

**“God”**  
**By Rev. Lyn Cox**  
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**Introduction**

My Girl Scout troop was hiking in Harper’s Ferry, following the tracks of historic trains on a path that was being converted from rails to trails. I was probably about ten years old. The hillside rose up to our left, speckled with tufts of determined grass. To our right, the hill dropped away to reveal the tops of sassafras and sugar maple trees. Above, a few clouds, white as un-toasted marshmallows, adorned the sky. We sang a song that we had learned at a meeting:

*I know a place where no one ever goes  
It’s filled with peace and quiet, beauty and repose  
It’s hidden in a valley beside a mountain stream and  
Lying there beside the stream I find that I can dream  
Only things of beauty to the eye  
Snow peaked mountains a-towering to the sky  
Then I believe that God made this place for me*

(I am told that this song was written for and is copyrighted by the Girl Scouts of Colorado.)

At the time, I did believe in a personal deity, but I didn’t believe that God would make a place only for one person. That seemed selfish. I did wonder if I were made for a particular place. At my grandparents’ farm, there was a stream that ran past the old sugar mill. Smooth stones as big as couch cushions overlooked the rushing water. Moss climbed the stones, doilies of green in some places, deep pillows of jade in other places. Being in that place, I could believe that God was hiding in the trees, watching with love as we played a slow game of hide-and-seek.

These days, I believe that Divinity is not so much a person as it is a force that is in all things and beyond all things. I believe we travel through our days in the bosom of Life reaching for itself, and that my spirit is enriched when I reach back. I believe in something, and I can call that something God, although I usually don’t. I’m not sure I could explain this to my ten-year-old self.

Let me pause here to affirm that the diversity of our beliefs is a valuable asset for this congregation. I am aware that our community includes atheists and agnostics as well

as a variety of theists. The respect that people here show for each other means our differences can be a source of encouragement and challenge rather than a wedge of division. My hope is that today's service will start conversations that help us to better understand ourselves and each other.

My adult sense of the transcendent would have been difficult for my ten-year-old self to understand, yet my childhood experiences inform the relationship I have with the Divine. Looking back on that hike with my troop, I can play hide-and-seek in my memory. I spot God in the rocks and trees along the path. I find holiness in the bond between members of my troop. I hear the sacred in the music we shared.

Coming face-to-face with transcendence in many forms is, I think, part of what Martin Buber was getting at in his book, *Ich und Du*, usually translated as *I and Thou*. (References are from the 1970 edition published by Charles Scribner's Sons, translated by Walter Kaufmann.) Buber suggested that, in most of our encounters, we see only limited aspects of the other, we don't always bring our entire selves or regard others as three-dimensional. We don't relate to them as if they are real subjects in and of themselves, but only objects. In Buber's framework, the word pair for the objectifying relationship is "I-It," while the word pair for the authentic relationship is "I-Thou," or "I-You" if translated less formally. Buber writes:

"The basic word I-You can only be spoken with one's whole being.

"The basic word I-It can never be spoken with one's whole being." (p. 54)

The conversation I hope we have today is an encounter between whole beings. We seek our wholeness in different places. The three I am going to focus on are the same three from the hike: finding the Divine in nature, finding the holy in human relationships, and finding the sacred in music.

### **I. Finding the Divine in Nature**

On more than one occasion, I have asked a room full of workshop participants to meditate for about three minutes on a place from childhood where they felt connected to something larger than themselves. For those who used the term, I suggested that this would be a place where one could feel spiritual. I'm going to pause for a moment to give you a chance to think about that for yourself. As a child or youth, where did you feel connected to something larger than yourself? Where was your sacred place?

How many people thought of a place where there were trees? Natural bodies of water? How many people thought of a religious building? How many people thought of a non-religious building? Were there other people in your mental picture? I hope to hear more about your sacred places during the discussion.

Usually, when I invite people to think about this, more than half of the responses come from nature. For many people, the Spirit of Life is present in places where things are growing and changing. Tall trees seem to be a particularly strong theme for some people.

