

BEYOND ATHEISM

There's a great book called *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. When did you first commit to memory the Pledge of Allegiance? Kindergarten? It's still with us--*I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to theanyone?* Soon after that some of us learned the Apostles Creed. *I believe in God the Father Almighty maker of heaven and earth, and..... and the Lord's Prayer? Our father, who art in heaven.....* . 12-steppers know the serenity prayer, *God grant me the serenity.....* And the revised version, *God grant me the serenity to accept the people I cannot change, the courage to change the one I can, and the wisdom to know that one is ME*. Interesting thing about this powerful ability to remember is that there's NO delete button. We simply cannot erase anything, no matter how we try—even phone numbers from years ago, utterly useless now, are still there in the mind.

It's no secret that I have been a member of Al-Anon for three and a half decades. I remember words from the steps and traditions as well as the Serenity Prayer. Al-Anon also has a brief introduction to the group that gives a basic description of who we are and what is expected of those attending. This intro, read at every meeting, advises us not to discuss religion. We're just there to share our experiences in relating to alcoholics, in the hope that we can help each other. The intro also contains this phrase: *take what you like and leave the rest*. In other words, listen, but if you hear something you don't like, just leave it alone.

Why is it against the rules to express religious opinions? because all 12-step groups must remain open to people of all faiths or none. Many groups use the Lord's Prayer as a closing, but that is actually not OK, since it is Christian. If someone quotes the Bible or denounces it, denies God or professes their belief in Jesus, Buddha or Allah, everyone at the table knows that should just be left alone, but heads may nod approval, or shake in DISapproval, and we will hear someone say "God language is against the rules." Yes, because it is the most divisive thing anyone can do in the place where people are struggling to keep their heads above the rough waters of life with alcoholics. For the freedom to speak God language in search of our own authentic belief, THIS is the place, right here in the fellowship of Unitarian Universalists, all of whom have come here at least partly for that reason—to believe as we see fit, and know that is OK, we are accepted.

The search for god as we understand that word often starts at age twelve or thirteen, as part of growing up. Like children in most Christian families, I grew up with David and Goliath and Noah's Ark, not asking questions. But at some point I did begin wondering: was Goliath taller than the Harlem Globetrotters? How did Noah know which porcupine was male or female? Such questions nagged at me, and most often I just did not know what or who or **whether** to ask. Church had always been part of my life, but at age fifteen I dropped out and began visiting alternate churches where no one knew me, or the Library, where I looked for familiar names in the shelf of religious books. Gradually rejecting one option after another, I began slowly and fearfully circling around the word *atheism*, as if *feeling cold and circling a campfire*.

After a while that label began losing its shock value, and I even used it deliberately, provoking arguments. But I made a common mistake by thinking of atheism as the ultimate denial of any God,

the end of the road, and that mistaken idea led me into a muddy lagoon, a backwater of confusion —it took over twenty years for me to realize that atheism is *NOT* the ultimate anything. After similar journeys, many people arrive in the safe harbor of UUism, but still believing as I did back then, that atheism is the polarity or end point of the religious continuum. Safe in a place where atheism was seen as a natural part of discussion, I began opening to the possibility that the religious continuum has no polarity, negative or positive. There is no such thing as the correct, right image of god, OR the ultimate escape from ANY and all Gods.

Mark Twain said: *God created man in his own image, and man has returned the compliment.* Each one of us lives out that concept, re-inventing the wheel. Childhood notions of a Superman God, comic book theology, start fading as we grow up, but the image of **God as an external being**, out there somewhere above the world that he or she created, omnipotent, responsible for everything that happens on planet Earth, that idea is deep-rooted. That is the biblical God of western religion as well as the Allah of Islam, but as long as Yahweh or Allah sits on the throne of the heart we are saddled with ideological conflicts and cannot find our way out of the backwater.

Caught in that dilemma, I *said* that I was an atheist, while desperately searching for a delete button in my brain that could remove the Bible, with most of its words. I reasoned, and firmly believe, that the world with all its evil, injustice, pain and death simply cannot be the work of a divine being. I agree with John Lennon—the concept of heaven and hell is irrational. Hanging on for dear life to some version of the Sunday School God, we are surfing through waves of doubt. Asking each other IF we believe, whether we swear YES I believe, or growl NO, sorry--but neither answer is really true. “Agnostic” may be closer to the truth, at least temporarily, but that too is really just another stage we pass through on the way from outgrown images to authentic personal spirituality.

