

Got GAME?  
Thoughts on God, Art, Music, and Enlightenment  
Dr. John Standridge, Presenter

Follow your Bliss. To Question is the Answer. The Word is God. Today's word is GAME: GAME being an acronym for God, Art, Music, and Enlightenment. This morning I want to take us on a journey to visit how some have envisioned God; how God has been represented in literature, art, and music; and how these near-visits with God might enlighten us.

The late great Joseph Campbell was a professor, writer, and lecturer best known for his work in the fields of comparative mythology and comparative religion. His work is vast and covers many aspects of the human experience, and his philosophy is often identified with the phrase he coined: "Follow Your Bliss".

A fundamental belief of Campbell's was that all spirituality is a search for the same basic, unknown force from which everything came, within which everything currently exists, and into which everything will return. This elemental force is ultimately "unknowable" because it exists before words and before knowledge. Although this basic driving force cannot be expressed in words, spiritual rituals and stories refer to the force through the use of "metaphors" - these metaphors being the various stories, deities, and objects of spirituality we see in the world. Campbell believed the religions of the world to be the various, culturally influenced "masks" of the same fundamental, transcendent truths. All religions, including Christianity and Buddhism, can bring one to an elevated awareness above and beyond a dualistic conception of reality, or idea of "pairs of opposites," such as being and non-being, or right and wrong. Indeed, he quotes in the

preface of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*: "Truth is one, the sages speak of it by many names."

In the interest of full disclosure, I should reveal that I choose to believe in God, therefore I am not an atheist; but I respect and I am fine with those who choose not to believe in God. I also choose to deal with the subject of the existence of God, therefore I am not agnostic; and of the many names I could use to reference the unknowable and indescribable force, the name I choose to use is "God".

I choose to believe in God because it is unacceptable to me to believe that mankind represents the ultimate truth and highest intelligence of our universe. I prefer to believe that truth is universal and that we humans have some capacity to glimpse this larger truth on occasion, and the capacity to tap into some mystical reservoir of a higher intelligence and, indeed, morality. Upon some inner reflection, it appears that I can no longer deny the existence of good and evil, although linking God to morality is tricky and unessential for me. My God is the life force of a complex nature and all that that implies.

If our earliest preserved art is cave drawings of scenes found in nature, is this not a reflection of our sense of the *integrated nature of creation and of its divine spirit*, and of both our appreciation of and participation in God's creation? Our earliest literature, our *written* art, finds *words* to describe God. An ancient Celtic poetic myth, "Song of Amergin", is found in the earliest existing Irish texts and represents an attempt by early poets to come to terms with the nature of God (or rather Goddess, as the earliest deities were female). Here the poet and the worshipper are one and the same. The language of true poetry is the language of the divine. I would love to hear the music of the Gaelic language repeating "Song of Amergin", but here at least is the translation.

*I am a stag: of seven tines,  
I am a flood: across a plain,  
I am a wind: on a deep lake,  
I am a tear: the Sun lets fall,  
I am a hawk: above the cliff,  
I am a thorn: beneath the nail,  
I am a wonder: among flowers,  
I am a wizard: who but I  
Sets the cool head aflame with smoke?*

*I am a spear: that roars for blood,  
I am a salmon: in a pool,  
I am a lure: from paradise,  
I am a hill: where poets walk,  
I am a boar: ruthless and red,  
I am a breaker: threatening doom,  
I am a tide that drags to death,  
I am an infant: who but I  
Peeps from the unhewn dolmen arch?*

*I am the womb: of every holt,  
I am the blaze: on every hill,  
I am the queen: of every hive,  
I am the shield: for every head,  
I am the tomb: of every hope.*

Art and music can be seen as metaphoric displays of the main spiritual threads common throughout the world. In “Song of Amergin”, the image of the divine is woven with potent images of the natural world. There is fear, but also wonder and safety; there is life and death. The four elements; the animals, birds, insects, and fish; male and female; abstract and concrete are invoked to give a sense of the integrated nature of creation and its spirit.

