

Finding God in a Crossword Puzzle  
Dr. Bruce T. Marshall  
July 18, 2010  
Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church  
Bethesda, Maryland

I need to begin this sermon by admitting that I am not very good at crossword puzzles. My brother-in-law: he's good. He rips through the daily *New York Times* crossword in a matter of minutes, even the hard ones that appear at the end of the week.

I don't rip through any of them, even the easy ones. When I start a puzzle, I'll go through the whole thing and maybe find four or five words I can fill in. The rest just sit there, staring blankly at me. This is not necessarily a bad thing, because if I were good at crossword puzzles, I doubt that I would have ever found God.

Let me explain.

I do crossword puzzles at night, when I'm already in bed but not quite asleep. By this time I'm too tired to read; I begin a sentence but by the time I've gotten to the end, I can't remember what the beginning was. That's when I pull out my crossword puzzle book.

There's a documentary called "Wordplay" that's about people who do crossword puzzles: famous people like Ken Burns who produce all those other documentaries. In an interview, Ken Burns said that he doesn't drink coffee, but in the morning what gets him going is a crossword puzzle. That's a clue. My brother-in-law does crossword puzzles in the morning also. The *New York Times*, where he gets his crossword puzzles, is a morning newspaper. My suspicion—not scientifically proven (but probably right)—is that people who are good at crossword puzzles do them in the morning.

People who wait until later in the day aren't as good at them, and those who are the worst at crossword puzzles—like me—wait until the very last moments of consciousness.

So it's nighttime, I'm in bed, drowsy but not quite ready to sleep. I take a look at the puzzle I'm currently working on. Let's say I started the night before, and I have five words filled in. I look through all those clues I didn't know the night before and, oh, there's one I should have gotten but didn't. And here's another. I don't know why I didn't see that before. Oh, and with the letters from this one, I've got enough of a clue to get this one over here. And then I'm asleep.

Incidentally, crossword puzzles are, for me, a very inexpensive hobby or, for that matter, a very inexpensive way to find God. One book of easy-to-medium crossword puzzles will last me for years. I am not exaggerating. For my birthday last August, my wife gave me a new crossword puzzle book with a total of 200 puzzles. Now, almost a year later, I'm up to number 31: 169 to go.

Let's move on to the third night on this puzzle. Now I have a total of 11 words filled in. I go through the clues again and here's one I didn't get the night before. Four-letter word for "Bishop on old TV." Now wasn't there a bishop who gave sermons on TV? I remember him in fancy robes: Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, I think. But there are no four-letter words there. Then something shifts, and I realize I'm going down the wrong alley. Not a church bishop but a person named Bishop: Joey. Joey Bishop. Got it, finally.

What intrigues me about this process is that from one night to the next, I do not think about the clues that stumped me. I don't think about the crossword at all. If someone asked me to name any of the clues I missed—or any that I got—I couldn't do it. And yet, when I return to the puzzle the next evening, I have several of the words I didn't know the night before. The night after that the same thing happens with other clues that had previously stumped me.

So it seems that somewhere/somehow at some level of my consciousness—without my knowledge or my permission—there's work proceeding on this crossword puzzle.

\* \* \*

I am a better writer than I am solver of crossword puzzles. I do my crossword puzzles at night, but I write first thing in the morning. The alarm goes off at 5:30, the second alarm goes off at 5:35, the coffee pot clicks on at 5:40, and I'm at the computer by 6:00.

What do I find at 6:00 a.m. when I open the file I'd been working on the day before? Well, the first thing I find is dreadful writing. It is so bad I can hardly bring myself to look at it. So I take a deep breath and a few gulps of coffee and start to read this dreadful horrible writing. And then, oh, I'll see something I can do to improve it, something I hadn't noticed the day before. Maybe I had been looking for just the right word, and it hadn't come. Or a way to manage a transition, or something to bring more clarity to a point I was trying to make. Once I notice a few of these possibilities, I'm into the process, and it might be hard to tear me away.

If I try to write something all in a single sitting—a sermon, a newsletter article, even a letter—it never is as good as one for which I write a draft, let it sit for a day, and then return to it. Because the next day, I'll find better ways to say what I had been struggling with. And sometimes when I've not quite known what I was trying to express, I'll begin to find the point the next day, and it will be still clearer the day after that.

