

“Which God Are We Talking About?”
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
February 17, 2008
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Invitation to Worship
Ellen Buller

When I had the opportunity to help Judy with a service that was inspired by the controversy about the movie “The Golden Compass” I jumped at the chance. Prepare for a service by going to the movies – how cool is that?

As often happens, as soon as a topic is on your mind – it seems to crop up everywhere... like when you buy a green Ford Taurus – the roads are full of them. Soon after our meeting, I was with a group of friends when one of them mentioned that she had planned to take her young granddaughters to see “The Golden Compass,” but after getting e-mails and hearing some of the warnings about the blasphemous nature of the movie, she changed her mind.

I certainly respect her desire to protect her granddaughters from material that might be too dark, confusing or frightening, and after further discussion, I was relieved to hear that she did not want to discourage their questions or keep them in the dark about different religious viewpoints. She simply thought that the movie might be too scary and not age appropriate. Awkward social situation averted — and I walked away without putting my foot in my mouth.

I’m glad that my friend encourages her granddaughters to ask questions... and I’m glad that we are coming together this morning in a place:

- Where responsible questioning is required;
- Where all questions are respected;
- Where there is more than one right answer;
- Where it’s OK to not have all the answers;
- Where questions can be more important than the answers.

When Judy and I went to see the movie, I did not find it dark and frightening. Instead, it was a story of courage and resourcefulness. Visually, it was a beautiful movie, but it did leave the viewer with a lot of questions: mainly, what is dust and why is it so important? As is usually so, I found the book much richer than the movie. While the movie had a hopeful Hollywood ending, the book did not leave me with the message that everything would inevitably work out for the best and that good would conquer the evil fueled by obsession. The book certainly did leave me eager to read the remaining two books in the series – I have to find out what happens to Lyra Belaqa the bold and brave heroine.

Isaac Singer was once asked whether he believed in free will or in predestination. “We have to believe in free will,” he replied. “We have no choice”

Come, let us worship together.

First Reading**The Garden of Love**
William Blake

I went to the Garden of Love,
And saw what I never had seen;
A Chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut
And "Thou shalt not," writ over the door;
So I turned to the Garden of Love
That so many sweet flowers bore.

And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tombstones where flowers should be;
And priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars my joys and desires.

Second Reading**"God"**
from *Heretic's Faith: Vocabulary for Religious Liberals*
Fred Muir

Across the street and on the corner from the church I served in Maine was a gas station. The station owner and I were on friendly speaking terms, though I think I remained somewhat of a mystery to him. I say this based on the monthly conversations we'd have when he happened to be out pumping gas and I walked by on my way to town. Our pattern was always the same: one of us would begin the conversation, which inevitably would turn to a local topic, which would lead to a national or international issue, which would highlight the differences and incongruities of human behavior and lead my gas-pumping, small-town, station-owning theologian to conclude: "Well, at least we all believe in the same God," which meant that the conversation was over and all was right with the world, at least his world. He would turn to walk away leaving me standing there, somewhat mystified and confused by his abruptness if not his conclusion.

I always wanted to yell to him, as he walked into the station office, "But that's just the point — we don't all believe in the same God." So why didn't I? I suppose I was apprehensive that he might say "What?" and then, well, then I'd have to explain the realities of God and God's believers. It's the same reality that those who continue to claim that God is dead have to face. God is very much alive and there is no consensus of who or what this God is — confusion reigns.

Sermon**Which God Are We Talking About?**

You may recall that there was a big flap around the middle of December when a movie was released called "The Golden Compass." For a brief period just before the release, fundamentalist Christians, and particularly Catholics, were vehemently denouncing the movie and urging parents not to allow their children to see it because it advocated killing God. E-mail messages were sent out under the headline: "Satan Wants to Devour Children At a Theater Near You." This got my attention.

So I went to see the movie, which I found charming and innocuous. There was nothing in it about killing God, though a discerning adult viewer would have noticed the allusions to a powerful religious organization which did not seem to have the best interests of humankind at heart.

Within a very short time after the movie came out, the fundamentalists' message changed to "Don't let your children see the movie because if they do, they will want to read the books, and the books advocate killing God." This also got my attention.

So I read the books, a trilogy by British author Philip Pullman called *His Dark Materials*. And guess what... I loved them! I think many of you would love them, too, because wrapped into a heart-stopping adventure tale of two children trying to do the right thing is a strong moral and spiritual message about religious authority and authenticity. And that's what I want to talk with you about this morning.

