

## *What's God Got to Do with It?*

David J. Hudson, June 18, 2017

Thirty years ago, just before we moved to Atlanta, Kate and I discovered a delightful rustic retreat on the coast of Maine called Hiram Blake Camp, named by and for the sea captain who established it in 1915. It is well off the beaten track on the shore of a remote peninsula near the town of Blue Hill. Hiram's descendants still operate it. For twenty five consecutive summers we rented one of their twelve simple cabins for several weeks, spending our days kayaking, cycling, sailing, or reading in an Adirondack chair perched on the lawn just above the water. Breakfast and dinner were served in a dining room attached to the rear of the original Blake homestead, a small Cape Cod style house. Meals there are family style, allowing patrons to enjoy the company of friends. Friends, because guests who become friends there tend to return year after year at the same time of the season to further their friendships. Such was the case with us.

One evening about twenty five years ago, Kate and I were chatting over dinner with our friends Richard and Joan from Cincinnati, and our friends Linda and Randy from Washington, D.C., who put me up last week when I was there for the Citizens' Climate Lobby's National Conference. The subject got around to religion. Randy and Linda are Episcopalians very active in the church near their home on Capitol Hill. Richard is a non-practicing Jew married to a non-practicing Catholic. And, of course, Kate and I are Unitarian Universalists.

The conversation began innocently enough, the subject having something to do with life in our respective congregations. But it changed dramatically when Richard, often direct, asked Randy the "G" question, "Do you believe in God?". Randy, a lawyer, accustomed to direct questions, did his best to summarize his belief in a power greater than himself; I don't remember his exact words. But I do remember Richard's immediate response: "God is a schmuck!" he said with the emphasis of certainty.

I was shocked by the anger in his tone. He went on to pontificate (an interesting choice of words) about the violence and harm that people had done for millennia in the name of God. To me at that time, the early Nineties, God was not

malevolent. God was simply irrelevant. I had long since dismissed the notion of a cosmic mover and shaker. But I was far from a militant atheist. God simply did not figure in my religious thinking. *I know how odd that must sound to a non-UU!* Kate and I had been UUs for ten or eleven years, and in that time I had not heard much reference to God in either of the two UU congregations to which we had belonged. “God” was the “G” word, perhaps more so than it is today.

Thirteen or fourteen years later the “G” word was to grab my attention in a very different setting. Kate and I had been at UUMAN five or six years when our then-minister Greg Ward gave me a little jolt when I heard him say in conversation, also very directly, “God is important to me.” In the time that I had known him I had never heard him make that kind of reference to God. It knocked me off balance. What did he mean? I wondered. What did that say about me, for whom God was not important?

So, I asked him. “What do you mean by that?”

He responded this way. “God is the spark of recognition, the sudden revelation, the epiphany, the flash of light in the bush, of the Divinity of another, of one’s fundamental connection with another through the fact of being, a dawning awareness of our common humanity.” I’m confident that those were not his exact words, but I’m also confident that they are pretty close. Their impact on me was profound, shaping what would become an emerging sense of the Divine.

Not long after that, with three other brave UUMANites, I signed up for a class Greg offered on Rev. Tom Owen-Towle’s book *Wrestling with God*. In his book Owen-Towle lays out his own theology, Panentheism, which borrows from Buddhism in its belief in the “interconnectedness of all reality.” Owen-Towle says, “The entire cosmos is shot through with Sacredness.” Or, as songwriter Peter Mayer says, “Everything is holy now.”

Through that lens Greg’s statement made complete sense—the notion of a *flash* of understanding—not dissimilar from a burning bush—a sign of something deep and fundamental pervading humanity—pervading the Universe, the Spirit of Life, we might call it, reverently.

Some call it God. Greg does, and, more and more, I do. *This* God is very definitely *not* a schmuck. Far from it! This God is that sense—that spirit—that speaks to us, calling us to see the *other* as our self. This God would bind us together, heal wounds, promote Wholeness.

I try to live my life in that spirit, to see the Divinity in others, to recognize the common ground I share with those whose perspective might be foreign to me.

These days that is hard. The past few weeks in particular have been excruciatingly difficult. Ideas and institutions we hold dear are under attack, being dismantled; witness President Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris Accords. We see no commonalities; we see only the opposite. We don’t *want* to hold hands and gaze into each other’s eyes to see that spark of Divinity. We want to shout and rail at the enemy.

Some would go further. In an earlier draft of this talk I wrote that some want “to throw bombs.” I might have written “take to arms.” How sad it is that we go to that extreme, but in some ways it is a logical, if extreme, extension of the ethos of partisanship that pervades our society today, that sees those with a different perspective as the “enemy”, as other.

But earlier this year, when Bruce Langston and our Earth Ministry team brought the film *Facing the Surge* (a film about sea level rise) to UUMAN, my eyes were opened to a different way. The showing was sponsored by a group, to which Kate and I have since signed on, whose fundamental belief is *that there is common ground among the most disparate worldviews and whose fundamental strategy is to appeal to and find those commonalities as the only way forward.*

The group is the Citizens’ Climate Lobby—or CCL. Our mission is simple and straightforward—to put a steadily increasing price on carbon in the form of fees (or taxes) charged to the extractors of fossil fuels and to return those fees to the citizens in the form of a dividend paid regularly—monthly, quarterly, annually.

