

## On Becoming Spiritual

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What you are about to read may not be what has really happened or is happening to me, but it will be my true story. The reference for this idea will be revealed later, and in the meantime, I appreciate Michael Hudson's confidence that I have something meaningful to say. I hope that my remarks will be worthy of your time.

Much work focusing on human development and growth, including both the heart and the mind, has contributed to where I am today in my spiritual life. I believe all personal growth is potentially spiritual in nature, and that spiritual development is personal. The title of my remarks, "On Becoming Spiritual," is rooted in Carl Rogers' classic book, *On Becoming a Person*. "On Becoming Spiritual" is meaningful to me because it emphasizes, "becoming" in the active sense of the word; it reflects a process and not an end. If Bob Dylan can add credibility to this, he has stressed how he values being "in a constant state of becoming."

I was received into the Episcopal Church this past spring and, until just last year, encounters with this church could essentially be counted on one hand. I first heard of the religion while in high school and Jonathan Winters, the comedian, defined an Episcopalian as a Catholic who has flunked his Latin. Firsthand experiences include funeral services over the past 30 years held in St. David's, St. John's in Sylva, and The Cathedral of All Souls in Asheville. One wintery Saturday five years ago I sat alone in St. David's while the service was being held in an Episcopal Church in Southern California for my deceased college freshman roommate. Certainly, there must have been a reason other than the deaths of friends for my awareness of the church. Indeed, there was; The Reverend Michel Dubord granted permission for me to tent camp behind St. John's Anglican Church while on a solo 200-mile trek in Canada four years ago. The following year I had the opportunity to meet him face-to-face and learned some of his Anglican views. These, I believe, teased me into learning more.

My religious upbringing and family history of Methodist ministers on my mother's side have long escaped my memory, but no doubt influenced where I am today. So have my serious consideration of Native American spirituality, the philosophy of Buddhism, the poetry of Sufis, and a wide range of other rich sources of inspiration and wisdom, including reggae music. These have been part of my studies and self examination for decades.

I find myself returning often to Robert Pirsig's powerful book, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. I have engaged in meditation, off and on since formal instruction 35 years ago and, yes, I am now largely on. I have believed since my twenties in the pursuit of becoming a whole person, a fully integrated human being where the various aspects of life (e.g., work, family, social, spiritual) are seamlessly interrelated. Such is life, the personal and the relational aspects are inseparable.

It is my intention that the impact of church be infused in my life, and know I can learn from both spiritual and concrete experiences. For example, while reading Foer's novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, I noted 9-year old Oskar Schell, the main character, telling the story of Stalin having the arms broken of residents in a Russian artists' community. Unable to feed themselves while in casts, they fed each other. Here, the difference between hell and heaven is explained in terms of people starving in the former, whereas in heaven they feed each other. Oskar goes on to say he doesn't believe in the afterlife, but he believes in the story. How meaningful, like Marcus Borg's attention to postcritical naiveté or, like in a footnote in *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, where he accounts a "Native American storyteller who always began telling his tribe's story of creation by saying, 'Now, I don't know if it happened this way or not, but I know this story is true.'"

I have not let much Christianity, at least in the formally defined sense, into my adult life. Have I considered it too prescriptive? Too complex? Too abstract? Too much hard work? These are questions I am asking myself; over the course of the past couple of years I have been curious about my dismissing religion as a part of my life. As much as I tried, even while beginning to attend St. David's over a year ago, what I was hearing and seeing frankly didn't move me. I found myself dwelling on Christian lessons and experiences others found moving and asking, "So what, for me?" I suspect this recurring question put me in crisis and I sought answers. As I put it to Michael very early this year as I appealed for help, "I just don't get it." He enabled me to make a sharp turn, of course.

An error, I believe, was that I was dismissing my own practice of valuing and subscribing to a *process* of development and was seeking *the* answer; in this case, I was attributing meaning to the end of knowing and not valuing the means. I am still trying to transform from one mode of thinking and practicing to another, and am finding it difficult. I am still trying to become comfortable facing the mystery which is spoken of so frequently, and living the satisfying life depicted in Robert Graves' poem, "In Broken Images," which closes, "I in a new understanding of my confusion." Richard Rohr said, "When we really know, we always know that we don't know."

Let me explain a bit about some of my beliefs in life and hopefully add clarity to what I've just said. Several years ago, as I approached completion of building a 14-foot wooden rowboat, I considered it necessary to name her. To not do so just would not have been prudent; likewise, she was christened. I certainly did not want be on the wrong side of the Gods of the Sea, that would be foolhardy! I named my boat Peregrinatio because of how I wanted to use her, but it also has come to have meaning related to how I wish to live my life.

