

Myth and the Meaning of Life

and

Where to Look for God

by Dr. John Alexie Crane,

edited by Robert D. Lane

August 1998



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Introduction

by Robert D. Lane

This chapbook contains two sermons by the now retired Unitarian-Universalist minister John Alexie Crane. Dr. Crane has served as a minister in several churches over the years including ones in Arizona, Colorado, British Columbia, and California. After he retired from the church in Santa Barbara, California, where I first met him, he continued to be in demand as a guest minister, a guest speaker, a teacher, and a counselor. In July of 1998 Lex came to Nanaimo to visit and was invited by the local Unitarian Fellowship to hold a service at the Boys and Girls Club in Nanaimo. The first sermon, “Myth and the Meaning of Life” is that sermon. The second piece, “Where to Look for God” was originally delivered at the church in San Diego, California.

A key word above is “delivered.” We need to note that these sermons were written to be delivered to an audience, to be read, performed. They were not written to be published. Hence, the use of short sentences, the rhetorical devices of repetition, the sentence fragments used for emphasis. As you read these works try to hear the unique human voice that is right there behind the words. A thoughtful, passionate voice.

It is important to hear that human voice in that the full sense of “human” is such a central part of the message of Lex Crane. He says, “we are free to find salvation now in the fully lived, fully realized human life. We will find it in art, in science, in close relations with people we love. We will find it in ourselves. We will find salvation in being as fully human as it is possible for us to be.” It is hard to imagine a more fully human being than Lex Crane. He is a veteran of World War II, wounded in action and decorated. He is in demand internationally as a speaker. He is a good friend, a fine writer, a devoted family man, a student of philosophy and of life.

I met him some thirty-eight years ago when he was a young minister at the Santa Barbara Unitarian Church and I was the church’s janitor. I used to stop in his office for long talks while cleaning the Parish hall. We shared interests in literature and philosophy and spent hours together talking about ideas while I was a student at the University of California. Many years later I asked Lex to write the introduction to my book on the bible, *Reading the Bible: Intention, Text, and Interpretation*, which he did.

Although we hadn’t seen each other for many years we both reported feeling as if the conversation had only just been interrupted briefly.

Lex can shock. Try this description from the second sermon, “I am an atheist who loves God.” His description of that theological position is interesting and challenging. More and more Lex is sounding like Spinoza. In fact, one of the key ideas in “Where to Look for God” comes from Spinoza: “The more we understand individual things, the more we understand God.”

Whether Lex is successful in arguing for his position as an atheist who loves God I leave to the reader. And whether the claim that God is truth is more than a tautology I also leave to the consideration of the reader. In any case these two sermons offer many ideas for consideration and rumination.

Myth and the Meaning of Life

I. A Dream That Is Dying

“... each age is a dream that is dying,
Or one that is coming to birth.”

There is a god-like perspective on human life caught up in these two lines from a poem by Arthur O’Shaughnessy [19th century British]. Each epoch in history, the poet observes, is one in which an old, old way of viewing the world is decaying, or one in which a new world view is taking form. It appears to me that both of these movements are occurring in our own time: an old vision of the meaning of life is dying, and a new one is coming to birth.

In the Bible, in the book of Deuteronomy in which the Ten Commandments are listed, there are hundreds of other commandments set down, all said to have been given by God to Moses for the guidance of his people.

One of the commandments reads like this: “If a man has a stubborn, rebellious son who will not obey his father or mother, even though they punish him, then his father and mother shall take him before the elders of the city, and... then the men of the city shall stone him to death. In this way you shall put away this evil from among you, and all the young men of Israel will hear about what happened and be afraid.”

Another brief commandment for the regulation of certain interpersonal conflicts reads: “If two men are fighting and the wife of one intervenes to help her husband by grabbing the testicles of the other man, her hand shall be cut off without pity.”

These are laws, plainly, conceived by a relatively primitive people, in the early stages of developing a civilization, laws no more infallible or without error than the laws of the state of California. It is hard to see now how anyone could read these two passages, and still look upon the Bible as the word of God, an infallible and ultimate guide for the behavior of human beings. Yet, a substantial, though dwindling number of people in this country still do so. For centuries our forefathers had little difficulty holding this conception.

This is because the mythical mode of thought, out of which this traditional story of God, Moses and the commandments grew, does not function critically, rationally, empirically, as we have become somewhat accustomed to doing.

