

# A Piece of the Truth

## Eva Marx

Guest in the pulpit  
February 4, 2007

Quote for order of service: "What each of us knows about god is a piece of the truth."  
Laila Ibrahim, Member, First Unitarian Church, Oakland, MI

First reading: From "The Cathedral of the World," sermon by Forrest Church, minister,  
Unitarian Church of All Souls, New York City, June 10, 2001

Imagine the world as a vast cathedral. Contemplate the windows. In the Cathedral of the World there are windows beyond number, some long forgotten, covered with many patinas of dust, others revered by millions, the most sacred of shrines. Each in its own way is beautiful. Some are abstract, others representational, some dark and meditative, others bright and dazzling. Each tells a story about the creation of the world, the meaning of history, the purpose of life, the nature of humankind, the mystery of death. The windows of the cathedral are where the light shines through.

The same light shines through all our windows, but each window is different. The windows modify the light, refracting it in various patterns that suggest discrete meanings. Even as one cannot believe usefully in "everything," to find meaningful expression Unitarian Universalism must be modified or refracted through the glass of individual and group experience (which by definition will be less than universal). One can be a Buddhist Unitarian Universalist, a Jewish Unitarian Universalist, a Pagan Unitarian Universalist, a Humanist Unitarian Universalist, a Christian Unitarian Universalist.

As with all extended metaphors, this one is imperfect. The Light of God (or Truth or Being Itself) shines not only upon us, but out from within us as well. Together with the windows, we are *part of* the cathedral, not *apart from* it. Together we comprise an interdependent web of being. The cathedral is constructed out of star stuff and so are we.

Here ends the first reading.

## A Piece of the Truth Eva Marx

Second reading: From Rabbi Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God: Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right*, p. 127

After the 2004 election I met with a funder from the Ford Foundation who was interested in supporting projects that could counter the growth of the Right. The meeting was going well until I showed her a poster for an upcoming conference on fostering progressive spiritual activism. Her eye fell on one workshop, which was called "God and the Economy: How Can Making a Living Become Sacred Work?" "Why do you have to bring God into this?" she asked angrily. "Don't you know all the destructive things done in the name of God?" Perhaps she forgot I was a rabbi, but what did she think a spiritual answer to the Religious Right would look like? Couldn't one of the twenty workshops mention God and speak to concerns of people who take their religious lives seriously? Had she forgotten that destructive things have also been done in the name of democracy? And yet the very mention of God was enough to alienate a potential funder.

Here ends the second reading.

## A Piece of the Truth Eva Marx

I chose this topic—what each of us knows about god is a piece of the truth--after hearing a conversation with Rabbi Michael Lerner on NPR. Rabbi Lerner, a leader in the movement to reclaim our nation's values from religious conservatives, was talking about his book, *The Left-Hand of God*. In that book he urged readers to take God back from the Christian right. Lerner stated that the right hand of God represents power and domination—righteousness—the vision of a god whose love and power is celebrated by the pain inflicted on those who are perceived as evil or undeserving. On the other hand—God's left hand, that side of God that, according to Lerner, can help us rescue God from the religious right, represents love, compassion, and generosity. Most people, Lerner said, have never been exposed to such a coherent spiritual alternative to the religious right. However, an even greater barrier that keeps us from reclaiming this compassionate side of God, Lerner noted, is what Lerner called a “spirituality or religion phobia” among liberal thinkers.

The reference to “spirituality phobia” reminded me of Reverend William Sinkford's call for what he called “a language of reverence.” Rev. Sinkford, who is president of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, caused quite a stir with his statement. The controversy began when he was misquoted in a Fort Worth, Texas newspaper after a sermon he had given to a congregation in that city. The newspaper article began with “A former atheist who is now president of the Unitarian Universalist Association will push to put the word ‘God’ into a new statement of principles.” It is clear that the reporter not only misinterpreted what Bill said but also had no understanding of UU congregational polity which means that we are an association of self-directed congregations living in community and that no one has the power to impose upon congregations beliefs or language that they have not chosen for themselves.

What President Sinkford did say was “Our Principles serve us well as a covenant presenting a vision of a more just world on which we agree and our promise to walk together toward that vision, whatever our theology. I wonder (however) whether the language of the Principles is sufficient to capture our individual searches for truth and meaning. For this I think we need what the Rev. David Bumbaugh, a Unitarian Universalist minister and religious humanist, calls a ‘language of reverence.’ ”

And President Sinkford is not the only UU minister who has expressed such sentiments. UU minister Walter Royal Jones, who headed the committee largely responsible for the wording of our principles, wondered how likely it is that many of us would, on our deathbeds, ask to have the Principles and Purposes read to us for solace and support.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of Unitarian Universalism, one of Unitarian Universalism's features that attracts people to our pews, is that we have no creed, no one tells us what to believe. We are in a constant search for and conversation about what gives our lives meaning. And our thoughts are diverse and in flux. We value our individuality and respect each other's freedom to explore.