In the universe created by Phillip Pullman, there are many worlds existing closely side-by-side. The first book, and the movie "The Golden Compass," take place in a world much like ours, but not exactly like it. Because the heroine of the trilogy is a young girl named Lyra, this is known as "Lyra's world" in the stories. There the lifestyle and the people are similar to our world, though there are quirky differences, like a carriage being pulled by a gyroscope instead of a horse.

One significant difference between Lyra's world and ours has to do with physics: there in Lyra's world, those whom we call physicists are called "experimental theologians." (And perhaps that's not so very unusual, considering that physicists and theologians both are concerned with the basic nature of the universe.) This juxtaposition of science with religion is a key element in Pullman's work. In fact, it is a former nun turned scientist who tells Lyra a story that awakens in the child her own sexuality and opens her heart to the possibility of great love for another person.

In Lyra's world, people's souls exist outside of their bodies where they can be seen by everyone, and they take the form of animals. "Soul" is probably an inadequate word to describe these creatures called daemons; they signify the inner truth-teller, the essence of the self in a different but companionable form. Children's daemons take on many forms and are constantly changing, because children themselves are unformed — they haven't discovered their essence yet, and they are trying on a variety of "selves" as they gradually mature, until finally their daemon takes on a permanent form that in some way reflects the fixed nature of their human companion.

Wouldn't it be handy to be able to see someone's soul in a recognizable form the instant you encountered them? It would tell you a lot about a person to see that their daemon was a mouse or a snake or a leopard. It could certainly be helpful to you in determining how you want to interact with that person, and what you might expect of them! But Pullman's characters are nuanced and complex; those whom you assume to be benevolent can have their venal sides, and those who seem to be evil or degraded often turn out to have something quite appealing about them.

Of great concern in all of Pullman's worlds is something called Dust. Actually, depending on which world it's in, it might have other names such as Dark Matter or Shadows. Dust appears to have its own consciousness, and it seems to be attracted to adults; at the times when it's visible it clusters around them. However, there are several

worlds where Dust is disappearing, and other worlds where certain forces are attempting to get Dust under their control.

Here's where Pullman's anti-religious sentiments come into focus. In Lyra's world, which is the primary world for much of the series, the church is organized into a group called the Magisterium.

Ever since Pope John Calvin had moved the seat of the Papacy to Geneva and set up the Consistorial Court of Discipline, the Church's power over every aspect of life had been absolute. The Papacy itself had been abolished after Calvin's death, and a tangle of courts, colleges, and councils, collectively known as the Magisterium, had grown up in its place.¹

In its attempt to control all aspects of life, the Magisterium is obsessed with Dust. It has decided that Dust is the physical evidence for original sin, hence its attraction toward adults, since children are essentially innocent beings.

Toward the end of the first book, Lyra has a conversation with one of those ambiguous adults who are both good and evil, and he explains to her the origins of Dust. Pulling out a Bible, he reads to her from the Book of Genesis:

And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and your daemons shall assume their true forms, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil... And when they did eat of the fruit, the eyes of them both were opened, and they saw the true form of their daemons, and spoke with them. But when the man and the woman knew their own daemons, they knew that a great change had come upon them, for until that moment it had seemed that they were at one with all the creatures of the earth and the air, and there was no difference between them. And they saw the difference, and they knew good and evil; and they were ashamed, and they sewed fig leaves together to cover their nakedness.

The man then says to Lyra:

And that was how sin came into the world... sin and shame and death. It came the moment their daemons became fixed. [Reading again from the Bible, he cites the verse where God is cursing Adam for eating the fruit, saying] *In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it was thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.*²

Making a connection between Dust's attraction to adults and the arrival of adulthood when one's daemon becomes fixed, the Magisterium has decided that it can remove sin and death from the world by separating children from their daemons before they become fixed. Without a daemon, a child will remain innocent and helpless, and Dust will not be attracted to them; the church will thereby overcome the forces of evil represented by Dust, and death itself will be vanquished forever, leaving the Church triumphant. (At the cost of everyone's souls, of course, but that's a small matter...). "It's for your own good, dear, just a little cut," say the scientists who are experimenting with kidnapped children and their daemons to perfect their separation technique.

