

# God and Metaphor

## Selections from Discussion at RNAnet

April, 2016

### Introduction

Sparked in part by interest in Nancy Abrams' book, "A God That Could Be Real", an online discussion at RNAnet examined the idea of God.

One initial response was "Why bother?", as some described god-language as convoluted or dangerous. But, as discussion shifted to "God and Metaphor" and then examined how, in science as well as poetry and religion, metaphor can help to convey abstract ideas, a range of interesting new questions emerged –

- on how widely and frequently metaphor is used,
- in how ideas, in being able to affect how people act, might be looked at as "real",
- in non-traditional ways that a God might be envisioned, and
- if the term, "god", is not to be used, then what alternative images or terms might be used to convey a religious sense of connection?

One outcome was thought-provoking conversation. Another was recognition that, whether they choose to use the term or not, many questions that are often discussed in ways that include some mention of "god" are of interest to a number of religious naturalists.

This site provides excerpts from this conversation, with anonymous quotes from members of the Religious Naturalist Association (RNA). We encourage you to take a look.

You can read the whole conversation. Or, you can jump to particular sub-topics:

- Prelude
- "A God That Could Be Real"
- What is "real"?
- God as metaphor
- Ways of envisioning God
- On whether, and why, to use the term or concept, "God"

## Prelude

I'd like to recommend that our next book discussion focus on Nancy Abrams' book: "A God That Could Be Real."

She includes her very personal experience as a primary datum,  
she offers a most original notion of "God"  
as well as a rationale for using that word,  
she's had as ambivalent a time as any of us has had with organized religion,  
she includes a unique definition of what all constitutes "spiritual" as well.

And I think she loves a good argument.

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I'm OK if everyone else wants to discuss Abrams's book, but I'd [also] like to discuss something else - "God as Metaphor."

I propose this because in my opinion Nancy's book is a somewhat elaborate defense for using the g-word, but it does not depart at all from the usage I find in most g-word-using religious naturalists, namely god as metaphor.

Gordon Kaufman does the same thing in equating creativity with god.

And I suppose most of us have gone through a "god as love" stage.

On the other hand, I think many if not most religious naturalists prefer not to use the g-word at all, so it seems clear the word is not necessary. Yet that still leaves the question of whether it is desirable.

\* \* \*

I don't yet get it, but I am curious – in how or why a God may be appealing to a self-described naturalist.

I'm wholly supportive of using the term, god, as a metaphor (as in Hawking saying something like, as we learn more about the cosmos, we would "know the mind of God").

I understand it where, as in Nancy Abrams' case, one needs to envision a "higher power" as part of a 12-step program, to change an unwanted behavior.

And, having been raised in theist tradition, I can see how – after having God be part of a worldview from early childhood, where we believed what we were told, it can be hard to wholly erase some sense of this.

But I can't see how this might be something other than a type of anthropomorphic image - something one might talk to – which somehow hears and may somehow help. Or, if this is not the case, I don't understand how it would be helpful or desirable.

I don't object to any of this. However one envisions things is their business and all fine with me. But, since this is interesting, and since it can be useful to understand, and since I don't yet get it and remain confused, I'd be interested in hearing thoughts on how it can be useful, as a naturalist, to have a sense of something that one feels is best referred to as God.

\* \* \*

Concepts of God, gods, goddesses, Goddess are (if nothing else) important parts of world culture, past and present. They may, as Gordon Kauffman says, be dangerous, but does that mean they have no value? For instance, fire is dangerous, it can burn your house down, but it can also enable you to cook a meal. . . .

. . . given what we know of the universe, it's difficult to reconcile the traditional roles of God as universe-creator and a direct intervener in our lives. But Nancy Abrams is hardly the first to use the word God in a non-traditional way.

\* \* \*

I'm totally in support of Nancy's view of an emergent personal God. All sorts of wondrous things have emerged, like language, that are very close to being God-like.

I strongly believe that at least for the next 50-100 years we need to carry a personal God with us so that we can bond in a healthy way with the rest of believing world. We shouldn't be fighting with them. We should be making happy and learning how to live together rather than saying I am right and you are wrong.

\* \* \*

So, why not tell the people who DON'T believe in God that they are right?

Just saying . . .

I mean, either would work, wouldn't it, if your goal is harmony?

\* \* \*

I don't "need to carry a personal God with" me to get along with believers. We need to keep in mind the vast differences among believers. For some their belief may be healthy and helpful for humanity. For others their belief leads to unhealthy actions.

\* \* \*

I continue to be fascinated by the need that many people feel for this kind of language. I confess that I wish that I could find it helpful. But every time I try, I only find it obfuscating and unnecessary.

