

**OMNIPOTENCE – A MISTAKE**

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**Reading before the sermon**

Ronald Wong Jue, past President of the Association for Transpersonal Psychology, wrote these words in 1987 as part of the forward to the book *Other Selves, Other Lives*, by Roger J. Woolger. They are even more relevant today in 2011:

Comfort and security levels often cloud our abilities to move deeper into knowledge of the images that impel and regulate our lives. Yet we yearn for ways to clear the clouds of unknowingness. In ourselves and our society, we are bound up with patterns that perhaps no longer serve us. If anything, these patterns, which focus on materialistic values and self-centered orientations, seem to create ecological havoc within ourselves and on our planet. On the other hand, these patterns have given rise to crises that are forcing individuals, groups, and nations to question old assumptions, models, and structures—and to develop a different perspective in order to deal with the perennial problems we face. As Ilya Prigogine, who won the 1977 Nobel Prize for a theory describing transformations, emphasizes, we are perhaps at a turning point where the stresses and conflicts of our time can thrust us into a new higher order. He is stating what Thomas Kuhn, a science historian and philosopher, calls a movement toward a paradigm shift—a paradigm being a scheme held by a community of individuals for understanding and explaining certain aspects of reality. We are presently emerging from a materialistic, control-oriented, self-centered scheme of reality into one which perceives life as an inseparable web of relationships. This new paradigm supports an

awareness that there are intrinsically dynamic processes (forms of consciousness) that articulate the patterns and structures of our lives... It must be considered that personal truth is never an objective endeavor within the realm of science, but rather a personal path and inner revelation which all great spiritual teachers have revealed. –p. xiii-xiv

### **1. An Engineer's Perspective.**

In April 2007, my mother was living in an assisted care facility in Vancouver, Washington. I drove there several times a year to visit, take her places she remembered, and generally just hang out. During this particular visit my brother, who lives a few miles from her facility, invited me to his home for dinner. Since my sister-in-law is a marvelous cook, I eagerly accepted. Dinner was scrumptious as usual, but then the situation changed. She cleared the table without asking for help with the dishes (which was very unusual), retreated to the kitchen, and my brother invited me to have a chat about the state of my soul and whether or not it's going to spend all eternity in hellfire.

Let me apologize in advance to this audience. I agree with Rev. Meghan that the Bible is an extraordinarily valuable document when the literal meaning of the stories is set aside, and we look instead to the metaphorical, perhaps mythological, meaning. But my brother, at least four years ago, was an evangelical Christian, and believed that the Bible is the inerrant word of God, without error, and is to be taken literally.

I thought to myself that this was NOT what I was led to believe this evening was going to be about, but oookay Bro, if that's the game, then I can play.

After some preliminary skirmishing, the subject turned to God's alleged omnipotence. I invited my brother to get out his Bible and turn to Genesis, chapter 1. Recall that that's the

Judeo-Christian creation story, and every religion has one. Consider the fifth day, I suggested, when God created the birds and the fish.<sup>1</sup> I agreed that creating all those animals was a huge amount of work, but it clearly says that it took God an entire day to do it. And the engineering definition of power is the ratio of the work done divided by the time it takes to do that work. I agreed that the numerator of that ratio may be huge, but nevertheless the denominator is a day. So God's power may be very large, but it is nevertheless finite.

Now turn over a page, I told him, to Genesis chapter 2, where God instructs Adam about the tree of knowledge of good and evil. God clearly says, "In the day you eat thereof, you shall die."<sup>2</sup> I emphasized that God clearly used the word "day."

Next, I instructed, turn over a couple of pages to chapter 5, and read how old Adam was when he died. Translations differ on that number, but my brother's translation said Adam lived for 963 years after he and Eve got kicked out of the garden.<sup>3</sup> How can this be, I asked? That's 963 trips around the sun, each of which (if you'll allow poetic license) takes 365 days. Is God a liar?

There was a stunned silence around the dinner table. The usual solution to this conundrum, I went on after a few seconds, is that a day for God is a thousand years for humankind, and 963 is indeed getting pretty close to a thousand. But now turn back to chapter one. Before humans were made, it was just God, so those days were "God-days," or a thousand years as we reckon it. And that means in the power equation, the number in the denominator, instead of a day, is really a thousand years, so God is not only NOT omnipotent, he's 365,000 times less powerful than he was two minutes ago.

