



EXPLORATION

God / The Divine

Readings

1. *Our Ultimate Concern*

by Sharon Salzberg

...As we come to deeply know the underlying truths of who we are and what our lives are about, abiding faith, or unwavering faith as it is traditionally called, arises.

Abiding faith does not depend on borrowed concepts. Rather, it is the magnetic force of a bone-deep, lived understanding, one that draws us to realize our ideals, walk our talk, and act in accord with what we know to be true. Theologian Paul Tillich defines faith as alignment with our “ultimate concern,” those values that we are most devoted to, that form the core of what we care passionately about. An ultimate concern is not an interest that is merely a fashion or a whim, but one that is a centering point for our lives.

When we wake up in the morning and picture the dealings of our day as consequential, we tell ourselves a story that is based on our ultimate concern. We remind ourselves of loving our neighbor or remembering God.

...Our ultimate concern is the touchstone we turn to over and over again, the thread that we reach for to convey a sense of meaning in our lives. It is the glue that connects the disparate pieces, the frame that gives shape to the picture of our experiences. We turn to our ultimate concern when afraid, or bewildered, or when we don't quite know who we are anymore.

Source: <https://www.awakin.org/read/view.php?tid=518>

2. *Godless Yet Good*

by Troy Jollimore

In polls and studies, a majority of Americans don't trust atheists and say they would not vote for a presidential

candidate who did not believe in God. “Religion” and “theology” are still frequently cited in the American media as if they were the sole aspects of human existence responsible for matters of value. “We need science to tell us the way things are; we need religion to tell us the way things ought to be,” as people around here like to say.

...The fact that ethical commitments, in some people's lives, find a natural place in the context of religion does not imply that such commitments can *only* be grounded and motivated in religion, nor that a universe can only contain morality if it also contains God.

...A secular ethics that emphasizes the significance of self-cultivation, individual judgment, and emotions such as compassion, as well as recognizing the usefulness of moral exemplars—teachers who are paradigms of wisdom, who inspire us and whom we can try to imitate ...is a secular ethics that shares some important common ground with religious tradition. The idea that morality stems from strong character rather than from obedience to a strict set of rules, for instance, is very much in line with the moral reorientation proposed by Christ in the New Testament, from a view centered on obedience to God's commandments to one in which love and compassion take center stage.

... Morality can get along just fine without God. But it cannot possibly get by if it neglects and ignores the very things that make human life meaningful and precious.

Source: <https://aeon.co/essays/rules-and-reasons-are-not-enough-for-an-ethics-without-god> (CC BY-ND 4.0)

3. *Self Portrait* by David Whyte

It doesn't interest me if there is one God or many gods. I want to know if you belong or feel abandoned.

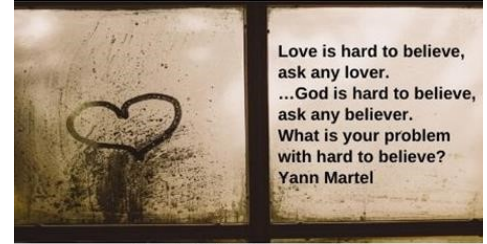


Photo by Gaelle Marcel on Unsplash

If you know despair or can see it in others.
I want to know
if you are prepared to live in the world with its harsh need to change you. If you can look back with firm eyes saying this is where I stand. I want to know
if you know
how to melt into that fierce heat of living
falling toward
the center of your longing. I want to know
if you are willing
to live, day by day, with the consequence of love
and the bitter
unwanted passion of your sure defeat.

I have been told, in that fierce embrace, even the gods speak of God.

Source: <https://high-road-artist.com/9574/wisdom-wednesdays/self-portrait-a-poem-by-david-whyte/>

4. *The God Debate*

by Nathan Schneider

What are we really talking about when we debate the existence of God? I think it can become a shortcut, a way of side-stepping more necessary and more



Photo by Andrew Wong on Unsplash

There are people in the world so hungry, that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread. Mahatma Gandhi

difficult questions. Denouncing others as atheists, or as believers in a false God, can become an excuse to treat them as less than human, as undeserving of real consideration. When terrorists attack in the name of a certain God, it can seem easier to blame their religion than to consider their stated grievances about foreign military bases in their countries and foreigners backing their corrupt leaders. When religious communities reject scientific theories for bad reasons, it can seem easier to blame the fact that they believe in God, rather than to notice that other believers might accept the same theories for good reasons. Good ideas and bad ideas, good actions and bad actions – they're all on either side of the God divide.

