

Spiritual But Not Religious

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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All right, I'm going to start with a personal story; it comes from an obscure religion that takes itself very seriously, and so it may sound a bit alien to you; but then again, maybe not. In any event, thinking about how to enter this sermon, this is what came to my mind, mid-week, during one of my many short walks around 49th and Oak—a time and place where a lot of things rise up in that curious organ—Steven's brain.

This happened a little over twenty years ago; but it feels like yesterday. I was a history curator at the Mormon Church's Museum of History and Art—it's just across the street from Temple Square in Salt Lake City and the headquarters of the Mormon Church. One of my colleagues had been working away for months with the Museum design team to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the founding of that religion's women's organization, called the Relief Society. That work entailed careful historical scholarship, the assembly and display of significant texts and artifacts and the concerted efforts of curators, designers and fabricators to put together and mount a compelling exhibit: reconfiguring interior walls, new paint job, display cases, artifact mounts, wall texts—it's complex and exacting professional work carried out under the pressure of tight scheduling and deadlines . (And we were very good at it.)

Now mind you, you may have this cookie cutter (or prurient) view of Mormon women and their place in that culture, but the origins of the Relief Society and its early founders were, for the 19th century in North America, quite radical in their notions about gender roles and female power—and therein lay the problem for a religion and its male leaders that, especially in

the latter quarter of the 20th century, had become increasingly obsessed with patriarchal power, message control and traditional gender roles.

Three hours before the exhibit was to open to the public, a Church leader was given a private tour by the museum director and my female colleague. I had been working in the historical archives a couple of blocks away and hurried over to the museum in anticipation for the opening of the exhibit. On arriving, I found my colleague distraught and in tears, and the exhibit construction crew furiously repainting some of the walls. Turns out that the Church leader demanded that some of the texts—taken directly from source documents and in the words of none other than Joseph Smith himself—were not to be displayed for the public and that a couple of artifacts had to be removed. You see, the significant and autonomous power of 19th century Mormon women in church organization and culture just didn't jive with late 20th century Church policy and practice. History be damned in a museum of history. And so, the exhibit opened with a couple of missing artifacts whose absence stood out in the display cases like a gap in a row of teeth and the smell of fresh paint obscuring quotes that powerfully affirmed the status and role of women in religion and society.

Some drama ensued over the next few days. On the morning after the exhibit opened, a prominent journalist from a local paper called my office. “Was it true that”...etc., etc. She had most of the facts straight. Obviously, someone on the Museum staff had leaked the story. Next day: front page news—“Relief Society Exhibit at Church Museum Censored Hours Before Opening.” And then the following day: all the Museum staff got rounded up for an important meeting with the Church leader who'd been given the tour and dictated the changes, along with a lawyer seconded to the Church's Historical Department, and an executive staff person from the Public Relations office.

In short order we were thanked for our invaluable work, and then told in no uncertain terms that the leaked story had caused considerable embarrassment to the Church, that in the future we were not to initiate any contacts with the media, that we were to refer any journalist contacting us to the Public Relations office whose appropriate task it was to handle all such encounters, and we were reminded, with an organizational chart on display, of the chain of command within and between all church departments, offices and employees. And do I need to tell you that our place—that is the Museum and its staff—within the whole organization was a very humble one, indeed?

Then the meeting closed with something that could have been scripted by Orwell. First, the exhibit curator was invited to share her thoughts, which she'd obviously been asked to think over in advance. Being the team player she was, a considerable slice of humble pie, acceptance and deference filled her mouth. Next, one of the art curators, known for his reactionary political views, and who'd also quite obviously been cast in advance and with well-rehearsed lines, stood and damned the offending newspaper, the journalist and the media in general as inveterate enemies of the Church. And then, finally, and quite without warning, *I was invited* to share my thoughts about the whole affair and the contents of the day's staff meeting. Well I can tell you the meeting didn't end with the deference and unanimity intended by our visiting church leader and his minions. And I knew that I would be needing to find employment elsewhere, and soon.

We all like a little dirty laundry, don't we, especially when it's aired in someone else's backyard. But believe me, we Unitarians are not immune; we have our own stubbornly stained personal, historical, theological and collective linen that no amount of new, improved detergent and bleach can quite remove. But how could it be otherwise? For one thing that is certainly and

always true of us as individuals, and especially of any kind of organization, is that fundamental, ineradicable *HPtFTU* principle—the human propensity to f*** things up.

