

Meditation on a Word
By Eric Johnson

I remember when I sang my first solo in church, many years ago. I stood behind the divider there in front of the choir, so you couldn't see my knees shaking. Now, I'm hiding behind the podium for the same reason.

I actually started writing parts of this talk in my head over a year ago. I guess one part of me wanted to present this, while the other part is saying "what in the world is this guy doing up here?"

I entitled this talk "Meditation on a Word:" that word is "God." The ancient Hebrew tribes would banish anyone who either spoke or wrote the name of God. I find it interesting that Jesus also does not use his name in the "Lord's Prayer," or Saint Francis of Assisi did not use God's name in his famous prayer.

I want to talk about my experience with this Word and why I think these people forbade the use of it. To do that, I need to tell you a little about my spiritual journey. Not that my journey is any more special than any of yours, but that I hope to show how I came to think and feel the way I do. I was raised in a non-denominational fundamentalist Protestant church. My parents did not attend, but neighbors took us kids to church each Sunday. I didn't know what a fundamentalist church was then, but when I was in high school the preacher one Sunday called out to the congregation in his sermon, "Who wrote the songs you hear on the radio?" To my surprise the whole congregation shouted, "The Devil." I had no idea where that came from. First, I had never heard the congregation, in my ten years of going to church, answer the preacher as one. And second, these were songs I liked to listen to. Songs like: "Nature Boy," "Rock Around the Clock," and "I Want to Hold Your Hand." I didn't see anything wrong with these songs.

By the time I got to college, my relationship with the word God completely changed. I'd given up church and the belief in an old man, up in the clouds, with a long beard, who seemed to have a strange penchant for delighting in the suffering of humans. I met my first wife, who also was leaving the church: The Catholic Church. I found out after we were married and she had returned to the church, that she was an ultra-fundamentalist Catholic. Now Protestant fundamentalists have been around for a couple of hundred years, but Catholic fundamentalists have been around for a couple of thousand years. When Vatican II liberized the Catholic Church, my first wife would not attend regular Catholic Churches, but attended the Greek Orthodox Church because they still covered their heads and while they spoke Greek instead of Latin in their mass, at least it wasn't English. She would also attend all night prayer vigils to ask the Virgin Mary to interpose with God to persuade him not to bring about the end of the world. It obviously worked! She would also invite priests to have meetings in our home to pray for the death of communists. To say the least, I didn't think like she did.

During this time I read a lot of philosophy and theology. While I had left the church and did not believe, I was haunted by the fact that over 80 percent of people believed in God and I didn't. I'm an engineer and would say that I'm pretty grounded in reality, but I couldn't see God in any of this. I couldn't measure God, I couldn't test for God, and I couldn't use God design roads, bridges or pipelines. I couldn't see him

anywhere. From all my reading I concluded that humans were not capable of knowing God rationally. None of the arguments for the existence of God made any sense to my scientific mind.

It was about this time that I found 1st Congregational Church. When I read the words “to walk together in all his ways, according as he is pleased to reveal Himself unto us in His blessed Word of Truth,” I felt like I was home. When I joined, one part of me did not yet believe in the existence of God, but I figured another part of me could be open to the possibility and wanted to see what he or she revealed to me. Needless to say, I’m glad I joined.

Now back to my title, “Meditation on a Word.” Part of me remained skeptical about God’s existence for a long time after I joined this church. It wasn’t until I began meditating that began to learn about this word, “God.” My meditation consists of reciting in my mind “The Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi,” the “Lord’s Prayer” and Buddhist and Hindu prayers. Some of you graciously read these prayers at my mother’s memorial service. I thank you again very much.

Before I go on, I want relate to you a few analogies I think will bear on what I’m about to tell you. I hope they will help explain what will try to say. I remember as a child first looking into a Viewmaster. I don’t know if you remember this device, kind of like a pair of binoculars, where you put in this circular disk with slides, so that when you looked in it you saw a scene in three dimensions. I remember being amazed by the sights of the Pyramids or the Grand Canyon like you were actually there. For some reason I worked it out that this wasn’t really all that amazing in that we see in three dimensions all the time. I decided that the amazing part was that until I looked in the Viewmaster, I hadn’t noticed that if I look out on a view, especially if there are trees nearby, that I see the same effect of three dimensions I saw in the Viewmaster. Apparently, I had gotten so used to reality that I didn’t notice it anymore.

A more recent example that Reverend Doug Lindsay used in his sermon a few weeks ago, was that of Surround Sound and HDTV. Again, until I heard the sounds around me in a theater I hadn’t noticed that is how I hear all the time, but that I was so used to it I didn’t notice it anymore. The same is true of HDTV. It’s so clear and vivid that “you can see them sweat.” But if I look around me, even with my perpetually dirty glasses, I find that reality is much clearer and more vivid than HDTV, but it’s taken the TV to show me that. For example, the grain of the wood in the pew in front of you or this lectern here is much more vivid and varied in pattern and color than HDTV could ever be. I had been looking in wonder at the TV, when I should be looking in wonder at the world around me.

Now back to my meditation: what I found was that meditation was like the Viewmaster, Surround Sound or HDTV. When I used it to look at the reality behind the word God, I found this reality more infinite than what this little word could possibly mean to my mind. I found that God does exist, but I still don’t rationally know what God is or means, but I have found that I can feel it with my being, rather than my mind. Here words leave me, which is what this talk is about. I could try to talk about the immensity and the depths behind the word, but I think I would start to sound like I was gushing, and engineers don’t gush!

A couple of observations: First, I find it interesting that in my meditation I didn't use the word God, but still the meaning found me. I think this is part of what Jesus meant when he said to consider the lilies of the field who toil not. They live without words or concepts, but live with their being. They don't toil with their minds, but simply exist. I also think Jesus meant the same thing when he said we should be like children before we enter the Kingdom of God. Children live life directly for the moment, without thinking about it. My second observation is that I can now look at the word God and see the hindrances to seeing God that word itself causes. It is as though I am behind, above, and all around the word all at the same time, and can see the old problems I had with seeing the existence of God when I only looked at the word from the front only.

And this brings me back around to those ancient Hebrews. I think that part of the reason they banished people for speaking or writing the name of God, was that by using the word it shut out the full experience and meaning of God.

In closing I would like to say that I'm not necessarily recommending meditation. There are many methods for gaining spiritual insight such as Prayer, Contemplation, Bible study, and communing with nature, just to name a few. And I'm certainly not recommending that we stop using the word "God." I'm just passing on to you that I've learned that my puny rational mind cannot take in the full meaning of the word and if I'm not careful, what I think will get in the way of my knowing God. But if I just get out of the way, he will be "pleased to reveal himself." Thank you.