Wrestling With the Holy
A sermon preached at the UU Church of the Lehigh Valley
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Many years ago as a new minister I was talking with a seasoned colleague, seeking insight into the work of ministry. We got to talking about creativity, and the mysteries of the sermon-writing process, and he tried to describe an experience he sometimes had when the writing was flowing well. Sometimes, he said, "I feel as though I become the channel for the sermon, rather than its author. It's as if it's coming *through* me somehow, coming from . . . from . . . well, *God*. I mean, let's call a spade a spade here."

I introduced this summer's sermon series by suggesting that we Unitarian Universalists need to take ourselves seriously as religious people, and identified a series of qualities that I consider essential to religious life. The first was the creating of covenantal community, and I'm leaving that for you all to explore together in the fall when it is your theme for September. Last time I was in the pulpit I spoke about cultivating compassion – common among all religions of the world. This morning, my title is "Wrestling with the Holy." Part of the religious experience involves seeking out and recognizing those moments when we feel connected to, or part of, or even just a longing for, something beyond ourselves.

(I'll start with a couple of caveats. For one thing, this will be more personal – and therefore perhaps a little less tightly reasoned – than my typical sermons. I just don't know how to talk about this stuff from any place but my own experience. For another, I"m getting into territory this morning that may not interest all of you. That's OK. Take what you can and leave the rest, and trust that next week may be more your cup of tea.)

The twentieth century liberal theologian James Luther Adams said people come to our congregations looking for two things - intimacy and ultimacy. By intimacy he meant the profound relationships we experience in human community. By ultimacy he meant our connection to something larger than ourselves, the moments when we experience awe, mystery, and transformation. We're good at the intimacy part, at least a lot of the time, but we still shy away from ultimacy.

Religion asks us to realize that it's not all about us, but that we are part of something astonishing that is much bigger than we are. And religion at its best helps us to experience and appreciate that connection and try to understand our place in it. Of course we have different ways of understanding what that means. For some of us, the larger context in which we live grows out of the network of human relationships. For others, it has to do with our place in the natural world. Next Sunday I'll be expanding on the idea of living with reverence, which is a broader and more universal way, perhaps, to think about that connection to the world, and our place in it.

But this morning I want to lift up the more personal connection, images of God, Spirit, Holy One, Comforter, Presence. My conversation with that colleague who experienced God working through him as he wrote took place nearly 25 years ago, but I still encounter that kind of reluctant embarrassment among us when it comes to sharing such conversations and experiences. In my eight years serving the BuxMont UU Fellowship I think I only preached on God once – and that was when someone requested it after they bought my sermon in the

service auction. And that was despite the fact that the idea of opening up to some sort of holy presence had already become important to me. But I was afraid to talk about it in church.

Our Unitarian heritage in particular has placed a heavy emphasis on the value of reason. UUs can be so dismissive of “irrational” things! And of course, many of us have come out of traditions that asked us to believe things that we simply couldn't. The expression “take it on faith” didn't have a positive ring for many of us; it amounted to being told to shut up and not ask questions and to check our minds at the door when we entered the church. But a deep commitment to reason doesn't mean that everything is best viewed through that lens. Our reason is a great and powerful gift, but it's not the only tool we have for interpreting our experience.

We know, as Unitarian Universalists, that we have among us many different ways of experiencing or connecting with the holy, and we also know that not all of us have any interest in doing that in the first place. This is not a sermon to say that we should all seek a relationship with God.

But it is a sermon asking you to remember that many among do need a chance to do that, and need to be free to talk about it without feeling defensive or embarrassed. We are committed to freedom of religion, not freedom from religion.

When we struggle to understand the reasons why our movement is not growing, we're confronted with the fact that increasingly people are looking for a place where their spiritual hungers can be fed – perhaps not in the old, traditional ways. But they want those hungers to be recognized, respected, taken seriously. And one of the most important ways we try to understand our experiences is to name them, to talk about them. For some of us the word “God” is a comfortable short-hand for that dimension that is beyond our naming. For others, that word is so loaded with preconceptions that it is no longer helpful, and we seek alternative language.

The beauty of it now is that we have alternative language. We can play with this. When I was growing up, raised as a humanist UU, I had only one way of defining God – the way I had observed in the culture around me. God, I learned from my school friends, was a being. An all-powerful being. A being who judged me harshly for being a UU, and who sent people to hell who didn't believe in him. (and God was definitely “him.”) I did not believe in this God. And therefore for a very long time I assumed I was an atheist. I had a religion – Unitarian Universalism – and I was proud of my religion. But I didn't think I had any faith.

The odd thing about this was that I always had a deep sense of being religious, even faithful. I sensed a strong connection to something both within and beyond me that transcended my rational understanding. But I had no way of naming it that made any sense to me. And then I began to discover theologians like Paul Tillich, who defined God not as *a* being, but as being itself, the ground of being. And Henry Nelson Weiman, who referred to God as “creative interchange,” the principle of creativity functioning in all things. And Ralph Waldo Emerson's writing on the Oversoul. (And, of course more recently Shelly Jackson Denham put the phrase “Spirit of Life” on all of our lips.) Gradually I began to feel my way toward a radically different understanding of what God might be. I still didn't believe in the God I encountered as a child. But I no longer felt like an atheist.

But one thing that held me back on the journey  was this deification of reason that I had absorbed growing up as a UU.  My fiercely rational upbringing left me feeling vaguely ashamed, when I found myself with deep longings that were outside the realm of reason altogether.

