

**Sermon, July 16, 2017: “If There Is a God....” Unitarian Church of Barnstable  
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Good morning, and thank you for inviting me back!

As many of you know, three years ago Alice and I moved to the Sonoran Desert, my childhood home. Like ospreys and monarch butterflies, we have become seasonal migrants. We get to be called “washashores” and “snowbirds” all in the same year.

Some might say that migrants like us have no real home, but for me, just the opposite is true. I find kindred souls wherever people love literature and art. The books I experience help me to feel at home wherever I am.

Artists and authors evoke a sense of home, and when people experience art and literature together, they create a bond of friendship. I remember the poetry services I participated in here at BUU, how we came to understand and love the way poets like Stanley Kunitz or Mary Oliver evoke the Cape Cod spirit, and how this spirit flourishes here. In the very same way, writers like Edward Abbey and Annie Proulx evoke the spirit of the Great American Desert.

Last summer and fall, I traveled all over America with my Australian friend and fellow bibliophile Dean Olafson, who at 75 years old had never been to America. What a time to be alive! We followed the election campaign. Dean got to know the candidates’ positions on the issues, and their supporters, and I watched the whole sordid spectacle unfold through his eyes, and learned lots about my own country.

As we traveled, we read and discussed regional American authors. One of these authors is William Faulkner, whose novels about rural Mississippi won him the Nobel Prize for literature.

A question that Faulkner placed on the lips of his character Jewel in his 1930 novel *As I Lay Dying* gave rise to today’s sermon. Early in this book, Jewel asks, “If there is a God, what the hell is he for?”

This was a timely question to ask in rural Mississippi in 1930, and even more so today. Faulkner applied it to issues as diverse as abortion, infidelity, access to health care, and the stink of an eight-day dead body—both literally and metaphorically.

For me, the results of the 2016 Presidential election revisited Faulkner’s question. I must admit that these results precipitated a faith crisis for me. I felt like running into the streets of Tucson in the predawn hours, banging on a frying pan, shouting Faulkner’s question at the sky.

Instead, I sat down in my office and wrote and read and wrote some more. I engaged thoughtful neighbors, colleagues and friends in deep conversation every chance I got. What I share with you today is a condensed summary of how I have coped with the news over the last six months. I'm banging on that frying pan with my pen and my tongue: my cry against the age-old efforts of ignorant authoritarians to silence artists and writers, to denigrate literature and art and civil discourse in all its forms.

An ugly and virulent form of censorship threatens America. We are witnessing a victory lap for what the author and physician M. Scott Peck termed "militant ignorance," what Nobel laureate Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn identified as "the lie." This censorship marginalizes reason and conscience, mocks those who seek civil, rational discourse, threatens teachers who encourage critical thinking, and deliberately spreads "fake news."

In times like these, we need Faulkner and other great artists more than ever. If there is a god, why do tyrants prevail? Why do racism and sexism, xenophobia, homophobia and a thousand other stains on the human condition continue to plague us? What kind of god would allow a Hitler, a Stalin, a Mao to exterminate millions of innocents? Closer to home, what kind of god would tolerate the opiate overdose deaths that cast so many homes on Cape Cod into bottomless wells of grief? Why has empathy been cast aside by America's leadership, abandoning support for those who care for aging parents, for children or grandchildren with disabilities, for neighbors and friends? If there is a god, what the hell is he for?

Of course, throughout history these questions have been addressed by theologians and philosophers, so who am I to continue to ask them? Over the winter I re-read and discussed some of these, but I came away unconvinced.

So I wrote essays in which I personally wrestled with these questions. Today, I've condensed these writings down to sermon-size, and I call on all of you to be my brutally honest critics.

Three insights have helped me to respond to Faulkner's question in my own heart and mind.

First, I have come to believe that the gods which western civilization has created and nurtured over the last 3,000 years are obsolete.

Human beings create gods to solve problems, absorb blame, and reciprocate emotions. They assign these gods human attributes, including creativity, inflated to superhuman dimensions.

Over millennia, these creative attributes have varied according to the human societies and cultures that created the gods, depending on the problems they experienced in their lives, their lenses on the human condition. Societies living in

deserts might create different gods than those living in rainforests, or on fertile plains, and so on.

When these societies and their gods came into conflict with each other, the winners' stories tended to endure, along with their gods.

The stories of the gods that have been told by the dominant system within the United States over the last 500-plus years have been used to justify enslaving Africans, perpetrating genocide against Native Americans, and desecrating the environment. But this system is now breaking down; its stories no longer ring true. As a society begins to falter – to experience “chaos” – so do its gods. The myths and metaphors and symbols the society has created no longer work.

At this point, repressed stories, myths, metaphors, symbols may re-emerge, or entirely new one may emerge. The enduring stories of the United States originated with the gods created by Western Civilization that include attributes of Greek, Roman, Norse, Hebrew, Muslim and Christian gods. As Eurocentric societies set out to conquer what they called “America,” West African, Native American, and Asian gods influenced the stories of the United States according to the cultural diversity of the particular neighborhood telling the story. Over the course of the winter and spring, immersing myself in the multitude of cultures of the Australia and the Sonoran Desert, I became convinced that the results of the 2016 election represent the death throes of obsolete gods, and that these death throes portend the death of the worst aspects of western civilization.