Our strategy is to *raise the political will* of the populace and, through the populace, the political will of our representatives. We do that through outreach of

all kinds—letters to the editor, editorials, endorsements from community leaders, tabling, social media, presentations to groups of all kinds.

But our primary tactic is that of finding common ground with those Members of Congress whose perspectives differ from ours. WE ARE APPEALING TO CONSERVATIVES, because they hold the levers of power. But we can't do that by calling them names.

At the film showing here at UUMAN Kate and I put our names and contact information on a CCL sign-in sheet. Not long after that a member of CCL's North Atlanta group called to ask me to attend their monthly meeting in Sandy Springs. I went (Kate was out of town) and—surprise, surprise—I agreed—for her—to start a group in Roswell, here at UUMAN. We are a fledgling group, still learning to fly. So, for me, it was inspiring to travel to Washington for the CCL's National Conference last week with two other members of our group, Gary Denning and Terry Schiff, the woman who introduced Bruce to CCL last fall. I could go because Kate graciously volunteered to stay home with our aging dog Rufus.

If I was attracted to this way before, I am now a firm believer. Imagine 1300 committed, knowledgeable, articulate ambassadors for climate action prowling the halls of Congress on one day, to appeal politely and tactfully to the staffs of House Members and Senators, trying to speak their language, listening more than talking, nudging conservatives and deniers toward awareness of climate change, building the will, by baby steps, in some cases, to take action against it.

CCL has been holding these conferences for ten years now. This was my first, so I can't speak about previous ones, but those who have been to four or five were overjoyed with what they heard in our meetings this year; we heard a recognition in the offices of conservatives that the tide is shifting; we heard a willingness to admit that climate change is real; we heard an interest in the bi-partisan Climate Solutions Caucus, which now numbers forty two house members.

Some examples from meetings I attended:

We asked the aide to Republican House Member Terry Collins from Gainesville, a conservative Baptist minister and climate change denier, if he might be willing to

meet with another Baptist minister from Gainesville who sees the issue of climate change as a Creation Care issue. The answer: “Yes, he would.”

Another: The legislative aide to Republican Mike Rogers of Alabama didn’t know about the Climate Solutions Caucus. When we described it, she expressed a willingness to explore it and CCLs Carbon Fee and Dividend Plan.

And an aide to Senator Richard Shelby of Alabama told us that he is open-minded and willing to look at the science—news to us!

I believe this shifting of the ground is happening, at least in part, because of CCL’s willingness to listen to the concerns of those on the other side of the political divide, those with other world views, and to invite them to consider a solution in which there is common ground. There is common ground, and our approach is finding it.

The poet Marge Piercy writes, “The process of sincerely loving ourselves, our neighbors, the natural world, the Divine Mystery...will unquestionably stretch us—today, tomorrow, forever.”

“Creative Interchange”, the process that Unitarian theologian Henry Nelson Wieman described in his book *The Source of Human Good* seventy one years ago, is just such an act of “stretching” love. For Wieman, a pragmatist, Creative Interchange meant opening oneself to what he calls the “qualitative meaning derived from other persons through communication...and integrating those new meanings with others previously acquired.” In other words, creative interchange is all about a willingness to be changed profoundly by another’s perspective, another’s truth.

At its core the platform of CCL is based on the idea that the perspectives of others have value, that progress depends on our willingness to hear them, and that we must be willing to stretch. Stretching is a sometimes painful way to grow. Often we would rather not be troubled.

But, says Wieman, “God calls us to the work and life of creating goodness in the world.” He says that God is a power in the Universe that “persuades” or “lures” all

living things forward to their ultimate fulfillment. The spark that Greg Ward describes is a manifestation of that mysterious pull. It's the burning bush. It's the epiphany, the ah-ha.

Owen-Towle says that the Divine moves in and through everything in the Universe, including us. We are critical cogs in it. But, as a Panentheist, he believes that Divinity consists of more than the elements or cogs that comprise the universe. It includes something greater—the Spirit that inspires us, that lures us toward our best selves, toward the growth of meaning and value in the world.

This Spirit is mysterious and elusive. I am reminded of a story my mother used to tell about it. One Sunday many years ago she asked my younger brother, Don, aged four, I'm imagining, what he'd learned in Sunday school that morning. "We learned that God is a Spirit," he told her. Then his eyes moved around the room, and suddenly he pointed and shouted, "There he is!"

Would it be that simple! We can search for The Spirit, meditate, study, and never find it. But, if we are open to it, it can appear in the unlikeliest of places. One of those places is in the hard work of listening to others and building relationships with those who don't share our views of the way the world works, like Members of Congress of the other party.

Members of the Citizens' Climate Lobby may not think of their work in these theological ways, but I submit that God is found in this work. Work that heals wounds and bridges divides is holy work.

Ultimately, the way across the deep chasm that divides our nation—dividing traditionalists from progressives; humanists, atheists, and Panentheists from Fundamentalists; the hopeful from the hopeless; the haves from the have-nots—the way across that deep chasm is to listen deeply to each other—the ultimate expression of love—and to risk being changed in the process. By now we should know that shame and ridicule bring few to the table. But a radically different approach, engaging with others in the sincere belief that they might actually have something to offer, just might hold the key to the salvation of the

species and the salvation of the planet—preserving a livable world, as we say in the Citizens' Climate Lobby.

May it be so.

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