I struggled with this issue during my brief time as a member of a self-described progressive Christian community. I heard lots of Tillichian talk about God as Ground of All Being; God as synonymous with love, nature, creativity, beauty, cosmos, ultimate reality. Initially I found this language liberating. In time, it just became frustrating. For the life of me, and after repeated readings, I still have no idea what "ground of all being" or "ultimate reality" mean in the context of a daily life or as things worthy of worship. Love, nature, creativity, beauty, cosmos – these are perfectly useful words that capture ideas that deserve our devotion. Why do we need to call them anything else?

Ultimately, all of this renaming came to feel like a word game: How many times can we develop a new definition of "god" that saves this word from the most recent advances in science or in our moral reasoning? Frustration with the word game turned progressive Christianity into a way station on the road to non-theism for me.

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## "A God That Could Be Real"

And again I say, read Nancy Abrams's book . . .

She explains her reasoning very carefully: why we cannot talk scientifically about a traditional creator God. She then explains why/how God was nevertheless real for her in a powerful, personal way.

As a scientist and atheist, she set out to figure out if there was/is anything in the universe that is worthy of the name "God." She concludes Yes, and it is as a real emergent phenomenon. She shows the parallels to other emergent phenomena.

One can argue with her reasoning, but do read the book. And then yes, do argue with it if still you have arguments. Even if you wind up not agreeing, she will sharpen your thinking.

\* \* \*

I've liked Nancy Abrams' approach of God being real, not merely metaphor, for many years . . . Her God, and an important version of my God, is that it (or He/She?) emerged in the last 50,000 years from human societies. It is a planetary God, for planet Earth, as Nancy points out.

The problem with that sort of recent God is that it doesn't fit well with the Religious Naturalism focus on Nature that has a reduced emphasis on human culture and humans being special. But . . . RN is a big tent, and I feel I fully belong in RNA. The nifty thing is that I also feel comfortable with many various branches of modern Abrahamic theologies.

\* \* \*

I do believe gods are emergent, in the sense that human brains produce them as part of our psychology and sociology.

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## Q &A – from Nancy Abrams

Hi Nancy,

This morning I posted to RNA a response to someone who made a claim about God as metaphor. I made the claim that your recently emergent "planetary" God is real, not metaphor. I was pretty sure, but not positive. Of course it all has to do with the definition of "metaphor", and whether emergent properties are "real" (again a definition of a word).

So I hope you can comment to this RNA discussion . . .

\* \* \*

## Response from Nancy Abrams

Thanks for asking.

Science is meaningless without thousands of metaphors. It's not as though we would speak more accurately about reality without them. Literary metaphors may be optional, but deeper, unconscious metaphors are the medium of our thinking. It's impossible to make a clear distinction between metaphor and reality if you're describing anything involving size scales other than the intuitively familiar ones on Earth. Cosmologists understand their mathematical theories of dark matter and dark energy through metaphors.

My concept of God is not simply our collective aspirations, any more than you are simply the collective cells of your body in a large slobbering mass. Emergence creates from our interacting aspirations something new and radically different. Is my concept of God as the emergent phenomenon from humanity's aspirations, "just" a metaphorical God? The emerging God is as real as we are. Is that real enough? (I know some physicists who argue that only the elementary particles are truly "real," but none of them live as though they believe it. They'd have to assume, absurdly, that all humans, including themselves, are just illusions – in whose mind, I don't know. )

Each human is continually emerging over decades, while countless atoms and cells cycle in and out of our bodies. People get to define what's real, and I think if we don't define ourselves as real, we're nuts. Our definition needs to support both science and that inner sense of identity and power that can make us full humans -- not only "real" but maximized.

Let me answer the metaphor question better with an excerpt from page 243 of my book with Joel Primack, "The View from the Center of the Universe".

## We Think in Metaphors

People often assume that metaphors are merely optional figures of speech whose purpose is to enliven expression and make it more poetic and appealing. The common assumption is that we could speak literally, but it's more colloquial and comfortable to use imagery – unless we're trying to be precise, in which case metaphors muddy up the idea being expressed. But according to research in neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and linguistics, metaphors are not just words or images that help describe a concept that already exists in the mind. Instead, metaphorical connection is the way the human brain understands anything abstract. The deepest metaphors are not optional or decorative: they're a kind of sense, like seeing or hearing, and much of what we consider to be reality can be perceived and experienced only through them. We understand almost everything that is not concrete (even "concrete" is a metaphor) in terms of something else. In short, the expansiveness of our metaphors determines the expansiveness of our reality.