Rather it explains and gives meaning to human experience by creating stories that satisfy the human need to know about things, to have order in our minds and in our lives, stories that satisfy human feelings, allay fears, enhance the human ego, that create meaning, comfort, order, peace, bring an assurance to people that they know all it is important to know about the nature of things.

The myths created a kind of protective canopy to shelter and structure human life. A shelter desperately needed by our species as it groped its way into conscious life.

It appears to me (and many others) that this old mythical mode of apprehension is a dream that is dying. Even among fundamentalists controversy has developed over whether or not the Bible is actually, without error, the literal word of God. The Wall Street Journal reported on the controversy a few years back. It pointed out that some of the fundamentalists can now see that “there are just too many areas where the Bible can’t stand up to close scrutiny.”

Others argue forcefully in defense that “once the Bible’s authority is questioned on any point, no matter how trivial, it’s only a matter of time until the entire book is questioned.” And this is quite right, of course. Once you admit the analytical and critical faculties to the study of an established mythology, its magic, its marvelous power to integrate, explain, and order human experience begins to decay. The two modes of thought are not compatible.

And we can’t seem to prevent ourselves from subjecting the myths to rational scrutiny. The lure, the promise, the rewards of the rational mode of thought are such, evidently, that we have developed our capacity to use it even though it has undermined the power of the traditional myths to bring us meaning, comfort, confidence, ego-gratification, and a substantial degree of psychological security.

II. One That Is Coming to Birth

It is a profound, world-shaking shift in the organization of human life, this change from the dominance of the mythical mode of thought to the ascendance of the rational mode of thought. It is at the level of a cultural mutation, an evolutionary change that will affect human life for centuries to come.

It is not yet clear whether the rational mode of thought is the primary content of the dream that is coming to birth, or if it is only the agent of decay of the dream that is dying. My intuitions tell me that the rational mode is essential to us but is not the ultimate answer, that the new dream is yet to be born. I sense that it has begun to take form, but is still not within the range of our vision.

It has taken centuries for the change to develop and ripen. You can see its beginnings in Socrates in ancient Athens, then again in western Europe in the fifteenth century. It began to grow more rapidly in the eighteenth century, more rapidly still in the nineteenth century; and in the past thirty years it has been moving swiftly forward. The radical changes in the religious tradition that have taken place in recent years are a reflection of this swift acceleration of the pattern.

The scholar, Joseph Campbell, who probably knew as much about mythology as anyone in our time, says in his book, *Myths to Live By* [1972]: “I like to think of the year 1492 as marking the end or at least the beginning of the end of the authority of the old mythological systems by which the lives of humanity had been supported and inspired from time out of mind.”

Why 1492? The view of the universe that most people carried in their minds up until that time was the image expressed in the Bible. In this view the earth was seen as flat, shaped something like a dinner plate, floating on a great ocean. This world view was very old, dating at least as far back as 2000 BC. The people who wrote the Bible understood the world to be structured in this way, and this was the way most European people perceived it in 1492.

There was another, more sophisticated world view held by learned people of the time which was derived from the ancient Greeks. Here the earth was seen as a motionless, solid sphere, enclosed by seven revolving, transparent spheres, each of which contained on its surface one of the planets: the moon, Mercury, Venus, the sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Thus, the earth was seen as being the center of a set of transparent spherical globes which enclosed it. Beyond the seventh sphere was the brightly lit celestial realm where God was enthroned.

This was the view held by most educated people in 1492, though these were relatively few in number at that time. The popular view was of the earth as flat, floating on a cosmic sea. But then, soon after Columbus sailed across the Atlantic and discovered the New World, Magellan sailed all the way around the globe. Our species had begun the systematic, empirical exploration of the actual earth, rather than remaining content with either of the old mythological images.

Then, fifty years after Columbus' first voyage, Copernicus published his argument that the sun, not the earth, was the center of the solar system; and a little over sixty years later, Galileo made a telescope which enabled him to see directly what Copernicus had worked out mathematically. The telescopes we have today are, of course, far more powerful than Galileo's. We can now see almost inconceivable distances out into the universe.

We no longer hold either of the ancient myths. The one in the Bible is relatively primitive. We know now that the sun is the center of the planetary system of which the earth is a part; but far more than this we know our sun to be one of about two hundred billion other suns in the galaxy in which our solar system is involved. This galaxy is a vast collection of suns and planets shaped like an immense lens, hundreds of quintillion miles across. We know also that this enormous galaxy is only one of many millions of other such galaxies dispersed in infinite space.

