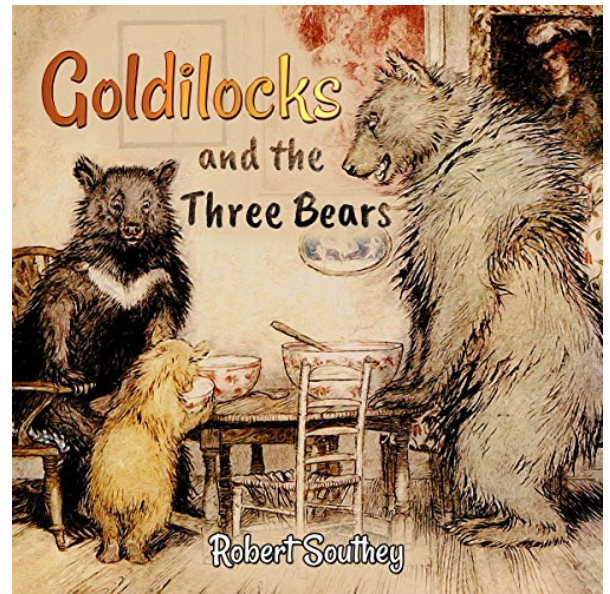


Soulful Songs and Stories



With a song and your stories, we co-create a soft place for hard conversations and a brave space for personal and spiritual growth. Then *Magic* Happens.

#13: Goldilocks God: not too small, not too big, just right

Hi Soulful Song Lovers and Storytellers,

an email exchange:

Steve Marston: “As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says, ‘The supreme religious challenge is to see God’s image in one who is not in our image.’”

Rev. Dr. Natalie Fenimore: “Not sure if the Jonathan Sacks quote applies across the board—”

SM: “There’s a joke about someone who claims to have invented the universal solvent, and the punchline is, ‘What do you keep it in?’ So, yes, nothing ‘applies across the board,’ not even love. We don’t have to think alike to love alike, but we all really should think.”

RDNF: “The challenge for so many is to see God in themselves—when all of society, and religious institutions have pictured God, goodness, holiness, otherwise. After seeing the God in your own self, then comes the equality which might enable Sacks’ challenge to apply across the board. I find this message in James Cone’s *Black Theology* and Gustavo Gutierrez’s *A Theology of Liberation*. But as you say, nothing ‘applies across the board’ and we should think.”

“Take Me to the Alley,” Gregory Porter https://youtu.be/JCtiuZGSt_I 5:16

Tiny desk concert: <https://youtu.be/sNJUzwBNbxo?t=304> (Suggested by Rev. Dr. Natalie Fenimore)

Well they build their houses in preparation for the king / And they line the sidewalks

With every sort of shiny thing / They will be surprised

When they hear him say

Take me to the alley / Take me to the afflicted ones

Take me to the lonely ones / That somehow lost their way

Let them hear me say / I am your friend

Come to my table / Rest here in my garden

You will have a pardon



“Who God Is,” Hannah Berkowitz (written when she was 16)

When I was 13, in the midst of preparing for my bat mitzvah, I decided I didn't believe in God. I walked into my rabbi's office for our weekly meeting about my torah portion and broke the news.... All he did was tilt his head and ask one question: "What God don't you believe in?" I had always pictured God in my head as a puppet master who controls our every move; the big guy in the sky whose "plan" is supposed to excuse every injustice. I fell silent, fuming. He kept nodding. After a few seconds, he looked into my eyes, leaned back, and said, "I don't believe in that God either." ... I don't think of God anymore as the world's scapegoat, but as a comforting possibility. All those words are ways to conceptualize and think about the unknown in a constructive way.