To describe the ensuing silence as "shocking," is a vast understatement. And remember, I came to play, so I just sat there and let it go on.

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In October 1999, I began a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. I briefly described that search in a sermon two years ago.<sup>4</sup> By April 2007, I had been at it seven and a half years. My brother was well-versed in his denominational doctrines, but he was not prepared for the depth of my scholarship.

Let me make a short aside here for the benefit of this audience. I have come to understand that the tale of Adam, Eve, and the talking snake is a mythological story of a process every one of us goes through. We all begin life in innocence, and we don't have to do anything. Our every need is taken care of by loving parents. Cry one way, and we get fed. Cry another way, and our diaper gets changed. And so on. Metaphorically, this is living in the Garden.

Then ... sometimes gradually, sometimes suddenly ... sometimes sooner, sometimes later, we have to start meeting our own needs. Metaphorically, we leave the Garden and enter the world of duality. Most people stay in duality their whole lives.

A few re-discover the world of Oneness, Enlightenment, abiding non-dual awareness, or what the Bible calls the New Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup> If you believe in reincarnation, then we'll all get there eventually, and there's no hurry, so relax and take it easy.

The beauty of interpreting the story as mythology is that it has many levels of meaning. Rabbi Harold Kushner points out that if you ask a dozen rabbis what the Adam-and-Eve-and-talking-snake story means, you'll probably get eight different answers.<sup>6</sup> So the question cries out, which one is right? Kushner's answer is they're all valid, and have meaning fit for the stage of spiritual development of the reader.<sup>7</sup>

## **2. A Theologian's Perspective.**

Let's move on. The engineer's perspective is an amusing way to pass a lazy Sunday afternoon, but it's not what we're here for.

I have only limited experience with atheists. I've encountered perhaps two dozen or so in the last decade, and while I have not made a scientific study, I believe I can classify atheists into two camps. The first, and smaller, group I call honest atheists. They have examined the evidence and arguments and found the evidence lacking and the arguments unpersuasive. I have a high regard for honest atheists, because they are ... well ... honest. Presumably, if some new body of knowledge became available, they might be open to changing their minds.

The second, and larger, group I call angry atheists. I want to emphasize that this is my own personal, very informal term, but synonyms such as hostile, or rebellious might also fit. This group is characterized by a refusal to believe in God, no matter what the evidence or who presents it. There also seems to be a great deal of anger underlying their attitude, hence the label, and in some people that anger is really close to the surface. In 12-step groups, it is said that if you can see a characteristic in others, then you've probably got it yourself. And so it was with me, because I spent about two decades or so in this camp, roughly from my late twenties to my late forties.

I would like to suggest a couple of things. First, that the anger is entirely justified, and second, that the anger toward God is miss-directed. I'm reminded of Rev. Meghan's quote of another theologian in a sermon a couple of years ago: "Tell me about this God you don't believe in, because chances are I don't believe in that God either."

For this part of this sermon, I would like to amplify on these two suggestions. I'm relying on a small book by Charles Hartshorne titled *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*.<sup>8</sup> Hartshorne begins by considering classical theism, which appears to have arisen during the Dark Ages, continued through the Middle Ages and even to the present. Theologians of the time began with the assumption that God is perfect and unchanging. This assumption led to the idea that since God is perfect in all ways, he must be perfect in power. It also led to the idea that God must also be perfect in knowledge. As you all know, the first of these ideas is called omnipotence and the second omniscience. There are several other features of classical theism, but today I want to talk about just these two.

The logic goes like this: Since God is perfect in power, whatever happens has been made to happen by God. In addition, since God is perfect in knowledge, whatever happens is completely known to God. Whatever actions we take tomorrow and whatever decisions we will make in the future are already known to God. This logic leads to a multitude of absurdities and contradictions. Suppose I get cancer, say. Then this disease is God's doing, and he knows it is going to happen, and when I'm going to get it, and whether I'll recover or die. He even knows the hospital bill to the penny. It gets worse. Airplanes flying into skyscrapers, according to this belief, are also God's doing. So are wars, pestilence, the holocaust, suicide bombers blowing themselves up in crowded market places, child abuse, and every other ill of humankind.

This ... is ... ABSURD!