This is the view of the world that all school children now learn. It is the world view, roughly, that most of us carry in our minds. It has displaced the old myths in defining the world for us. The displacement began, broadly speaking, in 1492; and as Campbell put it: "Actually, the occasion for an experience of awe before the wonder of the universe that is being developed for us by our scientists is a far more marvelous, mind-blowing revelation than anything the pre-scientific world could ever have imagined."

We are on the edge of a new era in the development of our species. Campbell makes very clear a fact we have been only dimly aware of, namely, that "there is no divinely ordained authority any

more that we have to recognize. There is no anointed messenger of God's law. In our world today, all civil law is conventional. No divine authority is claimed for it: no Sinai; no Mount of Olives.

Our laws are enacted and altered by human determination, and within their secular jurisdiction each of us is free to seek her own destiny, his own truth, ... to find it through her own doing. The mythologies, religions, philosophies, and modes of thought that came into being six thousand years ago and out of which all the monumental cultures both of the Occident and of the Orient, of Europe, the Near and Middle East, even early America derived their truth and their lives, are dissolving from around us, and we are left, each on his own to follow the star and spirit of her own life."

No divinely ordained authority... Each of us is free to seek her own destiny, her own truth, to find it through her own doing... Mythologies are dissolving around us... We are left, each on our own to follow the star and spirit of our own lives...

Those are the words of Joseph Campbell, a leading authority on the mythologies of the world. Do his conclusions sound familiar, sound Unitarian Universalist? This is the world view we have been developing since about the year 1800. Since that time we have gradually, one by one, set aside each of the elements in the mythological tradition as not being essential to the religious life. It is not that we have been leading the way. It is just that, because of our free organizational structure, we have been able to evolve as new knowledge accumulated. We found our way to this conclusion a little earlier than most other churches. But all are moving now in this direction.

III. The Natural Meaning of Life

We are aware now that our lives are conducted in the context of a vast universe outside us, as well as of a vast universe of experience within ourselves. Campbell points out that there is an extraordinary linkage between the world within and the world without. Our human nature is characterized by an intimate, electric congruence with the nature of the universe as a whole.

We were able with our minds long ago to spell out mathematically the laws of motion that govern the behavior of the suns, planets and galaxies strewn out in infinite space. Our minds are so constructed that we can, with effort, grasp to some considerable extent the immense nature of things in which our individual lives are set down.

We know that our being grows out of its being. Our nature was formed out of its nature. We human beings emerged out of this immense universe, are made of its substance, contain its potential for being. Each of our acts and thoughts and feelings is part of the whole process of being. We are the universe seeing itself, beginning to understand itself. We are the eyes, the ears, the mind of the universe, and are an intimate part of its vast being.

We are launched now on a great new adventure, that of exploring the infinite space within us, the infinite space outside us. We have begun to probe physically into the nearby planets in our solar

system; we have begun to probe the depths of the human psyche. As we begin this series of explorations, we do so after largely setting aside the old mythological mode of thought.

Instead, we are now asking that each individual develop the capacity of looking at the world in a free and independent way, that each approach the world insofar as possible without preconceptions, being analytical, critical and creative: not simply reproducing inherited patterns of thought and action, but becoming oneself an innovating center, an active, creative center within the life process.

Having begun to transcend the limitations of the old mythological way of organizing life, we are free to find salvation now in the fully lived, fully realized human life. We will find it in art, in science, in close relations with people we love. We will find it in ourselves. We will find salvation in being as fully human as it is possible for us to be.

By learning to think, to feel, to run, to dance, to work, to play. By learning to love wisely and well. By learning to be deeply in touch with the beauty of the natural world. By enjoying music, reading, people, sunsets, skiing, children, woodcarving, philosophy, cooking, stained glass, birds, sculpture, soaring mountains, trees, waterfalls, fountains.

A group of close friends, the warmth and beauty of faces close by, and the quiet pleasures of being alone. By learning to be in touch with our own inwardness, coming to know, accept, and respect ourselves, our feelings, thoughts, intuitions, the things we feared and had fled from.

Coming to know and love ourselves, to love others, to love the world; and to become a part of this wondrous adventure in the infinite universe of which we are an intimate, inseparable part, in which we live and move and have our being; and in which we are evidently invited to play an extraordinary and influential role.

“...Each age is a dream that is dying,
Or one that is coming to birth.”