(Excerpted; full text at the end of the PDF)

I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please. Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I don't want enough of God to make me love a Black person or pick beets with a migrant. I want ecstasy, not transformation. I want the warmth of the womb not a new birth. I want about a pound of the eternal in a paper sack. I'd like to buy \$3 worth of God, please. —**Wilbur Rees**, 1971

“There Is No White Jesus,” Famalam/BBC

<https://youtu.be/APMu32sC2nM> 1:58

“Please Don't Pass Me By,” Leonard Cohen

https://youtu.be/RlDT_aUQuRM 13:03

And you know as I was walking I thought it was them who were singing it

I thought it was they who were singing it

I thought it was the other who was singing it / I thought it was someone else

But as I moved along I knew it was me, and that I was singing it to myself

Please don't pass me by / Oh please, don't pass me by

For I am blind, but you, you can see / Well, I've been blinded totally

Oh please, don't pass me by / Oh please, don't pass me by

God is a human concept. God is the name we give to our belief that life has meaning, one that transcends the world's chaos, randomness and cruelty. To argue about whether God exists or does not exist is futile. The question is not whether God exists. The question is whether we concern ourselves with, or are utterly indifferent to, the sanctity and ultimate transcendence of human existence. God is that mysterious force—and you can give it many names as other religions do—which works upon us and through us to seek and achieve truth, beauty and goodness. God is perhaps best understood as our ultimate concern, that in which we should place our highest hopes, confidence and trust. —**Chris Hedges**, UCLA, May 22, 2007

I pledge allegiance to myself and who I want to be. I can make all my dreams come true if I believe in me.... I pledge to keep my dreams alive and be all I can be. I pledge to do my best each day and always believe in me. —**School Affirmation, Elementary School PS 181Q**

You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do. —Anne Lamott's priest friend Tom, *Bird by Bird*

My only wish is to transform friends of God into friends of people, believers into thinkers, devotees of prayer into devotees of work, candidates for the hereafter into students of the world, and Christians, who by their own admission, are “half animal, half angel” into persons, into whole persons.

—**Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach**, *Lectures on the Essence of Religion*, 1851

Be Thou My Vision, trad. Irish/ Ricad Hutapea (sax)

<https://youtu.be/X5ATDdTaWOI> 3:30

Ashokan Farewell, Jay Ungar/David J. Nielsen (cello)

<https://youtu.be/3RMNoIzUY-o> 3:28

This is how I can speak of God: a presence gradually unfolded by life in its richness and tragedies, its devastating losses and its abundance: a power calling us into a fullness of living, a passion for life, for good and ill: an unquenchable fire at the core of life, glimpsed in light and shadows.

—**Rita Nakashima Brock**, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 2002

Like children, most of us want to know who is in charge of the universe. We want someone to establish the rules of belief and behavior. That is what opens the door to tyrants and God. We like to think of God as in loco parentis—a surrogate parent. But God steadily refuses to interfere in human affairs.... The messiah we need is some random act of kindness, some proposal to close the hole in the ozone layer, some discrete move to introduce candor into politics, some new intensive care for the planet. Perhaps the messiah will come when we have broken bread with our enemies.

—**Robert W. Funk**, *The Once and Future Jesus*, 2000

“Spiritual,” Charlie Haden/Charlie Haden & The Liberation Music Orchestra <https://youtu.be/z6D4zs6f8o8> 8:59

The poor person does not exist as an inescapable fact of destiny.

His or her existence is not politically neutral, and it is not ethically innocent. The poor are a by-product of the system in which we live and for which we are responsible. They are marginalized by our social and cultural world. They are the oppressed, exploited proletariat, robbed of the fruit of their labor and despoiled of their humanity. Hence the poverty of the poor is not a call to generous relief action, but a demand that we go and build a different social order. —**Gustavo Gutiérrez**, *The Power of the Poor in History*

**“God Help the Outcasts,” Alan Menken, Stephen Schwartz/
Dan'yelle Williamson** from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*

<https://youtu.be/c2rdcwmIqQo> 3:00

Exceptionalism is the belief that a particular nation or region is “exceptional” and regarded as giving it a special role in history, world affairs, etc. The term carries the implication, whether or not specified, that the referent is superior in some way. (*Wikipedia*) Most often expressed or referred to as “American exceptionalism,” with people believing in the moral superiority of the United States, and used to justify it’s abuse of power on the world stage. This filters down to the white, heterosexual, (usually, nominally, “Christian”), male majority who often think of themselves as morally superior and more entitled than others. Anecdotally, *exceptionalism* appeared in the media multiple times in this past month, and *entitlement (or entitled)* has been heard at least four times recently in reference to UUCSR congregants and employees.

