

## God

**You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.**

—Anne Lamott

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God looms large. I often refer to the word *God* as the biggest word in the English language. As I write this column, our Building Your Own Theology class is discussing God and I am taking notes. The topic of our session is "Ultimate Reality—Creating an honest God." We Unitarian Universalists can wrestle with the concept of God boldly and nobly.

First the class was asked to draw four pictures of God—God of their childhood, God of their youth, God of their young adulthood, and the God they understand now...

*This is hard.*

*You used color!*

*She keeps moving and so do I... that's God to me.*

*Benign love.*

*Now, I don't know. I like the concept that God is a verb, not a noun.*

*I remember what a strange idea God was at the time.*

*God for me is an abstraction, a projection... you can tell a lot about a person looking at the God they profess.*

*The ground of my being is the data—what I can measure and assess.*

*He was the one who made you feel bad.*

*I went searching for a better God... where God made sense.*

*Now I think of God as hands... helping, holding, healing hands.*

*God has no hands but our hands.*

*I feel content to have my own thoughts about God, and that's enough for me.*

*God! What am I going to write about God?*

*I'm thinking... what am I missing?*

*I feel God is nature itself.*

*God is like this: [breathe in, breathe out].*

*You need to see God in each person, and feel it right in your heart.*

*To have a rainbow, you have to have an observer.*

Next, the class started asking and answering one of the big questions.

*Why do we even need God?*

*Why are we here "building our theology"?*

*If there is a creation, there has to be a Creator.*

*Maybe it's all about oneness.*

*Maybe it's about connection. You get lonely.*

*We have always been in a church no matter how much we doubted... even in oneness, we want to be in community.*

*I think it's love. Love is the binding force.*

*I think there is a natural call to personify anything that is significantly complex... I think God is that phenomenon happening with the Universe itself.*

*When your self drops away there is no line.*

This is how God manifests in a Unitarian Universalist congregation—in our searching as well as our finding. What a blessing it is to be a witness.

### MINISTER'S MESSAGE

#### God in a Unitarian Universalist Congregation



Rev. Anya Sammler-Michael

[www.uusterling.org](http://www.uusterling.org)

22135 Davis Drive  
Sterling, VA 20167

(703) 406-3068

Mail: P.O. Box 1632  
Sterling, VA 20167

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

### *God: The Awe and Wonder*

Prior to writing this article, I took to the time to ask some people to give me their thoughts in one or two words when I mentioned the word *God*. Some of their responses were Creator, Judge, Savior, Destroyer, Unconditional Love, Supreme Being, Inner Conscience, and Not Sure. When I



Bob Brown,  
Board President

wrote the list down on paper, I really noticed the last two thoughts (Inner Conscience and Not Sure).

Although we do have a physical presence while on earth, I believe each of us also has a soul. Although our minds enable us to learn, our souls are something inside us that let us know what is right or just. I can't explain how or why, but I strongly feel that it is

inside everyone and stirs a quest for answers to why we are here, how we got here, or what our purpose is. I believe that these questions and many like them cause us to continue searching and gives us what some say is God. For me, the search is for the truth—not of dogma, but through reason and inquiry, and where having doubt is a positive thing.

Unitarians Universalism embraces this type of search and also encourages awe and wonder. There are so many amazing and unexplainable questions in this universe and beyond, it's hard not to think there isn't something else out there.

### **Want to share something in the January newsletter?**

- ✓ **Reflections or articles related to the January liturgical theme, *conscience***
- ✓ **Announcements (including those related to events that will take place in January and the first 2 weeks in February)**
- ✓ **Group or committee updates (what you accomplished, what's planned coming up, etc.)**
- ✓ **Recent photos taken at UUS or during UUS events**

Please send anything you'd like to include to [newsletter@uusterling.org](mailto:newsletter@uusterling.org) by December 15.

## RELIGIOUS EXPLORATION

### *Holy Night*

*Each night a child is born is a holy night. A time for singing, a time for wondering, a time for worshipping.*  
—Sophia Lyon Fahs, twentieth century Unitarian Universalist religious educator

Each child is a child of the holy, containing a piece of the divine, whatever that may mean. Whether it is the Great Mystery, the Spirit of Life, Ultimate Love, or the interconnectedness to each other and the universe, when we realize the divine in each person, we glimpse God. In doing this we also truly recognize, as the first Unitarian Universalist principle describes it, “the inherent worth and dignity of each person.” Seeing God in each person allows the barriers between us to fall away.



