

To Those Who Don't Believe: Have Faith
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It was during my junior year in high school that our world history class came to the chapter on religion. Miss Porter assigned the section as a research project, thereby giving no special attention to any one faith. Our text book posited seven major religions and our class of thirty-some people was divided accordingly into seven study groups. Each was to examine a particular religion and give an oral report.

What you have to know to understand this story is that in my family good grades were very important. I had developed a system that allowed me to *stand out* in the minds of my teachers, who would, therefore, give me good grades. I either did something extra or something different than what was expected. In this instance, I went to Miss Porter and said, "It could round out our study of world religions to look at those people who don't fall under any of these categories, and to consider by what rules they live their lives." I propose that I gather an eighth group to look at atheism as a religious system. Miss Porter agreed that would be interesting and in my mind I banked an 'A'.

The seven reports were given in order. Then I arose – alone, because I could convince no one to join me – to present my study on atheism. I had recently discovered that my mother was an atheist. She had been pleased at my innovative approach to religious study and lent me her favorite book, *The Bible Unmasked*, by Joseph Lewis, copyright 1926, The Freethought Press, to help in my research. I have it still. I gave an excellent report. Miss Porter said so. "That was an excellent report," she said. "However, I think you know too much about that subject for your own good, so I'm giving you a 'zero' for the day." And she marked her record book accordingly.

Miss Porter was angry with me for knowing too much about atheism. My mother, on the other hand, was angry with Miss Porter, and within the week the written record of that zero was expunged, but not the continuing mistrust between me and Miss Porter. I often wished I hadn't been so clever in this instance, because Miss Porter stayed angry.

Lewis's book is not about the Christian church, not about the Christian faith, not even about Christian doctrine. It is, as the title suggests, a polemic against the stories in the bible. Joseph Lewis was angry about these stories: angry at the way they were written, angry at the people and morals they depicted and angry at the assumptions any reasonable person (meaning himself) might make about them if he were to believe them. His premise was this: "The Bible is illogical, pornographic and inaccurate, therefore I believe it not, and if you do, you're a stupid oaf, so there."

There are many authors today -- writers like Richard Dawkins, to name just one -- who define themselves as atheists or non-believers and write books to set people free from belief. They do their research, they gather their facts, they mount their arguments logically and well, and do not try to hide their anger. They seem so exasperated that intelligent people still support a belief in a non-human power referred to as God or one of his aliases. In fact, in my experience, anger has been a large part of the atheist story. Remember when the Supreme Court heard the arguments for and against taking prayer out of the public schools? There was lots of anger from both sides.

I admit that I put in a great deal of time labeling myself as an atheist; and a great deal of time being angry about religion. I would listen to music – moving music – or view paintings – beautiful paintings – created in the name of some religion's god and I would rail at the waste of their talent. Why couldn't these composers and artists find another hook for their creativity? I would listen to what others said about their beliefs and I would become enraged. These were the kinds of statements that made me most angry: "There are no atheists in fox holes." That one made me rant for days. Just because someone says, "Oh, God," doesn't mean he's a believer, I insisted, to no avail.

There was a Catholic priest on television who often intoned, “There are no atheists; only people who think they are.” I would be infuriated because there is really no come back to that kind of argument except a rather weak inversion of it.

But the person who could make me most angry was a Midwestern radio preacher by the name of Garner Ted Armstrong. I listened to Garner Ted because I loved his delivery. Oh, that I could speak like he. But his content enraged me. His major premise was that the world would be at peace when all people – *all* people – agreed that Christianity was the only true religion. Therefore wars and poverty, injustice and cruelty were the fault of all non-believers and other-believers. Christians need have no guilt; the state of the world was every one else’s fault. I remember driving down the street one day, pounding on my dashboard and yelling at the radio, “Garner Ted, you started from a false premise, you idiot.” My 10-year-old daughter, sitting beside me, said calmly, “Mother, why don’t you turn the radio off if he makes you mad? You don’t have to listen to him.” But I did. I needed to be angry about the things I didn’t understand, like, *how could anyone believe what I so logically disbelieved?* Anger was a large part of my faith then, just as it is with other fundamentalists who want the world to believe as they do. I was a fundamentalist atheist, a militant, angry atheist like my mother, like Joseph Lewis, like so many I have known. I was as angry as conservative Christians often are with unbelievers.