Though we may demystify other people’s gods and deface their idols, our critical capacity to demystify the commodity fetish still cannot break the spell it wields over us, for its power is rooted in deep structures of social practice rather than simple belief. While fetishes made by African priests were denigrated as irrational, the fetish of the capitalist marketplace has long been viewed as the epitome of rationalism. —Anna Della Subin, *Accidental Gods: On Men Unwittingly Turned Divine*

*Subin examines how the appearance of fetish idols by European imperialists “integrated into some of the foremost theories of Western modernity” and legitimized conquest, while **other forms of deification, particularly involving White authority figures, contributed to early forms of classism, sexism, and racism.*** —Kirkus Reviews, Dec. 1, 2021

“Star Spangled Banner,” verses 3 & 4, Francis Scott Key

*And where is that band who so vauntingly swore
That the havoc of war and the battle’s confusion,
A home and a country, should leave us no more?
Their blood has washed out their foul footsteps’ pollution.
No refuge could save the hireling and slave
From the terror of flight, or the gloom of the grave:
And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave,
O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave.*

*O thus be it ever, when freemen shall stand
Between their loved homes and the war’s desolation.
Blest with vict’ry and peace, may the Heav’n rescued land
Praise the Power that hath made and preserved us a nation!
Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just,
And this be our motto: “In God is our trust.”
And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave
O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave!*

“Star Spangled Banner,” John Stafford Smith/Jon Batiste

<https://youtu.be/j7OF7-LoljM> 1:54 (2020) https://youtu.be/j2vGg5_rgNQ 2:57 (2015)

Standing on the tiny deck of the Arabella in 1630 off the Massachusetts coast, John Winthrop said, “We will be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword throughout the world.” Well, we have not dealt falsely with our God, even if He is temporarily suspended from the classroom.... We are indeed, and we are today, the last best hope of man on earth.

—**Ronald Reagan**, January 25, 1974

Keep away from people who try to belittle your ambitions. Small people always do that, but the really great make you feel that you, too, can become great. —**Mark Twain**

“The War Prayer,” Mark Twain

O Lord our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead.... We ask it, in the spirit of love, of Him Who is the Source of Love. (*Excerpt; full text at the end of the PDF*)

Apotheosis is the elevation of a person to the rank of a god

Opposite those who don't believe in their own inherent worth and dignity, are the arrogant, the bullies, those who think they are god or want to be treated as one.

For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self. —**Thomas Merton**, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 1962

“Falling Slowly” (from the movie *Once*)

Glen Hansard, Marketa Irglova

<https://youtu.be/k8mtXwtapX4> 4:02 for lyrics, click on “show more”

**You have suffered enough
And warred with yourself
It's time that you won**



Divinity is fully realized humanity. The goal of life, then, is not becoming something we are not—divine—but to become what we truly are—human. We are not required to become divine: flawless, perfect, without blemish. We are invited simply to become human, which means growing through our mistakes, learning by trial and error, being redeemed over and over again from sin and compulsive behavior, becoming ourselves, scars and all. It means embracing and transforming our shadow side. It means giving up pretending to be good and instead becoming real.

—**Walter Wink**, *The Human Being*, 2001

**“God is what happens when humanity is connected.
Humanity connected is God.”**

—Jim Gilliam, “Why the Internet Is My Religion” <https://youtu.be/-4WKle-GQwk> 12:26

**“Come Sunday,” Duke Ellington/
Keith Jarrett, (p); Gary Peacock, (b); Jack DeJohnette, (d)**

<https://youtu.be/ysatpc52-UI> 9:44

We should make all spiritual talk simple today: God is trying to sell you something, But you don't want to buy. That is what your suffering is: your fantastic haggling, your manic screaming over the price! —**Hafiz**

“Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika,” (God bless Africa), Enoch Sontong

(National Anthem of South Africa) **for Desmond Tutu**

<https://youtu.be/NBKjWRjwMkY> 1:59 (Rugby match, 2012)

Charlie Haden & the NLO <https://youtu.be/8Gfp3jh7P74> 8:09

Song info: <https://everything2.com/title/Nkosi+Sikelel%2527+iAfrika>

“What Are You Doing the Rest of Your Life?”