¹ Pullman, Philip, *The Golden Compass*, Laurel Leaf Books (an imprint of Random House), 1995, p. 27

² *op cit*, pp. 327-329 edited

Shortly after this conversation, it is Lyra's daemon, Pantalaimon, who makes the observation that reveals the primary thesis of the books. Noting that all the forces who want to destroy Dust are the enemies whom they have been struggling against throughout the story, Pan says, "...if *they* all think that Dust is bad, it must be good."

What a revelation! And indeed, this is what Pullman has in mind in writing this trilogy of fascinating books. He wants nothing less than to re-tell the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden, only with a different emphasis. After all, Eve's eating the apple was what opened the eyes of humanity to the knowledge not only of good and evil, but to differentiation of the self from everything else. It was the beginning of human consciousness and self-awareness, the beginning of everything that has brought humans out from the simplicity and innocence of the rest of creation.

Pullman has referred to the story of Adam and Eve as "the central myth of humankind," the moment when you define yourself as different from all that surrounds you, the beginning of autonomy. From that moment on, you can't go back to innocence; you can only go forward — you have to grow up.³

So rather than labeling the event in the Garden of Eden as the onset of Original Sin, Pullman wants us to understand that moment as the beginning of human authenticity and creativity. Yes, coming alive into one's full self involves sorrow, guilt and shame, but it also involves joyfulness, wisdom, erotic energy, and choice. And he depicts that erotically charged moment not with a bite of the apple, but with a taste of marzipan.

The question about the nature of God, and God's intentions, thus becomes paramount in the stories. Pullman's trilogy is a retelling of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the classic epic poem from which Pullman borrowed the line, "his dark materials." Milton tells of the battle between Lucifer's army of fallen angels and God's rule in heaven. In *Paradise Lost*, God prevails. But in Pullman's books, the two child protagonists help to defeat the rule of the Authority (a word Pullman uses to imply God), and the Authority dies.

When critics say that Pullman's series advocates killing God, this is what they mean. But that is the most literal possible reading, and misses the point of the books.

The "God" who dies in the third book, *The Amber Spyglass*, is not a true God at all. Pullman's Authority is an impostor, more like Milton's Lucifer than like a traditional conception of God. In his novels, the universe's first angel tricked all other angels and conscious beings created after him into believing he is God, and has spent an eternity building a corrupt empire for the purpose of hanging on to absolute power.⁴ In a breathtaking scene typical of Pullman for its power as well as its ambiguity, Lyra's parents overcome their evil intentions and sacrifice their own lives to destroy the imposter so that Lyra may live and grow up.

³ "The Secrets of the Golden Compass," Artsmagic DVD

⁴ The previous three paragraphs are excerpted from an article in *The Boston Globe* titled "God in the Dust," by Donna Freitas, November 25, 2007

With the death of the imposter, the “real” God appears as a weary old man being carried by angels in a dirty, mud-spattered crystal litter. Here’s what happens next:

...he was so old, and he was terrified, crying like a baby and cowering away into the lowest corner...

Between them they helped the ancient of days out of his crystal cell; it wasn’t hard, for he was as light as paper, and he would have followed them anywhere, having no will of his own, and responding to simple kindness like a flower to the sun. But in the open air there was nothing to stop the wind from damaging him, and to their dismay his form began to loosen and dissolve. Only a few moments later he had vanished completely, and their last impression was of those eyes, blinking in wonder, and a sigh of the most profound and exhausted relief. Then he was gone, a mystery dissolving in mystery.⁵

Are these the depictions of God that the fundamentalists and the Catholics are so concerned about? An evil imposter whose entire being is focused on the pursuit of absolute power? A terrified old man with no will of his own, so fragile that he is demolished by a puff of wind? These are not images of God that would command anyone’s devotion, I hope. And these are the ways that God is depicted in *His Dark Materials*. Perhaps it is the depiction itself, rather than its destruction, which has the fundamentalists so upset.

Though his writing is nuanced and subtle, Pullman himself is very unambiguous about his own atheism. In an interview for *The Christian Century*, he said:

I was brought up in the Church of England, and whereas I'm an atheist, I'm certainly a Church of England atheist, and for the matter of that a 1662 Book of Common Prayer atheist... The plainest and simplest description of the world, for me, and the truest, is that there is no God, but that human beings are capable of great goodness and great wickedness, and we don't need priests or Popes or imams or rabbis to tell us which is which.⁶

These books are so rich and complex that they invite myriad interpretations, and indeed, there is a lot that has been written by and about Pullman’s religious or atheistic inclinations since 2000, when the third book in the trilogy was published. Although Pullman himself is an unabashed atheist, liberal Christians have found much in his work that appeals to their broad minded understandings of the nature of God. Of particular interest is that peculiar and mysterious substance known in the books as Dust.