Linda Weaver,  
Director of  
Religious Exploration

Each day, whether we recognize it or not, we face the question of whether our compassion or our distrust will determine how we view other people and how we will interact with them. Of course there are times we must consider our own safety because some people have lost touch with the wonder and compassion within themselves, but much of the time we can assume good intentions and live with our hearts wide open. Living from this place of vulnerability, while knowing that others may disappoint or even hurt us, allows us to live lives that are fully open to the mystery and the infinite love that is God.

May we come together with hearts and minds open to the wonder and love that was born and continues to live with each one of us. May we join together to celebrate the wonders of life and to provide comfort and companionship during times of sorrow and joy, and may we serve those who are lonely and in need. We welcome you to join us at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Sterling as we strive to live lives of compassion and love within the congregation and in the world beyond our doors.

*Children's Religious Education topics and a list of programs and events for children and families is on the calendar at the UUCS website, [www.uusterling.org](http://www.uusterling.org).*

## ASK THE INTERN



Andrew Mertz

The Internship Committee wanted to share a little more about the ministerial intern with the congregation. Here are answers to some questions Andrew has been asked.

### **Why did you decide to become a minister?**

Deciding to become a minister is less making a decision than it is answering a call. At General Assembly (GA) in 2005, I heard a powerful sermon that asked all of Unitarian Universalism to do as Thoreau did and leave the intellectual sanctuary of Walden Pond to return to a broken and needing world. I was awash with emotion. Before that moment, I had considered ministry as a career, but was not convinced it was a reasonable option. After GA, I realized that I had always been called to dedicate my life to this faith; I was just not ready to accept it until that point.

### **What is General Assembly (GA)?**

GA is the annual business meeting of our association of congregations. Because our congregation is in a covenanted community with the other Unitarian Universalist Congregations, our representatives gather once a year to pass budgets, elect leaders, and connect with one another. In addition to the business, there are also thousands of religious professionals and lay leaders who attend to take workshops, participate in worship, and connect with one another and share ideas.

Attending GA is a rite of passage for most. Until you experience Sunday morning worship with a choir of 150, the best preachers in the country, and 4,000 other Unitarian Universalists, you don't truly know what UU worship can be like. Some argue that attending GA at least once in your UU lifetime is our Hajj. Hajj is the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, a religious duty which all able-bodied Muslims who can afford it must do at least once in their lives.

### **What kind of work do you do at the Joseph Priestley District?**

As some folks know, my internship at UUCS is only part time. The other half of my hybrid internship is in the Joseph Priestley District of the UUA focusing on prophetic witness. Specifically, I am organizing social justice efforts to combat the New Jim Crow. The issue of mass incarceration and resulting social effects was described in *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander. I will also help to establish a district chapter of the national UU group of white allies working to dismantle racism and oppression.

For the five years before this internship, I supported congregations with their youth and young adult ministry. (I'll be doing that again once the internship has concluded.) This includes assisting district-based steering committees that create large conferences; leading trainings for youth advisors, chaplains, and other religious professionals; and supporting

the general health of congregations. This is an exciting year because for the first time, our district will join with three others for a regional youth conference. From time to time, I also represent the district at ministerial ordinations, installations, and building dedications.

### **Where do you see yourself in 10 years?**

In 2023, some predict that deafness will be fully curable, water will become a weapon of war, and brain implants will restore lost memories. I will be 43 and see myself as married with two children and a dog. We will be living near some urban center, like Washington DC or San Francisco, CA. Professionally, I will be leading a youth ministry at either a large UU congregation or a para-church organization, such as a district. I will encourage and be supportive of my wife's ministry as an Episcopal priest. I will have published at least one book on youth ministry and will occasionally teach a seminary class. Then again, 10 years ago I would have told you that I would be a doctor by now.

### **Where do you see us in 10 years?**

I see this congregation growing. You will have found a new worship building, perhaps even own it. With more families, more choir members, and more parishioners in general, staff positions will all be full time. Your role as a leadership congregation in the denomination is cemented as more and more seminarians seek out this congregation for their full-time internship. The vibrancy and commitment to Unitarian Universalism that members of this congregation show makes this the place for struggling congregations to learn best practices. The greater Sterling area also sees this community as a place that stands for justice and compassion, and it's where you send people who are seeking a liberal religious community.