Where to Look for God

I. Strange Gods

I recently found myself moved by a flash of insight into the nature of Unitarian-Universalist religion that I had been dimly aware of for years but had not clearly grasped. I found my way to the place where humanism and theism intersect. Contemplating this intersection, in turn, led me to a deepened understanding of our unusual kind of religion.

I began by reflecting on the theme, “where to look for God.” As I am sure you have noticed, the word ‘God’ is heavily charged. On one hand, it is for many a source of meaning and comfort; and for many others it is thoroughly repugnant. For others still, it is just incomprehensible.

When you look back in history, you can see that a wondrous number of atrocities have been committed in the name of the traditional God of the Western world, the almighty Lord and Ruler of the Universe. Omnipotent, omnipresent, just, merciful, loving. Creator of the heavens and the earth.

This has been the dominant idea of God in the West for centuries. It evolved out of the Hebrew tradition in the ancient world, was taken into and reshaped by Christianity. This is the God of our Fathers. I confess that I do not now and never did believe in this God. Though as a child I was heavily exposed to the idea, I found no meaning in it. It baffled me.

It was not until much later that I came to understand that this idea was not actually God, but simply our culture’s long-accepted conception of God. That it was in fact an idol: an image of God made by the hands, heads, and hearts of humanity.

What I want to discuss today is not any particular conception of God’s nature, but rather that something, that reality to which the word points our attention. I can’t tell you much about the nature of God, but I can, I think, tell you where to look for God. Where to seek an experience of God.

II. Atheism and Understanding

I am an atheist. I do not believe in God. Never did. But there is more. I also love God. I am an atheist who loves God. I am aware that this is a peculiar theological position, not a popular one.

For the first thirty years of my life, the concept of God was almost a complete blank for me. In theological school, it was, of course, my duty to study the idea, and I found that the more I learned, the more irritable I became. I was an active, practicing, militant atheist all through the period of my professional education, and was delighted to find that I could run rational circles around all believers, even terrorize some of them.

Still, I continued to study the matter off and on, as I intuitively sensed some significance in it. Then, one rainy day, it all fell into place, and I saw, I understood, it made sense. I still did not believe in God, but I knew then where to look for her or for him.

As I now see it, if people find they require belief or faith in order to relate to God, they are looking for her, for him in the wrong place. If they do not know where to look for God, they must believe in somebody else's conception of the deity. We do not have to believe in the moon. We know where it is, and can go have a look at it. Similarly with God. If we know where to look.

I feel uneasy about belief. I try to keep my beliefs to a bare minimum. Beliefs can be exceedingly destructive, especially beliefs about the ultimate. Joseph Campbell points out in *The Power of Myth* that belief is actually more of an obstacle than an asset to experiencing God.

Campbell quotes Carl Jung, who said once that a religion, a system of beliefs, "is a defense against the experience of God." Belief and faith are required not in God, but in your culture's or your church's or your guru's conception of God. I think the problem has been that the dominant idea of God in Western culture, the God of our Fathers, the idea of God as Lord and Ruler of the Cosmos has created widespread theological confusion.

Alfred North Whitehead shed light here: "When the Western world accepted Christianity, Caesar conquered..." The Christian God was fashioned "in the image of the Egyptian, Persian and Roman imperial rulers... The Church gave unto God the attributes which belonged exclusively to Caesar."

This traditional concept never touched me, reached me. I neither feared nor loved this ancient deity. However, I think I now have some understanding of the basic meaning of the word "God." I know what the word points to. I have a relationship to God that matters profoundly to me; but I do not find either belief or faith necessary.

It appears to me now that everybody - atheist, agnostic or theist - has a knowledge, an awareness of God; but because of the prevailing idea of the deity in the Western world, they may not connect the awareness with the word.

The 17th century philosopher Spinoza once said, "The more we understand individual things, the more we understand God." This has been a key insight for me, one that unlocked many doors. It points to the meaning of God I want to explore. It told me where to look for God.

"The more we understand individual things, the more we understand God."

III. Humanism and God

Humanists often feel uncomfortable or irritated or angry if they hear God mentioned. This is easy enough to understand. Hideously oppressive and brutal acts have been committed in the name of the reigning God of the Western world.

One of the first ministers to preach humanism from a Unitarian pulpit was John Dietrich, who spoke out in 1916 in Spokane, Washington. He was a brilliant speaker, an unusually learned and gifted man. Though he was a pioneer humanist, he can teach us significant things about the meaning of God.

