"God Carriers"

a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton

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Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
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Last weekend I was summoned to a sort of homecoming. On Sunday, the UU Congregation of Atlanta celebrated its final worship service in a unique, beloved round sanctuary-auditorium that generations had called home. Those ministers who had been ordained by, and at, UUCA – a dozen or so of us – representing different genders and generations of Unitarian Universalist ministry – answered the call and came home, to offer our blessings to the congregation and to its now former building, as its people move on to a new sanctuary. A new home.

In many ways, it was like a memorial service. A memorial service – for a building. But something unexpected – something unplanned (because death comes, unexpected) – took place *later* Sunday afternoon – hours after the final "Amen" had been said in that last worship service, hours after the Tibetan monks who had been commissioned to create a momentary mandala of richly colored sand had at last swept away that work of beauty, symbolizing the impermanent nature of all that is created, all that is built.

Later that afternoon, I returned one last time to that sanctuary where my ministry had begun and been blessed. I returned to bid farewell not only to those familiar walls, but to a woman who had, for decades, been synonymous with UUCA. You see, not only was there a memorial service for a beloved building in Atlanta a week ago – there was also a memorial service for a beloved *member* of that church, who had died just a few days earlier.

It was remarked, more than once last weekend, that a church is not a building – a church is *its people.* This truth was made evident in the events of that poignant day, for perhaps my most lasting impression, my most vivid memory – among all the things that took place in that sacred space last Sunday – was the eulogy given by the daughter of that pillar of the church. This was a woman, now in her late 40s, who as a teenager had been one of the leaders of the youth group that I had helped to create and coordinate – just when I was beginning to do what I did not yet know was *ministry*.

For 10 or 15 minutes, this woman had us mesmerized, as she seemingly channeled her mother – *brought* her mother, whom the couple of hundred people present had known in various ages and stages of her life (as friend, as sibling, as parent, as grandparent, as spouse, as church president, as denominational leader, as civic leader, as civil rights and social just activist, as dream-group coordinator, as artist, as boundary-breaking architect) – her daughter brought her *right into that sanctuary*, once again. She spoke with passion and conviction about the social causes that her mother had fought for – sometimes on the front lines, and sometimes behind the scenes – throughout her entire life. She spoke with equally heartbreaking clarity about tender, childhood memories. And with each word, with each gesture, as I watched, I saw her mother.

Friends, my sermon today is titled "God Carriers." It's a phrase I happened across a year or two ago – one sometimes used by charismatic Christian groups – that caught my attention, my fancy, because it immediately meant something to me as well – me, a Unitarian who is a Universalist. And so it is a concept I've been thinking about now, for some time.

But last Sunday, I *witnessed it* being made manifest. That woman's daughter – whom I had not seen in (as we calculated it) 29 years – was so clearly, so powerfully, so poignantly now carrying her mother. And in doing so, she was vividly able to help us all remember, help us all see, help us all experience (even beyond death), the woman who had carried, and then given birth, to her. We heard, and saw, and knew once more, someone whom we had all known, in life.

I believe that each one of us – and here, I want to look around the sanctuary, and make sure that you know, and *feel*, in your heart, what I am saying . . .
I believe that each and every one of us, carries a bit of the Divine within us. I believe that there is a sacred, timeless spark – inside you. I believe that just as we carry those whom we have known and loved, we also each carry something of *God* within. We are all God Carriers.

I believe this, in at least two respects:

Just as the Book of Genesis describes, in metaphorical language (for I don't believe this happened, *literally*), Yahweh blowing the breath of life – the "spirit" – in Hebrew, *ruach* (a feminine noun, by the way) – just as Yahweh is pictured placing God's own spirit *into* Adam, and thus giving him life – so too do *our* mothers, give birth to us – bestowing unto us, something of their unique spirit, something of their sacred selves.

Yesterday afternoon, many of us gathered in this sanctuary to remember and honor a member of our own church family – Nancy Ott. Nancy's three dear children – Adam, Julie, and Aaron – certainly do carry her, in them – much like Nancy, herself, carried the spirit and essence of *her* parents. Much like Nancy's

brothers, David and Mark, still carry something, in them, of their late parents as well.

When the time comes for someone to rest in God – consider what it means to say that God is in us.

And I believe it is much more than only those who have given us birth, whom we carry within. I know that I, too, carry something of Nancy Ott, in me – and will, for as long, as I live. I carry Dave Sofge. I carry not only my mother and my father, both of whom passed from this life, long ago – but I also carry Sam Gamble, and Kim O'Connor; Sandy Gaither, and Noel Pedrotty – and *everyone* in this church family who has touched my life and my heart. Who has come into my little corner of the world, and helped to shape *who I am*.