My own relationship with trees includes a history of climbing them. The apricot tree outside my window when I was six seemed to be a tall, living tower. I felt like I was part of the world, because I thought I could see the whole world from its branches. The pine trees when I was eleven provided easy climbing and year-round camouflage. When the pine sap got into my scrapes, it was like the tree and I were sisters. I hadn't climbed a tree in awhile until about two weeks ago, when the pink magnolia in my front yard held out a blossom that demanded attention. The only way to get a closer look was to climb. Holding my body against the trunk, I could imagine putting down roots in this place after many years of wandering. Each tree that I climbed—the apricot, the pine, and the pink magnolia—brought me into deeper relationship with that time and place. In retrospect, climbing them was an act of searching for wholeness. Martin Buber writes:

I contemplate a tree.

I can accept it as a picture: a rigid pillar in a flood of light, or splashes of green traversed by the gentleness of the blue silver ground.

I can feel it as movement: the flowing veins around the sturdy, striving core, the sucking of the roots, the breathing of the leaves, the infinite commerce with earth and air – and the growing itself in its darkness.

I can assign it to a species and observe it as an instance, with an eye to its construction and its way of life.

I can overcome its uniqueness and form so rigorously that I recognize it only as an expression of the law—those laws according to which a constant opposition of forces is continually adjusted, or those laws according to which the elements mix and separate.

I can dissolve it into a number, into a pure relation between numbers, and eternalize it.

Throughout all of this the tree remains my object and has its place and its time span, its kind and condition.

But it can also happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It. The power of exclusiveness has seized me.

This does not require me to forego any of the modes of contemplation. There is nothing that I must not see in order to see, and there is no knowledge that I must forget. Rather is everything, picture and movement, species and instance, law and number included and inseparably fused.

Whatever belongs to the tree is included: its form and its mechanics, its colors and its chemistry, its conversation with the elements and its conversation with the stars—all this in its entirety.

The tree is no impression, not play of my imagination, no aspect of a mood; it confronts me bodily and has to deal with me as I must deal with it—only differently.

One should not try to dilute the meaning of the relation: relation is reciprocity.

Does the tree then have consciousness, similar to our own? I have no experience of that. But thinking that you have brought this off in your own case, must you again divide the indivisible? What I encounter is neither the soul of a tree nor a dryad, but the tree itself. (p. 58)

Before I read Buber, I found meaning in the trees that I climbed by way of their connection to the rest of the environment, or by way of their usefulness to me, or by way of the forces of nature symbolized by the trees. Buber gave me back my relationship with the trees themselves. I can regard them as “Thou,” not because they speak to me in a language I understand, but because my encounter with the trees recalls me to wholeness.

The way we seek the transcendent in nature may depend on whom we are expecting to find. Creator God may be hiding in the beauty of a sunset. The Spirit of Life may emerge from young leaves. The Goddess may be laughing in the rushing water of a river. When deity doesn't seem to be part of the encounter, there is still the Interdependent Web, its scientific complexity inspiring mystery and wonder. There are many names for the Divine in nature.

## **II. Finding the Holy in Human Relationships**

Sometimes the part of nature populated by human beings is where I discover the holy. Someone asked me the other day when I feel perfect happiness.

What a question! I felt some pressure to be entertaining in my answer. I thought I should share a story about some spiritual adventure. I thought about places that had

taken my breath away: the beach at Cape Henlopen, driving on the bridge over the Susquehanna at sunrise, Yosemite National Park in the spring. Those are all treasured memories of transcendent moments, but I didn't remember them as being perfectly happy.

I should have known that pride would not yield the answer. When I stopped trying to think about how I would appear and just listened to the question, I had to say that the time when I feel perfect happiness is when I'm with my family. When I can be fully present with someone I love and trust, that is wholeness. That sense of belonging is a blessing.

Which is not to say that things are calm and stress-free between members of my family all the time. On a good day, noticing our differences and talking through our misunderstandings teaches me something about how to be a human being.