My wife, Amy, is an architect. She describes a similar process. In some projects, you reach a dead end. There's just no way to solve the problem you've been trying to address. The client wants a kitchen where there isn't room for one. Another client wants four new restrooms for the price of two. Another wants a building extension that will

violate every code in the book. So you put away the tools, give up, go to bed, wonder why you ever thought you could be an architect because it's just too darned impossible.

The next morning you get up, take a look at the problem again and—oh, why didn't I think of that before? Here's where we could put that kitchen into a house where there isn't any more room. And here's something I hadn't thought of when figuring the cost of those new restrooms. And here's a whole different approach to that building extension the client so desperately wants.

No matter what field you're in—from teaching to parenting to administering a government agency—you may be familiar with that process. When confronted with a problem, put it on the shelf, go on to other things, then return later and see where you are now. Chances are you will have been working on it without realizing it. You might have even found a solution.

So what do we have here? At the very least, it's a technique for creative problem-solving. If that's what you come away with from this sermon, great: you could do worse. But I'm going to be a little more ambitious this morning. I'm going to try to find God.

\* \* \*

It puzzles me when people refer to the presence of God in their lives. What are they talking about? What part of their experience do they name as coming from God?

So I listen. I try to understand what they are saying. What I hear when I listen to God talk is a sense of being in relationship to something greater than ourselves: an unseen power of superior understanding and deeper wisdom. This unseen power is not the possession of any single individual but an expression of a creative force that sustains all life. So that when we are in relationship, we tap into a source of wisdom and strength that may guide us through life's challenges and opportunities.

Maybe it's like what happens with my crossword puzzles: something inside of me or outside of me or both knows more than I do about what's going to be the right answer and helps me along until I find it.

Well, that might be claiming a bit much—that God helps me find answers on crossword puzzles. So let's just use that as an image, a way of talking about something that we can't quite express in words. It is that sense that we participate in something greater than ourselves that sometimes reaches out to us, calls us, draws us toward what we might do and be, even challenges us to be better people.

Let me give an example.

This is from the life of Bertrand Russell. Bertrand Russell was an English philosopher and mathematician of aristocratic lineage. His was a family of privilege with

a conservative heritage, yet he broke with that past and forged a path of his own, becoming an outspoken social critic, particularly on issues of peace and humanitarianism.

The following is from his autobiography. It describes a time when something grabbed his attention and demanded that he take a look at his life and how he was leading it—that ultimately changed the person he was and sought to be.

To set the scene: The year was 1900. Bertrand Russell and his friend and colleague—the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead—had been out for the evening, attending a poetry reading. Upon their return, they found Mrs. Whitehead, who suffered from angina, having an attack that caused her severe pain. She seemed cut off from everyone and everything around her. Bertrand Russell recorded what happened to him as he observed the suffering of his friend.

*Suddenly the ground seemed to give way beneath me, and I found myself in quite another region. Within five minutes I went through some such reflections as the following: the loneliness of the human soul is unendurable; nothing can penetrate it except the highest intensity of the sort of love that religious teachers have preached; whatever does not spring from this motive is harmful, or at best useless, it follows that war is wrong,...that the use of force is to be deprecated, and that in human relations one should penetrate to the core of loneliness in each person and speak to that...*

*At the end of those five minutes, I had become a completely different person. For a time, a sort of mystic illumination possessed me. I felt that I knew the inmost thoughts of everybody that I met in the street, and though this was, no doubt, a delusion, I did in actual fact find myself in far closer touch than previously with all my friends, and many of my acquaintances. Having been an imperialist I became during those five minutes a ... pacifist. Having for years cared only for exactness and analysis, I found myself filled with semi-mystical feelings about beauty, with an intense interest in children, and with a desire almost as profound as that of the Buddha to find some philosophy which should make human life endurable. A strange excitement possessed me containing intense pain but also some element of triumph through the fact that I could dominate pain, and make it, as I thought, a gateway to wisdom.*

*The mystic insight which I then imagined myself to possess has largely faded, and the habit of analysis has reasserted itself. But something of what I thought I saw in that moment has remained always with me, causing my attitude during the first war, my interest in children, my indifference to minor misfortunes, and a certain emotional tone in all my human relations.*

Was that an experience of God? It sure sounds like it. It sounds like how people talk when they describe an encounter with a power greater than themselves that draws them into a deeper wisdom, a deeper compassion. But Bertrand Russell was an atheist.

He did not interpret that experience as coming from God or any kind of supreme being. Yet it was life-changing in a way that experiences of God are often reported to be.