Those words or figures of speech that people call metaphors are only the last flourish of expression of an unconscious connection called a conceptual metaphor, which is built into our thinking. For example, when we say that a person is ice cold, "ice" is only the superficial metaphor; the underlying conceptual metaphor is "affection is warmth." Affection-warmth is a connection that every normal infant learns to make. While being held closely by a parent, the child's brain is activated in both the regions devoted to emotion and to temperature. As neuroscientists say, "Neurons that fire together wire together." The repeated pairing of these experiences causes the child's brain to build physical connections, embodied in synapses in its brain, creating the conceptual metaphor "affection is warmth." When people want to describe affection, they may automatically seek a word implying warmth – love sizzles – without knowing why.

Hundreds of conceptual metaphors become hard-wired during childhood as we move around in a human body on a planet with sunlight, plants, gravity, and other people. What is considered good or bad may differ between cultures, but "up is good" and "down is bad" are fundamental conceptual metaphors everywhere. In English this can be seen in phrases like "the economy is picking up," "she is rising in the ranks," "he really dropped the ball," and "she is feeling down." The use of conceptual metaphors is unconscious; they structure our thinking and can determine what we are able – and unable – to see. They don't act like figures of speech; they don't provide the spark, charm, or insight that makes us appreciate a genuine literary metaphor. They are instead the unnoticeable medium of thought itself. The fact that many conceptual metaphors are bound into the wiring in our brains is amazing news, because to the extent that meaning is grounded in our bodies, it is as "real" as we are.

Nancy

\* \* \*

Nancy's idea about this emergent god resembles in some ways the thought of one of the process philosophers -- Charles Hartshorne is the person I have in mind -- that one can conceive of god as the "mind of the universe." But Nancy brings this idea literally down to earth: god is the mind of the planet (or, actually, god is the planetary mind emerging from the activity of evolving, aspiring humans through the ages and in the present age).

It is not a physical reality, although it involves the physical reality of our neural structures.  
It is more than a conceptual reality, however.  
It is an emergent reality.

\* \* \*



## What is “real”?

I don't yet understand what is meant by "real".

Is this emergent God real in the sense that a distant star or the atmosphere (the air we breathe) is real, or more like Romeo and Juliet are real (as personalities that we know about and can learn from, and whose story might influence some of what we think about and do)?

Is it real in a way that, through actions or intent, may cause actions/responses in the world?

I get the point and appreciate the connection in the statement that this emergent God is as real as we are real (in that our sense of “self”, like a sense of God, is a mental construct). But, one difference in this “reality” is that, in addition to being personalities present in our own minds and the minds of others, we are also autonomous actors. And, while we don’t have full “free will”, we can and do act, and these actions prompt reactions from other real beings and objects in the world. I don’t see this aspect of reality in Nancy’s emergent God concept.

So, if it can’t work miracles and is not real in a way that can hear or respond to our prayers, what, then, can or does it do? And, why should we care about or try to relate to it?

\* \* \*

what is meant by "real" . . . That is one of my favorite questions.

If one would like to deeply understand that word one needs to chat a little about the strange world of physics. It turns out the meaning of the word "real" is surprisingly complicated in physics (as well as in cultures).

\* \* \*

But of course even "real" is a metaphor (interestingly, in the law we have "real property" and "incorporeal property," and oddly enough the 12th floor of a skyscraper is considered real property even though it could be torn down, and even though one could sell or rent that 12th floor in most jurisdictions even before the skyscraper is built). This observation is meant to underscore the pragmatic aspect of language.

Moreover, the "self" is a word we have fashioned to refer to certain experiences and physical descriptions (or rather uncertain experiences and physical descriptions). It is wondrous to recall that at one time in my heritage "self" was real and the "soul" real too. Then there came a time where self was real and soul was metaphorical. Now where are we?

I suspect we have reached the limits of what "metaphor" can mean . . .

For myself I am happy to just say that words -- any words -- are themselves social constructs that may be entirely fantastical, but which more often really (really?) do refer to something, though not necessarily what we may think it does.

\* \* \*

And Nancy hedges. Her title is "A God That Could Be Real."

\* \* \*

To me the kind of realness concepts have is different from the sort that physical objects have.

I like to define real as that which can cause an effect.

This definition includes things like physical objects, physical processes, and concepts.

I believe Nancy Abrams argues that concepts can cause effects and are therefore real.

By this definition metaphors, which are conceptual in nature, are also real.

But I think it makes sense to say that there are two kinds of real, two kinds of things that can cause effects; the physically real and the conceptually real. While both kinds of real can cause physical effects there is a difference in how each kind of real causes physical effects to occur.

Effects caused by physically real entities result from direct interactions between two or more physical entities. When sun, water, soil, and a tulip bulb interact a physical effect may occur (a flower may bloom). By contrast when conceptually real entities interact in a human mind no physical effect is produced (although a conceptual effect might occur in the mind). For example, when the concepts of sun, water, soil and a tulip bulb interact in a human mind no physical flower blooms (although a conceptual flower may "bloom" in the mind). Depending on the concepts involved what "blooms" in the mind might not be as innocuous as a flower.

