

A Personal Odyssey

This is an account based on one aspect of my life. The theme employed encompasses those events that are religious or spiritual in nature.

My earliest recollection of religion was during the time when my father was overseas in the U.S. Army and my mother and I were living with her parents in Nashville, Tennessee. My grandparents, my mother and I attended a local Baptist church that was within walking distance of my grandparents' home. I recall standing on the bench beside my mother so that I could see over the heads of those seated in front of us. What I most remember from that church experience was hymn singing. My maternal grandfather (Papa Spann), according to his eulogy*, was an active supporter of the local negro (black) church and helped raise funds to support the church. Probably not unrelated to this support was his practice of reverse integrating the city buses when he rode them. Most trips were by city bus and whenever I went with him on a bus trip we always sat in the back with the black passengers.

I also have early recollections of being admonished to avoid swearing and using the "Lord's name in vain" at the risk of being struck by lightning. I don't recall specifically who did this admonishing but the most likely sources were my paternal grandmother and aunt who both lived in the same general area. I should for the sake of accuracy point out that none of my paternal relatives are actually biologically related to me. My father was abandoned as a very young child and was reared by the Smith family whose members I had a familial relationship with all of my life. After my father's return, we lived on campus, in married student housing, at Vanderbilt University. I am told that my father did a double undergraduate major in English and chemistry and then went on to do a masters degree in English, all of which was done in 39 months.

As my father was completing school, we moved into a house that was owned by the Smiths and my father taught high school English for one year. During this time I recall running in an empty field not far from the house and taking a fall. I remember "taking the Lord's name in vain" in the course of this event. With some anxiety I awaited the promised lightening strike, which of course never came. After several minutes without retribution and being an experimentalist even at that young age I repeatedly challenged the heavens to do their best. Nothing. I walked out of that field a confirmed doubter in the "wraith of God."

Following my completion of the second grade my father took a position teaching English at Meridian Junior College and we moved to Mississippi. My father, in my recollection up to this point, had not attended church, nor had my mother since leaving her parents home. Once we settled in Meridian, my mother took up religion again and with me in tow she began attending a nearby Baptist church. My father did not attend nor did my only sibling at the time who was too young. During my attendance, I "joined" the church and was baptized.

In the summer, I would ride either the train or bus from Meridian to Nashville and spend a few weeks with my paternal grandmother and grandfather. I saw little of the latter since he worked as a night watchman and slept in the daytime. Mama Smith belonged to the Church of the Nazarene and she frequently took me with her on Sunday. Papa Smith never attended church as far as I can recall. The most vivid recollection I have about this church was the singing which was accompanied by a lot of movement and activity.

Mama Smith often told me that movies were the work of the devil but had apparently struck a compromise with him. She gave me admission fare to the nearby local movie theater on Saturdays so that I could go and watch the serial and double feature (usually westerns). She also purchased a TV to give me an additional reason to come and visit her since we did not have a TV at home and the only station in the state of Mississippi at that time was located some distance from us in the capitol of Jackson. We would not have a TV until after we moved to Madison, TN.

After a few years at Meridian Junior College, my father decided that there was no future in teaching English. We moved back to Nashville and lived for a few months with Mama and Papa Smith, until my father acquired a house in Madison, Tennessee. My father enrolled in a graduate program at Vanderbilt in audio-speech pathology and took a full-time, night job as a chemist with Avco Manufacturing Corporation.

After getting settled in Madison, my mother found a local church she liked and began trying to drag me along with her. I balked. First, I was now old enough and big enough that I could successfully assert myself with her. In particular, I recall an incident where she was trying to get me to put on some dress slacks and a white shirt to wear to church and I said I would only go if I could wear my jeans. I knew that this was entirely unacceptable to her. An extended argument ensued about proper attire to wear to church. My position was that if God cared what I wore to

church I didn't have any use for him. She refused to let me wear jeans and I did not attend church with her while we lived in Madison.

After my father completed his graduate program, he accepted a position as head of the Fairhaven School for retarded children in Atlanta and we moved to Decatur, Georgia. My mother went back on her "crusade" and wanted to "turn a new leaf" now that my father was no longer occupied all the time with school and work. She wanted the entire family to attend a local Baptist church. My father relented and agreed that we would all go and continue going until the first time they showed up at the house soliciting money. I went since my father had agreed that we would all attend. It was only one week before a representative of the church's building fund committee showed up at the door. Thereafter, only my mother and siblings attended. Sometime after we moved to Decatur I became acquainted with the word atheist and decided it fit with my outlook. Thereafter, I described myself as an atheist.