How shall we create a new story? What might be this new story's predominant myths and metaphors? In my own faith journey I have replaced the symbol of the cross with a butterfly.

This brings me to my second point: If the gods that western civilization created are obsolete, what other possibilities emerge? As winter staggered toward spring, I immersed myself in the art and literature of Native American, African, Australian, and Asian civilizations. These art forms share some spiritual aspects, among which are process-based languages and the concept of non-linear time.

These aspects became my “butterflies.”

The language that a community speaks, thinks in, dreams in, deeply affects how that community might answer Faulkner's question. At present, there are more than 6,500 human languages in the world, but more than 2,000 of these are spoken by fewer than a thousand people. A major goal of western civilization has been to marginalize and eventually eliminate these peoples and their languages.

This is truly tragic, because humankind desperately needs these languages, these thought-forms that western civilization has marginalized, because these embody the gods that all of humankind desperately needs today.

By reading a number of writers who speak, think and dream in some of these other 6,500 languages, I realized that questions of who, where, when and what no longer work for me when it comes to god, that, in fact, they throw up a huge smoke screen that prevent me from applying the two remaining interrogatories: how, and why. I started to ask these questions about the symbol, or metaphor, of the butterfly.

Thus my second insight was to eliminate all concepts of god as a noun.

As this insight grew fertile in my mind, I remembered Pat Dyke, a member of this church and of our poetry circle for many years, a gifted poet and one of the wisest human beings I have ever known. A decade ago, I wrote a poem based my conversations with her:

If the universe in infinite,  
Then every poem  
Has been written infinite times.  
But  
If the universe is finite  
Then so are we.

This winter I returned to this poem, and dreamt about it, and decided that the universe, at least this universe we live in, is finite, which means that each of us, you and me and all the tyrants, prophets, saints and sages of the human family are each unique. Our creative energies are essential. If things are going to change, we need to do it. God does not exist until we act, and what god is for depends on how we act, on what we do.

This brings me to my third insight.

When we act, things change. This seems obvious, of course, and has been popularized by the idea of the “butterfly effect,” originally posited by the meteorologist and progenitor of chaos theory, Edward Lorenz of MIT. Every action matters. Every action, no matter how small or insignificant we might believe it to be, ultimately matters, and affects the entire universe.

We make choices, big and small, and sometimes the choices we might think of as the small ones end up being the big ones. For example, think about someone you love very much. How did you meet? Did you decide to go out to a bar instead of to the library (or vice versa!) some Saturday night? Did you see someone’s cap on the beach and strike up a conversation about the Red Sox or the Yankees? Think about your parents: what are the chances that that one-in-a-million encounter would enable them to create you?

Yet, here you are! A miracle!

When we choose to act in a specific way, when we choose to create a work of art or a poem or a child or a first grade curriculum or a political campaign, the universe changes.

This may seem to put a lot of pressure on us, but it is also very liberating. It transforms us from subjects and objects to mutual lovers. It allows us to discover our mission and purpose in the context of all ongoing creation.

My mission and purpose is to practice compassion and to embody joy in all my thoughts and actions. This means not only resisting the lies and deceit that I witness, but, even more importantly, to foster the creation of systems that embody joy and compassion in social, economic, environmental, political and religious life.

The key point: we can't do this alone! We would exhaust ourselves fighting alone day after day for dignity and respect, for human rights and inclusion, for clean air and water and soil and all the wonderful goals this church and this community embrace.

So it's essential to remember that every inhalation has to be followed by an exhalation, and vice-versa, or we die. Our hearts rest between each beat, and so we too must all rest as often as we act. Even as we resist lies and create just systems within our families and communities, we need to remember that if we try to do it alone, we can overdo, exhaust ourselves, collapse, and leave our loved ones, our neighbors, our friends, our world worse off than if we took time to rest.

There are times to not do something, but rather just stand there. And this too becomes a choice, not a commandment. We balance like tight-rope walkers between the abyss of history on one hand, and the universe that is unfolding on the other, taking time together, making time together, to laugh and to cry, to celebrate and to mourn, to speak and to remain silent. As we put one foot in front of the other each day, our balance grows ever more secure: as the poet Antonio Machado so eloquently wrote, we create the road by walking it: "*Caminante, no hay camino. Se hace camino andante.*" We create the road by walking it. We come to see the whole human condition, and ourselves within it as this verse from today's reading so eloquently illuminates:

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,  
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho  
lies dead by the side of the road.  
You must see how this could be you,  
how he too was someone  
who journeyed through the night with plans  
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

I made it through the winter by clinging to these three ideas: First, the gods of western civilization are obsolete. Second, god is a verb. And third, human beings

become the creative energy of god to the extent that we choose to act as if all creation was literally “in our hands.”

It’s much more joyful to act together, to walk this balance beam holding hands with those we love. The how and the why of god is manifest not in each of us, but rather in all of us: all the relationships we share with one another and with the rest of the universe. When we discover ways to pull the same way on the same rope, the butterfly effect becomes the rhinoceros effect, and change happens a whole lot faster. We surprise and delight one another with the change we see.

That’s how I responded to Faulkner’s question. God constantly evolves, is constantly recreated and recreating, in us and through us, all of us, in relationship. That’s all there is, that’s as good as it gets. And I believe with every fiber of my being that that will be good enough.

Amen.