

A couple of years ago, my partner and I had a few discussions on god with a dear friend during which, every time we would talk about our inner moral compass, values, ethics, or conscience, she would insist that this was god. She was truly trying to understand how we continued to hold the belief that there is no god. And no matter how carefully we tried to explain to her our belief that we are all born divine, perfected in love, and whole she would return to her god that both Linda, my partner, and I rejected even in our childhoods. You know, that god that is punishing and willfully blind to all of the suffering in the world that he ostensibly has the power to stop but doesn't. The one who gave us free will, as any good parent would, but then sends us to hell when we have the audacity to use it. She, and all of the people living in our mobile park in Dunnellon, were at best confused, and at worst outraged, by our refusal to salute the flag or bow our heads in prayer at our monthly HOA meetings. And when we stood up to the bully who is the president of that HOA there were few who, cheered us on or spoke to defend us and others from his pitiful reign of Christian hubris and closed mindedness.

But the straw that broke our friend's back finally was when we declined an invitation to join her and a group of friends at the VFW for Friday night dinner. We thanked her for the invite but said that, as vegans, there would be nothing there for us to eat. "Oh", she cried out in total exasperation, "you don't believe in anything." It would have been funny had it not been so obviously frustrating and incomprehensible to her. What she meant was we don't believe in guns, god, murder, or rabid nationalism. We don't accept extremist Christian or other faith supported oppression, fear mongering, or in taking animals' lives when there is absolutely no need to. When in fact, animal agriculture is keeping starving children hungry, destroying the planet, our own health, and torturing animals so heinously that it is mind and soul numbing.

But this outcry from our friend whom we love started me thinking even more conscientiously and consciously about what I DO believe and that has been a journey of clarification that I'm grateful for. When I flip

over what I don't believe in and look at the back side of that tapestry, I can clearly see that what I do believe in gives me hope, joy, serenity, optimism, and self respect. The things I don't believe in come from an even stronger value system that gives me mental and spiritual ease, and the ability to look myself in the mirror each morning. When people of good conscience begin to reframe what we rail against, we are able to see that we are working for a world that aspires to creating the most good and the least harm for all. When we are working for justice, freedom, planetary restoration, and compassion we realize that we are living our religion in the only way that religion makes sense to us. We are manifesting our belief that "kindness is our religion."

So when I do not pledge allegiance to the flag it is because there is a much higher reality for me. And that reality includes not being able to say false words. There is not "liberty and justice for all" and how can we say "one nation, indivisible" without laughing out loud or crying? I cannot speak the words "under God" when an increasing number of us reject that concept generally, and the mean spiritedness of so many "godly" people specifically. When I defend those who kneel during the pledge to protest the false reality expressed in those words, I am not unpatriotic. I am taking patriotism to a deeper level that includes every single one of us in that statement of "liberty and justice for all" and I am refusing to pretend that our country is not hemorrhaging from the untreated wounds of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and a despicable level of wealth inequality.

And when I express my belief that there is no god, I am in no way saying that I believe there are not higher levels of awareness, kindness, understanding, or encouragement. I am saying that I believe love, peacefulness, accountability, and responsible stewardship is hard wired into us until our society shuts us up and down. I'm saying that if I did believe in a god, she would not be one who put life in front of us in all of its splendor but then spends eternity reminding us that we will all be born into sin because of that one evil woman and her sensual desire to taste life. And I'm absolutely positive that there could be no god who would cast all of the blame for our sinfulness on one

woman or on any woman. How would it be possible for an infinitely intelligent and compassionate god to blame the givers of life, the lovers of nurturance, the builders of community for all of the evil in the world? How could the literal guardians of our species' future be accountable for all of humanity's downfall? This does not make any more sense to me now than it did when I was a child of nine or ten and learned in church that all of my beautiful, good, and moral Jewish friends would be going to hell.

And when I look at what drives my visceral hatred of guns it is not because I am trying to take anyone's rights away. It is because I believe the promise that we are all entitled to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." And I believe that should take precedence over the toxic American individualism that enables many to think their right to own an assault weapon equals my right to continue to live. It is because I believe that a mother's keening over the loss of her child carries more clout than someone else's right to take that life.

When I criticize this administration's stance - on almost everything - it is not because I'm a sore loser or that it's just sour grapes politics as usual. No, it is because I believe that we - human and non-human animals - deserve to share a healthy and alive planet that belongs equally to us all as our cherished and only home. It's because I believe that we are responsible to at least the next seven generations and that we have been given the awesome and sobering responsibility of being caretakers of this precious planet that has been gifted to us through no effort of our own. I do NOT believe that the Biblical admonition of Genesis 1:26 to have "dominion" meant dominance and power over but that it was instead a reference to the sacred trust placed in us as worthy temporary stewards of this mystical journey of thousands of generations. We know that there were many agendas represented by those who wrote the Bible and that much was meant to be representative rather than literal. One spiritual blog I read talked about the idea of man's "dominion over" as referring to our need to have control over ourselves and that it is our lower instincts that are being described as all things that creep upon the earth.

But humankind has used cherry picked religious teachings to defend everything from factory farming to stoning gays, to the rape and almost mortal wounding of the Earth - the only mother capable of sustaining us all. Religion (and faith in God, Allah, Yahweh, Mohammed and even Buddha) has been used as the rationalization to silence, coerce, murder, exploit, and steal entire cultures and lands in a quest for power over. Religious “teachings” defend the beliefs and practices of manifest destiny, colonization, the Crusades, witch hunts, female mutilation, slavery, misogyny, over population and child abuse.

