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Inch a little closer.

At One Extreme or the Other

Whether we like the word “God” or flinch when we hear it, when world events wake us up from our little lives, our theological fierceness can lose its punch. Images of Londoners running for their lives on a spring night, the death count rising as we watch, puts our opinions about God in perspective.

Some of you may remember lining up last year in Runnells Hall according to your belief, or lack thereof, in God. One exuberant contingent put themselves so far at the “no God” extreme as to leave the building and stand outside the window, waving and smiling. It is worth noting, too, that this congregation populated that continuum all the way across the room, from the folks standing outside to those at the other extreme, who had a personal relationship or experience of a God or spiritual being that interacts with the world. I love that this happens here of all places, in a faith community, that the fifty or sixty of us who gather Sunday mornings live at opposite ends of a belief spectrum.

Of course, people do religion in their own way in houses of worship everywhere. By the time we’ve lived a while, we have our ideas about what works for us and what doesn’t. I remember Easters with my in-laws in Washington when I began to sit out Communion, to their confusion and bewilderment. As uncomfortable as it was to sit alone while John and our little children and everyone else in the room went up to the railing, that’s the way it was.

When we started going to a local Unitarian Universalist church years later, the Episcopalian in John stood his religious ground: figuring that his beliefs were welcome here, he would belt out all the original Christian hymn lyrics while the rest of the congregation sang what was on the page. A theist for sure, John used to like it when our minister, Marta Flanagan, would occasionally use the word “God” in worship. I told her this one day at coffee hour, and she laughed. “My mother,” she said, “always counts how many times I say ‘God,’ and for her it’s always too many!”

Then there are words people don’t say. Like the word “Catholic” in the Apostles Creed, a statement of belief widely used in Christian denominations. You might know it—part of it goes like this:

“I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins
the resurrection of the body...” and so on.

When they’d get to “the holy catholic church” part, my father-in-law, with his lovely big voice, would say, “the holy ____ Church,” living his faith.

A few weeks ago, when the UUFES annual meeting closed with a lusty rendition of the hymn “We’ll Build a Land,” I noticed that people were singing it the way my father-in-law recited the Apostles Creed. You know the line that goes, “We’ll build a land where sister and brothers, anointed by God, make then create peace...” Well, when we’d get to the word “God,” all around me I heard silences as well as alternative words!

And so what? We see things differently. Then what does it *mean* to welcome a variety of beliefs? Does it mean, “I want everyone to know where I stand on the subject of God because I feel strongly about it”? Does it mean, “I’ve worked hard on getting to this place, and traditional religious language triggers my discomfort and so this is the way it is”? Or does welcoming a variety of beliefs mean, “I’ll *make room* for your different beliefs, but don’t expect me to say your religious words—I’ll say my own”?

We can also welcome a variety of beliefs with an attitude that says: “We each make meaning in different ways. Today, as your neighbor, I’ll say or sing words a little beyond my comfort level if this would feel meaningful to you.” There’s something to be said for softening.

It happened to me in seminary. I arrived at Andover Newton exuberant about this UU faith tradition. Having moved away from my childhood religion and also—no small thing—having turned the corner on identifying as a *Christian* with Jesus my savior, I was sobered in seminary to find myself in a 10% religious minority. Much as Christian UUs may feel in our congregations, I was greatly outnumbered by people whose theology was fundamentally different from mine. My classmates represented literally dozens of Protestant denominations, and those ministers-to-be were every bit as exuberant about their faith tradition as I was. A gift, as it turned out.

After the introductory courses on the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Bible, Christian history and Christian ethics, everyone had to take a full-year course called Christian Systematics. We wrote papers on each unit every couple of months—papers on Christology (the study of Christ), God, the Trinity, Salvation, Eschatology (the final destiny of the soul) and so on. The format of each paper was to write about that unit from three perspectives: the Christian doctrine perspective, the perspective of a theologian of our choosing and our own perspective.

Brilliant on the part of Prof. Heim—and life-changing for me—the assignment specified that we present the Christian doctrine perspective *with empathy*. That challenge helped me see—and be touched by—a tenderness in the faces of my classmates during lectures on Jesus’s suffering or on how the doctrine of the Trinity came to be. That year, the requirement to write *with empathy* about Christian doctrine defused a prickliness, an edginess I’d nursed for some time. Empathy toward our neighbor can inch us off our fixed perches into more fluidity, more openness.

Of all people, Thomas Aquinas, 13th c. friar and priest whose work provides a foundation for Christian systematics, wrote of empathy in the human quest for truth: “We must love them both [he said], those whose opinions we share and those whose opinions we reject, for both have labored in the search for truth and both have helped us in the finding of it.”

Often, the truths for which we have labored feel like pillars that we count on—solid and sure. It also happens that our fervor, which feels so good, can be shaken—we are left with our heart's response. Last night's headlines toppled my image of you, lined up that evening at Runnells Hall. Photos of fear and riot police knocked that neat line of people, from atheists to lovers of God, into a jumble, everyone landing in a heap of different understandings.

We here today—not to mention we along with millions of shattered people across the world—have also been yanked out of our own stories, toppled from whatever was on our minds, into a collective heap of shock and sadness and helplessness, our theological differences beside the point.

Instead, our compassion, resilience and our sense of oneness bring us together. We are in this together. We feel it more strongly at some times than others. We feel it on the subway in a big city, with people of all ages and races and walks of life thrown together, sitting inches from each other. We feel it at the airport, looking into the faces of travelers, connecting with words or glances on the moving walkway, in line for coffee or for hours on a flight together. Anonymous yet together, the differences not as loud as in other settings. We are in this together.

At the same time, we live across divides every day, some deeper and wider than others. Some divides just *are*—we arrive in the world with our racial identity, our sexual and gender orientation—givens. As we grow up, cultural, class and economic associations create more divides between us. Over time, we grow into our own understandings. Here, we come together...and there, we grow into divides of our own making: political, religious, social.

Divides call us to pay attention. To think beyond our gut reactions and our hard-won opinions. To consider each other's perspective, mindful with our words, aware of the impact of stereotyping and unintended slights.

Let us move beyond making room for our differences. When we find ourselves at the far end of a continuum—any continuum—may we pause and pay attention. It might be that finding ways to inch away from the extreme is not only in our interest but in the interest of all.

And when we gather here in this bright, open sanctuary, riding the continuum of our beliefs, let us take care with our exuberance and listen generously to each other. Let us lean in a little closer to hear and to connect. May we find resonance in each other's search for truth.

So may it be.