

Many years ago... I may have still been an adolescent...someone explained to me that “God the father” was not meant to be taken literally. It was a metaphor, they said, because language is imperfect. It was just one of the many names for a God that transcends language. So, you know, I shouldn’t be offended by it. Since it wasn’t literal, it wasn’t sexist.

I responded, if we aren’t being sexist, then why not mix it up? But everyone knew it would be a big deal to call God “mother,” even though Mother must be one of the most obvious names we could give God. Everyone who ever existed was brought forth by a mother. Why not the universe, too?

Well, they told me, Father just happens to be the tradition.

When I got married when I was twenty years old, back in 1996, I asked the minister to refer to God once as “she” in the ceremony. The minister-- a UU—double checked to make sure I was prepared for the reaction that might cause in friends and family members. For some reason, even though the Bible contains many names and a wide variety of metaphors and descriptors for the divine, in Protestant and Catholic cultures God is referred to almost exclusively as he and as Father. Even people who don’t believe God is literally a dude, or who maybe don’t believe in God at all, are surprised to hear God referred to in any other way.

For something that isn’t meant to be literal, “God the father” sure is limiting.

It’s so limiting, that when a UU or a non-church person tells me they don’t believe in God, and I ask them to tell me about the God they don’t believe in, most of the time they describe a big dude in the sky, laying down the law, controlling everything. That god the father type thing.

It reminds me of an ad the UUA put out in the early 2000’s. It asked people, “Is ‘God’ keeping you away from church?”

And yet. In the Abrahamic faiths God has dozens of names- at least 99 of them in Islam alone. At least 49 in Judaism. In the back of our gray hymnals, there is a prayer by the pagan writer Starhawk addressed to “Earth mother, Star mother, you who are called by a thousand names.”

The religious historian Karen Armstrong wrote a book called A History of God, tracing 4,000 years of representations of God in the sacred texts of the Abrahamic traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. I can’t remember whether she says this in the book or whether I heard her say it in an interview about the book, but she points out that this “history of God” is told as a long story about God’s relationship with humans. And since it has all been written down by humans, it is ultimately a history of humankind’s perception of ourselves through God’s eyes. It is what we think God sees and how God regards us. It is a story of our relationship with the Ultimate. With existence itself.

I think something similar can be said for the names we give God. The act of naming and the words we choose reflect our experience of existence and our understanding of ourselves.

God is sometimes called all powerful because, well, humans are not all powerful. The powers and processes of the universe are much more powerful than we are. Call it what you will. We are subject to the whims of forces beyond our control. An omnipotent God, then, is a reflection of that relative powerlessness. **King of Kings** (as God is called in the Hallelujah chorus) is an omnipotent God name. Al-Aziz, The All Mighty, is one of the names for God in Islam.

God is sometimes called all knowing, omniscient, because a human only knows a small part of their story and the world's story. We are one little part of something that extends forward and backward in time, and out around us in the world. There is a larger perspective in which the way things fit together looks different, in which the meaning we would make of things is different. That failure you are experiencing, or that loss you've suffered, or that change you're in the middle of... they will look different later on. Wait for it. You don't know everything. An omniscient God is a reflection of our unknowing. The title of our reading this morning, "**That Which Holds All**," is an omniscient kind of name. So is **the Love that Holds All**.

You see what I'm describing here? The names and descriptions we give to God express certain truths about life. Even if you consider yourself an atheist, which approximately one third of this congregation does, the names are illustrative. For those who are theists, or who are theo-curious, the sheer number of names offers an expansive way of relating to God.

Ok. How about the name **God** itself? Where did we get that? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the etymology is "very uncertain." They even include the word "very," like *don't quote us on this*. But I'm going to quote it anyway. The OED offers two possibilities. One is that the name God comes from an old word for "pour." As in to pour out an offering. The other is an old word for "invoke." To call upon, as in prayer. Note that both of those "very uncertain" possibilities are things humans do for or toward something beyond ourselves. God is a relationship. A relationship between us and... this thing we are somehow part of. Existence.

Another name for god has to do with the act of naming itself. **Mi She'amar V'haya HaOlam** is Hebrew for The One Who Spoke the World into Being.

The creation story in Genesis is a story of God saying things like, "Let there be light." And creating the world. They (god is plural in genesis) speak the world into being.

What does that have to do with humans' relationship with the ultimate?

Try out a little thought experiment with me. Take a moment to just be, without thinking of any words, without letting your mind name anything. So... no thoughts.

...

What would be happening in your mind if you had no language? Sensory impressions. Attraction and aversion. Emotions. But no way to make sense of it, no way to process it. No

way to relate to it. Language is relational. Because we can say, “I am,” we have a self, a story, a larger reality to relate to that we sometimes call God.

The philosopher Martin Buber wrote a book called *I and Thou*. I and Thou as in you and me. We all want to be a you or a me. An I or a Thou. The other kind of relationship he described is I-It. You want me to relate to you as a You, not an It. I want you to relate to me as a you, not an It. We humans tend not to like the idea that we are merely objects, Its, in the universe. We want to say to god, I and Thou. We want god to see us the same way. An it seems incidental. We want our Being to mean something. The power of language is the power to recognize, to honor, and to relate.

