

Religious but not Spiritual?  
A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson  
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For those of you who were here last week, you may recall that I poured a fair amount of gasoline and lit a match on the wet blanket that soul-sucking, zombie- like religious bureaucrats throw over the fires lit inside us on those glorious, troubling, soul and mind expanding, awe inspiring experiences we may have, on those rare precious occasions, when the illumination woven in and through our light and life-filled numinous world shines through and reveals to us that there is some *meaning* to it all; a meaning that has *real* consequences; consequences that provoke and inspire us to be kinder, more loving, more resilient in face of life's challenges; consequences that lure and call us to become more fully and patiently engaged with the people and world around us for the sake of a more just and compassionate world.

As well, you may recall that I began my remarks last week with a personal story of an experience of censorship of a women's history exhibit by church bureaucrats. Here's another blast from the past, one from almost forty years ago; though it, too, feels like yesterday. It happened on the day before the last of two years having been a missionary in France. It was standard practice for the President of the Mission to conduct an exit interview with a missionary returning home. I had just returned to my apartment in a suburb of Paris after a long, hard day of tracting and meetings, when to my surprise, the Mission President turned up at my door. (Parenthetically, he, too, was on a voluntary mission, and in civilian life worked as a successful tax attorney in Arizona.)

Well, he asked me to accompany him to the commuter train station. As we approached the platform, we confirmed our appointment in his office in Versailles the next morning before my flight home, and as the train approached, and just before he boarded it, he turned to me and said: "Brother Epperson, I have a question I want you to think about before we meet tomorrow: 'What role is cynicism going to play in your life?'" And with that, he stepped on the train and left.

Now, this guy wasn't exactly Yoda; but for a tax attorney from Arizona, that was a rather arresting, Zen-like question to pose to a twenty-one year old. But as I watched the commuter train pull away and disappear into the night, I thought, "man has he ever got me wrong!" You

see, in my dictionary, the definition of a cynic is “a person with little faith in human goodness who sarcastically doubts or despises sincerity and merit.”

While it is true that from an early age I have been convinced by personal observation and human history of a fundamental truth about us—that is the *HPtFTU* principle—the human propensity to f\*\*\* things up, and while it is also true that the Mission President and I had locked horns on a couple of occasions, and he thought the fact that I would soon be returning to my Ivy League university was a sure-fired recipe for becoming an flaming infidel, I don’t think I have ever been nor will ever be a cynic, nor am I on the high or low road to cynicism. You could say that my issue, my problem, is just the opposite. I wish he’d asked: “*what role is being so damn serious about everything going to play in your life?*” I mean, I got dumped once because I was told: “Steven, you’re just too serious about everything.” You see, I may have gasoline and matches for some things, but I, too, toss my share of wet blankets around—don’t forget the *HPtFTU* principle!

Which gets me thinking about comedy. There are all kinds of types of comedy; its roots go back at least three thousand of years. In fact, wherever you get a struggle between relatively powerless people on the one hand and powerful others and social conventions that throw up obstacles to achieving the hopes and needs of those who lack social authority, then you get rock and roll, Molotov cocktails, Occupy Wall Street and, yes, comedy—one of the most powerful tool in the hands of the powerless. (But I digress.)

When I say name me a comedy act —what may come to mind is the lone stand-up comedian—like Lenny Bruce, Rodney Dangerfield, Robin Williams, Chris Rock, Russell Peters, Sarah Silverman, Louis C.K. etc. I’m thinking of another genre—called the “double act,” or “comedy duo.” Think of Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello, the Smothers Brothers, Wayne and Schuster, Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, Ackroyd and Belushi, the list goes on and on. In the double act—which has its counterpart in Chinese “crosstalk,” called *xiansheng*, Japanese *Manzai*, and the *Jamura* of India and Pakistan—the humour arises from the uneven relationship between comic partners. Typically, they’re drastically different in personality and behavior: you have the straight man, the feed, the stooge, on the one hand, and the funny man, the banana, the zany comic on the other. Though the straight man occasionally gets the laughs through sarcastic reaction to the antics of the partner, he or she is usually the one who “feeds” or sets up the joke for the other wilder one, who then

takes the feed and runs with it into out-of-bounds, unpredictable, goofy, cutting, crazy places. (see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double\\_act](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double_act))