By my definition Nancy Abrams' god is conceptually real but not physically real and so cannot by itself directly interact with physically real objects to produce physical effects. But a human being having the concept of Abrams' god in his/her mind may take physical actions that are influenced by that concept. The physical effects of these actions can then be said to have been indirectly caused by that concept of god. There is then, a distinction that can be made between an object having a role in causing an effect (as concepts do) and objects engaging in a physical interaction that directly results in an effect (as physical objects do).

While this distinction allows for Abrams' god to be real (it can indirectly cause effects) it also denies it agency. This god can neither choose nor act. This god amounts to information that can be taken into account when a human makes choices. But this is no small thing. Wars have been waged as a consequence of this kind of influence.

For me the problem arises when the two kinds of real are conflated. I believe this error is quite common and often has negative consequences. Most religions assume that their God (a conceptual object) has the capacity to choose and act as if it were a physical object when, in fact, it is confused humans doing the choosing and acting according to their beliefs around what their God wants and can do. A concept cannot want or do anything but it can have influence over what its hosts want and do, especially if the concept is believed to have abilities to choose and act (which are actually only possible in physically real objects).

For this reason I think it best to dispense with god concepts. There is just too high a risk that the common confusion over the two kinds of real will inspire divisive ideologies resulting in the kind of intolerance and acts of aggression we see today arising out of fundamentalist belief systems. I, personally, see no practical gain in subscribing to any god concept that outweighs the potential risks that arise out of conflating conceptually real objects with physically real objects.

The more this gets discussed, the more it comes to seem that questions and differences here are largely semantic.

We seem to agree with and appreciate the comment “that concepts can cause effects and are therefore real.” (This is in line with a favorite passage from William James, copied below.) Since this reality exists in “concepts” that are present only in the minds of some humans, I look at these as “ideas” or “metaphors”. They can be referred to as real, and can be real in human minds, but they are not real in the sense that a rock is real (and, if thrown, may break a glass or hurt a cat or a frog, as well as a human).

So, what one might say is “real”, another might call “metaphor”, as both are referring to about the same thing.

As I’ve thought about ways of trying to clarify views on what might be meant when people refer to “God”, one point that I found useful . . . is whether one believes that their God can act in the world, or not. Based on this discussion, another point of distinction might be recognized – in whether one believes that the God is real in ways that may exist apart from what is envisioned by some human minds, or not.

From William James. Varieties of Religious Experience, Lecture XX: Conclusions

“ . . . the unseen region in question is not merely ideal, for it produces effects in this world. When we commune with it, work is actually done upon our finite personality, for we are turned into new men, and consequences in the way of conduct follow in the natural world upon our regenerative change. But that which produces effects within another reality must be termed a reality itself . . . so I feel as if we had no philosophic excuse for calling the unseen or mystical world unreal. . . .

God is the natural appellation, for us Christians at least, for the supreme reality, so I will call this higher part of the universe by the name of God. . .

God is real since he produces real effects.”

\* \* \*

Thank you, for opening up the whole world of social constructs – the wonderful world that is created in large part by our language.

In grade school I was taught that nouns "stand for" or "are" persons, places, or things. That seemed reasonable enough until many years later when I began to pay attention to the types of "things" most nouns stand for. Most nouns do not stand for things in the ordinary sense that we regard as things when we ask ourselves "what is a thing?".

"Reality" is a noun. Is reality a "thing?"

"Conversation" is a noun. In what sense is conversation a thing? It seems more like a thing than reality does--to me anyway. But I still would not call it a thing.

"Tendency" is a noun. That does not seem to me to be a thing in hardly any sense of the word "thing."

But it is also important to notice that the word "thing" is used in two significantly different manners. It is used in the manner of a physical entity such as a pencil. This is what is most likely to pop into our minds when we think about what a thing is.

Does it make sense to ask what kind of a "thing" is a thing? Frequently we use the word to fill in when the grammar requires a noun and we have no more specific word to use. The noun "entity" has the same multiple uses. It would be interesting if the language required the use of different words in what I am calling the two different uses of the words "thing" or "entity."

There is certainly plenty of "room" for disagreement here. Obviously if we were to introduce such a way to distinguish among what we might want to call actual entities (things) we would want to distinguish the noun "room" (a thing) from the more common use of the word "room," as a grammatical requirement, when we seem to be talking about a metaphorical "room."

