

The Value of God

By JK Moore

Intro - UU Evangelism, Value of Commitment, Ethical Eating
Experiences with the discomfort with “vocabulary of reverence”

A common criticism of Unitarian Universalists is that we do not value God. Maybe this perception is because we don't use the word God very much in our sermons or maybe because we welcome *Atheists* as members of our congregations. Whatever the reasoning, the perception is not just from outside our faith, but also from within.

Members of UU churches don't want to be perceived as being *overly religious*. This seems to be our response to the perceived overemphasis on God associated with fundamentalists, whether Christian, Muslim, Hindu or any other. We tend to be *moderate* in our perception of the divine, whatever that means to each of us.

If UUs do not value God, then we should use an appropriate symbol for the divine: a quarter. It is the perfect invaluable symbol of the sacred. Few things today can be bought with a *quarter...25 cents...two bits*. What can the symbol of a quarter teach us about God, about life, about the ethics of our daily choices?

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A quarter is a *durable* form of money, not like paper, plastic or electronic types. It will last a long time, much like the eternal *Mystery*.

Its figure is perhaps the most primal shape, a circle. Looking up at the moon, sun and stars, we see circles everywhere. It also signifies the give and take of life and death, like our friend *Urobouros*, (the self-eating snake), which is part of the symbol for our sister Unitarian Church in Romania.

Many like to think of our experience not as a line with a beginning and end, but a circle with no start or finish. A common recognition among UUs is that all beingness comes from one source, and we are all destined to be reconciled with that common source. From where we come, so shall we return - *together*.

This perception is true for theist and atheist alike. For a UU Christian or Jew, the common source could be called God, Yahweh, Jehovah. For a UU Muslim, Allah. For a UU Hindu, Brahman. To a UU Atheist, Nature – from which we all grow out of and to which we return. Whatever the shape the sacred takes, it has a deep spiritual significance to the person who cherishes it.

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Whether we believe everyone was created as the result of divine intervention or scientific processes, we come from a *common* source. And in the end, we will be reconciled, either through Universal salvation, or through decay and entropy, always staying a part of *the interdependent web of all existence*.

Regarding the perspective each civilization has towards God, the quarter can help us understand why the concepts around the sacred are so different around the world. Let's say the quarter is God, whatever that means to you. Hold it in the palm of your open hand, and behold *the sacred*.

What do you see? How would you describe it? Is God a man? Is God an eagle? Half of you would say one, and half the other. Who's right? The answer, of course, is that *everyone* is right in their *perception*. We're all looking at the same thing, just from different points of view.

With half of the population believing God to be a man and the other half believing the divine to be an eagle, conflicts may arise between worshippers of these different visions.

God is a human. God is a bird.

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Half of you would say the other half is crazy for believing what would be considered perfectly rational to the opposite group. In the end, you are all looking at the same source, but you have different perspectives. You see God with *different eyes*.

Unitarian philosophy teaches us that these differing perspectives are viewing the same entity, whatever the image of that *Sacred Mystery* may be. We also recognize that while all perspectives are valid interpretations of God, no one view is complete. *Nobody* has a full and clear perception of the divine. That's why we study all traditions in the search for gaining a holistic view of the *Spirit of Life*.

In much of our *daily* experience, we tend to think of choices as a dichotomy between two *polar opposites* –

Heads	/	Tails
Good	/	Bad
Right	/	Wrong
Male	/	Female
Black	/	White

In reality, acts don't fall much in the black and white ends of the ethical spectrum, but rather are mostly in the gray area, much like the color of a quarter.

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Our concepts of good and evil are based on whether an action is mostly helpful or mostly harmful. Choices we make that are completely helpful to ourselves and others are good – the search for truth, the struggle for equal rights, caring for the poor, the meek, the disenfranchised. These are things that are helpful and therefore completely good.

The pollution of our environment, the persecution of minorities, the wholesale slaughter of an entire population based on their race, religion or sexual orientation: these are things we consider evil. There is not even 1% benefit to anyone.

But what about all the decisions we make in life that are not so clear cut? How do we judge the ethical correctness of actions which result in both help and harm?

Unitarian Universalists believe in the democratic process to settle disputes, recognition that majority rule, while not necessarily the perfect system, is still the best system available to address conflicting points of view. I suggest applying this same principle to ethics.

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If an act is 51% helpful and 49% harmful, then it is a good choice, an ethical decision to make. Most of life's choices are mixed with both good and bad elements. I drive here to spread wisdom, but spew pollution into the environment by using a car. The act of eating living beings to sustain ourselves. Industrial advances improve our lives but damage the planetary home which we inhabit. These are difficult competing interests to consider.

But what if an act is equally helpful and harmful? Like the flip of a coin, the percentages are 50/50. These are the greatest of ethical dilemmas. For example, twins playing by a cliff slip off the edge and their mother reaches them in time to grab both children by the hand but she must let one of them go to save the other. Whatever the mother's choice, there will be equal help and harm done, unless the mother fails to act.

If we fail to take action when called upon, we can do the most harm of all. The mother holding her twins dangling over a cliff may not be able to let one of her children die, causing all three to plunge to their deaths. Throughout our lives, we face challenges that force us to act quickly in making the right choice. The symbol of a quarter reminds us that sometimes, any action is better than taking no action at all.

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We commonly associate the concept of God with goodness. Goodbye was originally God be with you. If God is all that is good, then where does evil come from? Is it God, Satan, Allah, Ahura Mazda, Shiva? Whatever name of divine experience used, we have a common perception of there being good and evil in life.

But I feel a polarized view of these concepts is like trying to say that God is either a person or an eagle. Rather we need to look at the spectrum of actions we take from helpful to harmful. Some things we do are completely helpful (feeding the hungry) while others are completely harmful (supporting inequality). However, most actions we take cannot be classified as just one or the other, heads or tails, good or evil. Rather there is a whole range of helpful and harmful choices we must make every day.

For example, a doctor takes an oath to first do no harm. But making choices about the health of a patient can be inherently harmful to some degree. Surgery can result in death or disfigurement. Cancer treatments wreak havoc on the body, killing the cancer cells as well as many other good cells. These choices are not so easily identified as completely helpful or harmful. Much of our experience lies in this area between black and white, in the gray, much like the color of a quarter.

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If the quarter is God, then God is definitely a male, as is the mythology in many churches. God is Father. But in many UU traditions, God is Mother also. As a panentheist, I generally object to the personification of God. In my view of the divine, God is the body of the universe and we are simply atoms in that Spirit of Life.

However, I understand the need to make God in our image, to make “Him” more human, more personable. We find it difficult to identify with an “it.” As I approach fatherhood myself, I have begun to wonder what my responses will be to the many questions my child will have about God and the nature of life. Is there a God? What does he or she look like? What happens when people die? Where were we before we were born?

These are difficult questions, and I don’t pretend to have any answers (so if you do, please let me know), but I feel confident going forward with my quarter in hand reminding me of my faith and my convictions that there is no one correct perception of the divine, that the daily ethical choices we make are not simple and that whatever the nature of God and life is, there are elements both masculine and feminine, light and dark, known and unknown, and everything in between. The mystery of existence is what makes it exciting.