I remember the autumn when I was starting ninth grade and one of my brothers was entering seventh grade. He was going to the same middle school that I had just left. Every day, I thought of a new piece of advice to give him about middle school. I suggested that he get to know the teachers that I liked best. A couple of days later, I remembered to tell him to avoid the suspicious ketchup in the cafeteria. One night I sat down next to him at dinner and started listing the clubs that he should join.

"Stop trying to run my life," he said. He wanted to experience the school for himself, not as my emissary. Of course, he was right. In the guise of being helpful, I was directing my brother as if he were an actor in my play. I began to be able to see him as a person with his own interests and his own life. In Buber's framework, my brother became a Thou or a big You rather than an It. At least, I began to be able to see that sometimes. Buber writes,

"Relation is reciprocity. My You acts on me as I act on it. Our students teach us, our works form us. The 'wicked' become a revelation when they are touched by the sacred basic word. How are we educated by children, by animals! Inscrutably involved, we live in the currents of universal reciprocity." (p. 67)

Reciprocity may be part of the success of the way members of this congregation care for one another and participate in Circle of Hope outreach. Members realize that we

all need each other sometimes. Offering assistance is not about acting on a problem, affecting an “It.” Rather, care is about a relationship with a neighbor, seen or unseen.

I am reminded of folk tale about a religious community that had fallen on hard times. In the version I heard first, the religious community was a medieval Christian monastery with a rabbi for a wise neighbor.

The monastery had fallen on hard times. The grounds were a little unkempt. The monks were irritable with each other. Pilgrims no longer came through with alms. The situation discouraged new people from joining the order, and so eventually the monastery was left with just a few, old monks.

In the woods near the monastery, there lived a rabbi. The abbot decided to pay him a collegial visit, and he was greeted warmly. The two leaders had an animated discussion of their similarities and differences. Over the fourth cup of tea, the abbot shared with the rabbi about the troubling situation in the monastery. The rabbi thought about this. He looked directly into the abbot’s eyes, and said, “I can tell you one thing. Repeat this message to your community once. After that, no one must say it aloud again. The Messiah is among you.”

Well, what more can be said after that? The abbot and the rabbi embraced their farewell, and the abbot returned to the monastery to deliver the message. “The Messiah is among us.” What could that mean? Did that mean that the embodiment of God on earth was one of the monks in disguise? Silently, the monks looked at each other in wonder. Who could it be? There was no way of knowing, and the secret demanded no further discussion.

After that, the monks treated each other with reverence. After all, you never knew which one might be the Messiah. Everyone who took a turn at cooking their simple meals put as much love and care into the preparation as possible; the Messiah would be at the table. When working on the grounds, the monks attended to the smallest details, hoping to smooth the path beneath the Messiah’s feet.

The monastery became a more pleasant place for pilgrims to visit. Residents of the nearby town came to pray, or just to be among people at peace. The financial picture improved. A few young people decided to dedicate their lives to the community, without ever knowing the secret of the hidden Messiah.

Tales like these encourage us to approach every encounter as if it were with someone extraordinary, because you never know. Except that we do know: every person is extraordinary. Every person deserves respect because of the extraordinariness of ordinary humanity. For theists, it goes even beyond that: when we love what is mortal, we also love what is eternal. Buber writes:

“Extended, the lines of relationships intersect in the eternal You.

“Every single You is a glimpse of that. Through every single You the basic word addresses the eternal You. The mediatorship of the You of all beings accounts for the fullness of our relationships to them—and for the lack of fulfillment. The innate You is actualized each time without ever being perfected.” (p. 123)

I think Buber is trying to say something that neither he nor I can express with clarity, but I will give it another try. The Divine exists in the connections between living beings when both beings show up as their full, authentic selves. In other words, as we sang in the opening hymn, where charity and love abide, there is God.

### **III. Finding the Sacred in Music**

We have talked about looking for the sacred in nature and in human relationships. A third way that I seek the Divine is through music. Music has a way of sticking with me, providing a comfort and encouragement, much like a holy presence.