Now I've shared this personal story obviously for a reason: not only to lance a wound that's festered inside me for decades, but because it sums up a lot that I've come to abominate about religion: arrogant, willful disregard for history and truth, abuse of authority, sexism, soulless group think, bland, mind numbing hours wasted in relentlessly scripted meetings, and that the heartless assault on/the withering away of the ever shining, the fantastic, raw rough edges, drop down on our knees humbling, soul, heart and mind expanding, shout-out-loud, still small voice of the ever present, awe inspiring darkness and illumination woven in and through all our inanimate and light and life-filled numinous world; all of this drained away and boxed in by order and process obsessed bureaucratic hierarchs exercising unrighteous dominion over something that, in fact, is wholly beyond anyone's presumed power to slice, dice and control.

The case against so much about religion is so blindly evident, it is truly a wonder that we haven't fixed a millstone around its collective hydra headed neck and cast it, once and for all, into the depths of the sea. And the fact is, in increasing numbers, especially among young adults and in our part of the world—that is the northern half of the globe in general and in BC in particular—that's exactly what's happening.

Recent polls, in Canada and the US, are showing conclusively that people who say they have no religious affiliation at all constitute the fastest growing demographic on the landscape of “religion,” that disaffiliation by religious attendance is sharply on the rise, and that overwhelmingly, the “Nones” (the none-of-the-aboves, or non-religious) are *not* looking for a religion that may or could be right for them (see Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2012; the Pew's poll shows 88% of the “nones” as not seeking out a religion. See also results of Forum Research Poll in “Religion in Canada: Mostly for

Mom and Dad,” *National Post*, December 21, 2012.) These same polls show that religious affiliation is declining among both women and men and among those who have a high school education as well as those who have college or university degrees. Residents of British Columbia have the highest rates of not attending religious services in all of Canada, among the lowest rates of belief in God or a Supreme Being, and the lowest numbers in the polls in believing that “religious faith is under attack in Canada.”

When asked about their beef against religion/religious institutions, the nones, by wide majorities, say that religions are too concerned with money and power, focus too much on rules and doctrine, and are way too involved in politics, especially the small “c” socially conservative brand. And when the male portion of this cohort, most of whom, along with their female colleagues, were brought up in religious traditions, when men were asked about non-affiliation, they point out that the godly were too “calm, gentle and polite,” and they found all the “sharing,” “long sermons”(!), and “soft, gooey music” way too “dull and irrelevant.” (More on this, see John Longhurst, “No men in the pews?...., *Winnipeg Free Press*, April 9, 2010).

From being statistically insignificant just a few decades ago, those disenchanting, turned off and running away from organized religion have leapt fully and firmly into view. In British Columbia they constitute a big majority, and a whoppingly wide one among those between the ages of 18 and 34 where less than a third say they are religious. And it’s not just the “bronze-age absurdities...the wishy-washy niceness...the savage judgmentalism...the absurdly complex intellectual structures built on marshmallow foundations of a fantasy”—that’s turning people off. That’s not the really bad news, writes the British novelist Francis Spufford, when contemplating how, in the next year or so, his six year old daughter is going to find out her parents are religious and go to church. “No,” he says, “the really painful message our daughter will receive is that

[her parents are] embarrassing...and inexplicable.... We actually get down and worship. We get down on our actual knees, bowing and scraping in front of an empty space...an Authority with all its authority gone. Nothing is so sad—sad from the *style* point of view,” he writes “—as the mainstream taste of the day before yesterday.” (Francis Spufford, “The trouble with atheists...”, *Guardian*, Aug. 31, 2012)

But here’s the interesting thing, and I’ll be returning to Spufford’s conundrum next week, for now, what’s interesting is that while people in increasing numbers are running away from religion—and for all the reasons I’ve railed about today—by no means are they (and we?) running away from the Spirit of Life—that is “spirit” with a capital S that the choir and that we sang about in our invocation and opening hymn. “Spirit of Life come unto me; sing in my heart...” “Spirit draw near,” that’s what we sang at the beginning of this service. In this Province, with the *lowest* rates of religious attendance in Canada, we have the *highest* number of people who willingly confess that they “consider themselves a spiritual person.” While our children, our young adults, may be embarrassed by our public religious affiliation, they are not embarrassed to say—I’ve heard them say it—“I’m spiritual, but not religious.”

What do they mean when they say *that*? Not the: “I’m not religious” part—I think the reasons are blindly obvious. It’s the: “I’m spiritual” part that’s worth considering, and *that* I find profoundly moving and important for reasons I’ll explore in a few moments; but first some observations about spirituality.