Alan Bergman/Bill Charlap Trio <https://youtu.be/vsbNpuqF95c> 7:30

“A Laying on of Hands / I Found God in Myself,”

Ntozake Shange, (1948–2018) <https://youtu.be/XoZTLPiHRyc> 3:39

From her 1976 coreopoem for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf

I found god in myself / & I loved her / I loved her fiercely

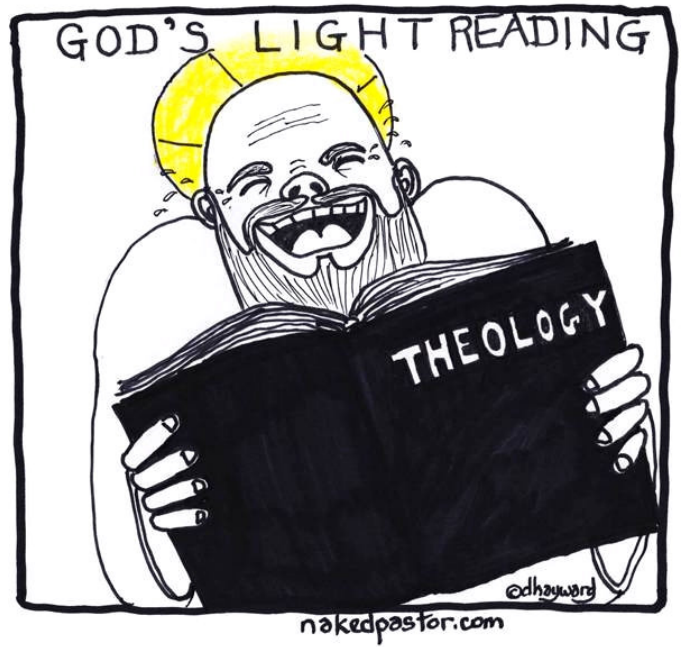
Article/Lyrics: <https://j.mp/32WQjN9>

*I had heard versions of Shange’s monologues before—whispered in my Brooklyn kitchen, late at night, far from the men who would be anatomized by their revelations. But Shange would have none of that intrigue. As one of her characters shouts, “i will raise my voice / & scream & holler / & break things & race the engine / & tell all yr secrets bout yrself to yr face.” That call undid something in me. It shattered the Negro propriety I knew and lived by. The force of Shange’s writing seemed to say, “F*ck the old rule of not airing your female business in front of colored men, white people, let alone the rest of the world.” You own the copyright on your life.*

—Hilton Als, *New Yorker*, Nov 1, 2010 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/11/08/color-vision>

When you love you should not say, “God is in my heart,” but rather, “I am in the heart of God.” —Kahlil Gibran, “On Love,” *The Prophet*, 1923





Who God Is

Hannah Berkowitz, *KidSpirit*, Jan 26, 2015

<https://bit.ly/whogodis>

When I was 13, in the midst of preparing for my bat mitzvah, I decided I didn't believe in God. I walked into my rabbi's office for our weekly meeting about my torah portion and broke the news. I expected him to blow up, kick me out, and cancel my service.

I had comebacks prepared and had practiced my straight face, promising myself that I would stay calm, even in the face of his inevitable explosion. But all he did was tilt his head and ask one question.

"What God don't you believe in?"

Completely thrown off, I stuttered some vague explanation of the God that I had always pictured in my head—the one that kind of looks like the man from the board game Monopoly; a puppet master who controls our every move; the big guy in the sky whose "plan" is supposed to excuse every injustice. My descriptions and voice tone rose the longer I spoke. I hated God.