Music provided a turning point for me during one difficult chapter in my life. Someone close to me was dying. I got up every day out of habit, but I couldn't find any meaning in my life that could stand up to the despair I felt. But then, one day, I woke up with a song in my head. It was a contemporary Pagan song, which led the soundtrack in my head to a Pagan chant:

*We all come from the Goddess and to her we shall return  
Like a drop of rain flowing to the ocean*

The prospect of losing someone hurt, nearly more than I could bear. But music was my companion, reminding me that other people had faced mortality before me and were facing it with me.

I thought about times when I would not have been surprised if my own life had ended, times such as car accidents, or while witnessing violence, or during turbulence on

airplanes. At some of those times, I imagined myself on the other side of that moment, absorbed back into the cosmos, a spirit dispersing to give energy to other spirits. I don't know for sure what will happen after I die. Since I don't know for sure, I will hold on to my working theory, which is that my soul will remember its place as part of the Spirit of Life, like a drop of rain flowing to the ocean. Anticipating something like that for my loved one helped me to think about letting them go.

The soundtrack in my mind moved on to Unitarian Universalist music, reminding me that I belong to a movement of people who provide mutual encouragement. UU minister Eugene B. Navias wrote verses for "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing," and these returned to me over and over as I reached out for the Spirit of Life:

*Come, thou fount of inspiration, turn our lives to higher ways.  
Lift our gloom and desperation, show the promise of this day.  
Help us bind ourselves in union, help our hands tell of our love.  
With thine aid, O fount of justice, earth be fair as heav'n above.*

Some of the songs in *Singing the Living Tradition* are oldies but goodies, many are re-cast to let the lyrics progress alongside changing beliefs, and still others are unique to the time and context of Unitarian Universalism in the 1990's. Sacred music means different things to different people in different generations.

If my time of despair had happened a few years earlier, I would not have been able to take comfort in a hymn like, "Fount." If a hymn that implied a traditional God came up in the service, I would stand silently while others sang. It took some time before I could sing along. I learned how to reinterpret the words in a way that was meaningful to me, and to sing songs that supported others even if they weren't what I thought I needed in that moment. My encounter with music did not stop the pain, but it helped me feel connected to my spirituality and less alone. A God who suffers with us is the kind of God I can believe in.

The version of *I and Thou* that I quoted earlier was translated by Walter Kaufmann. In his prologue, Kaufmann explains that *I and Thou*, while focusing more on human relations than theology, still has something to say to those who struggle with God. Kaufmann relates his explanation directly to music:



Still why use religious terms? Indeed, it might be better not to use them because they are always misunderstood. But what other terms are there?

We need new language, and new poets to create it, and new ears to listen to it.

Meanwhile, if we shut our ears to the old prophets who still speak more or less in the old tongues, using ancient words, occasionally in new ways, we shall have very little music.

We are not so rich that we can do without tradition. Let him that has new ears listen to it in a new way. (p. 31)

I agree with Kaufmann that being able to use religious language, even if we mean something different by it, opens up libraries of music and poetry. Just like we can watch a Shakespeare play being performed in modern dress, and we can reinterpret classical music with modern electronic instruments, we can approach sacred arts with our own authentic faith. Religious music addresses the essence of what is holy. Like music, that essence moves and changes. Every time we play hide-and-seek with music, transcendence has an opportunity for a new and surprising form.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

We grow when we can try out different ways of understanding what is sacred to us. New words for the Divine can help someone come to terms with their religious past or their experience of mystery and wonder in the present. Playing with the language opens up new avenues where we can challenge ourselves and encourage each other. The connections we find in nature, human relationships, and music may help us bind ourselves in union. Once we find those connections, let our helping hands tell of our love.

Sharing our ideas about God is important. Our relationship with the eternal, whatever that means for each one of us, is basic to who we are. We build community when we can share our innermost convictions, confident that we will be met with a respectful response. Differences need not mean divisiveness. May nature, human relationships, and music yield inspiration for you. I look forward to many conversations.

## Notes

*Hide-and-Seek With God* by Mary Ann Moore, published by Skinner House Books, 2003

*I And Thou* by Martin Buber, translated by Walter Kaufmann, published by Charles Scriber's Sons, 1970

"We All Come From the Goddess" by Z. Budapest

"Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing," verse 3, written by Eugene B. Navias