



JOURNEY IN... YEAR TWO THE NATURE OF GOD STORY

This lesson's Big Ideas:

- Our Unitarian Universalist faith asserts that each individual has a capacity for and birthright to an original experience of God. We seek no intercessors, no dogma, no special assignation of grace or salvation. God is immediately available to everyone.
- Prayer and meditation are ways to interact directly with God.
- There's a big difference between direct experience and indirect understanding.

Lesson Materials

- Copy of attached stories: "What the Hare Heard" and "The Holy Book at the River"
- Wooden cubes
- Permanent markers (careful!!)
- Flip chart

TEACHER REFLECTION AND PREPARATION

🕒 Ahead of time

Let me admonish you, first of all, to go alone; to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil. Friends enough you shall find who will hold up to your emulation [...] Thank God for these good men, but say, 'I also am a man.' Imitation cannot go above its model. The imitator dooms himself to hopeless mediocrity. The inventor did it, because it was natural to him, and so in him it has a charm. In the imitator, something else is natural, and he bereaves himself of his own beauty, to come short of another man's.

- from R.W.Emerson's *Divinity School Address*

Our age is retrospective[...] It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines to-day also [...] There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.

- from *Nature* by R. W. Emerson

Believe nothing, no matter where you read it, or who said it, no matter if I have said it, unless it agrees with your own reason and your own common sense.

-Buddha

Reflective question for teachers:

Where in your life have you sought and perhaps found an "original relation to the universe? What are your experiences with prayer and meditation?

**YOUR FIELD
EXPERIENCES:
FEEDBACK AND
NOTES**

CHECK-IN

🕒 5 minutes

Allow the Journey Guide to lead the group in a name game, an icebreaker, a get-to-know-you questions or a simple ‘How are things?’ moment.

PRIMARY ACTIVITY ONE

STORY: THE SOUND THE HARE HEARD

🕒 10 minutes

- Read aloud the story *The Sound the Hare Heard*. It is an ancient Buddhist parable about finding out for one’s self rather than running with the crowd. Younger groups—grades 1 and 2, for example – might enjoy being prepped to make animal noises at the appropriate cue or to slap their hands on their knees to make stampeding noises.

Wondering Together

- So what happened to those animals who took someone else’s word about what was happening in their forest?
- Why do you think that none of the animals turned back to find out for themselves?
- What was different about the lion?
- Do you think that Unitarian Universalists are more like the hare, like the other animals or like the lion? Why?
- How do you feel about taking other people’s word about what God is like? Would you rather have someone tell you how they think people experience God or would you rather find out for yourself? What does that mean?

PRIMARY ACTIVITY TWO

THE PARABLE AND THE TELEPHONE GAME

🕒 10 minutes

- We’ll play “Telephone” using the text of another old Buddhist parable. Explain to the class that each of them will go out into the hallway with the Journey Guide and another kid. The Guide will read the original story off the page and the listening child will attempt to remember all the details. Then, another child will step into the hallway with the Guide and listen to the first kid give a second-hand recounting of the tale. The story will pass from child to child until everyone has heard it. The last child’s job will be to tell what they remember of the story as they heard it to the class. With the Guide’s

help, the Teacher might want to preselect a child who will be willing to bear this responsibility without feeling anxious about being 'right'. Let the kids know that, while we want to try hard to give the next person the best rendition of the story, we understand that it's hard to remember everything.

- Older kids may purposely add extraneous details to the story just to be silly. Allow this to happen, because it, too, can become part of the metaphor.
- In large classes, tap consecutive kids on the shoulder to step out for the Telephone Game while everyone else continues to work on the third activity, the Prayer Cubes. In small classes, this may not be necessary in terms of time.

Wondering Together

Save these questions for the moment when the Telephone Game comes to an end:

- Did the story change? How? Why?
- Did we forget parts? Add parts?
- If it was REALLY important to get this story right, would the Telephone Game be a good way to pass it on? What would you have to do if it was REALLY important to get this story right?
- Is it REALLY important for you to experience God sometime in your life? If it is, does it seem like a good idea to only rely on other people to tell you what God is like? Why or why not?

PRAYER CUBES

🕒 15-20 minutes, heavy on the intro...