Obviously there is a "huge" "amount" (a noun) more to "say" in this "talk (a noun)" about language and metaphors. Must we distinguish between making sounds by talking or making marks while writing when we use the word "say"? A great "deal"(a noun) more of our "reality" is socially constructed than we (a noun?) might have imagined. But that is enough (a noun) for now (a noun?).

\* \* \*

Regarding the realness of concepts . . . .

Might it be correct to frame the line of argument as follows?

Ideas and metaphors are real.

God is an idea or metaphor.

Therefore, God is real.

\* \* \*

The error would be in the second premise, to wit:

Ideas and metaphors are real.

The idea of God is an idea.

God as a metaphor is a metaphor.

Therefore, the idea of God and God as a metaphor are both real.

Anyway, I agree with several posters that ideas (conceptual frameworks) are real in the sense that they have causal effects, similar in certain ways to rocks ... and dissimilar in other ways. I have held for a number of [years] that ideas are physical. When one lands inside your brain, a cascade of cause and effect events take place even if these amount to no more than "shields" being erected in the "blink" of an "eye". And heaven help you if you try to stop your mental "machinery" from trying to examine that new idea from "all sides".

\* \* \*

## God as metaphor

I am skeptical of God metaphors. When we employ any symbolic system of communication metaphors can be very useful, especially when they can help us understand a new idea or see the familiar in a new light. They can invoke deep emotional responses. However, I think there is a danger in employing metaphors to talk about what God is like.

When a metaphor is used to compare a concept (such as God) with a physical object (such as a mandala) or another concept (such as a mind) there is room for multiple and varied interpretations. Moreover, there is the tacit assumption that a God exists to which comparisons can be made. Metaphors used to invoke a conceptualization of God, if sufficiently compelling, may seem to validate the existence of God when in fact no substantial validation has been made.

The problem arise when a metaphor is taken too literally. In "The Pagan Christ" the author argues that the Christian church made a serious misstep when it decided to take the stories in the Bible literally rather than merely metaphoric.

A metaphor that I have run across is "God is cosmic consciousness." This metaphysical metaphor seems to be a statement of fact if taken literally and many people do take it literally, possibly because it is an idea they want to believe. While it may be very appealing (and may even be true), just saying it is so doesn't make it so. To my mind metaphors should not be employed when they encourage jumping to unfounded literal conclusions.

As a human being who needs to make sense of things metaphors of the cosmos are attractive to me but I don't trust them to be literally true.

There is a Zen adage that warns against mistaking a finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself. Similarly, a metaphor for God is not God and is not sufficient to establish God as real.

As a religious naturalist I embrace the awe inspiring mystery of the cosmos and find that taking nature to heart is more satisfying than attempting to capture the wonder of existence in a figure of speech. This, I admit, is a personal concern and others may be comfortable employing metaphors without fear of taking them too literally.

I very much enjoy and appreciate the use of metaphors in literary works but, because of our human tendency to take metaphors literally, I am suspicious of them when they are used in philosophical and religious contexts.

\* \* \*

*For some views on metaphor . . .*

Wiki is pretty good on this:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaphor>

\* \* \*

Here's another link - to a NY Times piece about metaphor:

"This is your brain on metaphors:

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/11/14/this-is-your-brain-on-metaphors/>

Also - Lakoff's book, "Metaphors We Live By".

\* \* \*

I recall a poet once telling me that EVERY word is a metaphor.

\* \* \*

I am very interested in hearing more about how the evolved brain develops concepts, beliefs, values and then uses those concepts in shaping, or changing, its worldview. One of those concepts is "God", which this thread references as a 'possible' metaphor.

Well and good. But, metaphor for what? And how do we develop such g-word concepts in the first place?

\* \* \*

I've done some study of the depth psychology of Carl Jung, and would like to suggest an answer based on that. If we represent our experience of life, the universe and everything as a symmetrical form (mandala), then God is one name for the centre of that mandala. The point where everything else originates from, and merges into.

As T.S. Eliot wrote:

"Except for the point, the still point,  
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance."

\* \* \*

That is an interesting way of looking at it. A sort of metaphor of a metaphor.

I'm usually against any sort of essentialism -- the search for a central concept. It seems to me that the wondrous messiness of evolution produced a brain (and a body and a social structure) that resist efforts to look for this kind of center.

That's not to say Jungian concepts don't seem useful -- they do. But my thinking is influenced by (though I can't give him the blame for what I did with it) several conversations with neuroscientist Terry Deacon, who says most brain operations may originate somewhere, but get input from many other locations in the brain and indeed the entire nervous system. One time he even said most brain operations are "whole brain" operations, though I am not sure he'd insist on that in every case.

I'm not really disagreeing, just wondering if even Jung would modify his ideas in light of modern neurology. Having a mandala seems poetically and metaphorically useful -- I'm just getting stuck on the idea of a "center" of a mandala, by whatever name.

