

## THIS I BELIEVE

I was raised Roman Catholic, complete with priests and nuns in the family, and 12 years of Catholic schools. I would say I filled my parochial school star card for internalizing the whole guilt and original sin bit. I also believe, though, that I absorbed many positives that are with me still. When I realized in my late 20's that I couldn't resolve the many disagreements I have with the Church (literal interpretation of the Bible, refusal to ordinate women, the whole papal infallibility thing, and their stance on birth control, to name just a few) and left, many I know who'd also left the Church expected me to be angry. And I *was* angry at the Pope and many other structural issues of that denomination. I was never, and am still not, angry at all with dear friends who have chosen to stay within that structure and fight the good fight. They are intelligent, passionate people and I love and admire them. It was difficult to separate myself from a community that had borne loving, supportive witness to some of the most difficult things in my life. There is great power there. I believe their prayers helped me in more ways than I'll ever fully realize, but never underestimate.

When I told the parish priest that I felt hypocritical and was pretty sure I wasn't a Christian anymore, I didn't face the consternation I'd expected. As I wept, he asked me, "Maureen, do you really think God wants you to be so desperately unhappy? I just don't think he does." I believed the compassion and respect I saw in his eyes. He asked me where I found God. I replied that trees and people, not necessarily in that order, seemed to be the big ones (I hadn't visited mountains yet). After a long discussion, he encouraged me, "Then go find God in those wonderful sources. We'll miss you. Maybe you'll be back. Either way, *please* come be with us often."

Since then, my beliefs remind me of the water cycle, some things flowing on, some evaporating, but many also returning, perhaps in another form. They do nourish me, though, whatever state they're in. A musical mentor of mine in Asheville once told me that I'm a perpetual student. He said it positively, and I knew he was right. I'm grateful for this in my personality.

I believe this openness, in my case, has allowed me to retain from my background the perspective of a mystic. I believe in and have had mystical experiences, even involving actual voices. It sounds crazy to *me* when I say it out loud. They weren't simply high emotion, or fatigue, or cycling hormones, they felt like visitations. I've tried at several points in my life to rid myself of this seemingly irrational way of being, but it's as natural to me as breathing. I might as well have my lungs removed. I value it as much as I value my perpetual studenthood. I've studied many approaches to spirituality with hunger, curiosity and some wariness, too.

Through this, my belief in God has surprised me by enduring. I've been furious, disgusted, and wanting to reject it more times than I can count. I say "it" because I don't believe in an anthropomorphized God, the "he" or "she." I don't knock anyone who does, though, because the God I believe in doesn't sweat such stuff. What I talk about as God is more the Holy Spirit of the Trinity I grew up with, no bearded guy on the holy cards. And it's not Jesus, although I may be wrong about that. We all may be wrong. Howard Hangar, the pastor of Jubilee (an exuberant, experimental Methodist congregation in Asheville), called it "The Big Wah", among other things. That really worked for me. If I try to picture God, I see the bright light that all other points of light are radiating back to. I see wavelengths reverberating in darkness. I remember telling my mother that I thought Heaven was the state of being in which there would be no such thing as questions, only complete knowledge and acceptance. *No need* for questions. Just little energy orbs, really, just groovin'. I don't expect to be aware of whatever state I'm in or not in, and that's a-okay.

Whatever permutation it took, though, my awareness of God, whatever God is, just wouldn't leave. I really like the way Anne Lamott described this. She wrote, "...as I lay there, I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner...the feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there – of course, there wasn't...I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this. And I was appalled. I thought about my life and my brilliant, progressive friends,...I turned to the wall and said out loud, 'I would rather die.' I felt him just sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my loft, watching me with

patience and love, and I squinched my eyes shut, but that didn't help because that's not what I was seeing him with..." And later, "...everywhere I went, I had the feeling that a little cat was following me, wanting me to reach down and pick it up, wanting me to open the door and let it in. But I knew what would happen; you let a cat in one time, give it a little milk, and then it stays forever. So I tried to keep one step ahead of it, slamming my houseboat door when I entered or left." She described her church experience as "...their voices or something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling – and it washed over me." I believe in that something.

Mary Daly, the famous radical feminist theologian, has insisted for decades now that God is a verb. She also alienated millions with great rabble-rouser statements like "If God is a man, then the male is God." Gotta love *that!* I admire her, but disagree that God is *only* a verb. My best definition of my God these days is a complete life-force energy something akin to the qi of Chinese philosophy, but sometimes much more personal. The Big Wah.

Another famous feminist theologian, Carter Heyward, (picking up on a theme, here?) has described God as *our* power in mutual relation, the power of *connectedness* with all things. That fits better for me, because God has never felt static to me, even when I felt unsure about it. I remember times in my life when I should have felt more unsure, almost wanted to, because it would have been easier in many ways. My mother died 20 years ago of her third form of cancer. I cared for her and felt all of the honor and horror that comes with that...some of you I'm sure know that journey, too. Paradoxically, when I'd begin to feel the most hopeless, I *knew* that God was there. I saw God in my mother's gaping mouth and machine-driven breaths as she lay in a coma. I didn't *want* to see it there, I wasn't looking for it, it was simply there. I saw it in her card games with her sisters, during which they'd get her laughing so hard I'd have to turn up her oxygen machine and cuss at them. It wasn't a panacea, but it was powerful and real. It was connectedness.

I have felt that connectedness, that energy that is more than energy, in my work as a counselor. I can't count the number of times I'd stand in the emergency room with no place for a homeless, chronically mentally ill client to go due to funding cuts, or sat in the play therapy room with a child letting me know of horrible pain and cruelty. My training resources were exhausted on a daily basis. I would find myself letting go of that, and the mantra would begin: "Please, please, please let me know what to say...please let me know what to do...please help us (my client and me)..." Answers came, sometimes crystal clear.

So, here I am today, a God-gal who's always been looking for a place that would let me live the question, and not judge me for my questions OR my answers. I hope this is it. I'll close with the thoughts of someone who can sum this up more succinctly and artfully than I have.

The Hidden Singer  
by Wendell Berry

The gods are less for their love of praise.  
Above and below them all is a spirit that needs nothing  
but its own wholeness, its health and ours.  
It has made all things by dividing itself,  
It will be whole again.  
To its joy we come together –  
the seer and the seen, the eater and the eaten  
the lover and the loved.  
In our joining it knows itself. It is with us, then,  
not as the gods whose names crest in unearthly fire,  
but as a little bird hidden in the leaves  
who sings quietly and waits, and sings.