

**“Another Counterfeit God?”**  
**Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley**  
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**The Rev. Judy Welles©; Elizabeth Motich, Worship Associate**

**Invitation to Worship**

Elizabeth Motich

How do you envision God? Is God a spirit or a form, a man or a woman, a governing force or nothing at all? In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus' teen son, Telemachus is aided in his quests by the supreme goddess Athena, who takes the form of an older man named “Mentor.” As Telemachus' mentor, Athena guides him on his way and protects him, while appearing to Telemachus as his exact youthful ideal of a strong, intelligent man.

Like many people, I cannot imagine who or what God is, or if there even is a God, but I often wonder if, like Athena in the story, Gods really can show up in our lives in unexpected forms. Perhaps they appear in the guises of nurturing spirits who care for us as nurses and doctors in hospitals, lurking tricksters who cause us to tip cups of coffee onto our laptop keyboards, or even the animals who brighten our days with their affection and charm. Gods could be people who challenge us, frustrate us, or encourage us to excel.

In the novel *The Shack*, which serves as the springboard for today's service, the main character suffers a great tragedy and is confronted by three spirits of God, chiefly personified by a kind, boisterous African-American woman. Mack, the protagonist, holds a traditional Christian view of God as a stern, white-bearded patriarch and he is startled and disappointed that God doesn't fit his stereotypical image. As he unravels memories of his past, he realizes that God can appear to him in any form, and that by challenging his perceptions, She encourages him to grow through his grief.

Today, as we explore some of the themes of *The Shack*, I invite you to examine your core beliefs and consider the image in which you most often see God.

Come, let us worship together.

**First Reading**

My “Honest to God” Question

Diana Eck<sup>1</sup>

*This is an excerpt from an essay by Diana Eck, a Professor at Harvard Divinity School, in response to the question “How Do I See God in the Year 2000?”*

My “honest to God” question is shaped not so much by modernity and science but

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<sup>1</sup> From “Honest to God: The Universe of Faith,” by Diana Eck, published in Borg, Marcus and Ross McKenzie, Eds., *God at 2000*, Morehouse Publishing Co., 2001

by our encounter with people of other faiths. My question is: How do we who are followers of Christ think about God in the world we now know, a world of religious diversity and difference where people of other traditions of faith are no longer metaphorical neighbors around the world but neighbors across the street and across the hall? Do we imagine we are the only ones who have sought God passionately, or who have let our souls take root in the depth and loving nurture of God, or who have lived our lives and died our deaths in terms of it? What does the growing dialogue of people of many faiths have to do with our faith as Christians? This is a question that will not go away. It is not a question only for people like me who make a vocation of studying religious communities on the other side of the world. It is a question that makes theologians of us all. It makes us think anew about God.

## **Second Reading**

A God Who Looks Like Me  
Patricia Lynn Reilly<sup>2</sup>

*This meditation was written by a woman attempting to broaden her concept of the Divine.*

My God, You are a Spirit, neither male nor female. You have been my Father for so many years, today I ask to know you as Mother. You are too vast to fit into only one compartment. How foolish of us to confine you to one image. It feels uncomfortable to call you Mother. They have spoken of you as Father for centuries. Yet I have always wondered how there could be a father without a mother. How is it that the feminine face of God has been obscured for so long? They tell me now that there is a God who looks like me. It's hard to take it all in.

## **Sermon**

Another Counterfeit God?

The Rev. Judy Welles

When we take the dogs to the park every morning, we let them off their leashes as soon as we're well away from the street, and each dog goes her or his own way sniffing and exploring all the temptations that the park has to offer. I've noticed that if Berry gets into something he shouldn't, and we shout "No, no, Berry! Off!" then no matter how far away Maya is or what she's up to, she will come running over to see what Berry has discovered. If we're yelling at him to keep out of it, it must be good!

I've developed a similar kind of response to items or events in American culture which get the fundamentalist Christians all riled up. If they're upset about it, there's probably something interesting going on, and I rush right over to check it out.

This is how I discovered *The Golden Compass* last summer — a terrific three-novel series written by British author Philip Pullman which gave rise to a sermon I titled "Which God Are We Talking About?" A similar instinct this summer has led me to read

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<sup>2</sup> Reilly, Patricia Lynn, *A God Who Looks Like Me*, Ballantine Books, 1996

*The Shack*, a novel by William Paul Young that has some of the Christian community in an uproar.<sup>3</sup>

Now to speak of “the Christian community” is to paint with a very broad brush, and I don’t especially want to do that. It’s like speaking of “the Hispanic community” or “the gay community” or “the disability community” without any acknowledgement of the wide variations within all of these groups. If we are curious about religion, and interested in all the ways in which religion touches on various aspects of American life, then we need to be careful about painting with this broad brush. Christians come in a wide variety, just as Hispanics and gays and people with disabilities do.