... I believe in God, but I often find more common cause with those who say they don't than those who say they do. I've come to care less whether anyone says they believe in God or not, and to care more about what they mean by that, and what they do about it.

Source: <https://aeon.co/ideas/how-much-does-it-matter-whether-god-exists> (CC BY-ND 4.0)

5. *Einstein's God Does Not Play Dice* by Jim Baggott

"The theory [of quantum mechanics] ... hardly brings us closer to the secret of the Old One," wrote Albert Einstein in December 1926. "I am at all events convinced that *He* [i.e., God] does not play dice."

[Still,] the ...12-year-old Einstein ... [had] developed a deep aversion to the dogma of organized religion that would last for his lifetime, an aversion that extended to all forms of authoritarianism, including any kind of dogmatic atheism.

...Although he wanted no part of religion, the belief in God that he had carried with him from his brief flirtation with Judaism became the foundation on which he constructed his philosophy. ... He explained: "I have no better expression than the term 'religious,' for this trust in the rational character of reality and in its being accessible, at least to some extent, to human reason."

...But Einstein's was a God of philosophy, not religion. When asked many years later whether he believed in God,

he replied: "I believe in Spinoza's God, who reveals himself in the lawful harmony of all that exists, but not in a God who concerns himself with the fate and the doings of mankind."

...Einstein's God is infinitely superior but impersonal and intangible, subtle but not malicious. ... There is no room in Einstein's philosophy for free will: "Everything is determined, the beginning as well as the end, by forces over which we have no control ... we all dance to a mysterious tune, intoned in the distance by an invisible player."

...Just 14 months before he died, he wrote...: "If God created the world, his primary concern was certainly not to make its understanding easy for us."

Source: <https://aeon.co/ideas/what-einstein-meant-by-god-does-not-play-dice> (CC BY-ND 4.0)

6. *Power of Blessing*

by Rachel Naomi Remen

We bless the life around us far more than we realize. Many simple, ordinary things that we do can affect those around us in profound ways: the unexpected phone call, the brief touch, the willingness to listen generously, the warm smile or wink of recognition. We can even bless total strangers and be blessed by them. Big messages come in small packages. All it may take to restore someone's trust in life may be returning a lost earring or a dropped glove.

A woman once told me that she did not feel the need to reach out to those around her because she prayed every day. Surely, this was enough. But a prayer is about our relationship to God; a blessing is about our relationship to the spark of God in one another. God may not need our attention as badly as the person next to us on the bus or behind us on line in the supermarket. Everyone in the world matters, and so do their blessings. When we bless others, we offer them refuge from an indifferent world.

The capacity to bless life is in everybody. The power of our blessing is not diminished by illness or age. On the contrary, our blessings become even more powerful as we grow older. They have survived the buffeting of our experience. ...I first learned to do this from

people who were dying, people who had moved into a more authentic relationship with those around them because only that which is genuine still had meaning for them.

Source: <https://www.awakin.org/read/view.php?tid=528>

7. *Let us pray to the God* by Rev. Max Coots

Let us pray to the God who holds us in the hollow of his hands—to the God who holds us in the curve of her arms—to the God whose flesh is the flesh of hills and hummingbirds and angleworms—whose skin is the color of an old black woman and a young white man, and the color of the leopard and the grizzly bear and the green grass snake—whose hair is like the aurora borealis, rainbows, nebulae, waterfalls, and a spider's web—whose eyes sometimes shine like the evening star, and then like fireflies, and then again like an open wound—whose touch is both the touch of life and the touch of death—and whose name is everyone's, but mostly mine. And what shall we pray? Let us say, "Thank you."

Source: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/5592.shtml>

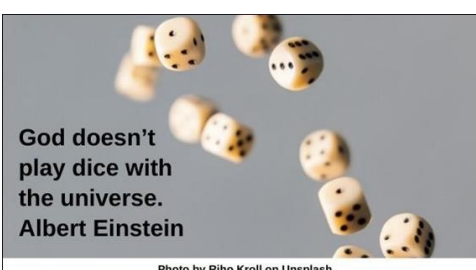
Wisdom Story

Looking for the Lost Donkey

Once the great Sufi holy man and wise fool Nasreddin Hodja was walking down the street when a group of women came running up to him. Obviously distressed, they cried out to him, "Help us, Hodja! Help us."

