

Thank God, or No-God, Whichever the Case May Be
November 5, 2017

Many generations of children have been tucked into bed each night and ended their day with a bedtime prayer. How many of us grew up saying a prayer before we went to sleep – maybe we still do? In the Western World, the Our-Father-in- Heaven-God has been the primary recipient of generations of prayers.

I grew up with this one:

Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep.

If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.

My best friend belonged to a conservative Baptist church and her prayer sounded like this:

Now I lay me down to rest, trusting all to God who loves me best.

If Jesus calls before I wake, I will with Him my last steps take.

I'm not sure when it happened, but at some point, I got obsessed with thinking about death. I've often wondered if it was from realizing the human aspect of Jesus's agonizing death after three days of being nailed to a cross. Or perhaps it was from things closer to home like watching the nightly news coverage of the war in Viet Nam and the graphic images of body bags and the horror of incidents like the Mei Lie Massacre.

I distinctly remember how I felt when I watched the report of National Guardsmen shooting students on the Kent State campus during an anti-war protest.

The death of innocent white students was as upsetting as the violence being inflicted on black Civil Rights activists in the American South.

The images of President Kennedy's assassination, his brother Robert Kennedy and then Martin Luther King Jr.'s murders were, and still are, imprinted on my brain. Then there was Charles Manson and learning about serial killers. My heart still carries the shock, disbelief, and sadness these unbelievable and illogical events caused.

I remember changing my bedtime prayer at some point because I didn't want to go to sleep with the fear and anxiety caused by agonizing, painful, and unnatural death. Throughout my teen years, my prayer sounded like this:

Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep.

Angels watch me through the night, and wake me with the morning light.

Forgive me and everyone else for all our mistakes. Bless my friends and family and I pray that every person can die a good death – that no one will ever die alone in agonizing fear and pain. Amen

When I went to college and took my first class in general psychology, the ideas of Jean Piaget easily wove themselves into my brain's evolving processes of thinking and knowing. Piaget theorized intellectual development was an extension of evolutionary adaptation and that there are two primary ways the structure for our housing our growing intelligence is constructed: assimilation and accommodation.

Assimilation is when the brain responds to new information in a way that is consistent with an existing schema. Accommodation is when the brain either modifies an existing schema or forms an entirely new one.

A child's bedtime prayer is a good example of a schema – an intellectual frame, if you will. In the young brain, images are very real: *Now I lay me down to sleep* – the child knows what it feels like to lie down, be tucked in and kissed goodnight by someone who, hopefully loves them unconditionally and in essence, is the child's whole world.

The child begins to understand the time has come to go to sleep – which is different than being awake. Sleep is the time for resting and dreaming; and when the darkness of night is magically transformed into light and a new day – it's time to wake up!

I pray the Lord my soul to keep. The singsong rhyme of the prayer is the age-old way of using words to sooth and comfort – it helps the brain store the comfort and peace associated with the words – *Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep.*

The Lord is part of the comfort and assurance the singsong words instill in the brain and body. It isn't until a child grows older that they may ask about God or the soul, or death.

At the risk of oversimplifying a tremendously complex phenomenon, and if I understand Piaget correctly, our brain's neuro pathways are the physical home of our cognitive activity and these pathways connect what Piaget called schemata – the frames for intellectual concepts.

Some of the information going into our brains is assimilated – or added on to existing schema. Sometimes information is accommodated – which then alters existing schema or creates new ones. According to Piaget, this is the fundamental process whereby our brains process all the new information which fills every waking minute of every day.

The Lord God is an integral part of the brain's schemata, those intellectual frames which, many times and in the case of religion, were started with a simple prayer repeated over and over through the years.

Everything which is subsequently learned about God and God's relationship to things like death, an after-life, suffering, forgiveness, gratitude, and a sense of self, has had this important place to live within the brain and the always growing and changing intellect.

For many, the Lord in Heaven -- the ever-present one who hears prayers, understands fear and anger, whose wisdom is deferred to when answers are hard to find – has been infused throughout the mind, body, and soul. For thousands of years, the Our-Father-in-Heaven God has been a rock solid, source of love and comfort for millions of human beings.