This is awkward, isn't it? In this sermon about finding God, my central example turns out to be one reported by an atheist. Bertrand Russell was deeply changed by the encounter but not converted to belief in a supreme being. Whatever happened to him during this experience, he did not become a believer as a result.

So is there a God who guides us through life's dilemmas, encourages us to live with greater love and compassion, challenges us to bridge differences between people, calls us to the life we are meant to lead? Or not?

\* \* \*

During the 1930s, there was a huge controversy among Unitarians. It became known as the humanist/theist controversy. At stake was the question of belief in God and whether Unitarianism would continue to be a theistic religion or whether it would evolve into a largely humanistic faith. The humanists said: we don't need a concept of God to be ethical, caring, socially-concerned people. Our faith does not come from a God "up there" but a belief in what human beings can achieve by working together. The theists said that if we give up the concept of God, we lose our connection to a long tradition that has shaped us and our society. We abandon a sense of the mystery that exists at the center of life, calling us to be more than we have been.

It was a major fight. People on all sides stomped out in protest. "I don't want to be in a church with those humanists," some theists said. "I don't want to be in a church with those theists," some humanists said. "I don't want to be in a church that has fights like this," said others who hadn't chosen either side.

So who won? Which side prevailed? Looking back from the perspective of some 80 years, I would say that neither side won. To me, that whole controversy was beside the point. I mean, it seems like the biggest of all questions: is there or is there not a God? But since we cannot know the answer, then something else becomes more important.

What becomes more important is the experience itself: that sense that we participate in something that guides us through life's challenges and that calls us to a deeper and truer existence. Whether that experience originates from a higher power—that is, God—or whether it comes entirely from within ourselves is less important than being attentive to it. Pausing sometimes, listening to what's trying to call out to us, returning to old problems, being present when it seems like there's something we should be hearing but have missed.

Because whatever we encounter in such moments, it's often right. It guides us toward who we ought to be. As Emerson put it, "There is a power in which we exist and whose ... (blessings are) accessible to us."

\* \* \*

The question of spirituality in Unitarian Universalism is often raised. For some, we're just a little too reasonable, a little too down to earth, we explain away too much. We don't quite address life's spiritual side, we don't help people summon the power it takes to go out and deal with the challenges of the world.

When Unitarianism began in this country over 200 years ago, a defining characteristic was the desire to subject religious claims to the test of reason. The early Unitarians looked at religious doctrines and reports of miracles and the beliefs that proceeded from them and asked the simple question: does this make sense? And often it didn't. But in the process of being so darned reasonable, we sometimes neglected that part of existence that draws from a well of mystery and can't be fully explained.

I understand this because I experienced it myself, as a child, growing up in a very reasonable Unitarian Universalist congregation. We subjected everything to the test of reason. But what about the lift we feel when encountering a passage in a piece of music that hits us just the right way? And what about the awe we feel when encountering something beautiful? And where do we get the strength it takes to endure difficult times? And what about this sense that we sometimes get—coming from deep within—that we're in the world for some purpose, to do something that matters? And how come—when I'm quiet and listen—then sometimes I appear to tap into a source of wisdom and experience greater than what my conscious mind can generate?

I don't know where those experiences come from—but I do know that they are real. They come from someplace valid and true, even though I can't quite put my finger on what that someplace is. So I try to honor these experiences: don't permit them to get explained away; see where they take me.

In Zen Buddhism, there is a concept called a koan—K-O-A-N. A koan is a statement or a question that defies rational explanation, but yet may point to a truth. The most famous koan is, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" There are others, such as, "What did you look like before your parents were born?"

A koan defies an easy answer, but you can't quite let go of it either. And so you live with it—you live with this question—because that process opens you to new levels of understanding. Perhaps we might view the question of God as a koan. There is no easy rational explanation, yet we can't seem to let go of it either.

So maybe we live with this question and remain open to the experiences it brings. Is God present when I get a word in a crossword puzzle? I don't know. But there's something going on I don't fully understand. Is God present when we feel compassion at another's pain, or when we feel outrage at an injustice? I don't know. Is there something of a higher deeper wisdom that calls us to a particular task or mission in life? I don't know, but many of the great things that people do are fueled by that inner conviction.

There's a hymn in our hymnal that has very nice words set to a virtually unsingable tune. So we're not going to try to sing it. I'll just close by quoting one of its verses.

*Like tides on crescent sea-beach,  
when moon's so new and thin,  
into our hearts high yearnings  
come welling, surging in,  
come from the mystic ocean  
whose rim no foot has trod.  
some people call it longing  
and others call it God.*