Just to keep the record straight, I have moved on. I am no longer that kind of disbeliever and I am no longer angry about religion.

That’s my story, my authority for choosing this topic to share with you. From here, I could take you in any of a number of directions. I could do the historical bit, citing famous atheists through the ages – those condemned and those condemning them. And the quotes would be marvelous: “If there were no God it would be necessary for us to invent him.” Voltaire. Or, I could review the current literature, like Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* or *What You Know About God is Wrong*. Very well written, but somewhat angry books. I could expound about the *biology* of belief, citing such authors as Newberg, D’Aquili and Rause, and their scientific studies on belief in their book *Why God Won’t Go Away*. I could tell you about the organizations available to non-believers, web pages and meeting. Or I could describe the scope of atheism, the liberal and the conservative denominations of it, ranging from what is called ‘the weak theology’ – *it doesn’t matter to me whether there’s a god or not; I seldom think about it* – to the ‘strong’ – *there are no deities, and, so help me god, I’ll never believe in them*. Any of those would have made an informative talk, but the more I thought about it, the more I was fascinated by the anger.

So. I’m going to take the Unitarian Universalist approach. I’m going to tell you more stories; I’m going to suggest some ways of thinking about it and acting upon it, so that if you ever find yourself *angry*, or know someone who is *angry*, or if someone is *angry* at you, you’ll understand it better. I’m going to continue the report I started in Miss Porter’s class by telling you about my anti-religious experiences.

Most of you know I went to seminary. Oh, wasn’t my mother angry about that? “*How could you? I’m so embarrassed. My friends think I raised a believer.*” But even though I was past my own anger, I sort of knew what she meant. A woman in my bridge club beamed when I made the announcement, and said, “*How wonderful, my dear, that you are going to serve God.*” I was sort of embarrassed; and I don’t know if it was for her or for myself. I replied, “I think of myself as serving people.” And she said, “Of course you do, my dear,” and patted my hand.

By then I didn’t really like the negative term *a-theist*. This is one of the *understandings* I got out of the Civil Rights movement. If African-Americans resented being defined as ‘non-whites,’ I could understand why, and I could relate it to the cynical and adverse effects on me of defining my religious beliefs *against* what someone else believed. One of my theology professors put it into perspective for me when he spoke to the atheists in his class, saying, “What you have to remember is that if you were raised in a church, you’re a Christian atheist, and if you were raised in a temple, you’re a Jewish atheist. If you say, ‘I don’t believe in God,’ then I say, ‘Which one.’ You can’t just deny, you have to *deal* with what it is you’re *not* before you can move on and become positive in your faith.” And he wasn’t angry when he said it.

Sharon Salzberg says much the same thing in her book, *Faith*. She wrote, “The tendency to equate faith with doctrine and then argue about terminology and concepts, distracts us from what faith is all about. Whether faith is connected to a deity or not, its essence lies in trusting ourselves to

discover the deepest truths on which we can rely.”

My next revelation on the subject of what to do about god came to me in the form of a book titled *Your God Is Too Small: a guide for believers and skeptics alike*, by J. P. Phillips. He says we are all bound by negative images of religion because we tend to look at narrow ‘proofs’ and not at the whole picture. This is true whichever side we are arguing for. My experience had been that what I thought and felt about religion was often larger than the definitions I learned in Sunday School. Anger often came from what I perceived as religion’s scarcities, the ‘do nots’ and ‘should nots,’ and the braggadocio that came from someone being unable to imagine any other any other definition of faith than his own. And I was compounding those scarcities and using my own bluster and bravura to counteract theirs. I finally realized that I could use my god-given brain, if you will excuse the cliché, to create a god-image large enough that it might include us all, even me, even Garner Ted. And other people didn’t have to accept my vision; god required only a transitory definition and could always be redefined..

That’s what the Universalists did, you know. They redefined the Calvinist god for themselves. They said, ‘We can’t believe in a god that would doom his children to eternal damnation; or a god who is angry and engenders anger in his followers. Our loving god is bigger than all that.’ That’s how they got their name, seeking universal salvation – good news for all.

