

Rev. Linda Simmons
Searching for Mercy
March 23, 2014

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 and has grown as I grow.

I have noticed that my god has matured as I mature. 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 unnameable, ineffable. I have not needed a god for a long time that I had to question, whose allusiveness haunted me, whose presence or lack of presence, response or lack or response will or lack of will tormented me.

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 possible.

Speaking of compassion I heard a story the other day of a women who shop lifted a can of peaches from a grocery store. When she approached the judge, who was compassionate, he asked if she 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 her husband yelled, your honor, she stole a can of peas too!

When I started working at Brigham and Women's Hospital a few summers ago as a chaplain and my heart started to break and this god I had come to know as the love between us could not fix it; 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 hospital, nipping at my ankles and dogging my hope. When I went to the small, windowless room where we chaplains slept at night in between emergencies, I lay my head down without a god to comfort me, or lull me into sleep. Awake, I heard the prayers in my ears of all those hoping, accepting, begging for mercy who were awake with me on those long nights.

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 and I would pray with these patients, mostly Christian, some Jewish, some Muslim or

Buddhist or Hindu and I would pray, 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, 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 the woman's and children's building to the heart building to the main 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 hospital variously comforting and punishing all of us who enter willingly and unwillingly?

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 have 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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She is the one who told me about Tikkun Olam. I love this idea that god had to contract to create a place that was not god and so poured a piece of itself into a vessel that could not withstand the pressure and burst into thousands of pieces that now fill the world. Seeing them, these shards, in all things, and connecting them back to god, is repairing the world. This connecting god shards back to god happens, as far as I can tell, with loving sight, loving presence, loving acknowledgment. I can understand this. I can work with this. I can see this, so to speak. It slips under my logic radar because it is action, it is showing up and doing something to repair the world, to restore us all to wholeness.

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 eat.

And one day, when I got on my bike and was filling up with rage at god, I just started to cry and thanked god for the courage and the love to feed her yogurt. That's all. Just to feed her yogurt. And I knew then, that who god is or what god is- is not in my domain. My mind cannot determine this, develop a proof that is logical and sound.

The question for me had to become not who is god but where is god because the answer to that question, when I have the courage to live into it, is always available, always within my experience. The answer to that question is right here, god is right here, in the space between us when we show up and express love, compassion, care for each other. When I 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 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, here between you and I.

The answer I found in the hospital, the right answer to the question of Who is God, is to show up and to open my eyes so that Where God Is becomes visible. And in seeing god there, here, between us, as love, grace, compassion, hope inside of suffering, I have remembered that the work of this life is always possible to do. There is no place that god cannot be if only we open ourselves, live into the question, show up with right action, see the sparks. God is always possible.

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.

Repair the world, this world, right here. Open your heart, 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, is an act of god's mercy. We are god's mercy on this earth. God is always possible. May our lives be the answer to the questions.

Amen