Douglas Todd, of the *Vancouver Sun*, in his customarily perceptive and forthright way wrote about the spirituality he has encountered and observed in our part of the world. First, and not surprisingly, it dichotomizes; it clearly distinguishes and separates spirituality and religion; with religion being the chump. Citing Eckhart Tolle, Neale Donald Walsch and a host of other New Age teachers, Todd writes that in their view and “what is fast becoming conventional

wisdom,” religion is [perceived as] rigid, divisive, authoritarian, self-righteous and absolutistic; “that having a belief system...does not make you spiritual no matter what the nature of those beliefs.” So far so obvious, though simplistic. (Todd, “Is ‘religion’ passé?” *Vancouver Sun*, August 29, 2009)

Next, Todd writes that nailing down a definition of “spiritual” is not so straightforward; it’s an ever-evolving, amazingly popular and vague word. So he turns to Mark Shibley, of Southern Oregon University for some help. Shibley suggests there are two major types of spirituality operating in our neck of the woods. The first “adheres to Earth reverence,” a view of nature as divine; that spiritual moments are best experienced, not in churches or temples, but in the wilderness and its overwhelming, beautiful and sublime grandeur: sites where we touch and are moved deep within by something far bigger than us, than self. The second type of being spiritual, and the one that Todd finds best fits Tolle and other purveyors of the New Age, is “self-spirituality” which emphasizes private spiritual psychological practices, with the self as the location and focus of the sacred. No need for institutions, systems of faith, or even nature’s sublime when the point of the spirituality is, the words of Tolle, “the transformation of [personal] consciousness—to a state of awakening.”

Two pesky problems here. While I get the Earth reverence part of spirituality, and I don’t have to have a fat bank account and all the Mountain Equipment Co-Op gear—even one tree outside my window or a walk on a nearby beach will do—what about the indifferent buffeting, raw realities of nature, “red in tooth and claw?” And what about when after the fire of the sublime cools down and we have to return to the lives all of us lead almost all of the time?

Which brings up the second problem. I think my basic issue with the New Age and transformative “self-spirituality” is that Tolle and company forget, or carelessly glide over, one of the most basic things about us, and that’s the *HPtFTU* principle—the human propensity to

f*** things up. My problem with the “Power of Now” is the *moment before now*, and the moment before that, and the moment that follows, and on and on both into the past and future. It reminds me of that Mormon Church leader who trashed the women’s history exhibit twenty-three years ago: no doubt about it, he was the king of the “power of now”; but I think he was also a blind, ignorant and arrogant beggar before the power of time, our fallible flesh, and the infinite, heart-breaking, beautiful, aching complex web of human relations wherein we “live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17:28)

Saying “I’m spiritual, but not religious,” especially when young people say it, is a profoundly moving and important artifact of our times; a testimony, if you will, that in spite of the human propensity to foul things up—and how deeply we’ve messed up so much of what we’ve done, said and adhered to in what we call religion—in spite of that, under the cope of heaven, there are some things that resist the flattening, deadening hand of resignation to the merely material, the merely expedient, the inevitable disappointments, the relentless monetization of everything, the smooth insinuating siren’s call that it’s all about the self, the now, the “all through the day: ‘I, Me, Mine.’”

Friends and lovers disappoint, but we have not wholly given up on friendship and love. Injustice and inequity abound, but our affirmation of justice and fairness endures. Children, parents and family aggravate, abuse, confound and try to the utmost breaking limit and yet, astonishingly, we pair off, build nests, bag lunches, endure sleepless nights and muddle through as best we can because the drive to create and nurture calls us in spite of everything that tells us it’s not worth the pain; that it’s not attractive or glamorous or pretty or charismatic or cool. And the world, and nature, so solid and prosaic, with its physical processes all running along on their own without hope and appeal, all the way up from quantum mechanics to the swirling

bodies of galaxies, why do, why have we felt it—even with its “blundering, low and horridly cruel” biology and its indifferent laws and unfathomable size and age—why this avowal of ours that we’re “spiritual”?

Why this feeling that behind, before and woven through all of it is an enduring illuminating presence which when felt, in spite of the messiness and messed-upness of everything, reveals to us that there is some *meaning* to it all, and us, and that that meaning, that presence, that illumination has consequences, *real* consequences—the opposite of superficiality and the insatiable preoccupation with material things—consequences that provoke and inspire us to be kinder, more loving, more resilient and enduring in face of life’s challenges and that lead us to become more fully engaged with the world around us for the sake of a more just and compassionate world?

Though we may have given up on religion, there is a rumour of angels, there are signs of transcendence that witness to and confirm the emotion, the feeling that rises in us, draws us and that we can’t shake off. That even today, including everything we know and have experienced, we still sing: “Spirit of Life, come unto me. Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion. Blow in the wind, rise in the sea, move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice. Roots hold me close, wings set me free; Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.”