Just after I began my senior year in high school, I was out with a group of friends one Sunday driving around the metro Atlanta area. One of the guys in the car kept saying, "We're going to have a wreck. Take me home." There was nothing about how we were driving that would cause him any alarm and he was hardly the type that got alarmed about much anyway. He definitely had never in our experience been known to voice premonitions. Of course, we all scoffed at his declaration and ignored him. He continued to request to be taken home. Eventually, we did drop him off and a couple of others as well. Finally, there was just the driver and I left in the car and we headed for my house. It had begun to rain and had gotten dark. We came around a curve and entered a long straight stretch of highway that was close to the turn off for my house. A car was coming toward us and another car was in the process of passing it. The car that was passing spun out and ran the other car off the road. The car began spinning round and round and drifting from one side of the road to the other. It finally went off the road on our side and then came back on the road just in time to hit us head on while it was broadside in the road forming a letter T with the two vehicles.

I went partially through the windshield and back into the car. When everything came to a stop I sat there briefly and then asked the driver how he was. He had hit the steering wheel with his face and made a total mess of his mouth. He managed to get out of the car and come around and help me get the door open on the passenger side so I could get out. We were just standing there in the rain trying take in what had happened when the guy that had been run off the road appeared. He looked at me and said something to the effect that I was bleeding to death. He

grabbed me by the arm and rushed me to his car and we took off down the highway. I had felt wetness on my face but thought it was water from the rain. As we drove down the highway I became aware of a gritty feeling in my eyes and realized it was probably glass from the windshield. I recall trying to keep my eyes very still so as not to do any more damage than had already been done.

We soon arrived at the emergency room in a university hospital where I went into shock. While I was lying on the table violently shaking, I overheard two physicians talking. They were basically saying that I had lost a lot of blood and needed a transfusion of whole blood and that they didn't have enough of the right type. I later learned that a student from the theology school on campus who had my somewhat rare (5%) blood type responded to a call and came in to donate some additional blood. I remember seriously praying for the first time in my life while lying on that table. There is some truth to the old saying that there are no atheists in foxholes. I was looking for help from any quarter that might be available. In this prayer I proposed a deal. Let me live and I would acquiesce to serving in the military. This was in the days of military conscription and the draft rubbed my libertarian sensibilities the wrong way but it was about all I could think of to put on the table, so to speak.

I spent several hours in surgery having glass picked out of my face and initial repair work done that resulted in about 350 stitches in my face. I spent nearly a week in the hospital with my face completely covered by bandages, including my eyes. When I asked about my eye sight I kept getting evasive answers. It was a great relief when the bandages were removed and I found that I still had my eyesight though I was missing an eyelid and couldn't close that eye. Needless to say, my face was a mess and once my injuries had healed I began a series of plastic surgery procedures to reconfigure my face.

About a year after the accident, I was sitting looking at the contrast provided by two photos. One was my senior picture for the school annual that had been taken a couple of weeks prior to the accident and the other was a "before" picture taken in the plastic surgeon's office before he began the operations on my face. Spontaneously, a strong wave of emotion swept through me. I had the distinct feeling that the person pictured from before the accident no longer existed. At first, I interpreted the feelings that I was experiencing as sadness but this gave way to something akin of a sense of an exuberant Aha! I realized that a transformation was taking place. The "self" in the school picture was free of all personal history that had defined that selfhood. At the time this was simply an intuitive sense but today I would say that what I realized was the fictive nature of the self. Our sense of who

we are, our ego, is an act of creative self-expression. Unfortunately, we tend to view this creation as "writ in stone" and surrender ourselves to the dictates of this fiction as if we are its puppets. This realization set me free of the past and what had been constructed from it. This sense of freedom was liberating and marked the beginning of a redefinition of myself and one that had a degree of fluidity inherent in it. This was what today I would call a noetic* experience.

*The word noetic refers to "inner understanding," a kind of intuitive consciousness—direct and immediate access to knowledge beyond what's obtainable to our normal senses.