Let me ask you this: which role in the double act would you prefer to play? Which personality type best describes you?: the mustachioed, over-fed killjoy Oliver Hardy, or tall, thin, anarchic Stan Laurel; the buttoned-down, up-right bass playing Dick Smothers, or the guitar strumming, over-the-bend brother Tom? The one who embodies conventional, appropriate social behavior, or the one that gives it a swift kick in the keister? You get the picture.

Which brings me back to the British novelist Francis Spufford and his conundrum; do you remember from last week? Spufford was worrying over the fact that in a couple of years his six year old daughter was going to find out her parents are religious and go to church; and that the really bad news, the painful message she was going to receive from her schoolmates and the surrounding consumer-secular culture, is that her parents, who “actually get down and worship...on our actual knees” are “embarrassing”—that is, she’s soon going to find out that her parents are the stooges, the straight guys, not the anarchic crazy bananas in life’s not-always-so-funny comedy duo routine.

Or let me put it this way: picture the movie *The Sound of Music*. Do you identify with the “Climb Every Mountain” Mother Abbess of the convent in Austria or the “Do-Re-Mi,” “My Favorite Things” singing, slightly nutty nun Maria? Does your heart warm to the brilliant Aristotelian intellect of the 11<sup>th</sup> century Islamic polymathic philosopher Ibn Sina, or the 13<sup>th</sup> century music, poetry and dance-as-a-means-for-uniting-one’s-whole-being-with-the-divine intoxicated Jalal ad-Din Rumi? (Who do you think, of these two Islamic luminaries sold more books translated in English and other modern languages in the past decade?—the philosopher Ibn Sina or the poet Rumi?) And before I forget it, which song did John Coltrane arrange and record playing on his soprano sax: “My Favorite Things” or “Climb Every Mountain?” Which one would you sing to your kids at bedtime?

Now I don’t think I ever sent my kids to bed singing “Climb Every Mountain,” but I think it would have been a lot more helpful if, forty year ago on a suburban train platform outside Paris, that tax attorney Mission President of mine would have asked, **not** “What role is cynicism going to play in your life?” But, instead “What role is being so serious about everything going to play in your life?” *That* question might have been helpful. At least I could have started taking some evasive action; maybe I would have even tried lightening up more.

Maybe my heart wouldn't have been broken or the stool knocked out from under my oh-so-serious feet so many times by the whited-sepulcher types I kept running up against; the ones who, arrayed up there in front of the assemblies of the religious, occupy the plush seats, the ones squatting on top of the organizational charts and the chains of command, the ones in the suits along with their myriad brethren in other religions equivalently garbed in clerical power, whose hands hover over and pull the power levers, the ones who say they main-line God. While the rest of us...?

I used to be on a committee for the Unitarian denomination that vetted candidates for professional ministry, and one of the few times when I felt like I could really be helpful to a prospective minister was when I suggested to the committee that we shouldn't give a green light to proceed until that person had taken a class in comedy improv. I wish that mission president of mine, or a Unitarian committee had told me to do that years ago. We don't always have to be the straight man or woman, the stooge, the feed in life's double comedy act. Part of life, including religion!, is always going to be out-of-control, and it may just be OK to be the anarchic, crazy, kick-them-in-the-keister banana from time-to-time. Stepping across the aisle could even help cultivate a better appreciation of the *HPtFTU* principle at work in all of us, and all of life—and doesn't the Good Book say the spirit goes where it will anyway—"it bloweth where it listeth"—where *it* desires, pleases, wishes?