Bruce Southworth, minister of UU church in Roanoke, Virginia, when Lynna Ruth and I were there in the early 1970s, gave a sermon titled, “One God at Most”. Bruce is now minister of The Community Church of New York, and describes the events associated with Jesus’ life and death thusly: Following Jesus’ death, something happened to the small group of women and men who had chosen to join him. A contagion of love—some transforming, creative event bound them together into a fellowship. They told stories to heal their grief and celebrate their newly found joy and sense of liberation in a world that oppressed and despised so many of them. One Roman Catholic New Testament scholar calls the stories “creative fictions” yet affirms their continuing power.

I find spiritual wisdom in Jesus’ affirmation, especially to the marginalized and oppressed of the world. Jesus taught, “You are the light of the world.” Everyone, each one of us, is precious. We Unitarians call it, “Affirming the Inherent Worth and Dignity of Every Person.” I know this because I have the T-shirt. The broad tent of Unitarian Universalism reflects the widest possible view of the plurality that is welcome in our movement.

I don't mean this to be a history lesson, but by the third century, Christianity had reinvented God as an all powerful male creator and destroyer; a bringer of order to chaos; a bringer of favor or disfavor to individuals and to whole races; quick to anger and ready to reward; exclusive rather than inclusive. The partisan and the political replaced the wondrous and the universal. Still in the *poetry* found in the Old Testament, and in the *songs*, the universal deity and the wonder are to be found. The art saves the essence of God from the political machinations of man's ways.

The Old Testament judgmental God dominates the Middle Ages, as seen in Milton's "Paradise Lost." The Cromwellian Old Testament God was harsh and repressive. Henry VIII considered representations of Christ to reflect Catholic idolatry and there was scant religious art produced until the arrival of William Blake, an artist whose attacks on conventional religion were shocking in his own day. Blake believed that the only true artists were those who were inspired by the spiritual. Blake's prophetic poetry has been said to form "what is in proportion to its merits the least read body of poetry in the English language". His visual artistry has led one modern critic to proclaim him "far and away the greatest artist Britain has ever produced". Blake challenged the 18<sup>th</sup> century religious order with his *poetry* that reflects a belief in a universal inclusive divinity. At age 30 he published a book titled "All Religions Are One". About Jesus Christ he said, "He is the only God ... and so am I, and so are you." Blake presents Jesus as a supremely creative being, above dogma, logic and even morality. Jesus, for Blake, symbolizes the unity between divinity and humanity: "Antiquity preaches the Gospel of Jesus." Blake designed his own mythology, as ultimately must we all.

Today *much* art has found its pre-Christian roots to transform the natural into the mysterious and supernatural. Many artists experiment with imaginative visions of nature. For example an ancient image of a tree is suffused with light and power as a symbol of regeneration, leaving no requirement for images of crosses or death.

It is common in the 21<sup>st</sup> century for artists to choose images beyond the confines of established faith. Recurrent motifs present images of God as light. German artist Rebecca Horn, in *Following the Light*, emphasizes God's immanence and the connectedness between the sacred and the everyday. She writes:

***What can you say about God?  
He's everywhere, in such a special frequency,  
That our world can hardly recognize him.  
We just have to train a bit more.***

Perhaps it is the lack of certainty that works to produce such rich considerations of the nature of God in our art and our literature. Perhaps it is in the face of change and doubt that we are at our most spiritually aware. If religion is the everlasting dialogue between humanity and God, perhaps *Art is its soliloquy*. Perhaps God is at the center of all creativity.

I am an amateur musician, and rightfully a quite humble one. I wrote a song once and recorded it using a synthesizer, an electronic keyboard with many voices. I recorded one voice, then while listening to that recording through headphones, I recorded another part, and so on, and so on. It was difficult because it was a very long piece of music and it did not have the normal meter or rhythm and it did not have what many people would

call a melody, so I had to keep the many parts in my head at the same time to make them fit. The genre of music that describes this is called ambient music. Without the normal meter there is no “rhythm entrainment” and without a predictable melody there is no “anticipation response”. The body and the mind can “turn off” and relax even that much more than if they had to respond in kind to the music. To some, ambient music is very soothing and relaxing as it flows around you: to others I am sure it is just noise. You could say the same for the ambient wind; and the analogy holds for God. The song I wrote and recorded that day had a spiritual feel to it and I titled it “Agape”.