"What can be done I will try to do," the Hodja replied. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"Our husbands," the women cried. "They've all decided that they must go out into the desert in order to dedicate themselves to finding Allah. Our children and we have been abandoned."



God doesn't
play dice with
the universe.
Albert Einstein

Photo by Riho Kroll on Unsplash

“This should not be,” the Hodja declared, and he set out after the pilgrims as fast as his donkey could carry him. As he approached the band of men, he began to shout, “Help me! Help me, my brothers.”

“What seems to be the trouble, Hodja?” the men called back.

“My donkey,” he said. “I’ve lost my donkey and can’t find him anywhere. Oh, help me search. I must find him!”

“But he’s right there,” the men replied, laughing. “Can’t you see that you’re sitting right on top of him? You don’t have to go anywhere to look for him.”

“And why do you,” the Hodja said, pulling his donkey to a stop, “feel that you must go anywhere to look for Allah? Go back to your wives; go back to your lives.” And that’s just what they did.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/practice/workshop8/60540.shtml>

Snippets

“For those who believe in God, most of the big questions are answered. But for those of us who can’t readily accept the God formula, the big answers don’t remain stone-written. We adjust to new conditions and discoveries. We are pliable. Love need not be a command nor faith a dictum. . . . We are here to unlearn the teachings of the church, state, and our educational system. . . . We are here to laugh at the odds and live our lives so well that Death will tremble to take us.”
Charles Bukowski

“When a child first catches adults out—when it first walks into his grave little head that adults do not always have divine intelligence, that their judgments are not always wise, their thinking true, their sentences just—his world falls into panic desolation. The gods are fallen and all safety gone. And there is one sure thing about the fall of gods: they do not fall a little; they crash and shatter or sink deeply into green muck. It is a tedious job to build them up again; they never quite shine. And the child’s world is never quite whole again. It is an aching kind of growing.”
John Steinbeck

“I believe in God, but not as one thing, not as an old man in the sky. I believe that what people call God is something in all of us. I believe that what Jesus and Mohammed and Buddha and all the rest said was right. It’s just that the translations have gone wrong.”
John Lennon

“Because here’s something else that’s weird but true: in the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship—be it JC or Allah, be it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles—is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive.”
David Foster Wallace

“God does not play dice with the universe; He plays an ineffable game of His own devising, which might be compared, from the perspective of any of the other players [i.e. everybody], to being involved in an obscure and complex variant of poker in a pitch-dark room, with blank cards, for infinite stakes, with a Dealer who won’t tell you the rules, and who smiles all the time.”
Terry Pratchett

“See, I wanna know if you believe in any god or if you believe in many gods or better yet what gods believe in you. And for all the times that you’ve knelt before the temple of yourself, have the prayers you asked come true? And if they didn’t, did you feel denied? And if you felt denied, denied by who?”
Andrea Gibson

“If every person in this room made it a rule that wherever you are, whenever you can, you will try to act a little kinder than is necessary—the world really would be a better place. And if you do this, if you act just a little kinder than is necessary, someone else, somewhere, someday, may recognize in you, in every single one of you, the face of God.”
R.J. Palacio

“Whether or not you believe in God, you must believe this: when we as a species abandon our trust in a power greater than us, we abandon our sense of accountability. Faiths... all faiths... are admonitions that there is something we cannot understand, something to which we are accountable. With faith we are accountable to each other, to ourselves, and to a higher truth. Religion is flawed, but only because man is flawed. The church consists of a brotherhood of imperfect, simple souls wanting only to be a voice of compassion in a world spinning out of control.”
Dan Brown

“Dear God,” she prayed, “let me be something every minute of every hour of my life. Let me be gay; let me be sad. Let me be cold; let me be warm. Let me be hungry... have too much to eat. Let me be ragged or well dressed. Let me be sincere—be deceitful. Let me be truthful; let me be a liar. Let me be honorable and let me sin. Only let me be something every blessed minute. And when I sleep, let me dream all the time so that not one little piece of living is ever lost.”
Betty Smith

“Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed.... Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.”
Elie Wiesel

Questions

The following questions are for your consideration.