The Latin word, Peregrinatio, has one of its meanings as ". . .the medieval practice whereby a monk or pilgrim would climb into a small coracle without oars or sail, push out to sea and go where the winds and waves took him." I am not courageous enough nor do I possess the faith--something I will get to shortly--to believe I would go to sea ". . . where God intended, undirected by fallible human agency" (AJ Mackinnon, *The Unlikely Voyage of Jack de Crow*). About to embark on a 125-mile, human-powered journey by water with our son two years ago, I did not want to get hung up on a goal or destination, but rather to relish in the process of the trip. I was successful in this regard, despite weather-related trials

and questions of doubt, especially during the first full days of rowing. For me, wandering was a remarkable experience and is still part of my practice when I'm on the water.

Returning to my current place in the church, I am more comfortable than a year ago experiencing St. David's and the Episcopal Church although I am nothing more than a pilgrim. Yes, I am still seeking answers and find myself working incredibly hard to not be distracted by narrowly focusing on asking for "the answer." My "not getting it" is still frustrating and perhaps the grand question for me has been who and/or what is God? I seem to always get stuck desiring something concrete; yet, seeking definitive answers is usually uncharacteristic of me. The notion of *spirit* of God is helpful to me, however; maybe because spirit has so very much usage and meaning in my life . . . team spirit, *esprit de corps*, reference to spirited discussions, in the spirit of the law, etc.

While preparing this essay, I have had a number of eye opening experiences. The good news is that these have revealed inconsistencies in my own thinking and feeling. I have emphasized for decades now, in my classes focusing on the human side of work organizations, the need to value process. Pay attention to process! Trust the process, I've told students *ad nauseum*! Yet, here I have been trying to make sense of Christian thought and looking for answers, ignoring the process.

Furthermore, I have long recognized the necessity of faith in so many aspects of life. As an educator, what has kept me engaged? Faith in students; after all, this work is done not for the semester of a class per se, but for the future well-being of graduates and the people they touch in their lives. Without faith, why would I persevere? What helps make for success in complex human enterprises? Faith in the organization and its purpose, faith in its membership, and so on. What keeps paramedics going? While watching Nicolas Cage's character, Frank Pierce, in *Bringing Out the Dead*, it must have been faith that kept him going in the face of tragedy after tragedy.

Some of you have seen, or will see and discuss, the film *Doubt*. Among other things, to me this was about faith and experiencing the agony of questioning one's faith. While questioning can alleviate some confusion, it can lead to a different state of confusion. Recall Graves' notion that this can be a place of new understanding.

Perhaps faith is not an end. It, too, can be conceived as a process and I might have been thinking about it in unconstructive ways. Maybe it *is* like Father Brendan Flynn stated in *Doubt*, "There is a wind behind every one of us that takes us through our lives. We never see it. We can't command it; we don't even know its purpose." Isn't this the experience of a sailor? Doesn't the sailor, even on a calm sea, believe in the wind? "He knows that it is there . . . He knows that he can seek it, but this seeking is with limits, and he accepts the limits, though he may curse them" (P.B. Vaill, *OD Practitioner*).

So here I am, having difficulty experiencing this thing called faith within the context of religion. What makes this so? Why can I grasp and embrace the meaning and role of faith in some of life, and even profess it, yet have difficulty related to lessons offered by the church? This, I do not know, but my pursuit of the answer is part of my becoming . . . spiritual. Or, at least I hope so. Foremost in my mind is that Marcus Borg (*Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*) reinforced the belief that faith, and not

reason, can lead to knowing. I do believe, as I read long ago, "The heart has reason that reason does not understand."

Returning to an earlier question of mine, is there something about the church that makes understanding things so difficult for me? No, it's not about the readings, the hymns, the rituals . . . it's about me! What this means, of course, is that only I can ultimately address my concerns.

The Right Reverend Spong, in a videotaped lecture entitled, "Beyond Theism, But Not Beyond God," I believe said there is no human way of completely understanding God. Nonetheless, my being human is not an excuse for seeking understanding.

As an aside, while my remarks may sound like my search has been lonely, it has not. I have the good fortune of having friends help me along the way, people like Curtis Wood and Newt Smith; a mentor and former professor, Barney Offerman, who read my remarks and responded with rich ideas to help me on my quest and even left a phone message yesterday to read the Pope's new *Encyclical*; Linda, who, for example, reminded me of the role of faith in Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find*; and our son, Tyler, who also read my remarks and posed questions I am not even able to answer at this time. Much work is to be done!

In conclusion, and attending to valuing process and the imperative of faith, I once again think of the use of my boat. As I named her Peregrinatio out of wanting to wander and to practice experiencing presence, not to get to specific destinations, I hope I am a spiritual wanderer, a learner who has and has had rich opportunities to experience teachers in a variety of places. For this ongoing journey I am grateful, and I am finding "the way" is far more meaningful to me than getting "the what." Here I am, not knowing what's happening to me or what I'm really talking about, but having a fascinating experience . . . characterized by frustration, wonder, and a little joy thrown in at times.

I stated earlier I believe spiritual development is personal so I will close with a poem having meaning to me, "Eat Your Own Fruit" by Anthony de Mello (*The Song of the Bird*):

A disciple once complained,

"You tell us stories, but you never  
reveal their meaning to us."

Said the master,

"How would you like it if someone  
offered you fruit and masticated it  
before giving it to you?"