And I carry as well, countless other departed souls, whom most of you have never met: Danielle Gladd, and Janine Winter; Bob Shore, and Lacrecia Taylor – just to name, and honor, and call forth a few. I carry in me, those who have gone before – simply because *I carry God*. Because to me, those are the same thing.

I believe that the Spirit of Life, the Spirit that is Life, that gives Life, that breathes Life into me, and breathes in and through me – which I call God – holds and contains, embraces and includes, all the living, and all those who *have* lived.

This may seem to be a broad, bold claim – an unprovable faith statement – but I would contend it is also a very *scientific* statement, should you need it to be – because we are all star-stuff. The elements that comprise you and me, the molecules that comprised everyone you or I have ever known, loved, and lost – everyone alive today, and everyone who has ever lived – *all share the same origin*, the same Source, in that primordial blast we have come to call the Big Bang.

So, too – there are those even more mysterious, less-understood quantum connections that human beings will surely never fully understand (try as we might, and try as we certainly *will*) – those inscrutable quantum connections that link together everything in our world, and in our universe. Everything that we see, and don't see, is intimately, intricately interconnected – in connections that, even the scientists admit, are quite literally *timeless*.

What a blessing – how amazing it is – to be the creatures who – even so dimly, as through a glass – might see, or at least sense, this incredible interconnection.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the story of an afternoon he spent in a grade school classroom, conversing with the children there. He asked how many of them believed in God – and was dismayed when not a single hand went up. But being the wise teacher that he is, Kushner then thought of a way to rephrase his question: "How many of you have ever *felt close* to God?"

As the story goes, showing no awareness of the contradiction, every child raised their hand – then eagerly began describing events or experiences such as

being present at the birth of an animal or a sibling, being hugged by their parents, lighting sabbath candles, losing a grandparent to cancer, forgiving a friend after an argument.

Feeling close to God – especially when feeling close to others – is, I would submit (and Kushner would as well) a universal human experience. We are the ones who are *aware*, at some level – and the ones who carry within us – the Spirit of Life, that Divine spark which is, after all, the thing that connects us. Connects us to all who have come before, to all who will come after – and all who are here, with us now.

What might this world of ours *look like*, if we could live our lives convinced, convicted, that it were so?

Knowing the Divine is in one another, how could we let anyone in our community go hungry? How could we say that some people deserve health care, while some do not? How could we take a child from their parent, and throw them both into separate jail cells, hundreds of miles apart? How, for God's sake – knowing that they *carry God* within them – how could we throw *anyone* in a cage, for trying to build a better life?

How could we demonize and dehumanize an entire group of people, march against them, shout hateful words at them – as happened a year ago this weekend in Charlottesville, Virginia – as is happening *today*, in our nation's capitol – as happens every day in our world? Such things have reached into our comfortable suburban township, this very week.

How could we do the evil things we do, if we believed that each and every person – you, me, our best friend, those seated in this sanctuary with you this morning – the homeless man on the street corner, the person who cuts you off in traffic, the immigrant mother, and the white supremacist on the news (or next door) – how might our actions *change*, how might our thoughts change, if we believed, if we accepted and internalized the idea that *everyone* has something essential, something profound, *in common*? That we share a Divine spark. We share the breath of the Spirit.

We are each God-Carriers.

So let us live – let us resolve to live – today, this week, for as long as we draw that sacred breath – remembering that every time we interact with another person, every time we so much as think about another person – we are encountering *the Divine*. We are entering into a sacred relationship.

Let us take for granted, let us use as our starting place, the idea I began with this morning: Namasté: That which is the highest, that which is most holy in me – the light I carry – recognizes and honors and cherishes the light you carry.

In these difficult days of division in our world – in this tender time in the life of our congregation, when some within our church family are struggling with job

or relationship challenges, with medical and health challenges; when some among us are under hospice care, when we have just lost another companion on our journey – in this poignant and precious time that we have together – let us look into one another's eyes . . . and see God.

Let us find, in one another, a reflection of the Divine that is in ourselves (that, too often, being the hardest thing of all for us to see). And let that meeting – that meeting of us, and another – be a *holy communion*, as it should be. Let us live, and love, this truth into being: That every one of us is a God-Carrier.

May we bless the world, with the presence of the Divine.

Namasté.