



# God Talk

Rev. Bruce Taylor

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Have you ever been in a situation where somebody asks you, “What do Unitarian Universalists believe?” It’s good to have an answer ready, an elevator speech. Sometimes it helps if the elevator is in a tall building.

The speaker is curious about Unitarian Universalism as a category of religion. They may assume that any religion can be described by its beliefs, using various statements about God. What they’re asking you is, which of those statements do Unitarian Universalists agree with?

That’s one way to describe a faith community. In our case, it’s not the best way. If Unitarian Universalism “works”, it’s not because we all believe certain statements about God, but because we are committed to certain deeply-held values such as freedom and interdependence, love and justice. We most often describe these values by our Seven Principles, which are seven distinct ways of speaking about the highest good, which some of us call God, and some don’t have a name for.

Nearly 500 years ago, Francis David said, “we need not think alike to love alike”. The implication is that we *do* need to love alike. This insight and this commitment have sustained us for many centuries. What also sustains us is to affirm that we *don’t* think alike. We don’t just accept this fact and tolerate it. Ours is one of the few faith traditions

that truly *embraces* multiple approaches to life's big questions, and the different answers that follow. To embrace multiple perspectives means to share them, to listen to different ones and sometimes even take them to heart.

In a 2010 article, Peter Morales draws our attention directly to what Unitarian Universalism is about, or can be about. He asks us,

*What do we love so much that we are moved to tears? ... What gives us peace beyond understanding? ... What do we care about so deeply that we willingly, enthusiastically devote our lives to it?*

We have been formed by traditions we were raised in, by stories our families told. We have struggled with the challenges life throws at us. We have inherited, and sometimes created, answers that ring true for us.

These answers we come up with are less than perfect, they may change over time, but they are part of us. They're part of the great gift we bring to the common life. In our tradition, especially, it's important to speak about our respective beliefs, and learn from each other. If we're not willing to do this, or if we don't have the language to do it, then we won't be able to reflect as a community on what we're doing and why.

In my opinion, the use of God-talk can be a good thing, in moderation. Religious language is imprecise, it's shot through with unexamined assumptions – and it's necessary, if we wish to communicate at all. I can sum up my attitude to God-talk with this familiar proverb: *Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.*

In today's message, the "baby" stands for the unique understanding each one of us has created, the questions and the answers both spoken and unspoken. Like all babies, this one is fascinating and demanding. She fills us with joy and hope. Sometimes she keeps us awake when we'd rather be sleeping.

We can cherish our beliefs and speak about them, while treating them as *provisional*. Our beliefs are like our clothing. We need them. But as we continue to grow up, we regularly outgrow them. This doesn't mean that we outgrow the need for the clothes, or the beliefs. We have to find ones that fit us, as we continue to grow.

Imagine a shellfish like the chambered nautilus – As the animal grows, his body gets too large for the shell he's built so far, this house he carries on his back. Every so often, he adds a bigger room, moves into it and seals off the old one. In the words of the poet, Oliver Wendell Holmes,

*He left the past year's dwelling for the new,  
Stole with soft step its shining archway through,  
Built up its idle door,  
Stretched in his last-found home,  
and knew the old no more.*

The result of all this creating and letting-go is a beautiful spiral. Beliefs can be like this – very often we come around again, to beliefs we once held, but in the context of a bigger reality we've come to understand.

We can cherish our beliefs, and speak about them, while treating them as provisional and *partial*. By *partial*, I mean several things.

First, our understanding is limited by the containers we provide for it. Like the chambered nautilus, as we grow and mature, our capacity for truth is greater, but the work is never done.

Second, our understanding is necessarily biased. It's shaped by our culture, our lineage, and our experience. We identify with this world-view, in other words, we're partial to it.

Finally, we're engaging a mystery that will always be partially hidden from us, no matter how high or how deep we go. The good news is that what's hidden is capable of being uncovered. That's what our Unitarian theologian, James Luther Adams, meant when he said "revelation is not sealed". The United Church of Christ uses God-talk to say the same thing: they like to say "God is still speaking".

We can cherish our beliefs, even as we recognize that they are provisional, and partial, and *indirect*. To adopt an image from a Zen saying, our religious language is like a finger pointing at the moon. It *points* to a light that shines in the darkness. To confuse the finger with the moon, or to focus only on the finger, is to miss the point completely.

In God-talk we could say it this way: "God" is not God's name. This is different from saying God has many names. Even when we use the same name, that name may refer to very different images and concepts we carry in our own heads. These images and concepts are certainly *not* God, though they may point to God.

When we speak about the mystery, if we choose to speak at all, it's important to realize that we are always speaking in metaphor. Metaphors are more than just decorations we add to everyday speech. They provide a way to speak about the unknown

in terms of what we already know. Each metaphor creates a connection between the familiar thing, and the mystery we're trying to know.

There is a tree that survives the winter. It weathers the wind and ice and snow, losing some branches in the process. Much of the tree is actually dead. It's heartwood, which no longer carries water, serves to hold the tree up. The bark, which is always cracking under the pressures of wind and new growth, protects the part which is actively living: the thin layer of tissue between bark and wood, which carries nourishment to all parts of the tree. Still very much alive, the tree is ready to respond to the sun and the warmth of spring.

We're accustomed to metaphor as a simple image. But a metaphor can be an entire story, with a complex interplay of characters and events. When we hear a story, each of us may identify with different parts of it. The story may stir up different emotions in each of us, depending on our life experience. A good story has something memorable or even unsettling that grabs you and doesn't let go.

You may remember the story of Exodus from the Hebrew Bible. God commands Moses to lead his people out of Egypt, where they have been living for centuries, and bring them to the Promised Land. After some (shall we say) unpleasant negotiations with Pharaoh, they are on their way. But they do not reach the Promised Land very quickly. Instead, they wander in the wilderness for forty years. (One possible reason is that the men refused to ask for directions).

Our story is a bit different in the details: we're not on a physical journey. But this story from the living tradition may resonate with us. The children of Israel were on a spiritual journey. They had to say goodbye to a past they had known, and resist the urge to go back. They had to make their way through a place of uncertainty. In the process, they became a people.

This spiritual journey did not take place once and for all, in some mythic past. It recurs again and again in the lives of individuals and faith communities. We continue to be called out from a familiar past into an unknown future. To live and thrive we need to pass through places of uncertainty and disorientation. Not only must we pass through it, we must abide there for a time, to engage with the primal forces of chaos and renewal.

It is this wilderness where the Buddha sat under his tree until he woke up. It is this wilderness where Jesus fasted for forty days before he began his ministry, and to which

he returned every night, to pray. It is here, in this sanctuary, that God speaks to us most clearly about what we are called to do, what we need to bring with us, and what we need to leave behind.

Through our language, our beliefs, our spiritual practices, and the stories we tell, I encourage each of us to interpret the rich experiences of this life we share. I invite you to ask, again and again: how are we being present to the sacred in this place, our spiritual home, and in the larger human community around us?