One result of this noetic experience was a question that began to creep into my thoughts. That question was simply if "ego" or "self" is a fiction, created from the way we pick from among our memories of our experiences and then spin them into a narrative, who is making these choices and creating the interpretation of them? This led me to an interest in psychology and philosophy and especially religious philosophies from India, China and Japan. In the course of searching out such books in local bookstores I ran across a biography titled There is a River. This was a biography by Thomas Sugrue of the psychic Edgar Cayce. In this biography there was a section based on Cayce readings about reincarnation and the eternal nature of the soul or consciousness that cyclically inhabited our physical bodies. This resonated strongly with me and seemed to be pointing toward an answer to my question. Also, about this time I had a friend who kept trying to get me to read the Christian Bible. Given that I had begun a trip "down the rabbit hole," I agreed to take a look and let him know what I thought.

About this time, I was in the process of moving to Knoxville, Tennessee to live with my family and take my father up on his offer to put me through college. Prior to this I had been attending night school taking what today would be called "developmental courses" to compensate for some of the many deficits I had from high school. Before I could make the arrangements to move to Knoxville, I was called up for a draft physical where I was told to expect induction into the Army within 90 days. I was determined to go to college and looked for a way to get around the potential draft call.

I was employed in a Georgia DOT lab on the Georgia Tech campus and one day at lunch time walked over to the Naval ROTC and Naval Reserve building on campus. I was informed that if I joined the USNR that I could get a deferment from active duty until I completed college and would have a two year active duty obligation, which was no longer than I would have to spend in the U.S. Army, if I

were drafted. I decided to join the USNR. The USNR application form had a box in which one was asked to write in their religion. I entered "None" and was told this was unacceptable. I said this was the truth and that I wasn't going to lie just to satisfy the Navy. The recruiter and I were at logger heads until I mentioned that my mother was a Baptist. He said, "fine put that in the blank." Thus, I met the requirement by writing, "my mother is a Baptist."

That summer I went to Great Lakes naval training center for "boot camp" and then returned to Atlanta, settled my affairs and moved to Knoxville in August. While waiting to hear about my application for admission to the University of Tennessee and for school to start, I went to the Knoxville library to look for some reading material. There I ran across a book by Frank Barron about his research on creativity. It was in his book that I first encountered a discussion of religious agnosticism. This discussion was in the context of his finding that the psychological profiles of "true believers" and atheist were almost identical. Barron pointed out that at root both were making an assertion for which they could offer no empirical proof. On the other hand, agnostics simply take the position that they don't know if such an entity as God exists or not and are content to wait for some evidence that bears on the question. I decided that this was closer to how I saw my own position than atheism and I began describing myself as an agnostic**.

After a year or so at UT, I recalled my promise to my friend and decided to take a look at the bible. The first thing that I decided was that the Old Testament was not Christian but Jewish. Further, the New Testament superseded the Old Testament in any event. That bit of logic dispensed with a lot of material. Next, I asked myself what was important in the New Testament. The answer for me was only those portions that purported to convey directly the teachings of Jesus upon which Christianity was supposed to have been built. I had now narrowed the task down to the four gospels. I looked those over and decided on Matthew for two reasons. First, at the time there was some opinion that it was the oldest. Second, it seemed to offer a fairly coherent account. Thus, I put my emphasis on Matthew and then wrote a didactic play titled, A Dialogue with Jesus***.

During the period that I was reading Matthew and writing on this play, I was also giving a lot of thought to the morality of the Vietnam war that was hotly in progress. I had just missed getting embroiled in this conflict, which may have been another intuitive event. When I was looking at alternatives to being drafted, I had almost enlisted in the U.S. Army's warrant officer program to be trained as a helicopter pilot. At the last minute, I backed out determined to find a way to go on to college, which I did through the USNR program. After completing the play, I

sent a copy to my friend and told him that this was what I took from the bible. He took the play to his Baptist minister who after reading it told him that it could only have been written by an atheist.

During my junior year at UT, Shirley and I decided to get married. We wanted to plan our own ceremony and did not want it to be religious in nature. On the other hand, we didn't want to have a civil ceremony over which we would have little control. My now lifelong friend and philosophy instructor at UT suggested that we get married in his church, which was the Unitarian Church on Kingston Pike in Knoxville. He spoke with his minister who agreed to perform the ceremony and to let us design it. Thus, we had a small private "church" wedding.

