

Being Grounded

Clay Nelson © 2 October 2016

Being grounded doesn't always have the best connotation, especially if you are a teenager being restricted after misbehaviour, but in religious terms it captures the spiritual revolution that is transforming religion. Last week, in discussing the evolution of Unitarianism, I touched on this revolution when I said many of today's Unitarians are rejecting Kant's "religion within the bounds of reason alone" as lacking any mystical or spiritual dimension. They are embracing what has been described as "ecstatic naturalism." They seek an experience that is beyond the capacity of words to describe, except perhaps in poetry and music.

Secular humanism having swept away a monotheistic, authoritarian god has also swept away moral absolutism. This has made room in Unitarian congregations for neo-Christians, neo-pagans, Buddhists, Sufis, and Zen Taoists to seek spiritual experiences without having to justify or explain them rationally. This does not eliminate reason, the gold standard of humanism, but simply knocks it down from being at the top of our pyramid. It is only one way of "knowing" in this new post-modern world, a world without absolutes. Humanism has been grounded, not in a negative sense, but in the sense of being brought back to earth.

At the Common Dreams conference the featured keynote speaker was Diana Butler Bass. I had mixed feelings beforehand about whether or not she would have anything of value to say to me. If you attended our Saving Jesus from Christianity religious education series, you may have experienced her as I did as one of the more conservative speakers amongst the progressive theologians showcased. My problem was she still seemed to hold to a theistic view of God. That may have been true when she spoke in the series (about six years ago) but after hearing her speak at the conference, I can see she has clearly moved on. She has become an articulate observer and advocate of the spiritual revolution engulfing us. It is her latest book, *Grounded: Finding God in the World—A Spiritual Revolution* and her two talks that have inspired this morning's attempt to capture the essence and importance of this revolution. While she still uses the word God frequently, it is light years away from a theistic understanding.

It turns out that Diana and I share previously unknown connections. We have crossed paths a couple of times, unawares, in Santa Barbara. The first time we were not likely to meet. I was serving a Unitarian church in Santa Barbara and she was teaching at Westmont, a conservative evangelical college on the other side of town. She had not yet been sacked for having rejected a traditional understanding of God and Jesus: what she calls her first conversion. She left the evangelical tradition to move to liberal religion represented by the Episcopal Church (the Anglican Church in the US).

This is important because it led to her visiting and spending time in retreat at Mount Calvary Monastery high above Santa Barbara on top of the coastal mountains the city backs into from the nearby sea. Mt Calvary is home to the Order of Holy Cross, a liberal order of Episcopal monks. It turns out that the monastery is holy ground for both of us. To my knowledge we did not encounter each other there but I had been going on retreat there since I was in high school. I went there regularly while at university in Santa Barbara. One of its monks was my spiritual director as well as one

of my lecturers in the religious studies department. Years later, when I returned from the east coast to southern California, I went there annually, including during my years at the Unitarian Society of Santa Barbara.

Diana gave me a treat at the beginning of her book by sharing her experiences at the monastery. She brought its natural beauty and beautiful Spanish architecture fully back to mind. It was built originally as a hacienda, and I loved sitting on its porch, which looked out on the Channel Islands and the city below it. One could see fifty miles of the California coastline in either direction from the refectory where the monks ate in silence or listening to spiritual writings being read to them. "Walking in its gardens was to experience sublime silence broken only by birdsong, bells, and monastic chants," as Diana puts it. "So high up, that otherworldly place felt a bit like heaven."

But in 2008 all that changed. I was in New Zealand by then but read reports that one of Southern California's notorious wildfires had destroyed it. In my next visit back to the states I went to pay my respects to what had been. There I found what Diana describes as the New Mount Calvary. It was different in a very significant way. The building still had a Spanish motif. The gardens were just as beautiful. A labyrinth for contemplative meditation was still at its heart, but it is no longer quiet. Traffic noise, tourist voices, leaf blowers, children's voices from a nearby school and joggers chatting to one another are now part of its ambiance.

When the insurance money came, the monks took their time praying as to whether or not to rebuild on the mountaintop. They decided to sell their scorched sacred ground on its secluded lofty perch and take up permanent residence in the city. Where they now live would only have been a speck from their former residence. Someone sitting in the new garden would have been invisible.

Like Diana, I feel grief over what has been lost, but something has been gained. She describes it this way:

The sounds provide a kind of gentle companionship, reminding me that I am not completely alone with my prayers. Sitting on the ground, I feel warm solidarity with the world of nature and the worlds of all those travelling nearby. And I feel that other presence as well, the heartbeat of love at the centre of things, the spirit of wonder or awe that many call God. Any sense of monastic isolation has been overcome with a sense of intimate connection with all that is around...