- This activity will explore the different types of prayers. Offer the idea to the kids that prayer is a way we can connect with God. Sometimes people pray with words out loud, sometimes people pray the words silently in their hearts and minds.
- People who pray do so for a lot of different reasons. Some of these reasons are to express thankfulness, ask for help, to seek clarity and understanding and to send loving thoughts to people in need. There are as many reasons to pray, no matter how one does it, as there are people in the world. Some people pray because they believe that their prayers connect them to God. Some people don't need to think about God directly to make their prayers worthwhile.
- Unlike many people for whom prayer is important, most Unitarian Universalists don't think that people can expect an "answer" to our prayers. In UU churches, you won't hear people praying, "Help me win my soccer game." or "Please don't let it rain on our picnic." Still, we pray for things that help us understand God and be better human beings. So, you might hear, "Help us be instruments of peace." or "Please bring healing and care to our neighbors who hurt and are sick." We know that we have to try to create peace and that we are the ones who bring care to sick neighbors. Prayer is a reminder that if it's important enough to talk about before God, it's important enough to *do something* about.
- We don't pray because we think we can get what we want from God. We pray because *we want God*.
- Still, when we use words to pray (not everyone does all the time), we often ask for help, sometimes say we're sorry, because it helps make our hopes and feelings clear for us. We believe that understanding ourselves is part of understanding God.
- Some people don't find the word prayer helpful. They use the word meditation to describe how they connect with God.
- **Kinds of prayers** (You don't have to teach the "big words" unless the 5th and 6th graders want them. We'll use words that start each kind of prayer to clarify their purposes for kids...)
 - **Petition** = PLEASE... (or MAY...)
 - **Intercession or Blessing** = HELP...(or MAY...)
 - **Confession** = SORRY...
 - **Meditative** = WHY...
 - **Gratitude & Praise** = THANKS

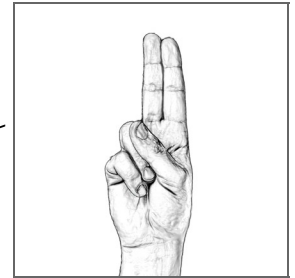
- Have the “kid words” written on an easel or chalkboard. We’ll write each of these words onto one of the six sides of a cube. This can become a prayer cube for us and our families. “Thanks” is such an important feeling when it comes to connecting with God that it will be on each of our cubes twice. Think about how often people just say, “Thank God!” reflexively when they feel grateful or relieved.

Making the Prayer Cubes:

1. Each child should select a cube and a permanent marker.
 2. In their best handwriting (this is to keep!), they will write these words on one side, each:
 - Please (May)
 - Help (May)
 - Sorry
 - Why
 - Thanks
 - Thanks
- 5th and 6th graders can write the theological terms on their cubes if they like.

Practicing with the Prayer Cubes:

The teacher can demonstrate using the cube. Families might try this at dinnertime or bedtime. If the class seems interested in what makes a UU prayer different from other possible prayers, try some example prayers and ask for a “UU” sign from the kids, holding up two hands in the shape of ASL letter “U”s. UU prayers are hopeful but realistic, faith-filled but without magical expectation. UU prayers aim to be meaningful experiences whether the people praying alone or together believe in a God that listens or responds or not.



For example, “Please get me 100% on my spelling test” might NOT get a UU sign, but “Please help me use my amazing brain as best as I can” might get a UU sign. “Please make my great-grandpa’s cancer go away” might not feel right to a UU, but “Please help us care for great-grandpa as a loving family” might feel right. It’s a matter of intention and openness.

If you have time, let each kid role their cube and try out a prayer that starts with that word. Frankly, this will be a most interesting theological adventure for you and the kids. Trust yourself. Learn from them.

CLOSING AND LEAVE-TAKING

🕒 2-5 minutes

Let’s not use someone else’s prayer this time. We can make up our own.

On the first Sunday of this cycle, the guide and teacher should allow the children to create a closing prayer for each other, one that encourages the kids to remember to trust their own direct experience of God and to remember each other as fellow travelers on the path.

“What can we say to each other and to the whole Universe when we leave this group to encourage each other to be courageous and trust our own hearts and minds to figure God out?”

Ask for some ideas and come to a consensus; be sure to write down the words for next week so that the group can have a set closing.

Repeat this closing week after week, hands joined, in a circle.

Our 'Telephone' Story: A Buddhist Parable

"The Holy Book at the River"

There was once a man who formed a religious cult and people regarded him as a very learned person. He had a few followers who recorded his instructions in a book. Over the years the book became voluminous with all sorts of instructions recorded therein. The followers were advised not to do anything without first consulting the holy book. Whenever the followers went and whatever they did, they would consult the book which served as the manual in guiding their lives. One day when the leader was crossing a timber bridge, he fell into the river. The followers were with him but none of them knew what to do under the circumstances. So they consulted the holy book.