There are many Christians who loved *The Shack* and have praised it up and down for its imaginative handling of one of the most difficult questions that anyone who believes in God faces: *where is God in a world so filled with unspeakable pain?* There is much to praise in this novel.

And if you are a very traditional Christian, there is much to criticize as well. The theology is questionable, the criticism of the institutional church is not even subtle, and it flies in the face of some of the most significant teachings of the Bible. No wonder they’ve referred to it as “another counterfeit God.”

My personal response to the book was warm (though not ecstatic). It’s not the sort of book that would keep me up late at night turning page after page to find out what happens. But as an allegory, it has some merit. *The Shack* is a postmodern sort of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, in which a man gradually comes to understand the nature of God. Just as John Bunyan did in the 17<sup>th</sup> century with Pilgrim’s journey “from this world to that which is to come,” William Paul Young offers us the story of Mackenzie Phillips’s journey through tragedy to personal peace.

I’d first like to give you an overview of the plot line, and then mention briefly why the fundamentalists don’t like it, and then I want to use some of the images and conversations in the book as a jumping-off place for my own musings on the ways that we might understand God and our relationship to God. Be forewarned — there are some plot spoilers in here, so if your only goal in reading it would be to find out what happens, then after this morning you needn’t bother. But there’s more to this book than its story.

As Elizabeth has already told you, the story, such as it is, concerns a man named Mack, who has experienced a lot of sorrow and tragedy in his life, culminating in the abduction and murder of his little daughter at a shack in the Oregon wilderness. He’s very interested in questions of God and religion, but since “The Great Sadness” overcame him after his daughter’s death, he seldom goes to church, and his conversational allusions to religion are barbed and sarcastic.

Four years after his daughter’s disappearance and death, Mack receives a note inviting him to return to the shack for a weekend. The note is signed by God. Mack is, of course, skeptical, but there’s a way in which he longs for healing and closure, so he

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<sup>3</sup> Young, Wm. Paul, *The Shack*, Windblown Media, 2008

arranges to make his way to the shack and see what is there for him.

What awaits him at the shack is nothing less than The Godhead — the Holy Trinity — personified in ways that Mack can relate to and talk to. God the Father is named Papa — she’s a big, bosomy African American woman who smells good and calls him “Honey” — sort of a spiritual Aunt Jemima figure. The holy spirit is also personified as a female character, a small, delicate Asian woman who collects human tears and loves to garden; she shimmers in the light and is a bit difficult to see clearly. Jesus is a man, a reassuring, hearty type of fellow dressed in jeans and a plaid shirt, wearing a tool belt and covered in sawdust. (When Jesus was introduced, I wanted to say to the author “Oh, please, couldn’t you have done better than that?” He even describes him as “Middle Eastern, big-nosed, not particularly handsome, with eyes and a smile that light up his face.”) So let’s say that Jesus is personified as, well... as Jesus wearing 20<sup>th</sup> century guy clothes, who ditched the sandals for a pair of work boots.

Over the course of the weekend, Mack gradually becomes convinced of God’s unyielding love for him and all of humankind. (And when I say “God,” I mean all three of them; they are the trinity, after all.) In fact, one of the things that charmed me about the book is the way Papa says, “Oh, I’m especially fond of him [or her, or them]” referring to any- and everybody. God is especially fond of ALL of us!

Mack gradually overcomes his anger at God, as all three of the manifestations of God explain to him in various ways that the problems of the world can be traced back to the matter of free will. Once humans took matters into their own hands with the apple in the Garden of Eden, God had to step back and let events play out in their own way. Man became the arbiter of what is good and what is evil — always inconsistently and using subjective judgment — thus losing sight of the reality that there is an Absolute Good which humans simply must be obedient to if the world is to be healed.

I found great comfort in the way Jesus comforts Mack as he agonizes over the terror his little daughter must have felt when she was abducted and eventually murdered:

“Jesus reached over and put his hand on Mack’s shoulder and squeezed. Gently he said “Mack, she was never alone. I never left her; we never left her, not for one instant. I could no more abandon her, or you, than I could abandon myself. ...I can tell you there was not a moment that we were not with her. She knew my peace, and you would have been proud of her. She was so brave!”