She begins her book with the story of Mount Calvary coming off the mountain as a metaphor for the spiritual revolution in which we are engaged. The spiritual questions today are less about God and more about, "Where is God?" Before the revolution believers were clear about God's location. "He," and he was definitely a "He," inhabited heaven, a distant place of eternal reward for the faithful. We occupied a three-tiered universe with heaven above, God's realm; the world below, where we lived; and the underworld, where we live in fear of living after death. The church mediated the space between heaven and earth, acting as a kind of a holy elevator, wherein God sent down divine direction and we, if we obeyed, would go up eventually to live in heaven forever and avoid the terrors below.

Look around the world and holy places routinely occupy high places. Towns would be built on hilltops and the church with its steeple would be the tallest building in the town. An early drawing of the New York skyline shows church steeples as the tallest, and thus most important, structures in the city, not skyscrapers. I once visited the small Tuscan town of San Gimignano, also known as the town of towers. Local merchants competed with each other to build the tallest, most ornate towers to demonstrate their success and importance. The higher the tower, the closer to God was its builder. At the height of this building boom there were over a hundred of them in a very small walled town.

Christianity isn't the only religion with a holy elevator. Certainly so does Islam and Judaism. It isn't by accident that Aztec priests performed their sacred ceremonies at the top of pyramids and that Greek gods lived on Mt Olympus or that Pharaohs built mountains in the desert as their tombs.

During the last century, the three-tiered universe crumbled, long before the Hubble telescope failed to find heaven. The Great War caused its philosophical and political foundations to wobble. The whole thing came crashing down after an even greater war, when the Nazis and the Holocaust and the bomb shattered history. In Diana's words, "God, like the monks from Mount Calvary chased by the roaring inferno, fled down the mountain seeking shelter in the midst of the city."

Not everyone understood right away that the three-tiered universe was gone, but Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor who would be executed by the Nazis did. He argued that a new "religionless" Christianity must emerge from history's ashes. Elie Wiesel, a Jewish humanist and a survivor of Auschwitz, summed it up well, "For God's sake, where is God?"

We heard this question on 9/11, after the Sandy Hook shooting and the myriad of others that continue to happen almost daily in the US, in Aleppo, and on and on. A consensus has emerged in the answer of those who ask the question. God is with the victims. God is with us. God has been grounded. This is not a personal god. This is not a god that can intervene and save us. This god is not a puppet master deciding our fates. This is not a god who is punishing us for our misdeeds or trying to teach us a lesson. This is not a detached god. This god belongs to no tribe or nation or religious belief system. This god has no heavenly throne.

This god is where wonder, mystery, love, compassion, fearlessness, beauty, nourishment, relationships and hospitality reside. While Diana would not say everything is God, she would say God can be experienced everywhere and in everything. God is no longer in a vertical relationship with us but a horizontal relationship. God is in our connections to the world and to one another. No elevator is required.

She says that we are more likely to find this god outside the walls of a church, synagogue, mosque, or temple than within it. She is describing a god without boundaries. People are experiencing a borderless kind of spiritual awareness that has enabled them to find awe and wonder in the world of nature AND in the geography of human life.

She points out that the participants in the spiritual revolution are not your usual congregation. They are secular humanists, agnostics, post-theists, atheists who have rejected a conventional God. Others are spiritual but not religious. They still believe in God but have abandoned conventional forms of congregating. Others declare themselves as “done” with religion. They slink away from religious communities and go tramping on Sunday morning. They would rather not be someone in church dreaming about kayaking, but someone who is kayaking experiencing awe and wonder. Some are still in traditional churches barely hanging on, hoping against hope that something in their church will change.

All these revolutionaries want to be in the world because they know they are made of the same stuff and that the world is what really matters. They all intuit that is where they will find awe and wonder. What those who are still theists call God. They also intuit that the natural world we are destroying and the people we are destroying through poverty and injustice and violence are destructive acts against ourselves and all that is sacred. They all seek to be grounded in love and compassion, making the world a better place for nature and neighbour.

Lest you think I’m trying to empty our sacred space on Sundays, let me assure you that my intentions are quite the opposite. Unitarians in their latest manifestation of evolution are fellow pilgrims with these revolutionaries. In addition to humanists, we make space for mystics seeking a deeply worldly faith, an earthy spirituality, a brilliant awareness of the spirit that gives life to the world, and a just and humane world. Our principles, every one of them, ground us in this spirituality.