

**First Unitarian Universalist Church**  
**Lurking Places**  
**Rev. Sandra Fees**  
**August 31, 2008**

Today's service marks the third in a series of services on the topic of God. We have talked about "Wrestling with God" and considered the reasons to "Bring Many Names." This service, "Lurking Places," explores the places where we find God, what some of us might call Ultimate Reality.

Most of us begin by looking for God in all the familiar places. This makes sense. We go where we know we have had an experience of the sacred before. Some of us discover that we do find it just where we expect to.

We return to the places and experiences in which we have felt the presence of the Holy. This could be a place we have gone day after day or year after year. Perhaps we go to the forest, our back yard, or another country. We may feel that presence during certain experiences. Perhaps we experience it in the company of the people we love best, while singing, or creating art.

This idea of looking for the Source of Life in the familiar places reminds me of the story about a young boy who goes to the woods every day to find God. His father notices this habit and asks him about it. "Why do you go into the woods every day," he asks. The boy explains to his father, "I go there to find God." The father gently reprimands his son. He says, "Don't you know that God is the same everywhere?" To that the son replies, "But I am not the same everywhere."

It can be easier for us to encounter the Holy in the usual places. There we can rely on ourselves to be more open. There we may come with eyes wide open, hearts prepared. There is nothing wrong with looking in the expected places and experiences. But we may miss opportunities.

As a boy, Charles Hartshorne learned, "life is big, life is big." That theology encourages us to look broadly. The whole of the world, its events, people and beings, all things, and each of us, bear something of the sacred.

Hartshorne captures a basic Unitarian Universalist approach to theology. Our Unitarian Universalist impulse is to seek the sacred in ever new incarnations. We do not believe that the revelation of the divine is limited to one time, one place, one religion, one person or one teacher. We push the boundaries to find the source of life in new and previously unexplored terrain, even as we continue to find the sacred in the usual dwelling places.  
(Wrestling with God)

Life is big. The title of Mary Oliver's poem, "Where Does the Temple Begin, Where Does It End?", suggests something very similar. The Temple is without limit. It has neither beginning nor end.

In this infinite terrain, we need only look, really look and notice. This means standing as if with our arms open. The physical act of opening our arms to the world is quite different from folding them over ourselves.

Both can be an embrace. But the second can also keep things at bay. Sometimes when I am resisting things I go outside on my porch and I open my arms to the universe. Or I'll walk into this sanctuary and lift my arms in welcome to whatever may come. It is both exhilarating and a bit frightening.

What this expansive theology can mean to us is that we search for meaning in the lurking places. That phrase "lurking places" comes from Henry David Thoreau. It can seem to have a connotation of a God who is sneaking around or lying in wait to ambush us. Thoreau was trying to caution us to be alert. He was evoking the theological idea of the hidden God, of the God we humans seek after.

Many religions have a sense of the Deity as hidden. Even we Unitarian Universalists share something of this idea. Our principle of the free search for truth and meaning suggests that the Holy is something we search after to discover. We search in our Unitarian Universalist principles, in our sources, in the world's religions, in our own experience (CLF, *Between Sundays*, "Answer Section," Background for Hide and Seek with God). We even have a curriculum for our children called "Stories of God," which is based on the storybook, "Hide and Seek with God."

Mystics, like C.S. Lewis, discovered the life force in what was hidden. C.S. Lewis describes this experience as:

Our lifelong nostalgia,  
our longing to be reunited  
with something in the universe  
from which we feel cut off,  
to be on the inside of some door  
which we have always seen from the outside. (from God Hunger, by John Kirvan)

Who has not at some time in their lives had this experience? Who has not hungered for a spiritual connection? I have myself gone through periods of time when "longing" was my primary experience of the spirit of life. Our very hunger for that "something in the universe from which we feel cut off" can itself become the experience of the divine presence.

Rather than close and fulfilling, God may be distant, even absent. In this absence, we thirst for the living God as a deer longs for flowing streams (Psalm 42). Deep calls unto

deep, as the Psalmist writes. And this calling, this thirst, can draw us closer. Spirituality is so often paradoxical in just this way.

What are other hiding places? Let me offer a few suggestions this morning. And then I encourage you each to seek and name your own.

The life force can be hiding right here in our very own hearts. We so often wander around seeking outside ourselves, unable to acknowledge the divine spark within.

I know we talk about this all the time. We say that the spark of the divine is within every person. But we may not always believe it or act as though it's true. God within us may be a very well-kept hiding place. There is an old wisdom tale that suggests just that. God was placed in our hearts because it is one of the last places we ever think to look.

Some of us just can't see ourselves that way. We may have trouble seeing that we are worthy and good. We may know it intellectually. But emotionally and spiritually we may have trouble believing we share in the divine nature. Our first principle affirms that each person has inherent worth and goodness. It affirms the possibility of goodness in humanity. We each share in that.

Adi Granth of the Sikh tradition saw God in all, including our own hearts. He writes:

Why do you go to the forest in search of God?  
He lives in all and is yet ever distinct;  
He abides with you, too,  
As fragrance dwells in a flower,  
And reflection in a mirror;  
So does God dwell inside everything;  
See him, therefore, in your heart.

The divine presence can be felt in serving others. This may not seem like much of a lurking place to some of us because it is so much a part of our faith tradition. But I want to challenge us all to think about service in a particular way here this morning. I encourage us all to search for ways to serve that are selfless acts.

How can we serve without expectation of reward or return? This kind of service isn't a means to our own personal end. The stories of Jesus illustrate this well. When we clothe the naked and feed the hungry, we serve God. When we help the stranger, we serve God.

In what ways do we serve that are not actually about us? Don't misunderstand. I think we can do both. We often do. When we help our own families, we are helping ourselves too. Some of the generous things we do also benefit us.

I do many acts of service – for this church, for our denomination, for other organizations. And yet, when I really think about it some of what I do seems to fulfill the call to serve

selflessly more than some others. Some things move me more fully outside myself and my own need for fulfillment.

In her book, Wisdom Walk, Sage Bennet tries to describe the distinction of true service. She says of her own effort to serve that “I was still very much preoccupied with myself and interested in getting my own needs gratified.”

She describes helping to organize books at the library, but admits that in the end she “was motivated primarily by what I could gain from the experience. ‘What’s in this for me?’ still loomed larger than my efforts to contribute to the community.”

Along the way, she discovered what it means to serve selflessly. This happened for her with a student. Christina was in her spiritual practices class. Christina was also nine-months pregnant. She missed the 7<sup>th</sup> class because her water broke. Things were fine, and Christina had her baby and they went home. But then they had to be readmitted to the hospital due to an infection.

At this point, Bennett felt drawn to visit, though she had never visited a student in the hospital before. Compassion called her to visit. She found Christina was feeling a bit crazy. Bennett stayed with her and prayed with her and her baby. Christina was grateful because her family lived at a distance. Her husband worked and cared for their other children. Bennett found herself deeply present yet hardly aware of herself during this time. For Bennett, being there was an act of selfless service.

How one moves from self-centeredness toward service is a bit of a mystery. But it has to do with shifting our focus from ourselves and what we have to gain to others. In the words of Albert Schweitzer, “I don’t know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know, the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found a way to serve.”

Life is big. Let us reach out. Where will you search? What are the hidden places where you will seek? The search can bring us closer to God. It can bring us as close as our own hearts, as close as selfless service to another.

The divine is right here, waiting to break forth into our consciousness, into the world. May we greet it with open arms. Amen.

**Resource:**

Wrestling With God: A Unitarian Universalist Guide for Skeptics and Believers, Tom Owen-Towle