I sometimes use words because of how I like the way they sound without full appreciation of their meaning. *Agape* is one of several Greek words translated into English as *love*. The word has been used in different ways by a variety of contemporary and ancient sources, including Biblical authors. Many have thought that this word represents divine, unconditional, self-sacrificing, active, volitional, and thoughtful love.

I played this song for an artist friend soon after I had recorded it. He said, “You didn’t write this.” Thinking he was trying to complement me, I smiled and said, “Yes, I did!” But his face became serious and he said, “No, you didn’t.” Thinking now that he was trying to challenge me, I looked sincere and convincingly earnest and said, “Yes, I did.” And with direct eye contact he said, “No, you didn’t. You were just the vessel.” Then I understood, and thought, “What a compliment!” Later I understood that all artists are vessels and that God is the wellspring of all creativity.

I want to play “Agape” for you today and it will serve as our postlude and will play softly while we enjoy our fellowship and coffee. I also want to give the CD “EarthSpirit”, which contains “Agape” and other ambient songs, to anyone today who wants one.

From Gregorian chants to Handel's *Messiah* to Verdi's *Requiem* to Jesus Christ Superstar, there are abundant representations of God in music, just as in art and literature. The larger point to be made is that it is *all* art – not just paintings and poetry, literature and music. Quietly sitting together with a friend, holding a conversation over coffee, engaging the body politic, cleaning up the environment, driving defensively, gardening, almost any act, thought, or expression imaginable is art: it is *all* art. Therefore we are all artists... engaging in our own performance art, the art of living, the art of being. We are all vessels. God is in us and works through us and we express that same basic, unknown, creative life force in individualistic ways. Unique expressions of the same God – each one different – that is what makes it art. What a happy canvas we are. What a bold use for dust are we!

But time is waning and I wanted to touch on enlightenment. I mentioned previously that, in art, recurrent motifs present images of God as light. Should *enlightenment* not follow?

To question is the answer. In other words, it is the journey, not the destination, that is important. It is who we are in terms of what we believe and hold dear, how we respect and treat others, and how we affirm our lives that gives our time on earth meaning and worth – not where we *plan* to be someday or even eternally. Among our most familiar and revered Unitarian ministers is Ralph Waldo Emerson. He once wrote:

A person will worship something – have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts – but it will out. That which dominates our thoughts will determine our lives, our

character. Therefore it behooves us to be careful what we  
worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.

As artists, as vessels, it is who we are in terms of what we believe and hold dear,  
how we respect and treat others, how we affirm our lives that gives our time on earth  
meaning and worth, and how we give expression to our art of living and of being.

Clearly to question is the answer, but it gives our lives sharper focus at times to  
give *answers* to the big *questions*. Immanuel Kant's essay "Answering the Question:  
What is Enlightenment?" held it necessary that all church and state paternalism be  
abolished and people be given the freedom to use their own intellect. Well, there is a  
defined starting point – intellectual freedom is the *sine qua non*, the without which none.  
But then where does one go with one's life to achieve enlightenment? I would hold that  
all roads can lead there! It's not as if that one has it and the other one doesn't. Rather it  
*is* the quest, the journey itself, the path one travels in the good company of God and  
nature, the way one *is* in thought and spirit -- the way one *is* in brotherhood or sisterhood.  
One may *follow* one's bliss, but one must *travel* with one's true self and the good  
companions of God and nature. To Question *is* the Answer. To Search with intellectual  
honesty and freedom *is* the Answer. Go with Truth, and go with the creative life force of  
a complex nature, and go with Love.

*Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.*