

MY SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

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My spiritual journey is really all about putting the big stuff in first. Only, it took me a really long time to figure that out.

I began my journey with putting the sand in the bucket. I was fortunate enough to be born into a family that had absolutely no church ties, never talked about God or spiritual things, in fact, never really talked at all about anything philosophical. Kind of a blank slate.

My mother told me recently that she has always felt that religion and philosophy are personal matters and one did not discuss personal matters with others. An odd way to think, I agree, but one that I was born into. So, I never thought much about religion or spirituality.

My mother had for years been a non-practicing follower of Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Scientists. Her take on that religion was that evil didn't exist—it was all in your mind. Pain didn't exist—it was all in your mind. All is beautiful and lovely and the best of all possible worlds. A bury your head in the sand kind of life style.

Mother always ridiculed church-goers as people who went to church only to be seen by other people and who were phony do-gooders. Churches just wanted your money.

Nevertheless, she did not actively discourage my sister and me from going if we felt like it—she just wasn't about to step foot inside a church.

All my friends knew all the names in the Bible and all the church songs and all the stories and I knew nothing. Many of them went to Catechism, and I thought that had to be the coolest thing to do, even though I had no clue what it was. But, I wanted to be cool and one of the "in" crowd who knew all this stuff. I wanted to know the names of all the pebbles and grains of sand.

There was a Faith Baptist Church kind of across the street from our house and every Sunday we heard the really nice music from the bells in the church and saw all the people dressed up going inside. So, one Sunday when we were about 9 years old, my twin sister and I put on our linen dresses and straw hats and white gloves and patent leather shoes and went to the Faith Baptist Church.

We were lucky enough to be there on the Sunday the minister was fired up and ready to save everyone's souls from the eternal damnation of hell's fire and brimstone. Needless to say, my sister and I were scared to death and never went back there again.

About three years later my friend asked us to go to Vacation Bible School with her—the Methodist Church this time—and we did. I still wanted to know what everybody else already knew. And, I did learn a few names in the Bible, but mostly I learned how to weave a basket—poorly.

I should also probably mention that it was about in this time frame—from the time I was about 8 or 9 and for a couple of years after that—that I KNEW, just KNEW, that I had the answer to some really important question. I KNEW that I was the only one in all the world that had the answer.

Only, I just didn't know the question. I was positive that if someone would just come up to me and ask this question, I'd be ready with the answer and it would be an important one. I never told anyone this, which was probably pretty stupid if I wanted to find the question, but no one talked about weird stuff like philosophy and serious questions in my household.

I remember clearly thinking and thinking about what the question might be, but I never found out. I suppose some of this church going was an attempt to find that question—I don't know.

I imagine, although I've never talked to anyone except Tom about this before, that all kids feel this way—they know something vitally important if only someone would ask them the right question. I doubt if it was only me. But, whatever, in a couple of years I forgot about it and never thought of it again until a few years ago.

I still don't have a clue about what the question was, but I guess growing up erases all that. I wish I had found that question. I wish I knew the answer I was so sure of back then.

Of course, you probably should keep in mind that I also firmly believed I was invisible when I was eight or nine, and I'm pretty sure I wasn't really.

Eventually, I became visible, forgot the remarkable mysterious answer I knew, grew up and got married and Tom and I attended the Presbyterian Church—it was a nice general faith with little dogmatism to worry about. I put on the sackcloth dress of Christianity and it fit loosely but sort of comfortably.

We became increasingly involved with church activities and I learned lots of names of pebbles and grains of sand. I remember when we first started attending church, we got to the part in the service where everyone stands and sings the Doxology—you know, “praise God from whom all blessings flow...”. I thought I was the only one who didn't know the words by heart. I was so embarrassed that I had to have a songbook out to know the words.

Same thing with the Apostle's Creed. I had to read the words out of the book. Eventually, I learned all the words by heart. I was so proud—I made a point of looking around me as I said the words so everyone would know I knew the words.

After about five years—I'm a slow learner—I was having more and more difficulty making myself actually say those words. I didn't believe that Jesus was sitting someplace next to God and judging people. I didn't believe in a virgin birth. And, Jesus rising again from the dead? I don't think so.