\* \* \*

A mandala is symmetrical — how could it not have a centre?

\* \* \*



## Ways of envisioning God

I'm fond of the Zen Buddhist saying, "Don't mistake the finger pointing at the moon for the moon." It seems to me that all god-talk at its root is a finger pointing at something.

The questions are:

At what is it pointing?

Is that "what" worthy of being called "god?"

Is that "what" some kind of reality, or is it rather some kind of delusion?

\* \* \*

I pose that, for the most part, we are using "god" as a "finger pointing" to an experiential/emotional dimension in our lives, or if not in our lives then in the compelling (self-reported lives of some whose reports we are inclined to accept as authentic and sane, worthy of respect and deep consideration).

The opposition to using the word "god" is rooted, on the one hand, to use of that word by some others who use it to point to doctrinal and philosophical dimensions which we do not find compelling; in fact, we find them logically spurious and not verifiable or falsifiable, therefore not scientific. On the other hand, I think there also is opposition to what often seems to us to be superstition - an emotional reaction to an emotional experience without any (or sufficient) rational or scientific sifting, and, childlike, expecting "magical" results. More can and should be said, but I'll leave it there for now.

Here I'll turn to the studies of Andrew Newberg and Eugene Aquili, among others. That experiential/emotional experience and dimension, when it happens, is one of intensity and tends to change one's life orientation. The correlations in their MRI studies and SPECT analyses seem to show that we experience such "enlightenment" experiences via the right pre-frontal cortex and its special connection to and through the limbic brain right down into the neural synapses around our solar plexus and our guts. But the right pre-frontal cortex is not a language cortex; the language (and linear, and measuring) cortex is our left pre-frontal cortex. So, when it happens we don't have ready language for it. When we don't have language for it, we need must turn to metaphors: "Well, it's not exactly 'X' but it's like 'X' but it's also like 'Y,' but it's not exactly 'Y' either."

What seems to be the key experience is that the parts of the brain that usually help us distinguish between "me and not me" are dialed way down, dimmed, darkened; and parts of the brain that register our radical connections with each other and with all the cosmos are dialed up, brightened. So a major, or the major, experience is of merging, "being-one-with" all that is. (Another, at least occasional experience, seems to be an experience of "an other" or "an Other.") A particularly vivid instance of this kind of experience by a scientist was/is neuroanatomist Jill Bolte Taylor's experience of her stroke, as recounted in her lovely little book, "My Stroke of Insight." ("Insight" is another label often used for this kind of experience.)

I suggest that it is this experience, or precursor experiences to it (the profound experience of wonder and awe at nature, profound relationships, etc.) we are pointing to when we ask, "Shall we call this 'god?'"

Further questions are . . .

Do we gain anything by calling it "god?"

Or should excise that tendency with Occam's razor because it adds nothing?

Does it add nothing?

I'll stop for now.

\* \* \*

Overall I think it is clear SOMETHING is happening, vis a vis altered brain states, when one is meditating (or, I assume, fishing). Whether that justifies using the term god is another matter. I suspect it does, if and only if the g-word user clearly explains his or her usage (as Abrams and Kaufman do, for example).

\* \* \*

I wonder if you might like this statement from Rabbi Rami Shapiro. It comes from his reflection on the third step of the 12 steps. He writes, "God, as I understand God, is Reality itself, and reality is infinite and infinitely creative. . . ." I myself have no personal trouble with talking Creativity instead of talking God.

\* \* \*

When I was serving a UU congregation and preaching, I used to say something like, "God is a three-letter word that is attempting to point at some human-experienced reality. If that word God gets in your way, then God damn God. Throw the word and the idea out."

\* \* \*

The laws of nature set pretty broad limits, but they are not limitless.

God could be real, but outside of Nature.

God could be real, and physical (some form of energy or physical intelligence itself).

God could be non-existent, and the energy and the laws of physics are it.

I defy anyone to calculate a probability for these three possibilities.

So by necessity, at this time, humans must resort to either a belief in one of them or to a state of non-decision.

It is in that sense, I think, that God might be (just) a metaphor, although 'she' might be real and hidden, real and revealed, or real and playing some kind of game with us.

\* \* \*

The g-word has longer history than Christianity. It has been, and is, used with and without a capital, in plural as well as singular forms, and has feminine forms (Goddess, goddess) as well as masculine forms. The gods and goddesses of classical polytheism were connected more directly with animals, rivers etc than the Christian God. Tantric writings of India equate the Mahadevi (Sanskrit for Goddess) with Prakrti (Sanskrit for Nature).

You asked what's gained by putting a human face on nature. Perhaps it can be an antidote to human alienation from nature?