## A Piece of the Truth Eva Marx

We come from many faith traditions. Some of us describe ourselves as not coming from any tradition at all. We bring many names. We call ourselves atheists, agnostics, earth-centered pagans, humanists, mystical humanists, theists, pantheists, Christian UUs, Jewish UUs, Buddhist UUs—the list goes on. But what are our shared theological understandings? Do we have a common piece of the “truth”? What is the unity in our diversity?

Two years ago the UUA Commission on Appraisal, a committee elected by delegates to General Assembly to study issues of concern to the Association, published a report entitled “Engaging Our Theological Diversity.” The report is based on interviews, focus groups, surveys, and open meetings. The commission’s original query was just that question—“What is the unity in our diversity?”

The Commission explored many corollary questions but I want to focus on their findings about what UUs think about the nature of reality and particularly what the Commission learned about what UUs think about God.

The commission found that almost everyone agreed that our primary religious authority is our own experience—that freedom of conscience and choice are central. One person described the center of faith as the freedom “to draw from the truths of all religions to make meaning in life and to do this search in a supportive community where we share each other’s humanity.”

The commission found strong consensus about a sense of being part of an interconnected web. Although there was less agreement about finding “god” at the core of faith, god and the interconnected web both appeared with similar frequency at the core of faith statements. People spoke of “faith in the interconnectedness and interdependence of all life” while others referred to valuing the natural world, where they experienced “a sense of the holy contained within the ordinary.”

And we are not as god-averse as I thought. Even in a congregation that described itself as strongly humanist, 80% of the respondents agreed with the statement “We encounter ‘God’ in our own depths, in others, and in nature, seeking wholeness and transformation.”

About a third of respondents surveyed by the commission named a transcendent dimension, referring to the holy, divine, or sacred. One person found the center of faith in “the deep-set belief in a great good that lures us forward to our best selves, also known as God.” Another described a “deepening experience of and relationship to the Holy, shared in community and encouraged through mindfulness.” Someone else wrote “At the center is and always has been a rooted, personal, and living sense of connection to the source, the eternal, what as a child I was taught to name God. But even then I knew it was much bigger than humans could name.” Even as a child knowing that it was something much bigger than humans could name.

## A Piece of the Truth Eva Marx

For me, becoming a Unitarian Universalist was, as I suspect it has probably been for many of you, an alternative to what I had grown up with and what I felt had been imposed upon me. Unitarian Universalism offered many options and an opportunity to reject what no longer had meaning for me and for me that included rejecting the word “god.”

I came from a reform Jewish tradition and had quite reluctantly attended Sabbath School every Saturday until my early teen years when I finally convinced my parents that this experience was benefiting no one, least of all, me. As I listened to the bible stories that were the centerpiece of the teachings at the temple, I thought that the god I was hearing about was incredibly egotistical and cruel. How could I praise a being that had drowned almost all living things in an enormous flood, that had tested Abraham's faith by demanding that he sacrifice his beloved son Isaac (although God did relent on that one), that punished the Egyptians by slaughtering their first born, and that denied Moses entry into the promised land because Moses had been disobedient. This was not a loving God.

Although Judaism didn't meet my needs, I still continued my search—was there another way to think about god? Was there a kinder god? Maybe the Jews and the bible got it wrong? Yet how could we explain creation and all the wonder and mystery of life without something greater than ourselves? Were we just accidents of nature passing through on this planet?

My first year in college started me on my path to Unitarian Universalism. My brother was preparing to marry a Presbyterian and, in their search for a minister willing to perform a non-Christian service, they explored Unitarianism. Although they ended up elsewhere, I had found a home. At the same time I discovered Emerson in an American literature course covering the Transcendalist period—and found out about a whole new language for describing the unknown and unexplainable.

Soon thereafter a reading in a philosophy of religion class moved me one step further when it proposed that religion or faith begins where science ends—faith as an ever-shrinking but never-ending mystery. Because in the end, what research or experiment could ever demonstrate or prove the ultimate origin of the universe, whether or not the universe has a purpose, or what that purpose or meaning might be?