So, finally, I just stood alongside everyone else and didn't say the words at all. I had come full circle. The grains of sand and the pebbles didn't mean anything to me anymore.

After we returned from a year or so of living in Germany, Tom and I began attending the Unitarian Church. We were looking for a change and we had read a bit about Unitarianism and it sounded interesting. That first day, walking in and hearing the minister talk about spiritual things that didn't include Jesus and virgins and stuff—it was just like coming home. I felt so free and just right.

My dress of Christian sackcloth was now increasingly itchy and uncomfortable and I needed to change it. So, I stripped off the Christian dress and put on bits and pieces of UUism—made up of Oriental meditation and pieces of agnostic doubt and a hat of paganism.

When we moved to D.C., and tantalizingly close to the source of everything written—the Library of Congress—I spent at least three days every week there—reading about early Christianity.

It was my thought that if I could just go back far enough in Christianity, before the organized Church contaminated everything with politics and power struggles, I might discover what it was that Jesus knew. Then, I'd get some real answers.

In all my searchings I judged not on reason or on logic but on how comfortable and “right” the various ideas made me feel. For me, that's how I know I'm moving in the right direction—MY right direction.

Well, nobody ever thought far enough ahead to have Jesus speak into a tape recorder, so I never found out anymore about his real thoughts. But, in the process of reading and searching, I discovered the Cathars and became intrigued with their ideas of dual forces in the heavens and their simple take on Christian living.

Also about this time, I found cable television. In D.C., I had access to wonderful television programming. I could get anything. One day I tuned in to a guy in a tweed jacket giving a lecture to college students. He was SO enthusiastic in what he was talking about. He was loving this stuff. And he made it sound so vital and interesting. He was exploring comparative mythologies.

This turned out to be a series of lectures over many days. I tuned in every day. It was mesmerizing stuff. It seems people around the world over centuries all had the same or very similar myths about the origins of the world and about god and about virgin births. Fascinating!

The importance of this to me is the fact that we all—everyone—is interconnected. We are all human animals who share a common human drive, a common human need to create a god figure, a common human fear of abandonment in the universe.

I'm sure you've guessed by now that the guy in the tweed jacket was Joseph Campbell. I found out he was famous—I thought he was my own personal private discovery. I found out he had books and books and books published, which I read and loved. Talk about feeling comfortable and right. This was it!

And, because of Joseph Campbell, I found Carl Jung. In particular, I was drawn to his explanation of the archetypes that are common to all of us. We dream, often, of the same images—falling, teeth falling out, flying through wires, wandering through strange houses, getting lost in familiar places, walking around naked among strangers.

It's amazing to me that people who are not otherwise related or who don't know each other, or who are born on different sides of the world, all have these common dream images. We are all connected. We are all part of that great mysterious web of human life.

In recent years, I have discovered Annie Dillard. Annie has given me a very important spiritual tool—humility. Just how important are we humans in the grand scheme of things anyway? I'm still working on that one.

So, that brings me up to the present. I finally found all of you, and my journey is at a very pleasant place indeed. You have given me the warmth and caring and encouragement to get on with my journey and continue trying on new spiritual garments as I change and the old garments don't fit any longer.

If all this has defined my spiritual journey, then good. Personally, I have some difficulty defining what spiritual is, let alone a spiritual journey. The older I get, the less I know about things spiritual, at least, the less able I am to put it into words that would satisfy me.

I have grown more comfortable with who I am and where I am in the vast scheme of things. I like how I fit into the patterns of nature and life. I am reluctant to tie myself down with words that say for all time what I feel spiritually and how I define spirituality. I'm continuing to grow and to learn and to fit more comfortably into my space in this universe.

I have learned a bit. It may not be the ultimate “right”, but it feels right for me right now.

I've learned that if the spiritual garments don't fit or feel comfortable, then take them off and find ones that are.

If the dogma fits a bit too snug around the waist, then get rid of it.

If sustained meditation feels a little loose and sloppy along the hemline, then don't use it. And, orange is definitely NOT my color.

If bowing to Mecca is rough on your hat brim, then don't bow anymore.