Infuriatingly, my rabbi just nodded. Where was his narrow-minded, angry dismissal? Where were his ignorant rebuttals to which I was so prepared to respond? Those hours I spent loading an armory of snide replies were all for naught. I fell silent, fuming. He kept nodding. After a few seconds, he looked into my eyes, leaned back, pursed his lips, and shrugged.

"I don't believe in that God either."

What? I stared at him. What other God was there? We're Jewish. Believing in only one God was kind of our thing. Wasn't the rabbi supposed to know that? At the time, I thought he was an idiot. I rolled my eyes, crossed my arms and sat back in my chair, done with the subject. He asked me to sing my Torah portion again and then let me go, but his words still echoed in my head.

I spent the next years of my life cycling through a range of beliefs—atheism, agnosticism, Buddhism, even Satanism. I had a shallow understanding of everything I tried and the only thing that stuck for a slightly significant amount of time was Satanism, although I look back on that time with only sheepish amusement. Satanism took every Christian belief and turned it on its head simply for the sake of making it

seem stupid. The whole thing is spiteful and obnoxious, which fit in perfectly with my attitude at the time. I thought everyone who followed organized religion was an idiot. I didn't see the point and couldn't understand the attraction of seriously believing in a higher power.

It wasn't until about a year after my bat mitzvah that I revisited my conversation with my rabbi and my attitude about God. I must have subconsciously recognized the significance of my rabbi's words, because they never left me. I never stopped taking part in Jewish traditions and my community, but I would tune out at every mention of God when we went to High Holiday services. At some point I accepted that God was never going to be a large part of my life, but, then I really began to rethink my original perception of Him.

My attitude towards religion and religious people began to soften. I watched a good friend, physically sick and mentally lost, transform when she lit the Shabbat candles. Her eyes would clear. She would stand up straight. Her whispered prayer seemed to slide from her lips and weave around her like a shield. Her faith gave her a reason to go on. Even while she suffered she felt that there was a plan and a reason for what she was going through. When she told me that, it was the first time I felt grateful for the concept of God. Because of Him, I wasn't going to lose someone I loved.

I realized that I was just one young girl so what did I know of God? I started to figure out that God could be anything I interpreted Him to be. The word God is a placeholder for a concept, easily replaceable by "the universe" or "fate" or "Mother Nature."

That was what my rabbi meant. God was anything I wanted him to be. I don't think of God anymore as the world's scapegoat, but as a comforting possibility. We don't know why things happen in our lives. All those words are ways to conceptualize and think about the unknown in a constructive way. I'm still figuring out exactly what God is to me, but that's where I should be. I'm on a journey that is uniquely mine. My perception of Him [sic] will probably be constantly changing. The point is to learn something about myself. 🐾

Hannah Berkowitz is 16 years old and a 10th grader at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. She enjoys reading and writing, and loves small animals.

THE WAR PRAYER

Mark Twain (1904) *excerpt*

You have heard your servant's prayer—the uttered part of it. I am commissioned by God to put into words the other part of it—that part which the pastor, and also you in your hearts, fervently prayed silently.

O Lord our Father, our young patriots, idols of our hearts, go forth to battle—be Thou near them! With them, in spirit, we also go forth from the sweet peace of our beloved firesides to smite the foe. O Lord our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with their little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst, sports of the sun flames of summer and the icy winds of winter, broken in spirit, worn with travail, imploring Thee for the refuge of the grave and denied it—for our sakes who adore Thee, Lord, blast their hopes, blight their lives, protract their bitter pilgrimage, make heavy their steps, water their way with their tears, stain the white snow with the blood of their wounded feet! We ask it, in the spirit of love, of Him Who is the Source of Love, and Who is ever-faithful refuge and friend of all that are sore beset and seek His aid with humble and contrite hearts. Amen.

Written by Mark Twain during the Philippine-American War. “The War Prayer” was published in the 1923 anthology Europe and Elsewhere, 13 years after Twain’s death.