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The hunt for God's real presence in everyday life

by Mariam Williams

At the Intersection

As I noted in my last column, I recently attended a talk by the 2014 Grawemeyer Award in Religion winner, Tanya M. Luhrmann, Ph.D., a psychological anthropologist at Harvard University. The University of Louisville and Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary give the award jointly, according to the Grawemeyer Award website, to "honor and publicize annually creative and constructive insights into the relationship between human beings and the divine, and ways in which this relationship may inspire or empower human beings to attain wholeness, integrity or meaning, either individually or in community." Books published within the last five years are eligible. Luhrmann won this year's award for her 2012 book, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*, in which she asks and answers the question, "How does God become and remain real for modern evangelicals?"

"Real" in this case isn't about God's existence; Protestant evangelical Christians already are convinced of that. Luhrmann wanted to know how believers come to see God as present, responsive, and interested in their daily lives.

In short, the answer is, through a combination of church cultural training, predisposition to imaginative thinking and an intense practice of prayer. It is not easy to become a "prayer warrior" or to clearly hear the voice of God, and according to the people Luhrmann interviewed, Christians can mistake their own desires for God's will. They also experience doubt. But this practice of a personal relationship with God helps them deal with the doubt.

Full disclosure: I was on the committee that read and selected *When God Talks Back* as the winner over two other finalists for the Grawemeyer Award. One of the qualities that convinced me that Luhrmann deserved the award was her book's ability to answer questions for people like me -- believers who don't

have a relationship with God in which he speaks to them as he did with Moses, chatting with them as a human would with a close friend.

I have marveled at people who have this kind of relationship with God (or believe they do). Days before opening this book, I had a conversation with a friend, and about four times within an hourlong conversation, she said, "So I asked God about the situation, and God said ... " I stopped her to ask how she knew what God was saying and how she knew it was God. I've posed these questions to different people for years, and everyone I've asked has different methods of "hearing" God. Some say the answer pops out at them through Scripture or that a sermon they heard the day they were seeking God's answers for a dilemma they faced seems directed at them. Others have an idea, and friends and strangers alike randomly say something to confirm the idea is good and, therefore, from God. Some hear an audible voice or feel led to do something out of character. For others, everything they're attempting to do falls in line so perfectly that God must be behind it.

In these conversations, however, I've never heard anyone express doubt. That may be due to the fear of judgment from other Christians. Doubt, after all, is a dangerous thing for a Christian to have; prayers only get answered if you believe and do not doubt, so any inkling toward a lack of trust in God has the potential to render prayers useless and shatter entire belief systems. Luhrmann, however, acknowledged that learning to recognize the way God speaks -- to distinguish between a self-generated thought and a God-generated thought -- is a hard skill for people to learn because they have to be able to tolerate ambiguity and live with the fact that they could be wrong.

This is why I may never have a Moses-type relationship with God. I have an irrational fear of mistakes, and I hate ambiguity. The fear rarely keeps me from taking action on something I *think* I should do, or on something I think *God* wants me to do, but I hate to move without being sure. And when my decisions don't lead to positive outcomes, I take it as a sign that I was wrong. I bite my tongue to keep relationships intact when friends attempt to cheer me up with Romans 8:28, and I wonder how much faster I would have reached my goals if only I had known God's voice.

This is a rather depressing state to be in, so recently, I stopped doing it. Instead of dedicating myself to the practice of an internal, sensory prayer life in order to experience God, or pouring God a cup of tea in the morning so that we can talk, as Luhrmann's subjects did, I stopped listening for God's voice altogether. I do lightweight prayers ("God, please let me make it to the bus stop on time"), but for what I see as high-stakes decisions -- should I take this job, attend that school, write this in my proposal, move to that city, study this discipline -- I'm at the point where interpreting God's voice gives me the same angst as depending on logic.

This should not be the case for someone who, according to data from the experiments Luhrmann conducted after her field study, has the capacity to experience God at a friend and sensory level. If I'm so invested in the willing suspension of disbelief that I yell at characters when I listen to audiobooks, then surely, I can feel a hug from the Almighty. But it hasn't happened that way -- yet.

God doesn't talk back to me, but I don't doubt his existence or his love. And eventually, the trust I have in him to hold the bus at a traffic light when I'm running late may grow into something more substantial.

[Mariam Williams is a writer born and raised in Louisville, Ky., where she's received numerous arts awards. When not working in the field of social justice research and taking graduate courses in women and gender and Pan-African studies, she blogs at RedboneAfropuff.com. Follow her on Twitter: @missmariamw.]

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