Spiritual garments should feel good and natural. Of course, we are all shaped differently and we all have different tastes in clothes, so whichever spiritual garment looks best and feels best on you, then, by all means, wear it.

Second, I've learned that we are all part of life; a surprising and amazing part, but just a part. All of us are rural people. We live close to nature. Many of us have built our homes in the middle of woods. Most of us are sailors and have spent hours on the bays and oceans and lakes of the world. Consequently, we are all aware of how small our human part of the big picture really is.

When I am in our boat and the shoreline disappears and all I can see is water and sky, I realize that my existence is not all that important. I'm just a speck on the ocean. If I were to be sucked under the water, the world would still go on functioning just as well as if I had never been.

When we hike through the deserts of Texas every winter, we see on occasion lines of marching farmer ants, all carrying pieces of green leaves back to their homes to be turned into fertilizer for their food supply. If one of those ants gets stepped on, the others pick up the piece of green leaf and keep right on marching. Their world still needs that leaf, their world keeps on living.

Annie Dillard makes the point that Nature is incredibly wasteful. Millions and millions of baby sea turtles are hatched every year. They struggle through incredible odds to reach the sea. Most are eaten before they even reach the water. Many more are eaten as soon as they enter the water. But those that remain live to reproduce and make more baby sea turtles who then will have to run that terrible gauntlet. All to reproduce their species and keep life churning on.

Billions of cute cuddly baby bunnies are born every year. They struggle for food so they can grow and become mama bunnies on their own. Everything and their cousin is out there waiting to eat them—hawks and coyotes and bobcats and humans. But, every year, some survive this slaughter and they produce more bunnies to keep life churning on.

We humans are no different. Every year, humans produce millions of crying naked helpless babies. The baby struggles for years before it can even feed itself and protect

itself from the cold. Many die in the process. Disease, abuse, ignorance kills many. If the baby survives those years, it struggles for longer still to get through the agonizing teenage years. Finally, it is old enough to reproduce itself. And life keeps churning on.

Every living thing is born with just one big goal—to live long enough to reproduce itself and keep its species alive. Nature wastes billions of living creatures just to ensure that a few make it through. We humans are just a small part in that process. We are born to reproduce and keep our species going. This is what we have been about for millennia. My life is just a teeny piece in that process. And, all the interesting stuff that happens along the way in our lives is just gravy.

Annie Dillard agonizes over the enormous loss of all kinds of life during the simple process of recreating ourselves. Billions of insects hatched so that a handful can live and reproduce. Millions of seedlings blown into the wind so that a handful can survive and reproduce. Millions of baby bunnies born so that a handful can survive and reproduce. Millions of human babies born so that a handful can survive and reproduce. What waste!

In this quote, Annie uses the analogy of a railroad train to illustrate the gross wastefulness of this system (and of the god that created the system.)

“Say you are a manager of the Southern Railroad. You figure that you need three engines for a stretch of track between Lynchburg and Danville. It’s a mighty steep grade. So, at fantastic effort and expense you have your shops make nine thousand engines. Each engine must be fashioned just so, every rivet and bolt secure, every wire twisted and wrapped, every needle on every indicator sensitive and accurate.

You send all nine thousand of them out on the runs. Although there are engineers at the throttles, no one is manning the switches. The engines crash, collide, derail, jump, jam, burn....At the end of the massacre you have three engines, which is what the run could support in the first place. There are few enough of them that they can stay out of each others’ paths.

You go to your board of directors and show them what you’ve done. And what are they going to say? You know what they’re going to say. They’re going to say: It’s a heck of a way to run a railroad.

Is it a better way to run a universe?”

Although that sounds like a dismal thought, it doesn’t depress me. It just says to me that we are indeed a part of a huge picture. We’re part of the flow of life. I can sit back and enjoy the beauty around me, the awesomeness of nature, the comedy of life.

If I can create a little humor or beauty or interest in that life, so much the better. If I can make the journey easier for those that follow, or safer, or lovelier, I’ve done my job.

I don't know if there's a god that started all this life in motion and is somewhere overseeing it. Or if this god just started things going and then went off to do something else. If there is, I don't know if this god cares any more about humans than it does about the bunnies and the sea turtles. My believing or not in this god won't make its existence any more true.