During my time at UT, I had read a lot of the Edgar Cayce material and had become quite interested in it and the implications it held about spiritual matters. I learned that there was an organization called the Association for Research and Enlightenment (A.R.E.) in Virginia Beach, Virginia. that was dedicated to preserving and distributing the materials delivered through Cayce. I wrote to the A.R.E. and said that I anticipated being in the Virginia Beach area in the near future and wanted to know if their archive of materials was open to the public. Why I felt I would soon be in the area I couldn't say. I just felt that I would and strongly enough to contact them about possibly getting access to their archives.

After graduating from UT, Shirley and I moved to Decatur, GA and lived with a friend and his wife for a short period until Shirley could find a job. I was waiting on orders that would begin my active duty in the USN. Writing the Dialogue had if nothing else helped me clarify my thinking about the Vietnam war, which was simply that there was no justification for it either ethically or legally. While waiting on my orders, I spent a lot of time struggling with my commitment to serve in the USN. In a way, I felt bound to my commitment both by the prayer mentioned earlier and by the fact that I had voluntarily joined the USNR albeit in the face of what qualified as coercion. But, I had made something of a pact with the Navy. They would keep me from being drafted, allow me to attend college now and in return I would owe them no more of my time than being drafted would have taken.

After struggling with this dilemma for a month or so, what appeared to be a workable solution came to me. I drafted a letter to the Commandant of the Sixth Naval District to which my USNR unit belonged. In that letter, I said that I had resolved that ethically I could not allow someone else to determine when I would or would not engage in an act of violence. Thus, I planned to honor my

commitment to serve in the USN but reserved to myself the right to decide whether or not to engage in aggressive behavior. In short, I would not blindly follow an order to commit violence. Further, I would accept no pay from the Navy while on active duty and thereby I viewed my service as wholly voluntary and in no way subordinate to their intentions because I was not accepting pay to serve.

I received a reply that offered me the opportunity to apply for a conscientious objectors discharge. I wrote them back and rejected the offer on the grounds that I was not a C.O. because I could conceive of circumstance in which I might engage in aggressive behavior but only I could make that determination. Shortly thereafter I received orders to report to the naval base in Charleston, South Carolina for processing.

The first thing that happened in Charleston was an attempt to transfer me from the USN to the Marine Corp. I fought this transfer largely through the office of Senator Al Gore, Sr. of Tennessee. After that effort was foiled, I went through a number of "pay days" and refused to accept the checks. This apparently created some disruption of the financial operations because the disbursing office became very insistent that I had to clear the checks out of their accounts. Eventually, I took the checks, put them in an envelope with a letter and sent them to Senator Gore. In that letter, I told him basically what was taking place and that the checks represented money that belonged to the taxpaying citizens of the U.S. Further, since he was a representative of those citizens I suggested that he should distribute the money in any way that he saw fit.

Once I accepted the checks, I received orders to report to the USS Franklin D. Roosevelt an aircraft carrier in dry dock in Portsmouth, VA. Interestingly, Portsmouth is not very many miles from Virginia Beach where the A.R.E. is located and this assignment put me right where earlier I had told the A.R.E. I expected to be; i.e. in the Virginia Beach area. Upon arriving on board, I was asked to report to a conference room where I met with several officers. They told me that they had been informed by the Department of the Navy that I did not have to accept my pay checks and that if I had any further issues that I should talk with them before getting Senator Gore's office involved. They then assigned me to work in the chaplains office on board the ship.

I was soon designated the office manager for the chaplains of which there were two. One was a protestant minister and the other a catholic priest. This office consisted of the two chaplains and four enlisted personnel. The office performed or coordinated all religious services on board, ran the ship's library, maintained the

crew's lounge and handled all personnel matters of a personal nature such as deaths in the family and similar emergencies. The protestant minister was only on board a few months before being transferred but during that time he recommended me for Annapolis, which recommendation I declined and asked that it be removed from my personnel file. I became friends with the catholic priest and spent a good bit of time off the ship at his apartment. The replacement for the protestant minister was a Southern Baptist and the youngest captain in the history of the USN Chaplains Corp. I let him read my play, *Dialogue with Jesus*, after he'd been on board a little while. After reading it, he declared that he was the only chaplain in the U.S. Navy whose office was run by an atheist.

In my role as Chaplain's Yeoman, I learned to set-up and assist with Catholic mass. I also was involved in working with the Jewish personnel, the Mormon personnel and the Black Muslim personnel on board. I assisted them in scheduling their services and finding locations for their services when necessary. I also helped with obtaining any supplies that were needed. In fact, we maintained a locker of supplies specifically provided by the Navy for Jewish religious observances and services. In the course of carrying out these duties, I became familiar with the diversity of religious practice on board the ship.