Trust in God's goodness, love and steadfastness is infused within a beautiful prayer like this one: Heavenly Father,

You've chosen me to cherish and nurture these precious children of Yours.
 You've entrusted them to my care. It is an unspeakable blessing and fearful responsibility to bring them up in Your love
 and teach them to know Your ways.
 I want to be a good parent, but I need Your help.
 Give me the patience to endure the challenging moments.
 Help me love my children unconditionally, just as you Love me.
 Remind me to always view my children with Your eyes.
 May Your goodness and mercy fill me, that it may overflow into my family.
 Thank you for being the best Parent for me to look up to.
 I know You will also mold me more and more into Your image.
 I pray to raise my children to honor You. In Jesus Name, Amen

There are many experiences in life which the brain assimilates therefore, for many, these life-experiences are proof that God exists as a separate entity outside of the human brain. Again, at the risk of oversimplifying a very complex physiological and metaphysical phenomenon, the human brain has the capacity to understand God intellectually and then reinforce this concept with experiences from life.

Piaget's theory of how the brain's ability to create and grow intelligence and the capacity for thinking – our cognitive abilities – is based on the human body's stages of physiological growth. Many of us may be familiar with Piaget's work.

The *Sensory-motor stage* is when infants engaged in simple reflex behaviors and circular reactions; for example discovering a rattle and then figuring out how to make it rattle by themselves – intellectually, this is an innate ability to follow curiosity.

The *Pre-Operational* stage is reached when the child learns to speak.

During these years, children do not yet understand concrete logic and cannot mentally manipulate information, but they can form stable concepts as well as magical beliefs. Thinking in this stage is still egocentric so the child has difficulty seeing the viewpoint of others.

Around the ages of seven to eleven, we find the *Concrete Operational Stage* of development. Children can now conserve and think logically, a test of which is the ability to understand reversibility. Even though the child is limited to what they can physically manipulate, their ability to classify objects improves greatly.

From about the age of around eleven and from then on, Piaget described the brain's cognitive abilities as *Formal Operational* which is the capacity for abstract reasoning and thinking. The capacity for abstract thought means the brain can think logically and use metacognition which is the awareness of self.

Operational skills during this stage include multiple-step problem solving – which is why algebra isn't taught until late middle school, because before this time, the brain's hardwiring just isn't constructed to the point it is ready to process the logic and reasoning required by algebra.

Throughout these important formative years, all the information generated by, hopefully, age-appropriate behaviors is inputted into the brain, which then forms it into schemata. These intellectual forms then become the building blocks of the neurological home for memory, intelligence, ability to think, and ability to create meaning.

After I became a parent, I wanted my children to end their day in a peaceful and happy state of mind. But when I started to teach them my childhood prayer, I realized they too would fall asleep with the image of death – *If I should die before I wake*. So I changed the words:

Now I lay me down to sleep, may peace and hope their vigil keep;

Help me through the friendly night, till the break of morning light.

Then we confessed our mistakes and named what we learned from them, then we blessed everyone, and finished with what we were thankful for. Amen

After I started saying this prayer with my children, it took awhile for me to realize that Our-Father-in-Heaven God had been transformed into peace and hope. Even after I realized this, I wasn't too concerned that the God of my childhood wouldn't necessarily be the God of my boys' childhood.

I was, however, of the opinion it was important for my children to know how to 'do church.' I knew they would have friends who went to church and maybe even invited them to come along;

and as they grew up, my sons would be attending weddings and funerals in many different churches. So I hauled my children to Sunday services at the Christian church down the street from our house. After the whining and complaining ceased and we had settled down in our favorite pew, the questions began.

If God was such a loving being, then why did bad things randomly happen – especially to children? If God was such a loving father, then why did he send his son to be crucified on a cross? If God was so good and powerful, then why why why?

For many of us, becoming a primary care-giver is a crash course in theology and if the standard doctrinal answers don't bring comfort and reassurance, or don't feel authentic, we may choose not to repeat them. This is also the reason many young families find their way back to a church in search of answers to their children's why, why, why questions.

I remember a conversation with my oldest son, who was about six at the time. We had been listening to a story on National Public Radio about the victims who were dying of radiation poisoning after the meltdown of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Russia.

After I tried to explain radiation poisoning in terms a six-year-old could understand, and after thinking for a bit, Jake announced that when he grew up he was going to invent a special rocket that could be loaded up with all the poiseness stuff and then he would launch it to the sun where it would explode and not be able to poison anyone or the earth ever again.

Through the years, I've often wondered why this particular conversation has stuck with me and I have come to realize two things: first, the boys and I had been active in the Unitarian Universalist church for several years, so Jake's ideas about his relationship to the world were being encouraged and reinforced by people like me who weren't too worried about that the Our-Father-in Heaven God wasn't the focus of the children's religious education. But this does beg the question, if God isn't the go-to person for understanding how to make sense of our lives, then the go-to person is yourself – me, myself and I.