Belief in an eternal, external Being is theism; the omnipotence of such a God provides believers with a sense of security and hope of life after death; any other answer, **they will say**, constitutes atheism. They ask *if god is not all powerful, does not intervene in human affairs in answer to prayer, and there's no life after death, why do we need him?* Good question. America's founding fathers had rejected theism in favor of DEism—that is, belief in God as an abstract principle—not a being--Love, peace, nature, justice; benevolence, a YES to Life.

Bill Wilson and the earliest members of AA discussed these ideas frequently, and many came to believe that atheism was inevitable, but could be accepted and then left behind—the twelfth step's promise of a spiritual awakening would be found further on, beyond atheism. Now it's me talking and not Bill, who created the twelve steps as his own lifeline to faith and recovery. After I got to know Bill, he helped me out of the mud and back into the mainstream, and then I saw clearly that atheism is not the end of anything, it is a natural, logical and usually necessary *stage* in the spiritual awakening. Most of us will find authenticity and serenity only *after* passing through that stage, led by the light of courage and honesty.

This is not abstract theology, theoretical stuff with no relevance to ordinary life—it is the sane and sensible pattern that leads to peace of mind. Men and women, young or old, black or white, drunk or

sober, rich or poor simply cannot afford to sink into despair when they find themselves unable to resist atheism, for that is a loss of courage and stops us from living up to the serenity prayer. The external, omnipotent God was never our real higher power—letting go of that image is spiritual growth, not loss of faith. The search for god as we understand god cannot begin in earnest until we clear away the debris left behind after we have rejected images that never really worked for us. Only a god we truly understand can become our Higher Power.

A few years ago I attended a day-long workshop on how to help military veterans return to normal family and community life. The 2008 movie **The Hurt Locker** filmed some brutal moments from the war in Iraq, bloody and frightening scenes the soldier hero of the film had lived through. The grim faces of the fighting men and women and their desperate attempts to find some kind of ethical structure to justify what they had done—that stayed with me. In the workshop we were given a sanitized version of war, and led to believe the omnipotent external god could help us recover. This seldom works—in fact, you probably know, returning military veterans are killing themselves at a terrible rate.

Called to inflict violence, cruelty and death, having lost whatever faith they had, filled with fear and anger against an omnipotent god who would allow such evil, they pass judgment against themselves. At the end of **The Hurt Locker** the returned vet goes grocery shopping, and we see him pushing a cart down an aisle filled with colorful boxes of sugar-coated flakes. This array represents the civilian life, everything sweet, clean, and not quite real, but the world of war is still with the ex-soldier, powerfully real, a life and death existence where there IS no god. He simply could not find any way to fit back into the homefront as the different person he had become in the grip of war, and so he re-enlisted and went back to Iraq.

Other returning veterans choose suicide, usually by some kind of firearm. Still others (and this is only too familiar, as it seems increasingly common) they take out their anger and despair on us, cutting down complete strangers as they did in Iraq or Afghanistan, or their own loved ones who have failed to help them in their spiritual desert. The minister leading that workshop did his best to reach the veterans in our group, and to inspire people like me to believe we could help, but I went away frustrated and sad.

We communicated love and hope, an honest willingness to walk with them toward the light, but we still did not know the way out of the swamp. God as you understand god must come alive within your spirit. To find your own god, ask yourself what he/she/it *must* be and what he/she/it *NEVER* be in order to become your higher power. Light will begin to shine through the spiritual emptiness as you delete false words and fake images. During the years of atheism, some seed had been planted in me, and it blossomed into life when I decided that God simply could not be all-loving and also omnipotent. For me the higher power was unconditional Love, could NOT be omnipotent and therefore was NOT in charge of the world. This seed began to put out tendrils of courage, strengthening my belief in myself, and then one day I realized the higher power was coming to life within me, turning my emptiness to faith. The priceless gift of serenity can silence doubt and anxiety, not with fabricated answers but with the blessed assurance of a living spirit within.

Let me close where this message started, with the marvel of memory. Over decades of familiarity with fellow codependents and their alcoholic loved ones, I have heard the long-term program veterans say *that's OK if you don't believe in God, ANYthing can become the representative of your God.* Pick that big tree in the yard, your best beloved pet or your favorite hat. Pick something that puts you in touch with your inner spirit—that works because it's real--god as you understand God. When you're scared you might die, concentrate on that **God, letting go of anxiety.** That is step twelve, *having had a spiritual awakening.* The unique spirit that lives within you has always been your higher power, always available whenever you turn the light in that direction, awakening the power. *Amen.*

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