Hartshorne calls this the tyrant god, and I claim it's worth rebelling against. I also claim that this god doesn't exist except in the imagination of theologians who believe in classical theism. When I look around the world, human egocentricity and ignorance are fully capable

of explaining all the ills of the world. On the other hand, I also see in my personal life the actions of some kind of higher being—whom I choose to call Spirit—and I see that Spirit is on my side, so to speak. From what I discern, Spirit wants what's best for me.<sup>9</sup> I also perceive that I have meaningful choices in life. I can choose to go along with these synchronicities that continue to happen, or I can make other choices—and I get to experience the consequences of these choices. This is my experience, and experience trumps doctrine. Therefore, I claim that the anger of angry atheists should be directed, not at God, but at the theologians who have deceived the western world about the true nature of God.

Hartshorne again: “No worse falsehood was ever perpetrated than the traditional concept of omnipotence.”<sup>10</sup>

The real question is what to do with this anger? After you've been angry for awhile—maybe a couple of decades, as I was, and you keep waking up day after day and nothing has changed—what do you do with it? How do we get un-stuck from this state of anger? When I was almost 49, I joined The United Church of Los Alamos. Shortly thereafter, the pastor, Rev. George Easley, said something in a sermon that rang a bell in my head. I recognized I was stuck in anger with my father, and I spoke with Rev. Easley about it. He said, “It's not good to be stuck,” and he gave me instructions, simple to say but hard to do, to get unstuck. I followed those instructions, wrote a long, angry, furious, letter to my father—and then burned it in the fireplace. And somewhere in that process I was changed. From that time forward I could carry on a civilized conversation with the man.

Getting unstuck from anger at the theologians took me a lot longer. I had to find a new model for God, which I did by studying the near death experience. A well-intentioned friend gave me Raymond Moody's book *Life After Life* when I was 34. I read it, but it didn't work

for me, so I put it on the shelf. Many years later, by some kind of synchronicity, I found Dr. Michael Sabom's book *Recollections of Death: a Medical Investigation* on the new books shelf at the Los Alamos Public Library. I was fascinated by the first-person accounts, and intrigued that the interviewees were reluctant to tell their stories. After that I read everything I could find on the subject. Not a single account used the phrase "Being of Light" (apparently invented by Moody), but they all spoke of experiencing unconditional love. Ram Dass writes, "Once you have drunk from the water of unconditional love, no other well can satisfy your thirst."<sup>11</sup> Unconditional love is transformative, and the people who returned from near death experiences were changed by the experience in very positive ways.<sup>12</sup>

So I adopted the Being of Light as my higher power, and I would take walks in the forest after work and have long talks with B.L. It worked, too. Because of those chats, I managed to keep my sanity in the very insane work environment that was the Los Alamos National Laboratory at the time. I also managed to keep my health when people around me were getting ulcers, heart attacks, and strange stress-related diseases I'd never heard of—and many of them died. One of my group leaders committed suicide by sticking a shotgun in his mouth and pushing the trigger. A man down the hall from me went through Tums® like they were candy.

Those long talks with the Being of Light worked on the spiritual side of my life as well. Eight years after I joined The United Church, I was asked to be an Elder. I can still recall every detail of the Sunday afternoon I was asked by Ken Freese. It was one of the very few times I wept for joy. "Why are you crying," he asked. "Because," I replied with tears rolling down my cheeks, "it was not so very long ago that such an honor would have been

inconceivable.” A year later I was chair of the committee to serve communion, an honor all its own, which led one of the more wondrous experiences I’ve ever had.

I think it’s clear that omnipotence is a theological mistake. As Hartshorne shows, it leads to the tyrant model of god, which is simply untenable, because it leads to all sorts of ridiculousness. But the real question for us is how to get unstuck from that model so we can get on with our lives. I’ve summarized for you two ways of getting unstuck that worked for me. I wrote a letter to my father and then burned it. In her sermon two weeks ago, Rev. Meghan told us how she got past her anger at her grandfather.<sup>13</sup> Ask her for a copy of that sermon—it’s worth some serious study.

And I found a new God that worked for me. So, if your god doesn’t work for you any more, or if you’ve recently woken up from the con of classical theism, then fire that god and get a new one. And if you don’t have one, then you can borrow mine for awhile.