Throughout that time I considered myself a humanist—that we are an accident of nature, here on this earth to fend for ourselves with responsibility for one another's welfare—beginning and ending with our human community. And during those earlier years I had what I can only describe as a visceral reaction to the word god, especially when I heard it used in church. I could feel a jolt every time god-language was spoken—if not a “spirituality phobia,” certainly a god phobia.

I want to share with you thoughts about god and god-language from others--a Jewish theologian, a UU minister, and a former Jesuit. The Jewish theologian Martin Buber wrote, “Some would deny any legitimate use of the word God because it has been

## A Piece of the Truth Eva Marx

misused so much. Certainly it is the most burdened of all human words. Precisely for that reason it is the most imperishable and unavoidable.”

Ken Read Brown, minister of my congregation, First Parish (Old Ship) in Hingham, Massachusetts, said in a sermon last winter, “What we believe or don’t believe about God won’t change the nature or reality (or non-reality) of God. What we say about the matter won’t change it.”

Jack Miles, author of *God: A Biography* and a former Jesuit, points out that, although many people may no longer believe in God, we are still part of a Western culture whose history we cannot shed. In our Western culture our values—values such as justice, wisdom, mercy, patience, strength, and love, are still deeply rooted in experiences from Biblical texts whether we like it or not.

He also notes that in Western culture we cannot escape the concept of god and that parents who would raise their children without god still have to accept the fact that everybody has heard of god; it is really unavoidable. The word god is on our coins, our politicians use it regularly, it appears everywhere. And because the word god is so omnipresent, it must have some meaning for our children as well as ourselves, as would any word. The bible and the concept of god are part of our cultural mythology.

Miles then goes on to observe that some religious philosophers surmise that god is a human construct and that ideas about the nature of god are projections of human personality and that we have projected our own personality traits onto however we imagine god.

Miles traces God’s changing, or evolving, personality throughout the Bible—as creator (Adam and Eve), destroyer (the flood), lawgiver (Moses), father, fiend (Job), and holy one, to name a few. And the word “holy” doesn’t appear until the Book of Isaiah or page 479 of my version of the Old Testament. If the nature of the biblical god is a reflection of our own complex human personalities, then it would make sense that the biblical god about whom I had such strong feelings would have had both positive and negative attributes. It appears that what I perceived in my early years were the negative ones.

And we do personalize god. Even within Unitarian Universalism, we talk about god and goddess, we aim for inclusive language and seek the appropriate pronoun to use in our references to divine being—sometimes using “she” and sometimes using “he.”

I think I made my peace with the language of god when I realized that we can talk about god, goddess, the mystery, the spirit of life, divine manifestation, however you want to label it, without attributing the personal qualities that the biblical god connoted for me. I have realized that there can be a spiritual dimension that does not have agency—that is, a spiritual dimension that does not have power or control over us, does not watch over us, and does not punish or reward us—a spiritual dimension that represents our common humanity, our oneness with nature, our interdependence, our capacity for love, the awesomeness and wonder of life and the universe of which we are a part, the

A Piece of the Truth  
Eva Marx

mystery of being—divine manifestation without divine intervention. Divine manifestation without divine intervention.

## A Piece of the Truth Eva Marx

So that is a glimpse into my window of the cathedral, a peek at what my ever-changing piece of my truth happens to be today. What do you see through your cathedral window? What are your pieces of the truth? Perhaps they are embodied in a single pane or maybe in several panes blending together—I think my window resembles a prism where the light shines through at different angles at different times, illuminating different facets--a prism that breaks the light into a rainbow of colors with first one and then another coming into my consciousness, first one and then another giving my life meaning.

Our fourth principle, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, leads us on a path of learning and changing and growing. Being a Unitarian Universalist is hard work. It means building our own theology. Being a Unitarian Universalist means living with ambiguity. Being a Unitarian Universalist requires courage in a world where we don't rely on divine intervention and where religion has become a negative force in many venues.

I'd like to close with a paragraph from the book, *Faith Without Certainty*, by Unitarian Universalist minister Paul Rasor,

Liberal theology is not for the faint of heart. It points us in a general direction without telling us the specific destination. It refuses to make our commitments for us but holds us accountable for the commitments we make. The liberal religious tradition is an invitation, not a mandate. It invites us to live with ambiguity without giving in to false compromise; to engage in dialogue without trying to control the conversation; to be open to change without accepting change too casually; to take commitment seriously but not blindly; and to be engaged in the culture without succumbing to the culture's values. Liberal religion calls us to strength without rigidity, conviction without ideology, openness without laziness. It asks us to pay attention. It is an eyes-wide-open faith, a faith without certainty.

Thank you.