There does not have to be a higher consciousness in the universe for our Being to mean something. If human consciousness is all there is, then *we are* the consciousness that the universe has. We are an incredible part of that larger thing. And if there is some kind of larger consciousness, and we are its children, then we are part of *that* larger thing. Either way, we can marvel at the mysterious source from which we and language came.

The force that “spoke the world into being.” *Mi She’amar V’haya HaOlam*.

UU’s sing and pray to the **Spirit of Life**.

On the one hand, “Spirit of Life” is kind of vague. It’s a way to say and not say God at the same time. It could mean a lot of things which means some people will think it means nothing. UUs get teased for that sometimes. But we didn’t make Spirit of Life up. That name also connects back to the Biblical creation story. God forms the first human from the earth, shaping dirt or clay into a person, and then adds something to it. The original word is *ruach* which means breath or spirit. That’s what gives life to the first human. The ruach of life. The spirit of life. An animating force. It is still a source of great mystery to us, what made living things come alive for the first time. What is it that leaves us when our lives are over? Some essence. Some spirit of life. Where does it come from? That source, that thing that is no thing, the Mother we pour out libations to, honor, and try to name.

How about **El Nora**, from the Hebrew scriptures. It is translated as Terrifying One. But *nora* is also translated as “awesome.”

Awe and fear are related. Awe is the feeling we get when something fills us with reverential fear, wonder, or respect. Psychology researchers Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt locate awe “in the upper reaches of pleasure and on the boundary of fear.”ⁱ Awe, when it is profoundly experienced, is both pleasant, and also connected on some level with a kind of fear. In a good way, most of the time. Like when you see a picture of earth from space. Or greet a newborn child. Or go out on the ocean and remember all over again that the ocean covers 71% of the earth. I traveled between Vancouver and Nanaimo in Canada last week for a colleague’s installation at the Vancouver Unitarian Church, and then a clergy retreat. We took a ferry across the Salish Sea. The water looked so deep, so dark. The earth is covered in deep, dark fathoms teeming with creatures we have never seen or named.

Awe quiets the ego and awakens us to something profound. Where fear is part of awe, it is often because something is unknowable, unexplainable, or, especially, makes us realize

how small we are. The Buddhist teacher Roshi Joan Halifax says that when we experience awe, it is often also an experience of threat to our egos. The ego is “deconstructed.”ⁱⁱ

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “We can never sneer at the stars, mock the dawn or scoff at the totality of being. Sublime grandeur evokes unhesitating, unflinching awe. Away from the immense, cloistered in our own concepts, we may scorn and revile everything. But standing between earth and sky, we are silenced”ⁱⁱⁱ

People often feel they have experienced God when they experience profound awe.

El Nora. Awesome one. Terrifying one.

So many names for something so mysterious, so everywhere, and so nowhere, all at the same time. I’d like to close with a prayer I wrote a long time ago, about all of this naming we do. It has been a while since I last shared it with you. Will you join me in a spirit of prayer?

Holy one,

Many-named and nameless one,

How shall we address you? You who are without form, and yet are everywhere, and are everything.

We call you spirit, ground of being, love,

We call you nothing, we call you mystery,

We call you mover, source of peace.

We speak to you in metaphor.

We pray. We speak. We are made for language, for relating, and so we say “You” but this is only another approximate guess.

How shall we address you?

And how shall we look upon you?

We whose hearts long to know you, who were crafted according to the trajectory of stars to love the mystery, to be filled with awe, and to look for you but it is

like looking into the sun

and you are known by inference,

in poetry, you cast your shadow forms

in music, you flow over us like rays of light.

[Poised] before you in search of words,

We bring all that we have for your name,

And all that we have within us to lay at your feet:

Beauty and curiosity,

Anger, fear, and confusion,
Longing for comfort, for connection,
And when we have laid it all out,
When the earth and sun, the moon and stars have borne witness
And we come to the place of silence,
Receive, O Holy one, our gratitude.
For the light and the dark,
For the brown branches bursting with spring blooms,
For the deep peace of wild places, beyond and within us,
For the conversation,
For the pause,
For being.
Amen.

ⁱ Keltner, Dacher and Jonathan Haidt. "Approaching awe, a moral, spiritual, and aesthetic emotion." *Cognition and Emotion*: 2003, 17 (02). 297-314

<<https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/dacherkeltner/docs/keltner.haidt.awe.2003.pdf>> (6 Dec. 2019)

ⁱⁱ Panel discussion. Wisdom 2.0 Conference. San Francisco, 2019.

<http://www.wisdom2conference.com/Videos/myriad_single_element/3805>. (6 December 2019)

ⁱⁱⁱ Qtd. and cited in [https://dailymeditationswithmatthewfox.org/2019/08/05/rabbi-heschel-on-the-via-positiva-part-](https://dailymeditationswithmatthewfox.org/2019/08/05/rabbi-heschel-on-the-via-positiva-part-2/?utm_source=ActiveCampaign&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Daily+Meditations+with+Matthew+Fox%3A+August+5%2C+2019&utm_campaign=Daily+Meditations+August+5%2C+2019)

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