My children learned about the Our-Father-in Heaven God, but not in the context of one set of stories from one book. They were encouraged to value and use many books and stories to fuel their growing intellect and cognitive processes, and to trust in their own ability to make meaning and sense out of what happens in life. They were encouraged to trust in their own goodness and ability to learn from their mistakes and that, whether or not there really is a God in Heaven, the most important thing is to behave in ways which are pleasing to Him (or Her).

Through the years, bedtime prayers have stayed the same and yet they have changed.

Now I lay me down to rest, I pray that all the world be blessed.

Lady Moon and Sister Star watch over me from afar.

The Lord of Dreams will dance and sing,
 And to me, sweet dreams will bring.
 And when I wake to greet the day,
 Brother Sun will light the way.

Parents and other primary caregivers are children's most immediate and direct source for answers; so it's important to respond to their questions in ways which encourage them to use the new information to figure out their own answers – not just memorizing the same old ones all the time.

As someone who self-identifies as a Spiritual Humanist, I am proud to have built my own personal theology around a deep faith in the fundamentally amazing and ingenious cognitive abilities humans are born with – the hard wiring which causes us to love first, to think and reason, and then to create meaning!

If you believe a human's genetic disposition is to love first, then embedded within this impulse to love is the operational factor of trust. Ideally, infants are born into perfect love and perfect trust in the form of the caregiver's love and dependability. Most children learn the magnitude of the importance of trust as soon as they are able to understand choices and consequences. The age-old adage about taking an instant to lose trust and a life-time to rebuild it has endured through the ages because it is true.

As my own personal theology has grown and matured through the years, I have come to see **trust** as so essential to life's health and well being, that behaviors which abuse and exploit it, individually and collectively, are acts of immorality because they are, in theistic terms, offensive to God. In non-theistic terms, they contradict and undermine the genetic programming which is designed to cause life to flourish.

To have a conversation about trust also implicitly includes forgiveness; which is why it is important for a child to understand why they should say I'm sorry. If they don't understand how even a very simple trust is broken, then they will repeat the mistake and sorry becomes an empty word.

One of the theological tenants many children are taught is that Jesus died for humanity's sins. When one begins to understand the abstract nature of ideas and beliefs, sometimes the question arises, 'Why would a loving Father God sacrifice a beloved child for everyone else's bad behavior?' The ancient answer the church still gives is, 'Have faith, God has a reason for everything and doesn't give us anymore than we can bear.'

Unitarian Universalist theology has led us to the conclusion that it is impossible to reconcile this particular theological point: if Jesus was God in human form, then God is mortal and can die too. But since God is God, then God can't die. The only way this logical incongruity can be reconciled is by replacing reason with unquestioned-faith.

When it comes to the Our-Father-in-Heaven God I grew up believing in, I confess I no longer believe in what the Episcopal church taught me but I have come to believe that just because someone doesn't believe in a the Our-Father-in Heaven God, it doesn't mean they don't believe in anything because the act of believing comes naturally -- humans are hard-wired to-believe, period.

Life is full of awe-inspiring times when we are moved to tears: poignant acts of kindness and compassion; gorgeous sunrises and sunsets; inspirational music and art; medical and scientific achievements like heart transplants and space ships – all of which can cause a person to transcend their sense of self and experience a kind of sacred harmony with the universe.

It is just as helpful to place our faith in the power inherent in these divine moments because we are experiencing spiritual power that calls forth the best in each of us – those qualities which enoble what it means to be human.

One of the most important theological take-aways from this belief, is the image of a holistic spectrum. In this way, religion is an active process whereby ideas and beliefs don't just exist in an unyielding mental framework.

Instead, religious insights are points of light infused with vitality and motion – traveling and nourishing each other throughout the beautifully complex and resilient neural highways within our brain.

To be a part of a religious community such as this one, is to take seriously the responsibility inherent in processing and transforming the new knowledge born from experience and imagination. Instead of only living in the rejection of answers which no longer make sense to us, we have the ability to move out of rejection and actually create a better understanding of religion – including a God or no-God.

We must not let fear be the sole driving force for individual and collective decision making. We must not let ignorance of each other's humanity cause self-serving ideologies and out-dated belief-systems to blind us to the greater good, the purpose of which, is to serve every facet and dimension of that which causes life to flourish.

Being a Unitarian Universalist in 2017 means we share the same concern for the fate of humanity and the world with everyone else who is striving to live moral, good, and productive lives – no matter the church they do or don't attend, and the God or no-God they believe in.

The philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre reminds us:

That God does not exist, I cannot deny

That my whole being cries out for God, I cannot forget.

Amen