\* \* \*

I agree with the "perhaps" statement at the end of your post. What I am curious about is how we'd know whether it is an antidote to alienation, or an aggravator of alienation. I suppose some would correctly answer that by saying all of the above at different times and places.

So that just raises another question, namely what are the salient factors to making the g-word useful vs. dangerous?

\* \* \*

Religion is a technology, and God is a tool in the toolbox, as are narratives, and as are the myth-supporting strategies. Abrams provides support for Rue's contention that the root metaphor must be believed for religion to 'work,' and so Abrams' presentation is about a god that she can consider real, so that it can play the role she needs it to play - a very specific and personal role based on her personal circumstances. Given sufficient overlap in circumstances, her approach might be generalisable for a wide audience.

For me, though, the larger issue is whether her methodology is generalisable - not her result. I would love people to be inspired to work through their own "personal religious construction" (for lack of a better phrase), as an equally available alternative to adopting someone else's construction. This, I suspect, is a matter of temperament: each individual is perhaps more likely to either adopt, adapt or create.

\* \* \*

. . . as I rack my brain for what God has meant and now means to me (some shifts involved from past to present), I still feel the concept fits in with central identity of "me" -  
where is my identity and with what do I identify, as a central concern?

The word "me" (self) doesn't mean much except in relation to a "you" (other). Martin Buber understood this — it's the point of his book "Ich und Du". This is why in the Indian and Tibetan tantric traditions the centre of the mandala can be two figures — a divine couple — rather than one.

On the other hand, my brain has tons of compartments and categories which I use when I analyze things, or try to distinguish between things, so that I can figure out how to function. As to the shift from past to present, I realize the content itself for what God is has shifted ... from a belief in REAL to a belief in POSSIBLE ... or more accurately, I now have three boxes residing somewhere in my brain,  
one which says REAL,  
one says POSSIBLE or ENERGY OF THE UNIVERSE, and  
the third says NOT THERE AT ALL.

When I see the word God in print I rotate, as a RATIONAL matter, through all three boxes. As an EMOTIONAL but POSITIVE matter, I rotate only through the first two boxes, and as an EMOTIONAL but NEGATIVE matter, I rotate in and out of the third box. So a whole lot is going on during this period of personal history (last 50 years) and during western cultural history (last 400 years, to Hume, 600 years to Hobbes).

As I get back to my personal CENTRAL sense of identity, that central identity was undercut by this transition and may never settle well after the God is Real concept has been so largely uprooted. And I, as an initially trained physical chemist, have a profound respect for scientific inquiry and the scientific method. BUT the argument that the lack of scientific 'evidence' for some 'thing' greater than physics justifies (as it proves) the thesis that nothing greater than physics exist, is, well, a failed logic (as I understand logic). Physics and energy may be all that there is, and I am good with that. There is a huge 'awe factor' to pure physics acting on energy.

But there remains something very peculiar about the emergence of self-awareness COUPLED WITH the capacity to manipulate physics to alter the environment, namely to CHANGE OUTCOMES.

Even before the emergence of self-awareness, is there not something peculiar about the emergence of the earliest (microbial) life out of physics and chemistry? It is this what is (physics and energy) and this capacity of performance (to forecast and then manipulate the environment to alter outcomes) that has PRODUCED the question of WHY one outcome and not another?

Do you know of Stuart Kauffman? He is a biologist and systems theorist who argues that there is a self-organising tendency at work in the universe, an entirely natural creative tendency which he nonetheless identifies with God...

Why would 'mere' physics and energy lead to that option?

If physics is all there is (and that might be the case), then God is just a metaphor for a psychological need or a psychological state.

If physics is not all there is (and that, too, might be the case), then God is conceptual symbol [that] references some unknown set of conditions embedded somewhere in the full Reality.

Physics is about what things — including living things — are made of — the building blocks of the world. But what Kauffman is interested in, is the way those building blocks managed to build themselves into complex structures.

\* \* \*

## On whether, and why, to use the term or concept, “God”

To me the real question, from a naturalist viewpoint, is whether humans need a god-concept at all. I can see both sides of the argument; after all we are a primate who like other primates has leaders, and in our case we have symbolic leaders as well.

I do not think a god-concept is absolutely necessary (witness a large portion of our members who don't seem to need or want one), but I can see where it could be helpful, if it is made clear the symbolic or metaphorical nature of the construct.

Then there is the question of whether some sort of transitional concept is useful or needed. Even if one posits that there will come a time when we can talk about psychology and sociology and other disciplines without a god-concept, perhaps one is needed as a transition.

For myself, I really don't like to use god-language, and people I know who were reared without a god-concept even find it strange. But I am open to it if it is clear what is being said.