With the realization that my concept of god needn’t be defined in the negative, needn’t be acceptable to anyone else, needn’t be traditional or revealed, my anger was gone. I was able to think, to reason, to rationalize and to accept the god-concept. I won’t bore you with my journey away from being away-from-god. We each have to take our own if that’s our direction. But one example I think, would not be remiss. Take the phrase *God is Love* or, simply, *A loving god*. To me that suggested a duality – the lover and the loved one. It implied that *there is me and there is something better than me that loves me in spite of myself, and I can never be anything more than I am, but ‘there, there, god loves you anyway.’* Out of my own experience of love, of connecting to the universe, of realizing the spark of divinity within all creation, of the possibility of being part of something larger than myself, I knew there could be no duality in the god-definition. The use of any adjective to describe that *something larger than myself, but part of myself*, the use of any anthropomorphism as metaphor, limited my sense of the holy -- made it not large enough. I cannot create a god in my own image. If I speak at all of the god-concept, I am more likely to say something like ‘the whole of creation’ or ‘the spirit of each and all;’ and I will continue to say that until I can think of something even larger to define my sense of what god-ness might be.

By the same token and with this same reasoning, I realized that atheism, itself, this denying of gods, is also a duality. You can’t not believe in nothing. Trying to deny what someone else means by god and then trying not to believe in it – that is where the anger is conceived, is born. To give acknowledgment to something in order to deny it is a noose that strangles any sense of faith, any responsible search for truth and meaning.

I realized, that unlike Joseph Lewis, I wasn’t angry with the bible. There are some wonderful stories in the bible. If I look at them as teaching stories, I find a rich understanding of what the people who told them were trying to convey. I can find in them metaphors for my own struggles to live a better, a more understanding life, to live lightly on the earth and to leave something better behind.

If any anger remains for me, it is with people who have twisted their religion's teachings to gain power over others, or to feel better about themselves. There were too many of those kinds of people who created traditional religion as we know it today. I've often said, I would be a Christian, except for the church. But the smallness, the pettiness and the anger prevent me.

When anger does arise in response to someone's insistence that I believe as they do, I ask myself, what does this person get from believing so? What do I get from denying it? In the tension between these two is my best understanding of faith. When doubt arises, I ask myself what is my experience, what is my faith? I no longer ask, 'what do I not believe.'

I had the good fortune to hear Sharon Salzberg speak a few years ago. Much of her lecture came out of her book, *Faith*, and it felt like coming home. She wrote, "Faith doesn't carve out reality according to our preconceptions and desires. It doesn't decide how we are going to perceive something but rather is the ability to move forward even without knowing. Faith, in contrast to belief, is not a definition of reality, not a received answer, but an active, open state that makes us willing to explore. Beliefs come to us from outside ourselves," she writes; "faith comes from within."

So we can be non-believers, if we choose, but we can still have faith. Salzberg is a Buddhist, a religion without a god, and I find her concepts very Unitarian Universalist. This is what I love most about us as a religious community. -- that we can believe differently and try to hear one another without anger. And it is this idea of faith over belief that allows us to do so.

I love it when Sharon tells us she is a Deist and we don't have to be one too. I loved it when she said one day from this pulpit, "I believe in God, but after I've said that, I want five minutes more to define what I mean before you say anything." I love it that we have in this denomination Christian-Unitarian Universalists and Jewish-Unitarian Universalists and Buddhist -Unitarian Universalist and Atheist-Unitarian Universalists and many others, and we can feel safe in this place and we can talk to one another about our journeys. I love it that we can say *this is what I was taught* and *this is what I believe*, or not, and this is my faith.

_____ You know how, *in utero*, we all have vestiges of tails and gills at some point in our development? Well, I have come to believe that in all of our lives at some period we all have vestiges of atheism. Our evolution comes with building on those vestiges. The growth comes with moving away from the negativity and the scarcity of them to something more positive and generous, creating some good thing out of our beliefs or non-beliefs *and* out of our faith, and sharing, either by word or by the deed, our holy and beautiful religious lives.