After being separated from the U.S. Navy at the end of my two years, I returned to Decatur, GA. During the initial months back in Decatur, I did not do much of anything but relax. We lived in an apartment next to an old cemetery. One day I sat quietly, for an extended period of time, just gazing out the window at the cemetery, which because of all of the trees and landscaping was pleasant to the eye. I suppose one might say I was in a meditative or contemplative state. Suddenly, I found myself in what I can only describe as a profound state of awareness as to the Unity of Consciousness. It was as if, to borrow a concept from the TV program *Star Trek*, I had a Vulcan mind meld with a universal state of consciousness. This is the second experience in my life that I would now describe as noetic in nature.

About a year or so later, I was walking in the yard of a small apartment complex where we lived and that was owned by my brother-in-law. It was a cold winter day and no one was outside so it was quiet and I was very much alone. As I walked about immersed in the solitude, I was suddenly seized by an intuitive realization. What I came to know in that moment was that reality as we know it is a social construct. Just as several years earlier I had realized that the ego or self is a fictional narrative that we spin for ourselves so too is social reality. In short, these were parallel intuitions but one was on a personal level and the other was on a societal level. This I would classify as my third noetic experience. While the

previous two experiences had eluded any attempt to capture them with language, I made a passable effort to do so with this third experience through a poem. The poem is titled "[Outlaw](#)" and can be found on my web site.

The cumulative effect of the three noetic experiences described above was that I achieved a private, intuitive and direct understanding that there is a spiritual dimension to life that is superordinate to materialism. An understanding that encompasses a phenomenological* understanding of both personal and social reality.

*Phenomenological understanding is based on the premise that reality consists of objects and events as they are perceived or understood in human consciousness and not of anything independent of human consciousness.

I subsequently did a good bit of reading looking for material that I found compatible with my understanding. Two sources that I read during this time that resonated with me were the writings of the American mystic Franklin Merrell-Wolff and the Seth channeling by Jane Roberts. During this same period, a friend told me about a woman he'd met through his brother who did psychic readings. The friend, a university professor, was pretty impressed with this woman's abilities. He offered to see if the psychic could do a reading on me without my being present since she was a considerable distance away. She agreed and I too found her impressive for among other things she told me some personal things that no one other than myself was aware of and would have been extraordinarily unlikely guesses. Between the earlier premonition about the auto accident, my own intuitive sense that I would be located close to Virginia Beach and this woman's readings, I was convinced that there were information flows taking place in the universe that could not be accounted for by current scientific theories about what was possible.

My next experience with religion was to become a minister in the Universal Life Church, which was entered with the idea of using institutional religion as a vehicle for tax purposes. While this did not work out as a "tax dodge" for reasons I won't go into here, it did require that a "church" be formed and services conducted. Thus, I prepared a set of founding principles for a religion that I called [Trinitarianism](#), not realizing at the time that there was already a religion using the name Trinitarian that had been around for 800 years or so. The principles for my version of Trinitarianism can be found on my web site. The Trinitarian congregation was small and met monthly in my home's large family room in which I performed one marriage.

For a number of years following this time, I was too involved with my family and career to be actively involved in spiritual matters other than a little reading here and there when the opportunity presented itself. Upon retiring from my university position, I began to devote more time to thinking about spiritual matters. One effect of this was to, for the first time in my life, voluntarily associate myself with a church. My wife and I joined a small lay led Unitarian, Universalist Fellowship. This was probably influenced in part by having been married in such a church and in part because I didn't really consider it a religion; i.e., no theology and no dogma. After serving in several administrative capacities in this church, it became clear to me that this was not a spiritual community but merely a social organization and a quite contentious one at that. Further, the funding practices of the UUA appeared designed to exploit small congregations to the benefit of large congregations. Finally, I was not entirely comfortable with the idea of being a member of an organization that called itself a religion. Thus, we left this church and are not now affiliated with any religious organization. However, my interest in spiritual matters remains and I continue to pursue that interest in whatever suitable ways that presents themselves, including opportunities through religious organizations.

Note: The above is a personal narrative constructed from events in my life. I could choose different events or make alternative interpretations of them and create a different narrative. In large part, we define who we are and this personal narrative is a self-definition of at least one thread that weaves through the recollection and interpretation of events in my life. I cannot say that it is a true narrative in some absolute sense, but it is meaningful to me.

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