

[Spirituality](#)

[Guest Voices](#)



(Unsplash/Sorasak)

by Tom Carney

[View Author Profile](#)

[**Join the Conversation**](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

February 19, 2018

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

As a child, I attended a parochial school, taught by nuns. We had daily religious education classes and I recall several discussions about what should motivate you to

keep God's commandments and those of the church.

There are basically two motivations, I recall a nun saying. Fear of God's punishment and love of God, and, of course, the latter is preferred.

But I was skeptical. I knew how you could love family members or a sweetheart (I already loved Mary Ann, my best friend's cousin). But God? You can't see him, hear him, touch him or really know him so how can you love him? I wanted to go with love, but had to settle for fear, although I didn't quite understand how the fires of hell squared with a loving God.

I've struggled with those questions much of my life. Some would say, "What a waste of time!" But I believe the struggle has been worth it because love has won out.

Still, for many people searching for God, the question remains: How can you really love God? For me, there are at least three keys.

One is what I believe to be the primordial longing for God that is expressed in the beliefs of primitive peoples around the world. It is voiced exquisitely in [Psalm 42](#) of the Hebrew Bible.

As the deer longs for streams of water,

So my soul longs for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God, the living God.

When can I enter and see the face of God?

My tears have been my bread day and night,

As they ask me every day, "Where is your God?"

Another way to say this is that humans are "programmed" to seek and love God. Social scientists may argue this, but I believe it's evident throughout history and throughout the world.

Advertisement

The second key is a sense of gratitude. Many people today show gratitude toward "the universe," ascribing to it attributes formerly ascribed to God. Personally, I look upon the universe as God's creation and apart from God's presence, it's cold and impersonal, not an entity toward which I can feel any gratitude.

No, I side with the author of the Psalm 42. My gratitude is for the God to whom I owe all that I am and have. And I can relate to the song released by singer and composer Audrey Assad in 2010, whose lyrics are:

You live in a million places

Your fingerprints can be seen on a million faces

There is a trace of you in every hallelujah

Every song that I sing

And for love of you, I'm a sky on fire

And because of you, I come alive

It's your sacred heart within me beating

Your voice within me singing out.

The third key to love of God is, I believe, love of others. The [First Letter of John](#) puts it nicely. "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen." So, love of God expresses itself in love of others.

But what does loving God mean practically, in my daily life? Czech theologian and sociologist Tomas Halik addresses this question elegantly in his book, *I Want You to Be: On the God of Love*.

To love God and experience his love means saying all the time a mature and faithful yes to life — including everything I suffer and everything that remains a mystery and is a source of constant amazement. It

entails knowing about the depths of life even at moments when I am so absorbed by what is happening on its surface that I am scarcely aware of its depths.

It means to give up playing the lord and master of life, of my own life and the lives of others — and to do so with understanding, joy, and freedom. To love God means being profoundly grateful for the miracle of life and expressing that gratitude through my life, assenting to my fate, even when it eludes my plans and expectations.

[Tom Carney, a retired journalist, writes a weekly blog called Skeptical Faith at skepticfaith.blogspot.com. He lives in Des Moines, Iowa.]