1. In reading #1, Sharon Salzberg refers to Paul Tillich’s term, “ultimate concern.” For some, this may be God, but it can be other things, like love or peace. What is of ultimate concern to you? How does it give your life meaning?
2. Do you agree with the assertion in reading #2 that “morality can get



along just fine without God?" If yes, why? If no, why not? Why is it that atheism is generally regarded so negatively? Is there anything that can be done to rehabilitate the word? As people increasingly identify as "spiritual but not religious:" or "none of the above," i.e., no religious affiliation, do you think that attitudes about atheism will evolve in more positive ways?

3. Some people who don't believe in God have stopped using the term atheism because it means that they are being defined by people who believe in God. Instead, they say that they are non-theists. They do this because atheism is often regarded as being dogmatic and fundamentalist, while non-theism seems open-minded and reasonable. Is this a distinction without a difference, or a useful way of defining one's position? Why?
4. In reading #3, David Whyte sets aside the idea of God at the beginning of his poem to focus on how a person experiences life. Are there phrases that appeal to you? Which ones? Why? The last line returns to gods/God. What do you think he means by this? If you were editing this poem, would you keep or discard this sentence? Why?
5. Nathan Schneider (4th reading), believes in God, but he often finds common cause with those who don't, since other believers misuse God. How would you respond to his last two points: What do you mean by God or no God? How does this belief influence how you act?
6. The fifth reading describes Einstein's God. Does his description of God make sense to you? Why or why not?
7. In the 6th reading, Rachel Naomi Remen suggests that blessing others

may be far more important than prayer. Do you agree or disagree with her statement: "When we bless others, we offer them refuge from an indifferent world?" Does "blessing" have to be related to a belief in God or can it simply mean wishing someone good things in life?

8. The 7th reading by Unitarian Universalist minister Max Coats portrays God through a number of novel images about God. Which images appeal to you? Why? What images would you add to this portrait? Why? In essence, he is saying that God interfuses everything. Do you agree? Why or why not?
9. The wisdom story features Nasreddin Hodja, the wise fool. To help the women, he plays a trick on their husbands by making the point that Allah or God is wherever you are. This is a distinction between a distant, inaccessible sky god and a god embedded in everyday reality. Which view of God makes more sense to you? Why?

The following questions are related to the Snippets

10. Charles Bukowski, a rather irreverent writer, wrote about the challenge and freedom that comes with not believing in God. Do you think that life is easier for people who believe in God? Why or why not?
11. John Steinbeck, in *East of Eden*, wrote about the consequences when children discover that their parents are not gods. Did you have this experience as a child? What impact did it have on you?
12. John Lennon rejected the idea of God as an old man in the sky. For him, "God is something in all of us." What do you think he meant by this? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
13. David Foster Wallace agrees with Ralph Waldo Emerson who wrote, "A person will worship something—have no doubt about that." While not explicit, Wallace suggests that the worship of false gods "will eat you alive." Do you agree with Emerson? Why or why not? Do you think that some people worship

false gods? What would some of those false gods be? Why is doing this so problematic?

14. Terry Pratchett was a famous English novelist with a wonderful sense of humor. What amuses you about his portrayal of God? Why?
15. Andrea Gibson is a poet and an activist. She asks a number of questions. Which one do you find most intriguing? Why? How would you respond to it?
16. The quote by R.J. Palacio is from her book, *Wonder*, where the main character, Auggie Pullman, who has significant facial disfigurements, enters fifth grade in a mainstream school. The theme of the book is kindness, and the principal, Mr. Tushman, in his graduation speech to the 5th graders calls on everyone to "act a little kinder than necessary." He equates kindness with God. If you were designing God, what attributes would you want a God to have? Why?
17. Dan Brown writes "when we as a species abandon our trust in a power greater than us, we abandon our sense of accountability." Do you agree? Why or why not? To whom or what are you accountable? How does this accountability guide/influence how you act?
18. The 1943 novel, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, was written by Betty Smith. The book chronicles the coming-of-age of the main character, Francie, who lives in poverty. What strikes you about her prayer to God? Why?
19. The quote by Elie Wiesel comes from his 1960 book, *Night*. It recounts his experience with his father in concentration camps at Auschwitz and Buchenwald in 1944-1945, which, among other things destroyed his belief in God. His experience directly challenges the belief that God is all powerful. How is it possible to reconcile such experiences with a belief in God?