To be fair religion has also been the motivation for a lot of good over time for a great many people. But religion has always had a built in leaning toward the belief that only “we” know the one right way. Since “we” changes according to the speaker, the place, the circumstance, and the historical period the only religion that I can really have any faith in is that of kindness. The Dalai Lama tells us to “be kind whenever possible.” And he continues “it is always possible.” It is fairly difficult to misunderstand what it means to be kind or to rationalize that there are times when we shouldn’t be. Everyone recognizes kindness and responds to it - even the most broken and scared among us. Kindness is the universal language and costs us nothing at all ever. A smile at the stressed out mom in the grocery store, holding our friend’s hand at the funeral of her spouse, telling our children we love them not once a week but every single day, easing the new cashier’s anxiety by saying “relax, I’m not in a hurry - you’re doing a great job.”

My religion has become a rich stew with the main ingredients coming from Unitarianism, Native American spirituality, Buddhism, and humane education. When I first read about the Native American perspective on life as a teenager, I felt an inner resonance immediately. The respect for all of life and our interconnectedness existed in indigenous hearts, minds and practices about 12,000 years before our Unitarian principles were crafted. The seventh principle of “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a

part” has been central to indigenous communities the world over and has only been forgotten, ignored, and pillaged by the many powerful in more recent history. Kindness, equity, and according everyone including animals and the planet, respect, dignity, and a life free of fear has become the overarching enemy of the conquering, Empire mentality. And humane education, which informs my life dozens of times every day, looks at all of our global challenges through the many lenses of animal protection, human rights, environmental ethics, and how media and culture shape us without our conscious awareness to behave in ways that constantly conflict with our deepest values.

So I learned of indigenous, earth and community centered spirituality first, then tripped into Unitarian/Universalism, and finally learned of humane education for the first time in 2004. But the most powerful spiritual practice for me came a few years before that when I went seeking for something that I couldn't name and that seeking was answered by my stumbling into a Buddhist sangha, led by my two beloved teachers Ahn-Houng and Thu Nguyen. Ahn-Houng and Thu studied with Thich Nhat Hanh for a couple of decades and were among the first students to be ordained by him. In their sangha, The Mindfulness Practice Center of Fairfax, I learned about mindfulness in general and the five mindfulness practices taught by TNH specifically. Mindfulness practice and humane education have shaped my life in ways more powerful, more heart felt, and more mind clarifying than all of the other paths I've followed. I think of these two life philosophies as the main path with other paths of spirituality diverging and rejoining them in constantly changing configurations. Both Buddhism and humane education have at their heart loving kindness, compassion, awakening, and service as the way to true happiness for ourselves and for all others.

The website for Deer Park, TNH's monastery in California, has this introduction to the Five Mindfulness Trainings.

The Five Mindfulness Trainings represent the Buddhist vision for a global spirituality and ethic. They are a concrete expression of the Buddha's teachings on the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, the path of right understanding and true love, leading to healing, transformation, and happiness for ourselves and for the world. To practice the Five Mindfulness Trainings is to cultivate the insight of interbeing, or Right View, which can remove all discrimination, intolerance, anger, fear, and despair. If we live according to the Five Mindfulness Trainings, we are already on the path of a bodhisattva. Knowing we are on that path, we are not lost in confusion about our life in the present or in fears about the future.

In a nutshell, the five mindfulness practices are “reverence for life”, “generosity”, “sexual responsibility”, “mindful speech and deep listening”, and “mindful consumption.” So all that we would hope for - peace, sustainability, compassion, justice, community, health, abundance - are possible through the practice of these trainings. The trainings are not shallow or superficial. Reverence for life, for example, doesn't just refer to human life or our companion animals' lives, but extends to every being (that includes all wildlife, all domestic animals, all trees, water, sky, insects, plants, and minerals). Generosity doesn't just mean of our money and treasure. It refers instead to a much broader understanding of the generosity of our presence, our compassion, our loving kindness to all, and even the generosity of giving each person the benefit of the doubt when they are behaving badly. Sexual responsibility saves us all much unnecessary drama and heartache and reserves that intimacy for only those for whom we have deep, unselfish, and abiding love. Mindful speech and deep listening might be the most important training of all. The way we speak to each other shapes our present and our future, as does the way we speak to ourselves. And our ability to listen deeply to other people, to the hearts of animals, to what nature has to say to each

of us about her love for us determines our ability to become one with all - inter being - while the absence of it guarantees we remain stuck in separation, isolation, and fear. And finally, mindful consumption refers not just to the food and drink that we take into our precious bodies. It refers to being mindful of what we read, watch, email, and have conversations about. It makes us aware of not only what toxicity we may be consuming, but also what toxicity we may be releasing into the world for others' consumption.

At the heart of all religions is the notion of kindness "do unto others". I've begun to think of mindfulness as Kindfulness and to understand that in practicing radical Kindfulness we can create a world that works for all. I'm not talking about some kind of squishy, saccharine niceness. I mean that we model a fierce and gentle warrior approach that is fearlessly kind in speaking difficult truths, standing up for those being bullied and oppressed, insisting on justice for all - not just our own - Radical kindness insists that we give voice to the billions of abused and tortured animals, protect the natural world with our letters, phone calls, and marches, and hold those in power accountable to be in power with rather than power over. It means that we go beyond being kind ourselves and we insist that others are also kind. So that means calling out our friends who tell racist jokes or make light of a rape culture; it means calling out those institutions and practices that keep feeding the already financially obese at the expense of the resource starving; it means giving up our comfort zones so that those who have had a boot on their throat can finally breathe. It means doing good without god and being the kind of warrior who serves first and eats last.

In individual tragedies and in the collective chaos in which we now find ourselves many are asking "where is god?" I would give the same answer as I heard recently from a UU chaplain. She said

that god is in the people who come to help, to encourage, to comfort, and to witness our grief and our despair. May we all be such comfort in a world of so much pain. May we all be kind in every moment.