

"Taking a Hike and Keeping the Door Open: Spirituality Is Where You Find It (Or It Finds You?)"

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I had intended to present a smooth flowing text weaving together a series of vignettes about experiences in my life that were spiritual in nature for me. What you hear may feel more like hopping around. Part of that is because I found that "spirituality" is difficult if not impossible to tie up in a neat little package. I hope that you will bear with me and find some food for thought.

During my research for this presentation I came across a blog that contained a discussion of "Spiritual, But Not Religious" by David Breeden. I have decided to start with that brief article rather than a definition of spirituality.

"Ekstasis," the Greek word from whence comes the English word "ecstatic," means displacement or trance. It literally means being "beside yourself." Notice that the word includes the term "static." Meaning, the same; autopilot. "Ek" is a Greek preposition meaning "out" or "from". Ek-static is being out of our spaces. This state is a central focus of religious and spiritual practice.

Definitions can be slippery, but the difference between "religion" and "spirituality" is important. "Spirituality," as I see it, is our impulse to awe and wonder in the face of human reality. We do lots of things with this impulse, including art and philosophy, dancing and hiking. Lots of things. Anything that pushes our impulse of awe and wonder toward what we call transcendence – toward getting outside our static, autopilot selves – is "spiritual."

So... Where does "religion" come in? A particular religion proposes (and sometimes requires) a particular set of actions and beliefs that a particular tradition has developed over time. For example, Hatha Yoga in Hindu practice leads to "yoking" with the divine. It also can be, even when divorced from its religious roots, very good exercise. Union with the divine is also the aim of many of the sacraments practiced in Christian traditions. In religions, the spiritual impulse is harnessed, if you will, to a set of predetermined practices. The end is, ideally the same, however: turning off the autopilot. Transcendence.

Spirituality is the impulse; religion is a technique. So, when someone says "I'm spiritual but not religious," chances are that the person likes to paint, dance, play kazoo, hike, or what – have – you, to find a sense of awe and wonder that leads to transcendence. Or perhaps a person mixes two or three or more religious traditions."

Breeden uses the word "transcendence" and other words may apply as well. Thus, when I was discussing my preparation for this presentation with a friend, he asked me, "What did you experience backpacking up Firebox Canyon in the Rock Creek area? Did you think of clinical notes, politics, an oil change for your car?" After a moment of consideration, I answered, "I felt the cold water on my legs crossing a stream. I felt blessed to be able to backpack like that, especially with my son. As I viewed those huge rock walls around me, and later, higher up, the prairie far below to the east and the mountain peaks to the west, I was reminded of the vastness of the universe and my infinitely tiny part in it. My friend suggested that experiences of that type can be

transformative. Indeed, being open to experience and reflective in regard to experience respects the one constant in life - change. It often allows one to adjust and move with change in thoughtful response more so than with reactive emotion. At the same time, it allows both thoughtful response and reactive emotion to occur as each is a part of the whole person, the whole experience, and the whole universe. Thoughtful response allows reflection and reactive emotion allows that gasping of breath when suddenly encountering something awe inspiring. Each has its place as a part of the whole and, in that sense, they are connected. John Muir, the great naturalist said, "When you try to pick something up by itself you find it's connected to everything else in the universe." I think he's absolutely right.

As you can see, being there in the experience is essential. However, if one's focus is on the campsite at the end of the trail, one can miss all that is along the trail. One can be lost in the focus on how fast one is moving from point to point and miss everything else. That is not to judge that kind of determined focus because it, at times, has its purpose. Thus, a search and rescue team may move as quickly as safety allows on the way to help an injured backpacker. Or if one is caught in one heckuva storm, it's hard to be transcendent when one is exhausted, hungry, cold, wet, and slopping through the muck. Also consider the fact that an awe inspired gasp is hard to achieve when one is sucking wind. On the other hand, if you've raced to arrive ahead of the storm, having a full belly and being warm and dry in one's tent while the rain ponds down around you can be a spiritual experience.

The experience of spirituality is not always born of a brief moment nor is it always matter of beauty. It is often, maybe always, one's internal experience of an external context entering through one's own life filters. Thus, one may struggle through a series of difficult circumstances and, reflecting back on those circumstances, realize that a transformation has occurred in oneself and in how one views one's world and lives in it. Just such a set of circumstances occurred for me over an 18 month period during my 23rd and 24th years of life.

In April of 1968 as an active duty 2Lt. in the U.S. Army Medical Service Corps, I applied for the status of 1A0 Conscientious Objector. My first application was turned down because, according to the Army, my application was based on a "merely personal moral code." Thus, with the assistance of an ACLU lawyer in Seattle, I reapplied. I had to articulate my thinking and feeling in regard to this issue in a manner that the Army could hear me. I sent my second application up the chain of command. It crossed paths with two new regulations coming down from the Conscientious Objector Review Board, one requiring an assessment by a psychiatrist and another requiring an assessment by a minister. I was deemed the sane and since I was able to quote 1st Corinthians 13 and the Golden Rule and stated that, "If God is love, I believe in God.", I was considered religious enough. Along with my application were support letters from family and friends, even some who did not agree with me, who attested to my sincerity. On October 12, 1968, seven months after I first applied, I received notice that my application had been approved.