"Help! Help!" the Master shouted, "I can't swim."

"Please wait a while Master. Please don't get drowned," they pleaded. "We are still searching in our holy book. There must be an instruction on what to do if you fell off from a wooden bridge into a river."

While they were thus turning over the pages of the holy book in order to find out the appropriate instruction, the teacher disappeared in the water and drowned.

The Sound the Hare Heard

Long, long ago, the Buddha was born as a lion in a forest near the Western Ocean. In one part of that forest there was a grove of palms mixed with belli trees. A hare lived in that grove beneath a palm sapling at the foot of a belli tree.

One day the hare lay under the young palm tree, idly thinking, "If this earth were destroyed, what would become of me?" At that very instant a ripe belli fruit happened to fall and hit a palm leaf making a loud "THUD!"

Startled by this sound, the hare leapt to his feet and cried, "The earth is collapsing!" He immediately fled, without even glancing back.

Another hare, seeing him race past as if for his very life, asked, "What's wrong?" and started running, too.

"Don't ask!" panted the first. This frightened the second hare even more, and he sprinted to keep up.

"What's wrong?" he shouted again.

Pausing for just a moment, the first hare cried, "The earth is breaking up!" At this, the two of them bolted off together.

Their fear was infectious, and other hares joined them until all the hares in that forest were fleeing together. When other animals saw the commotion and asked what was wrong, they were breathlessly told, "The earth is breaking up!" and they too began running for their lives. In this way, the hares were soon joined by herds of deer, boars, elk, buffaloes, wild oxen, and rhinoceroses, a family of tigers, and some elephants.

When the lion saw this headlong stampede of animals and heard the cause of their flight, he thought, "The earth is certainly not coming to an end. There must have been some sound which they misunderstood. If I don't act quickly they will be killed. I must save them!"

Then, as fast as only he could run, he got in front of them, and roared three times. At the sound of his mighty voice, all the animals stopped in their tracks. Panting, they huddled together in fear. The lion approached and asked why they were running away.

"The earth is collapsing," they all answered.

"Who saw it collapsing?" he asked.

"The elephants know all about it," some animals replied.

When he asked the elephants, they said, "We don't know. The tigers know."

The tigers said, "The rhinoceroses know." The rhinoceroses said, "The wild oxen know." The wild oxen said, "The buffaloes know." The buffaloes said, "The elk know." The elk said, "The boars know." The boars said, "The deer know." The deer said, "We don't know. The hares know."

When he asked the hares, they pointed to one particular hare and said, "This one told us."

The lion asked him, "Is it true, sir, that the earth is breaking up?"

"Yes, sir, I saw it," said the hare.

"Where were you when you saw it?"

"In the forest in a palm grove mixed with belli trees. I was lying there under a palm at the foot of a belli tree, thinking, 'If this earth were destroyed, what would become of me?' At that very moment I heard the sound of the earth breaking up and I fled."

From this explanation, the lion realized exactly what had really happened, but he wanted to verify his conclusions and demonstrate the truth to the other animals. He gently calmed the animals and said, "I will take the hare and go to find out whether or not the earth is coming to an end where he says it is. Until we return, stay here."

Placing the hare on his tawny back, he raced with great speed back to that grove. Then he put the hare down and said, "Come, show me the place you meant."

"I don't dare, my lord," said the hare.

"Don't be afraid," said the lion.

The hare, shivering in fear, would not risk going near the belli tree. He could only point and say, "Over there, sir, is the place of dreadful sound."

The lion went to the place the hare indicated. He could make out where the hare had been lying in the grass, and he saw the ripe belli fruit that had fallen on the palm leaf. Having carefully ascertained that the earth was not breaking up, he placed the hare on his back again and returned to the waiting animals.

He told them what he had found and said, "Don't be afraid. If you had gone to look for yourselves, you would have seen the belli fruit that fell to the ground with a THUD." Reassured, all the animals returned to their usual places and resumed their routines.

Those animals had placed themselves in great danger because they listened to rumors and unfounded fears rather than trying to find out the truth themselves. Truly, if it had not been for the lion, those beasts would have rushed into the sea and perished. It was only because of the Bodhisattva's wisdom and compassion that they escaped death.