### **Do you have experience with congregations that transitioned from one service to two services? How did it go?**

Yes: my home congregation, Bull Run Unitarian Universalists (BRUU) in Manassas, VA, went from one service to two a few years ago. Being able to look back at it, it went well. However, any significant change in a congregation, like finding a new minister or moving to two services, creates a lot of anxiety. BRUU, just like us, was faced with the wonderful problem of growth beyond our capacity. We were busting at the seams with one service and there was no way for visitors to feel like there was enough space for them. We watched each week as a visitor would show up, find it too crowded, and walk away. This was even happening to members. We started the process of moving to two services by consulting with all the stakeholder groups. That gave us the road map of what would need to change to hold two services. It was not easy, and some people were upset with all the change. That was normal and expected: after all, who likes change?

The interesting part of moving to two services was that many people feared that the community would become split. Although some people would only come to one service or the other, most people did not feel a split in the community. Attendance at social events, workshops, a shared coffee hour, and meetings more than filled the need to feel like a single

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community. Making space was the key ingredient in being welcoming for those who were seeking our community.

### Have you had any surprises since coming to UUCS?

I have been here for three months now and I am a little surprised at how at home I feel in the building. This is the first religious community I have been a part of that did not own its building or land. I must admit that I was a little judgmental about our building being in a commercial space. I just assumed that it would feel like we are guests in someone else's home. Now that I have been in the space long enough, I no longer feel that way. I feel at home in our building.

### What is one thing that would surprise us about you?

From time to time, I still purchase and play with those little Matchbox toy cars that I loved as a kid. I think it's some sort of denial that I am an adult now. These toys were one of the first and most consistent things that I would spend my childhood birthday money on. It was a treat when I could buy them in the store. Now, as an adult with an adult income, the temptation to continue to purchase these toys is too great. I only buy a few a year, but I almost always stop in the toy aisle to see what new cars are available.

### You grew up as a UU: what was that like?

Growing up as a Unitarian Universalist is wonderful! I felt embraced and loved by all those around me. I felt that I mattered, was important, and could make decisions about my beliefs for myself. Being raised with our value system set me up to start my first petition in the fifth grade. It was trivial, but it was a success. I felt like my church was a spiritual home that would always be there for me. Unfortunately, my family moved to an area that did not have a church nearby, so we stopped attending when I entered high school. I started attending again just after college and quickly signed up to teach Our Whole Lives. I could go on and on about what this experience was like, so feel free to ask me next time we have a conversation.

## HOLIDAY PROJECT

The Immigration Task Force and Lifespan Religious Education Council are sponsoring a holiday collection for teens served by CAIR (Capital Area Immigrants' Rights Coalition). Beginning on December 8, you will find ornaments on a Christmas tree at UUCS. Take an ornament with a picture of an item you would like to donate. Bring the unwrapped item back to UUCS by December 22, affix the ornament, and place it under the tree.

## A MONTH OF SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

### October: Covenant

Members of our congregation are invited to engage the practice of *Lectio Divina*. *Lectio Divina* is Latin for divine reading, spiritual reading, or holy reading, and represents a traditional practice of scriptural reading intended to promote communion with that which is ultimately meaningful. It is a way of praying or meditating with sacred words that calls one to study, ponder, listen and, finally, rejoice within the soul. Unitarian Universalists embrace a wide-reaching definition of scripture, finding words of profound meaning in the works of the world religions, scientists, poets, and the experiences of our own lives.

Find the time in your day to read each piece every day. Read, pause, read again, pause, and then reflect. You may choose to write each quote in a journal and add notes from your reflections. You may choose to read each piece to your family at the dinner table. You may choose to read in the morning or before sleep. You may choose to use the piece to gather your spirit for prayer or meditation.

### December 1—8

*Coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous.*

—Albert Einstein, *The World as I See It*

### December 9—18

*God has no religion.*

—Mahatma Gandhi

### December 19—22

*God will not look you over for medals, degrees or diplomas but for scars.*

—Elbert Hubbard

### December 23—29

*If I should ever die, God forbid, let this be my epitaph: The only proof he needed for the existence of God was music.*

—Kurt Vonnegut

### December 30—31

*I think it [ticks] God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it.*

—Alice Walker *The Color Purple*

## SACRED STORY FOR ALL AGES

### Jacob Wrestles With God at Peniel

From the Bible, Genesis 32:22–32

The same night [Jacob] got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking."

