Columns
Spirituality



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It is very disconcerting to set out on retreat only to discover within the first couple days that there is an atheist within me. Now, before clutching your cufflinks in horror, let me clarify.

While on retreat, I came to know deeply that in order to truly embrace God who is Holy Mystery, I needed to stop believing in a God who is ossified in this or that image. In a very real sense, finding my inner atheist has drawn me even closer to God.

Looking back on my life, I have been something of a purveyor of God. I've been Roman Catholic since the day I was born. Before baby monitors, there were guardian angels, crucifixes and reliquaries watching over me as I napped.

And throughout my life, I've been on the lookout for God in a variety of faith traditions, theological persuasions and philosophical systems. I've looked high and low, often preferring the low, for that is the space of the ordinary, the earthy and the so-called profane. If God could not be found in the low, I reasoned, then that was no God for me.

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On retreat, I struggled with finding myself undeniably within God while simultaneously rejecting the notion of God entirely. It's as if there is a fissure between *knowing* God and *knowing about* God. The two don't always add up, especially when our very concepts and language are woefully inadequate for "containing" Holy Mystery. Even the word "God" is deficient.

Hence the atheist within me. It is an atheism which refuses to believe in the existence of a God who is a thing. "God? Oh yes, look over there. Right between the chair and the lamp." It is an atheism which rejects God as subject and as object. God exists neither as a thing that performs actions nor as one who receives actions. Note: Parsing a sentence is not the most intricate theological method; however, it serves to illustrate that God is not in this or that thing. Rather God is in the action, the verb, if you will. God is in the movement, the being-ness, the dynamic that holds all the things together.

The language we are using here is halting. It is aspirational. It may even sound perplexingly heretical when misunderstood or taken out of context (I see you St. Teresa of Ávila). We have entered the realm of mysticism where we encounter Holy Mystery in soaring mountains, deep chasms and even the humble plains. This is not a space in which to be literal or pedantic. It is a space to explore and move about the sacred more freely, lightly. It is a place to know God, not to know about God.

In opening the door to this space, this dwelling if you will, I discovered on my retreat that while God was very much present to me in this space, I could not see God. My eyes could not fix on this or that form. There was no God between the chair and the lamp. Every time a form emerged in my imagination, I almost immediately rejected it. "Nope. Not God. Definitely not God." I began to be concerned. I talked about it with my spiritual director. "I close my eyes, and I feel God. But when I open them, there is nothing. No God." She held that space for me, which was enough for me to dwell in without having to dismiss it or figure it out.

> God is in the movement, the being-ness, the dynamic that holds all the things together.
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When I returned to my retreat room, I felt restless. Why can't I see God? I don't even know what I'm looking for. Should I look for a lion or a mother hen? A warrior or a shepherd? A cloud or a flame? What exactly does one look for when God is *the* master shape shifter?

I was frustrated. And then I got mad. One by one, I began rejecting the images of God that were trying to get in the room with me.

The first one to go? Old white man in the sky. To you, sir, I say no.

Once I unexisted that God, the rest receded like an angry tide of red-hot lava.

I am an atheist to the vindictive God who terrorizes, punishes and smites; the God who creates suffering to test us and to break us that we might be made worthy.

I am an atheist to the God who chooses some and not all; the God who rejects those who struggle, who fail, who hurt, who regress, who exceed, who differ.

I am an atheist to the God who makes me hate myself; the God who needs to extinguish everything that constitutes me — mind, body and spirit — in order to enter their presence.

I am an atheist to the God who determines what is sacred and what is profane; the God who has no time for the mundane, the playful, the sensual, the divergent, the queer, the messy, the tedious, the temporal.



(Unsplash/Matthew Henry)

Idols. Each and every one of them. I'd take a room full of golden calves any day before I take one of these. They all have to go. And honestly, if even one of these Gods were legit, I would rather be damned than behold.

Selah.

"I close my eyes, and I feel God. But when I open them, there is nothing. No God."

I have had to unexist a lot of Gods in order to clear out the room. I like to keep the room spacious and so must routinely tend to the specters of God who creep back into my imagination. And when they begin to fill up the space again, I start to lose my footing. I slip and fall, fall, fall because I cannot exist in a space with them. I lose my balance. I lose my intensity. I forget how to play and how to dance. I forget my name.

Not today, Gods. Not today.

I like hanging out in the empty room. It is a true dwelling, a place where I can live. It feels spacious, open, verdant. "I dwell in possibility," as Emily Dickinson once wrote. In this dwelling is the "No-God" God that I experience. And, I will do everything I can to move toward the possibility that one day this dwelling and the ordinary space of my daily life will become one.

The way to oneness of "No-God and God" and of "mystical and ordinary" is nothing short of adventure. I hadn't realized that I would have to unexist many a God along the way. Sometimes it's perilous, and sometimes I don't know the next step.

But it's then that I remember that the Christ is in the wild unknowing. And I can hear and feel the words of my spiritual director: "Love everything that moves you closer."