\* \* \*

Throughout my life, every time I have tried to conceptualize the term "god" I really bogged down, although it was easy to conceptualize what I thought God was not. My Methodist upbringing and brief efforts at existentialism or process theology really provided me no anchor to reinforce or replace a god concept. After delving into religious naturalism I found fertile ground to grow my spirituality.

A god is not only irrelevant, it's a distraction from my seeking to understand and experience this world, which is my home.

\* \* \*

. . . by the time a baby is few days old it is imprinted powerful responses to human faces. The relevance to RN is to put a human face on nature. The Christians did a great job of that with the Son and the Father. They actually also included the Mother in much of their art with Mary. Clever.

\* \* \*

The children I'm familiar with also have powerful responses to other animals, rivers, the moon, flowers, beetles. What is gained by putting a human face on nature? And it's not my understanding that the father son and Mary were faces on nature. Weren't they faces on the supernatural?

\* \* \*

I don't necessarily put a human face on whatever it is I might name "god."  
And should I ever, it would be for different reasons than the traditional ones.

\* \* \*

If God is not the creator or progenitor of everything else then there is no God. We can create other concepts of God or other meanings of the term. If we do so, however, I wish we would also create a new name for it.

\* \* \*

I also do not find the term God helpful and don't use it. I agree that attempts to redefine it are convoluted.

\* \* \*

Up front, even though Nancy's book has given me, for the first time in 50 years or so, a clear and acceptable way to personally use "God", the word still sticks in my throat a bit.

\* \* \*

Obviously those of you who are preaching may need the word, so you can address a wider portion of your congregations. And [some have suggested that it can be useful to use the word, god,] to build bridges with supernatural theists . . .

But are there other ends?

In particular I'm wondering if any of you use the word in your own thought-processes (and if so how and why?), or do you mainly use it for communicating with those who apparently DO use it in their thought-process?

\* \* \*

In my internal self-talk, I use God language (God, Great Spirit, all-that-is, Spirit of Life). I grew up experiencing deep loving community, and that community used those words, so I associate them with the connection, love and acceptance I experienced there. It just feels right. I have given up trying to conceptualize what I mean by "God." Some days it feels like my own subconscious. Other days it's the earth itself, an embracing, nurturing matron. My analytical brain likes Michael Dowd's term "Ultimate Reality." Sometimes it feels more like The Force that George Lucas borrowed from Buddhism.

I have a cherished repertoire of prayers and affirmations from childhood that speak to and elicit the best in me, and most of them include god language. They "work" in that they remind me of my highest values and goals. I no longer care "who" they are addressed to; at the very least they are addressed to myself. . .

For me God is a catch-all term for that numinous and connective experience that was described (pre-frontal cortex/dimmed-down separation/ramped-up connection, etc). It's a feeling, an experience, difficult to describe. It just is. Trying to conceptualize it destroys it, like dissecting my wife to find out why I love her so intensely. I think there are some things that are better just accepted as we feel them, without dissection. Conceptual analysis of numinous experience leads us to different words and concepts for it, then we inevitably fall to arguing about those, when the experience itself is likely very similar. Given a choice (and I think we ARE given a choice) I'd rather share the experience with other people, and avoid attempts to pin it down with words.

In my public work I use a variety of words for Ultimate Reality, to invite people from various faith backgrounds to set aside their conceptualizations and focus on the experience of awe, wonder, reverence, connection and joy. Reality as science reveals it has SUCH rich offerings of these!

GREAT discussion! Thanks.

\* \* \*



Awesome post.

It was very moving, and has now become my "default position" of what those of my fellow religious naturalists who choose to use god-language mean.

That doesn't mean I won't quibble with some usages where I believe g-language is confusing whatever is at issue, but when others mean what you mean, all my quibbles are just that.

\* \* \*

I agree.

Thank you for sharing your personal affinity for god language.

I was not raised in a religious environment and your story has helped me understand how it is possible to use this type of language and still be a religious naturalist.

\* \* \*

My father was raised in an intense Methodist household.

Dad began his undergraduate course, *The Psychology of Religion*, by announcing

"I do not believe in God."

He ended one of his last books by admitting,

"I still pray devoutly, and when I do I forget my qualifications and quibbles and call upon Jesus — and he comes to me."

Since he never spoke like this in the family context, I was stunned when I read the passage.

I grew up in a loving community that didn't use such words, and hence the words are without resonance for me.

We each, it would seem, have our own god-language story.

I'll close with my beloved granddaughter, now age 7, who, at age 5, was listening to some of us talking about a family event that happened before she was born.

"Did that happen when I was in the Essence?" she asked.

And on another occasion, when someone's death was being discussed, she remarked that he had returned to the Essence.