But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

So he said to him, "What is your name?"

And he said, "Jacob."

Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."

Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name."

But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him.

So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

## Family Discussion

In this story, God looks and acts like a person. What do you think God is like?

How have you experienced God or something greater than yourself?

Have you ever wrestled with the idea of God or religion? If so, what happened?



## CALENDAR

### Stay Up to Date With UUCS Events

D E C E M B E R	
<b>Sunday, 12/1</b>	<p><b>10:30 am — Worship Service: "Where is God in the Philippines?"</b> Many religious people have questioned their faith when faced with the horrific. The images and stories from the Philippines may ask some of us to ask, if there is a God, then why does that kind of thing happen? Where is the Spirit of Life amongst so much death? Our choir will sing.</p> <p><b>Noon — Inquirer's Class in Rev. Anya's office</b></p>
<b>Friday, 12/6</b>	<p><b>6:00 pm — Holiday Decorating Party</b> All ages welcome: join us in trimming the tree, hanging wreaths, making ornaments, and sharing a potluck meal.</p>
<b>Saturday 12/7</b>	<p><b>9:00 am — 4:00 pm — Holiday Portrait Day at UUCS</b> Families served by INMED Partnership for Children will have portraits taken and receive prints that day.</p>

<p><b>Sunday, 12/8</b></p>	<p><b>10:30 am — <i>Worship service: “God of Many Names”</i></b>                  Our service explores the Universalist conception of the holy: “All names of God remain hallowed,” says the Jewish theologian Martin Buber, “because they have been used not only to speak of God but also to speak to him.” Clarisa Marcus, Kim Fitzgerald, and Harry Harris offer special music.</p>
<p><b>Sunday, 12/15</b></p>	<p><b>10:30 am — <i>Worship service: “Rights, Rituals, and Rigamarole”</i></b>                  Our service is a primer for the holiday hullabaloo, inviting a deeper reflection into the rights and rituals of the season. Special musical guests Abba Gadol join us from the Beth Chaverim Reform Jewish Congregation.</p>
<p><b>Friday, 12/20</b></p>	<p><b>7:00 pm — <i>Solstice service</i></b>                  Our Women’s Earth-Based Spirituality (WEBS) group leads this annual solstice service based on ancient faith traditions. Child care provided.</p>
<p><b>Sunday 12/22</b></p>	<p><b>10:30 am — <i>Worship service: “Las Posadas” Holiday Pageant for All Ages</i></b>                  Celebrate the possibilities of welcome as we reenact Mary and Joseph’s search for an inn, bringing the blessings of this Latin American and Southwest United States tradition to life! The children’s choir will add their voices to the celebration.</p>
<p><b>Tuesday, 12/24</b></p>	<p><b>6:00 pm — <i>Christmas Eve Candlelight Service</i></b>                  Join us for a reverent evening of music, stories, and candlelight with our ministers, Rev. Anya Sammler-Michael and Andrew Mertz, and our choir, led by Kris Adams, as we celebrate Christmas Eve. A wine and apple cider reception will follow the service. Child care will be provided.</p>
<p><b>Sunday, 12/29</b></p>	<p><b>10:30 am — <i>Worship service: “Fireside Stories for Kwanzaa”</i></b>                  This service uses the seven guiding principles of Kwanzaa to gather stories from the congregation to warm us in this dark time of the year. Members share their experiences as we light the Kwanzaa candles representing unity, self-determination, collective work/responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith.</p>
<p><b>J A N U A R Y 2 0 1 4</b></p>	
<p><b>Sunday, 1/5</b></p>	<p><b>10:30 am — <i>Worship service: “Arise!—A New Year’s Celebration”</i></b>                  We enter the new year exalting the dawn with world-renowned percussionist Tom Teasley and our annual Fire Communion. This all-ages service invites us to shed the old and assume a bold new beginning.</p> <p><b>Noon — <i>Inquirer’s Class in Rev. Anya’s office</i></b></p>
<p><b>Sunday, 1/12</b></p>	<p><b>10:30 am — <i>Worship service</i></b></p>