Her mother had died several months before she was diagnosed with cancer.

She was in her 20s. She told me she was unworthy of love, of healing, of life and all the reasons why. I listened to her. I held her hand and walked with her into that darkness and I must tell you here and now, god did not look like a good friend to me in that place.

I railed at a god who could let a young woman suffer like this. It was one of my darkest hours at the hospital, of my faith, of my ministry. In the room with Beth, I loved and loved and mothered and mothered. But when I left and got on my bicycle to come home, I screamed at god. If my mother heart could see that this was beyond all acceptability, how could you god be less capable?

While Beth would be telling me her story, I would hold her hand and listen and afterward, we would talk of other things, what she loved, missed, dreamed of. And somewhere in this all, I would be saying, why not take another bite of yogurt? And by the end of our visit each day, she would eat more and more yogurt and drink more and more water.

And by the by, Beth came back to her hope and her body and her will to live. I do not tell you this to credit myself with this returning, I was a small part of a large team, but to say that I was given, graced with the love, the loving strategy, of saying: take another bite dear one, take another bite.

Between her tears and nausea and darkness and a hand holding a hand, the words came out: take another bite dear one, take another bite. I would get back on my bike and curse and curse god and then I would see Beth again and help her take another bite.

This sermon is called bravery muscles and both bravery and muscles have a lot of machoness associated with them. Buck up, buckle up, bulk up, suck it up, get over it, stop whining, be grateful, you have so much...basically, don't feel what is yours to feel and you will be braver and stronger.

Beth taught me this, it is only if we give in to feeling it all, really give in to the wave of fear and anger and loneliness that being human in any time evokes, and stay there long enough to notice that somewhere in the mess someone comes along and says, "Take another bite dear one, take another bite." And you do and you know that it is all still there, it is all still here, and you can bear it because you are not alone, because you know that your part is not about having all the answers but about letting go of some of the questions long enough to notice that no matter what, no matter what, love is always here and it is enough.

When I can just show up and love, god is right here, in the space between me and the eyes of the mother who just lost her child, in the hands of a 20 year old leukemia patient that reach out and to take mine, in the quivering shoulders of a 62 year old man before open heart surgery as I say a prayer that he might feel love, in the words of a 96 year old man who is disappointed I am not catholic and then after an hour of talking about life and what matters and hope and commitment, tells me as we shake hands that he loves me.

To live a life that is meaningful does not require the answering of big questions, it requires the living into the questions until our lives become the answers. It matters

not if we use the word god or nature or love or commitment or hope or goddess or truth or mystery. What matters is how we choose to live our lives, what the focus of our lives brings into being in this world, right here, right now.

There is too much to do to wait in the questions. There is too much love to give, too many voices to affirm, too many small, simple acts that can change the lives of those around us on this very day, that can remind someone of their light, their worthiness, their dignity and capacity to live and love.

Find the shard of god that is your life, and make transparent the love you have to give. There are so many ways to offer someone another bite of yogurt, there are so many ways to give life and each of them is an act of mercy. Only we can create mercy on this earth.

Amen