I won’t give away much more of the story, but I do want you to have some idea of why the Focus on the Family crowd warns that this is a dangerous book. The gist of the argument is that the book puts forth harmful ideas which are non-scriptural; parts of it fly in the face of Biblical teaching, and what the Trinity encourages Mack to do is put aside his preconceived notions about how things are. For those who hew closely to the Bible as the ultimate source of religious authority, preconceived notions are what it’s all about.

Tim Challies, the author of the lengthy and thoughtful (though critical) review that I read on the Focus on the Family web site, wrote:

Though we certainly do need to maintain some objectivity when we study Scripture, God has also told us many things with certainty and we need to cling tightly to these. Many preconceived notions are theologically sound and informed by biblical truth.<sup>4</sup>

All his other arguments flow from this: that many of the ideas and situations portrayed in *The Shack* are contrary to what is taught in the Bible, and if you have the Bible as your only and inerrant authority, you will find this book very disturbing. Or worse, it will cause you to ask questions and question your assumptions.

Now as Unitarian Universalists, of course, this is familiar and comfortable territory. We are always questioning our assumptions, always open to learning something new and unfamiliar, seldom content to settle for the first answer we get. We are unwilling to say “This is it. Here I stand and I will go no farther.” In fact, it was Universalist minister and scholar L.B. Fisher who wrote in 1921, “Universalists are often asked to tell where they stand. The only true answer to give to this question is that we do not stand at all. We move.”<sup>5</sup>

And in the case of *The Shack*, I picture us moving toward its imaginative, creative and iconoclastic ideas, whereas the fundamentalists are distancing themselves as fast as possible from the same ideas, because they call all their assumptions into question. What Focus on the Family sees as dangerous, I see as open to possibility, creative, *heretical* in the true meaning of the Greek word “heresy,” which is “free to choose.”

(I can not tell you often enough, “heresy” is a good word; freedom of choice is what we are all about.)

Because Unitarian Universalism does not rely on the Bible or any single holy scripture as its authority, I could just stop here and point out that the criticisms of *The Shack* are irrelevant to us, since those criticisms are grounded in the assumption that any ideas which are contrary to scriptural teachings are wrong and dangerous. But there are some deeper issues to pursue here, issues which might help us to understand why some of our Christian brothers and sisters think and react the way they do. We know that the way to better communication is through understanding, so let’s look a little deeper.

Christian teaching instructs us that the only way to God is through the mediation of Jesus. This is perhaps the most important single tenet of the Christian faith. Because of Adam’s sin, God no longer reveals Himself directly to us, but must be approached through Jesus Christ. Challies wrote:

God's revelation to us is now mediated communication. We may long for im-mediate or unmediated communication, but today our sin stands between us and the Holy God.

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<sup>4</sup> Challies, Tim, “The Shack: A Review,” found at <http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001788.cfm> — Boundless webzine, a website of Focus on the Family

<sup>5</sup> Reference in a sermon by Lyn Cox found at <http://revlyncox.tumblr.com/post/132509586/in-motion> and in many other searchable Unitarian Universalist sermons on line.

Yet the first source of our Unitarian Universalist faith is “direct experience...” a personal encounter with wonder and mystery *that moves us toward* the forces that create and uphold life [paraphrased]. You can imagine the dismay that Challies would feel encountering a God who grabbed him to her bosom and whirled him around yelling his name and saying “I am so glad to see you! My, my, my how I do love you!” Whereas, personally, I think that would be pretty cool...

Another criticism would have gone right over my head because I’m not that familiar with the subtleties of Christian teachings. But this one is really very significant in the larger picture of current American culture. Here’s what it is:

Even though the Trinity is defined in Christian doctrine this way — “God is three persons. Each person is fully God. There is one God” — there is a hierarchy of authority within this triune godhead. Challies quotes Christian theologian Bruce Ware, who

...says rightly that "the most marked characteristic of the Trinitarian relationships is the presence of an eternal and inherent expression of authority and submission." [Challies goes on...] From this we learn that both authority and submission are good, for both are expressive of God himself. ...The Son may submit to the Father and the Spirit may submit to the Son and the Father, even while maintaining absolute equality in worth and essence.

But the way the Trinity is described in *The Shack*, there is no hierarchy among them. Papa explains to Mack:

“...we have no concept of final authority among us, only unity. We are in a circle of relationship, not a chain of command or 'great chain of being' as your ancestors termed it. What you're seeing here is relationship without any overlay of power. We don't need power over the other because we are always looking out for the best. Hierarchy would make no sense among us.”

This is a far cry from Biblical teaching; scripture says otherwise and it says so clearly. “But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.” (1 Corinthians 11:3)

Then Challies goes on to make this statement, which I think is highly significant:

Denying roles and hierarchy within the Trinity is an error that has implications that may reach to the very foundations of human relationships.