Shortly thereafter, I volunteered for duty in Vietnam. I did this for three reasons. First, I needed to test my belief that war is not the answer. Maybe I was wrong. Second, I believed that, whatever the outcome of this test, for some, I would have a right to an opinion only because I had been there. I learned all of us have a right to an opinion no matter what. Finally, there was a part of me as a young man that wondered what Bruce Andrews could handle. The essence of that wondering is well articulated by Norman Maclean in his book about smokejumpers, "Young Men and Fire".

Maclean writes,

..."It is very important to a lot of people to make unmistakably clear to themselves and to the universe that they love the universe but are not intimidated by it and will not be shaken by it, no matter what it has in store. Moreover, they demand something from themselves early in life that can be taken ever after as a demonstration of this abiding feeling.

For many former Smokejumpers, then, smokejumping is not tied up closely with their way of life, but is more something necessary for them to pass through and not around and, once it is unmistakably done, does not have to be done again. The 'it' is within, and is the need to settle some things with the universe and ourselves before taking on the 'business of the world, 'which isn't all that special or hard but takes time. This 'it' is the something special within that demands we do something special, and 'it' could be within a lot of us."

Was I scared by what this decision and action might mean? In a saying of that era, "You bet your sweet bippy I was scared!" However, I was going on my terms without a weapon. If I were to take another's life, it would be my decision and not on someone else's order. That was my primary aim in all of this.

From this experience and my tour in Vietnam that followed, I learned a lot. What an understatement. There is a saying that goes something like this, "Behold the turtle, it only makes progress when it sticks its neck out." That saying took on real meaning for me. Although I didn't have the words for it at the time, I experienced something that, in a very real sense, allowed me to carry on my life with less struggling. What I'd done and was doing felt right. There was a greater certainty - not an absolute certainty. I get nervous when I feel absolutely certain. However, I experienced a synch or a flow or a continuity that was new to me and seemed to fit. That eighteen month experience was transformative for me. "God is love" pretty much became "agape" for me. At the same time, I feel one can use one's own terms for God. The Golden Rule, I learned, was written in the religious texts of almost all major religions. How one lives that is up to the individual. In a very real sense, it is a matter of conscience.

Another example of a matter of conscience is one shared by Jo Lynn and me. We became former members of the Presbyterian Church when its general assembly decided that the homosexuals were more than welcome to attend its churches only if they chose not to be homosexual. We could not abide that. We talked it over with our minister who supported the general assembly. Thus, we had to move on and here we are today with our hearts and minds in synch.

For me, a discussion of spirituality would not be complete without including music. Of those things that lead me to a sense of transcendence, music is certainly one of them. At times, I simply find myself lost in music. I am transported to a place where nothing else seems to exist, but the music in the moment. I guess one could call it an out-of-body experience. More accurately for me would be a term like "an in-of-body experience." In one of his college term papers, Doug proposed, far more eloquently than I, that, in the arena of human emotions, the art of music serves where words will never suffice.

Spirituality exists in many forms. Next is an area to which I think most of you can relate. It has to do with taking pride while trying hard not to be prideful. This has happened when I have had the privilege of observing my daughter, Amy, as she plied her professional craft as a special education teacher in behavioral classrooms.

I have spent many hours over the years observing students and their teachers in classrooms and I know excellent teaching when I see it. I have come away from Amy's classrooms knowing that her students are being taught by a highly skilled professional and, more important, they are loved and respected for who they are. That love and respect are returned not only by her students, but also by her colleagues. I know because they have told me each in their own ways.

As for Doug, many of you already know of his skills as a singer/songwriter as they currently exist. I know from whence they came. Doug is just as dedicated to the learning, development and application of his craft as his sister is to hers. What he does has depth. That is part of who he is. His product speaks for itself. More important to me, though, is when people say to me, "For all his gifts and how he shares them, he's still a really nice young man."

Those of you who know me know that my family is the most important thing to me in my life. In family, the seeds of relationship are planted, tended, and grown within and beyond the family circle in which they are rooted. Fortunately, I am blessed to have in my life Jo Lynn, who has let me hang around for almost 40 years. I guess you could say she has the patience of Job's wife. Lucky for me! There was a spiritual moment at one time that directly involved her, although she wasn't present. I was on a backpacking trip with a neighbor, his daughter and his daughter's best friend. We were going to climb Cloud Peak and we were based camped at Misty Moon Lake. The girls had their tent and my neighbor and I had ours. This was at about the time when a group called Promise Keepers would gather literally thousands of men in football stadiums to jointly reaffirm their fidelity to their partners. Their spiritual guidance came from scripture in the Bible and, to my knowledge, it served them well. My friend, having witnessed Jo's and my relationship for a number of years, asked me what guided our committed relationship. Since we talked for over three hours, I'll not tell you all of my answer. Suffice it to say that we concluded our conversation with him still doubtful about my answer.

Essentially, what I told him was that I learned how to be a husband and a partner and a Dad from my father and my mother through how they conducted their marriage and parenting relationship and from my Jo in how she participates in ours. I learned that there is no women's work or men's work. There is shared work that needs to be done to take care of a home and the family relationships within it. Each person in the partnership and in the family as a whole does their part in order to share in that which is family. There is awe and wonder in that. To me there's nothing more spiritual than that.

For me then, in this moment of my life, spirituality is not as much where you find it or it finds you, as it is what you make it through your own experience, reflection, and action.