I remember meeting with a support group of colleagues once and trying to describe what I could only explain as a longing for God – in whom I did not believe – saying it's kind of like when you loose a tooth, and you've got this hole in your mouth, and you know it hurts when you stick your tongue in it, but you can't help sticking your tongue in it, just to see if it still hurts.  And one colleague suggested, Perhaps God is what's making you stick your tongue in that hole.  I had not thought of longing itself as a sign of God' presence, although I know now that that's a classic theme of spiritual life.

The thing is, if you do experience that longing or hunger – and not all of us do, and that's OK, one way is not better than the other.  But if you do, you just can't ignore it because it's not rational – not without doing harm to your soul, anyway.  I like to say I had my crisis of faith in reverse.  I never lost my faith.  I didn't have any to lose.  I was raised in a humanist UU household and was a proud and happy atheist.  My crisis came when I started to find my faith.

Despite my reluctance, I found myself drawn to traditional hymns, to gospel stories, to the language of prayer.  I didn't want find these things compelling.  I had always been so disdainful of those old, sentimental Christian hymns,. I sometimes think this has been God's joke on me, to draw me in using the very language I wanted to disdain.

We can't always choose what's going to speak to our hearts.  I would have preferred to encounter holiness pretty much anywhere other than through the Christian story, because I hate so much of what passes for Christianity in this culture.  But we have to pay attention to the things that open our hearts.  Even when they make us uncomfortable.  Maybe especially when they make us uncomfortable.

For many of us, opening up to the richness of metaphor is a key piece of this journey.  We've lost much religious language and story because we thought it was intended literally.  And because the literal understanding became impossible for us, we threw it all away.  I have a good friend, raised a conservative Lutheran, now a scientist.  Partway through high school he realized he had learned enough chemistry that he could have performed a blood alcohol test on himself following communion to verify that the wine had not, in fact, become blood.  At that point he discarded all things religious and never looked back.

But much religious language was never intended to be heard literally.  Karen Armstrong, whose work on compassion I quoted last time I was here, talks in her book A History of God about the concept of the Trinity as a metaphor for the multi-faceted nature of the divine – never intended to be codified into a literal understanding of three persons, a father, a son and a spirit – but an image of the mysterious, complex, interactive nature of holiness.  I believe the same is true of many of the gospel stories, that they are rich with metaphorical and symbolic meanings that were never meant to be heard literally.  The early readers would have understood this, but somewhere along the line it got lost.

When I began to struggle mightily with this during my seminary years, I was blessed to have a class with the Rev. Krister Stendahl, a Swedish Lutheran theologian and bishop, who

suggested that I should feel free to take the Christian language and metaphor in my mouth and try it for size, allowing a wide poetic margin. He acknowledged that our culture makes it very hard to do this, but he gave me much-needed permission to taste the language and metaphors without having to swallow them whole. And slowly, out of that, came a new understanding and a new depth.

Religious language is always metaphorical, symbolic language. It points beyond the image to something beyond our naming. That's why I love that poem by Nancy Shaffer that I used for our reading this morning. So many images of God. None of them literal. All of them true. It was when I was given permission to hear the language of the Christian story as metaphor that I was able to let it speak to me in ways that opened my heart and brought healing and hope.

Our congregations need to be places where people can experiment with different ways of naming their longings and experiences without being shamed or made to feel defensive. The language one person uses may not be comfortable for another. I've used Christianity as my example because that has been my experience – and it also happens to be the language toward which we are most reactionary. I understand why that reaction is there. I used to be one of the most reactionary among us. But we need to get over that reactivity if we want to provide a meaningful religious home – not only for people yet to find us, but for many of the people who are already here. We need to allow people to explore using the language and symbols and metaphors that speak to their hears, and trust that they will grant us the same privilege.

Many years ago I came across a little quotation, a stanza from a poem by Antonio Machado:

> I dreamt last night
> oh marvelous error
> that there were
> honeybees in my heart
> making honey out of my
> old failures.

Those lines spoke to me so powerfully that I copied them down on a little slip of paper and put it next to my mirror where I would see it every morning. This was more than 20 years ago, when my journey toward God was still very tentative and unwilling. If the poem had been about God, I would have ignored it. But it used this wonderful metaphor of honeybees. And it said to me: Our lives are filled with failures, but if we allow time and grace to work in us, then transformations of unspeakable sweetness are possible." I hungered for that grace and transformation, and the metaphor of honeybee – that I could live with.

Only years later did I discover that the poem has two other stanzas, also images of transformation, and ends with these lines:

> Last night as I slept,
> I dreamt – marvelous error!
> That it was God I had here inside my heart.

I want to close by reading the full text of the poem – in a slightly different translation.

Last night as I was sleeping,
I dreamt—marvelous error!—
that a spring was breaking
out in my heart.
I said: Along which secret aqueduct,
Oh water, are you coming to me,
water of a new life
that I have never drunk?

Last night as I was sleeping,
I dreamt—marvelous error!—
that I had a beehive
here inside my heart.
And the golden bees
were making white combs
and sweet honey
from my old failures.

Last night as I was sleeping,
I dreamt—marvelous error!—
that a fiery sun was giving
light inside my heart.
It was fiery because I felt
warmth as from a hearth,
and sun because it gave light
and brought tears to my eyes.

Last night as I slept,
I dreamt—marvelous error!—
that it was God I had
here inside my heart.

Whether we talk of honeybees, or fiery suns, or springs of the water of new life, may we all be free to find and use the language that helps to open our hearts.