Pullman has written:

Dust is my metaphor for all the things that [I do firmly believe in]: human wisdom, science and art, all the accumulated and transmissible achievements of the human mind.⁷

⁵ Pullman, Philip, *The Amber Spyglass*, Laurel Leaf Books, an impression of Random House, 2000, p. 366-7.

⁶ <http://filmchatblog.blogspot.com/2007/11/philip-pullman-extended-e-mail.html> (the blog of Peter Chattaway, Christian film critic)

⁷ *ibid*

Yet one liberal Catholic theologian, Donna Freitas, has written that she finds in Pullman's *Dust* the liberationist and feminist depiction of the Holy Spirit that sustains her own faith. She writes:

For Christians, then, perhaps the most important concept of all in the story is that divinity isn't just a being, but a substance that loves us and animates us, yet has a mind of its own. In the books, *Dust's* love for humans is unconditional, even though they often do things to hurt and deplete *Dust's* influence and presence.⁸

So as Unitarian Universalists, what are we to make of these thrilling stories with their myriad levels of metaphor and myth? How are we to reconcile the various interpretations of Pullman's work with his own statements of belief?

There is an observation that the definition of a liberal is one who can hold two conflicting and contradictory beliefs at the same time. In my experience this is true, and although it's a characteristic that gives the absolutists a reason to criticize us liberals, I believe that the complexities of modern life require us to have some familiarity with and take some comfort in ambiguity. There is plenty of gray, and shades of gray, between those absolutes of black and white which many people believe are the only options for understanding how the world works.

So I think that we, as religious liberals, can take away meaning and significance from these stories whether we believe in God or not, whether we experience God as parent, creator, forgiver and lover, or whether we don't need God in order to celebrate life. Although fundamentalists have seized upon the books' attacks on the institution of the church and the way it has attempted to organize society, I'm not convinced that that is the most important aspect of the story.

Personally, I find myself much more drawn to his truthfulness about the positive message of the story of the apple (or the marzipan) in the Garden of Eden. Pullman believes that the Biblical story of Adam and Eve is a tremendous source of spiritual oppression, because it blames human beings for their natural tendency toward pleasure and curiosity, making them feel guilty instead of joyful about their awakening into authentic awareness.

I have always thought that Eve should be acknowledged as one of the great heroes of humanity, for her bite into that apple marked the beginning of true human consciousness, the onset of intellectual curiosity, the opening of our eyes to both the beauty and wonder of life and to its capacity for evil and suffering. This is what it means to be a grownup.

Our focus as Unitarian Universalists is on the way we live our lives in this world, here and now, with all the clarity and clear-sightedness that we can muster. What happens before birth is a mystery; what happens after death is also a mystery, despite some people's assertions that they know. Our focus is on life after birth, not life after death. And a brief interlude it is. As my colleague Kendyl Gibbons has said, "We have such a little moment, out of the vastness of time, for all our wondering and loving."

⁸ Freitas, *op cit*

Therefore, let there be no half-heartedness; rather, let the soul be ardent — in its pain, in its yearning, in its praise.”

This life may be the only moment that we have. But what a gift it is, this life that encompasses work and love, pain and failure, brokenness and wholeness. May we be worthy of this life and all that it holds for us.

Amen.

Minister’s Prayer

Gracious and loving God whom we call by many names, or by no name at all, we are grateful for your presence within us, among us, and beyond us this day.

We have come here to be together for this hour, in this place made sacred by our presence and yours. We ask to be worthy of the trust that others put in us, that we may rise to the occasion when we become aware of others’ needs.

We ask for open hearts, that we may meet one another without suspicion and without prejudice. Keep our hearts open to our own selves as well, lest we judge ourselves by a harsher standard than we would apply to others.

We ask for patience and forbearance, that we may give one another the benefit of the doubt.

Loving spirit, accompany us out into the world today and this week, so that we may be aware of your continuous presence in our lives. Help us to remember that nothing can ever separate us from your love, and help us to take that love flowing to us and through us, and send it outward to a world that sorely needs it.

Amen.

Benediction

For All Who See God
Robert M. Doss

For all who see God, may God go with you. For all who embrace life, may life return your affection. For all who seek a right path, may a way be found... and the courage to take it, step by step.