Dietrich said, in a Humanist Magazine article published in 1953, that his earlier humanism (in the 1920s and 30s) seemed to him to be “too narrow in its conception of the great cosmic scheme.”

“...we should not have drawn such a hard and fast distinction between theism and humanism, making them contradictory. That was all right so far as orthodox theology and supernaturalism were concerned, but there is a type of theism which does not stand in opposition to humanism, and I have come to accept that type.”

In an essay he was working on in the last few years of his life, titled “Thoughts on God,” Dietrich added an insight that I think is exceedingly important in knowing how, as well as where, to look for God. He said that to approach understanding and awareness of God, we must use the intuitive rather than the rational approach. “He [or she] must be felt and experienced rather than thought of and reasoned about.”

This is a crucial insight. God must be felt and experienced rather than thought of and reasoned about.

IV. Joseph Campbell on God

In *The Power of Myth*, Joseph Campbell said that the word ‘God’ is a symbol that points to the ultimate mystery of being: beyond philosophy, beyond theology, beyond the reach of language. The mystery must be experienced directly, without the mediation of words. One’s whole being is involved in the experience, not the intellect alone.

God is a wonderfully rich symbol that may, if we can rise above our negative experience with the word, call up a significant awareness in us, renewed again and again. The fact is that our lives are totally dependent upon a vast reality which we know only in part, and yet, to which we are intimately and inextricably related. Personally related.

Science reaches out to embrace the entire cosmos in both time and space. How the world began, and how it will end. In its own way, the Bible does the same thing. Which, in turn, is a reflection of the fact that human nature is such that we experience a sense of relationship with all that is.

Our minds and hearts reach out in relationship to the whole of being. Of reality. This vast whole flowing through time matters profoundly to us. It is the ultimate context of our lives. We understand it in part. Much of it remains in mystery. But we are intimately related to it all. In thought and feeling we are in touch with the whole of reality.

It is not compulsory that we use the word ‘God’ in either thought or speech to designate this reality. It is not a matter of hellfire and brimstone. We simply do not need the word in the urgent

sense that we need air, water, or sleep. In much the same way, we do not actually need music. But the presence of music can greatly enrich the quality of our lives. So it is with the word 'God.' It is an exceedingly rich symbol.

The word God serves as a symbol, a focus for the thoughts, feelings, and intuitions that go into our intimate, inward relation with the whole of reality, both known and unknown, seen and unseen.

V. The Meaning of God

Wilfred Cantwell Smith is Professor of World Religions at Harvard, and a leading thinker on the great religions of humanity. One of his books, *Questions of Religious Truth*, was published by Scribner in 1967.

His understanding of where to look for God, I was pleased to discover, was very similar to my own. The idea is breathtakingly simple, but radically different from the most widespread conception of God in our society. Listen closely to Smith's wonderfully concise way of framing it: "Any statement is the word of God insofar as it is true." This is so because "God is truth... Wherever truth is found, there is God. And wherever truth is stated, there God is speaking."

Any statement is the word of God insofar as it is true. Because God is truth.

I ask myself then, what is the connection between truth and reality?

Every day, each day of our lives, we move about in reality, in the real everyday world; and as we move about in it, we take experience of it into ourselves, where it accumulates in some form, whether biochemical, electrical or symbolic. When we have lived for twenty, thirty, forty years, we come to contain a vast store of experience of reality, encoded in our own being. Within us.

God is truth. Truth is reality encoded in some form, in some way in human substance. In each of us. In each human culture. Hence, it is also true to say that God is reality. God is that vast reality, which we know only in part, that ultimate mystery in which we live and move and have our being.

Truth is what we know about reality. Hence, as Spinoza said, "the more we understand individual things, the more we understand God."

This is what we strive for in our churches: ever growing understanding. As we grow in understanding of individual things, we grow in understanding of God. Of reality. It is our love of God, of truth that moves us to seek an expanding, deepening understanding of the nature of things and of ourselves set down in it.

Our lives are totally dependent upon a vast reality, which we know only in part; and yet, to which we are intimately and inextricably related. And in which we live and move. We take God into ourselves, so that, it is within us that we are closest to her or to him. Within. That's where to look for God.

As John Dietrich put it, God “must be felt and experienced, rather than thought of and reasoned about. One’s whole being is involved here, not the intellect alone. Out of this feeling and experience, an intimate, inward, personal relationship emerges. Awareness of mystery in the nature of things is kept alive, is repeatedly renewed in us.”

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