If there is a god, and there is life after death, then wonderful! But, I can't do anything to impact that, so my worrying about it won't change anything. I will continue to live my life the same one way or the other.

So, my spiritual journey has led me to not knowing if God exists. It has led me to not knowing if there is life after death. I've journeyed all this way and still haven't found out either of the two really big answers to the two really big questions.

But, this spiritual journey hasn't been a total waste, I guess. It has taught me a few simple answers to living my life. If you have visited my studio, you know what those answers are—they're painted in large print around the walls of the room. THIS is the big stuff.

- “She who laughs, lasts.” This I've put first because it is just so very important to my life. Laughter is what makes the world magical and sometimes even tolerable. People say that love makes the world go round. I think that's wrong—it's laughter. The joy in a single really good deep laugh is essential to me.
- “Great women are never predictable.” Need I say more?
- “If it's out of reach, stretch.” This one pretty much explains itself. NEVER settle for the ordinary—always stretch for that little bit more. If you think you just can't do it—you can. Try harder.
- “To sleep, perchance to dream; perchance to mess with reality.” We must, as human animals, go through life pretty much as our genes and basic natures govern. But, it is also our duty to sometimes reach outside of the norm and the patterns laid out for us and do something off the wall, something unexpected, something special and wonderful.
- “No matter where you go, there you are.” I like this one on several levels. No matter where you go, there you are! Like, live with whatever you end up with. Or, no matter where you go, THERE you are! No matter where you go, you are right where you are supposed to be—the best place to be. Or, no matter where you go, there YOU are. Wherever you are, you have all the time with you, yourself—to support you, to laugh with you, to say, “you're doing all right.”

- “Just do it.” I think this is a Nike ad slogan. But, it has proven very very useful to me. I’m not a brave person. I like to hide in a nice safe shell. So, when I find myself cringing at doing something unfamiliar or unpleasant, I tell myself, “just do it!” And that’s all the push I need to get out there and get on with life. Life is about experiencing all there is to experience. If we’re only going around once, then “just do it!”
- “Just dance the steps.” This is supposedly from a story about Mikhail Baryshnikov, the great ballet dancer. When Baryshnikov was just a beginning dancer, in a dance troupe, he was puzzled about his part in the ballet and wanted to figure out the whole story so he could find his place better in his little part. The choreographer told him, “Don’t worry what the whole ballet is about—just dance the steps.” What a great answer when we start to worry about what’s it all about. Don’t worry about if god exists or the meaning of life—just dance the steps. Do your part and rest of the great mystery will take care of itself.
- “Time flies, whether you’re having fun or not.” Life is short. But, it’s the same length whether you’re enjoying yourself or whether you’re trudging along with your head down. Have fun! Don’t take life too seriously. Don’t worry about the sand and the pebbles. Get the big stuff in and the rest will take care of itself.
- “Follow your bliss”. This is a quote from Joseph Campbell, my idol. What else can be more important in your life than this? If you aren’t doing what makes you feel complete, what makes you blissful, then you shouldn’t be doing it. Oh, sure, there are lots of things we all have to do that we don’t want to do. How blissful is it to wash the clothes or file income taxes? But that’s the small stuff. If you aren’t following your bliss for the really big stuff in your life, the stuff you spend the most of your time on, then you’re not making the most of the precious time you have here on earth. Follow your bliss!
- And this is one that hasn’t made my wall yet because I just found it a month or so ago. I saw a pickup with a camper on the back. An American Indian was living in it, going from place to place, mostly watching birds. The pickup camper was covered—covered—with stickers. A lot of stickers of all the different states this Indian had visited. But also stickers that apparently he just liked and slapped onto his pickup. The sticker that caught my eye and one that I intend to add to the wall in my studio says, “Cram It All In.” I love that. Cram it all in. Do it all. See it all. Put as much into your life as you can cram in. Don’t worry about getting hurt or getting robbed or getting lost. Just cram it all in. Don’t worry about what the neighbors will think. Don’t worry about what the children will say. Don’t worry about how old you feel. Experience life. Cram it all in.