And there, my friends, is the heart of the matter regarding their vehement opposition to same-sex marriage. ***Who would be in charge?*** I don’t mean this frivolously at all; I think it’s very serious and very significant. If your entire world view is made up of an understanding that the wife is subservient to her husband, the husband is subservient to Christ, and Christ is subservient to God, then what happens when there are two wives or two husbands? It shakes the very foundations of the orderly structure of the

universe. From a conservative Christian perspective, it makes sense to say that gay marriage threatens the institution of marriage as [they like to pretend] it has always existed. "...the very foundations of human relationships" indeed.

I recently stumbled upon a review of a new book called *The Evolution of God*, by Robert Wright. His thesis is that throughout history, the image and understanding of God has been shaped by what he calls "the facts on the ground." That is, a people's or a nation's depiction of God reflects their political status and their international relationships. When they are in a harmonious and peaceful state, their God is loving and gentle; when they are in conflict with their neighbors or hold the status of the underdog, their God is vengeful and violent. The book is worth a whole sermon in itself, so I'm not going to discuss it now except to wonder out loud why the depictions of God in *The Shack* have arisen now, and why they have given rise both to high praise and to energetic criticism.

We live in a time of instantaneous communication. National barriers are breaking down, national identity (at least in this country, and to a considerable extent in western Europe as well) is being called into question as immigrants from all parts of the world relocate and challenge our assumptions about who "we" are. It's a postmodern age, in which structures which we always took for granted — political and social structures, religious understanding, literary conventions — all these structures are being taken apart and reassembled in unfamiliar ways.

What kind of a God might be called for in times like these? Wouldn't some people be longing for a God who knows them by name, who relates with them personally, who is familiar with their personal history? A god who holds their hand or hugs them, who speaks their language and dances to the same music they do? A God who "is especially fond" of everyone and will never, ever desert them even under the most dire circumstances?

And in this same none-of-the-rules-apply-any-more postmodern society, there will be others who cleave to a God who makes the rules clear and enforces them sternly, punishing those who break them and rewarding the obedient with eternal salvation. It would feel like a safe and familiar place in the midst of uncertainty to have one and only one source of authority, inerrant and omnipotent, unapproachable perhaps, but solid as a rock.

Would you choose one of those Gods? Or perhaps you might choose another one altogether... Diana Eck suggests that to wonder about God in the face of 21<sup>st</sup> century religious diversity makes theologians of all of us. You are as well equipped as any of the professionals to imagine the God that you need for these times, whether it is the God of your Sunday School childhood, a god who looks like you, or one that comes from the farthest reaches of your imagination. Would God take a human form, as in *The Shack*, or would God manifest as something else altogether?

Years ago I gave a sermon in which I suggested that people create their own images of God. Char Klein took me up on the idea and made the figures that you see in

front of me on the table. There are three women, all old, all with wise and benevolent faces. One of them bears a striking resemblance to Char's own mother. The old man, who has vaguely Asian features, was added later to complete this Divine Quadrilateral.

You may not be as artistic as Char, but you have an imagination, and you know what needs and fears lie in the darkness of your own shack in the wilderness. What would the God look like who would give you comfort and inner peace?

### **Minister's Prayer**

*Inspired by the words of the late Reverend Max Coots:*

Let us pray to the God who holds us in the hollow of his hands — to the God who holds us in the curve of her arms — to the God whose flesh is the flesh of hills and hummingbirds and angleworms — whose skin is the color of an old black woman and a young white man, and the color of the leopard and the grizzly bear and the green grass snake — whose hair is like the aurora borealis, rainbows, nebulae, waterfalls, and a spider's web — whose eyes sometime shine like the evening star, and then like fireflies, and then again like an open wound — whose touch is both the touch of life and the touch of death — and whose name is everyone's name.

And what shall we pray?

We ask for comfort for those who suffer, and companionship for those who rejoice. We ask *[specific prayers for members of our congregation...]*

Our lips shape the many names of God as we ask for this comfort and pray for this community of seekers, and for all those who search down the ages for a path to God. May we find God where we seek, and may we find comfort and encouragement wherever two or more of us are gathered, this day and every day.

Amen.

### **Benediction**

Our Compass and Guide  
Diana Eck<sup>6</sup>

Whatever this word *G-o-d* points toward is greater than our understanding and greater than everything we think we mean. God transcends our understanding of what that word *G-o-d* means. That should be the source of deep religious humility on our part. Our compass and guide is this: to know that the most important thing for us to know is what we cannot fully know.

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<sup>6</sup> Eck, *op cit*