### **3. A Psychologist’s Perspective.**

There is another perspective on this problem. It starts with the statement, “God is the father, and we are his children.” You find variants of this claim throughout our culture. Let’s have a brief look at child development. It’s common knowledge that children need firm boundaries appropriate for their age and maturity. It’s well known that all children will challenge these boundaries from time to time, and that these boundaries need to be enforced firmly and lovingly. Further, as children grow and mature these boundaries need to expand to fit. No one takes a step-function jump from zero responsibility one day before their eighteenth birthday to full and total responsibility the day after. The transition is always

gradual. As children grow and mature they decide more and more of their own behavior. At some point they become mature adults, capable of living their own lives and making their own decisions. And their parents are still their parents, but the relationship becomes more that of equals, each walking their own path and living their own lives.

And so it is with our God—or should be. Our relationship with whatever we accept as greater than ourselves changes as we mature, and becomes more like equals. We become co-creators of our world, partners, so to speak, in this great adventure called life—in a phrase, adults of God<sup>14</sup>—authors of our own development and evolution.<sup>15</sup>

#### **4. A Vision for the Future**

I have a vision for the future. Unitarian Universalism has a tremendous product. Our second and sixth principles use the word justice, for example. Hartshorne points out<sup>16</sup> that this value serves two functions. First, it rules out a wide swath of human behavior that would be called injustice. Second, it leaves to us the choice about how to creatively do justice. Similarly, the value compassion rules out many kinds of behavior that would be lacking in compassion, and it allows us to find novel ways to be compassionate. In this way we are called to become co-creators of a better world.

I have heard from many sources that attendance at main-line churches is declining. That means many people are searching for a better alternative, and we have that better alternative.

Dannion Brinkley had a near death experience in 1975. It transformed his life in very positive ways. It was as if he had been to a distant land and then returned with a message for all humanity. One small part of that message is that “Humans are powerful spiritual beings meant to create good on the earth.”<sup>17</sup> So we ... all of us ... and in particular all of us here in

this community called UUCM are powerful spiritual beings. And I claim that if we can develop this power, and if we can learn to manifest this power here on the physical plane, and if we can learn to harness this power for good, then this community of people can transform the world.

Let it be so. Namasté.

————— JJJ —————

### References

1. The fifth day is described in v. 14-19.
2. God's full quote is in Gen. 2.16-17: And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."
3. Gen. 5.5: "Thus all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred thirty years; and he died." This is the New Revised Standard Version's translation. I believe my brother had the New International Version.
4. Jerry Jacoby, "A Personal Journey to Diversity," October 4, 2009. See [www.ugrassvalley.org](http://www.ugrassvalley.org), click on the word "sermons", and then scroll down.
5. See, for example, Robert A. Johnson, *He: Understanding Masculine Psychology*, revised edition, Harper, 1989.
6. See Harold S. Kushner, *How Good Do We Have to Be?* Little, Brown, and Company, 1996.
7. For a brief discussion of stages of development, see Jerry Jacoby, op cit. and references therein. Rev. Meghan Cefalu also talked about stages of faith in a recent sermon. The

definitive reference is *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, by James W. Fowler, HarperCollins, 1981.

8. Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*, State University of New York Press, 1984. Omnipotence is the second mistake, and omniscience the third of six.

9. Jerry Jacoby, “Synchronicities – Communications from Spirit,” May 24, 2009, available on the UUCM website.

10. Hartshorne, op cit., p. 18.

11. Ram Dass, *Be Love Now: The Path of the Heart*, Harper Collins, 2010, p. 55.

12. See, for example, P. M. H. Atwater, *The Big Book of Near-Death Experiences*, Hampton Roads, 2007, in particular chapters 6, 7, 24, and 25. See also Kenneth Ring, *Life at Death: A scientific investigation of the near-death experience*, Coward, McCann, & Georghegan, 1980.

13. Rev. Meghan Cefalu, “Wholeness and Holiness,” September 25, 2011.

14. Jerry Jacoby, “Reincarnation Part 3 – Self-Acceptance,” January 2, 2011, available on the UUCM website. See in particular page 9 and the footnotes.

15. Fausto Massimini and Antonella Delle Fave, “Individual Development in a Bio-Cultural Perspective,” *American Psychologist* **55**, no. 1 (January 2000), p. 24-33. This idea is expressed on p. 28.

16. Hartshorne, op cit., p. 21.

17. Dannon Brinkley with Paul Perry, *Saved by the Light*, Harper Collins, 1994, p. 25. The full quote is: “Humans are powerful spiritual beings meant to create good on the earth. This good isn’t usually accomplished in bold actions, but in singular acts of kindness between

people. It's the little things that count, because they are more spontaneous and show who you truly are."