I think it's blindly obvious that a person, that we can be religious, but not spiritual. And I'm not talking about the toxic wolves in sheep's clothing, or the corpse cold, worm food types with the brilliantly white washed exterior facades; they're too easy a target and fodder enough for religion bashing and journalists looking for some headline hype. I'm talking about me, maybe about us. Don't know about you, but my guess is that we can stand only so long in front of a burning bush or stay in cave with the words of Gabriel resounding in our ears; forty days in the wilderness come to an end; a silent retreat concludes only for us to be re-immersed into the cacophony of life; after our bones have been rattled and we're soaked to the skin and shaking after doing a Shinto mishogi ritual under a waterfall, we return to the bathhouse, dry off and pull on our world-infested clothes and head back out into the mean streets; awe-filled in a cathedral of old-growth cedar, reluctantly we climb back into our cars and hit the road; "gathered here in the mystery of this hour," after invoking the "Spirit of Life," after lighting the chalice, after the companionable, even reverent company of others in this room, after singing "Carry the

Flame?”—‘after the ecstasy, the laundry’: isn’t that how the saying goes? The routine settles in, the fire burns out, the voice fades away. Religious, but maybe not so spiritual. After the fire, does the fire still burn?

And if I’m honest, how many times have the not many hairs on the back of my neck stood on end singing from our hymnal? And five times a day performing *salat*, the daily prayers in the Islamic world, or wrapping *tefillin* and *davening* in the Jewish world, or putting on a *kachina* mask and emerging from a Hopi kiva, or ramping up to speak in tongues, or sitting in meditation, or waving a *haraigushi* purification wand in a Shinto ritual, or listening to an edifying sermon(!)—it all looks like religion, but tell me, is it always illuminated, is it unusually alive with that numinous Other, that still small voice, the shout of ecstasy, the spirit? Always? Never? Sometimes? Rarely? We may want to “draw down the moon,” as the pagans say, but Luna’s a coy mistress, and so too, are all her divine kin. And we prosaic folk plod along in the sublunary world; doing the laundry, playing the straight man and woman, inclined as always to *HPiFTU*. (Or is it just me, I’m the one after all, who’s too serious about everything.)

Then again, if I’m honest, it *does* happen, in our public religious lives when we intentionally set aside time, and heart, and thought and make room for the moon to draw down, the light to well up inside us, the melody heard above and within all the strains and struggles, the beauty and wonder. “The poetry of earth is ceasing never,” wrote John Keats. “When all the birds are faint with the hot sun/And hide in cooling trees, *a voice will run*/From hedge to hedge about the new mown mead.” It may even happen when we’re hanging the laundry on the line, or greeting one another and handing out orders of service on Sunday morning, or serving on a church committee; or here, even, like on that Sunday morning November 11, 2012, when I sang “Bright Morning Stars” with you for our closing hymn. And “though we’ve broken our vows ten thousand times,” wrote Rumi; though we’ve pegged ten thousand socks on a clothesline; though we’ve sung how many hymns, how many “Carry the Flame[s],” and it may all start to feel routine, threadbare, a parched dry, narrow irrigation ditch of life, of religious, but not spiritual...somewhere, up-channel, a hand opens the water gate and living, life-giving water comes swirling, sluicing down.

And we have this *feeling*...Now I know that emotions are fleeting, oft unreliable phenomena; but there is this *something* that occurs; we Unitarians call it “direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder” that is a source of our “living religion”—and it’s the

feeling of it that's primary; we assent more or less to our ideas, rituals, institutions, values and beliefs that come limping along thereafter because of that feeling, that emotional assurance—of what? *Mercy* felt and embraced—in spite of everything—during a long, dark night of the soul? An encounter with an undemonstrative, infinitely patient, sustaining *Presence* that abides, illuminates and animates from quarks to galaxies? *A sure place to stand* in solidarity with the small decencies of life—and thus, by way of contrast see as pathologies the priority given to the pursuit of financial gain in modern society, the dampening down and control of mental and emotional diversity all for the sake of efficiencies, consumption, and the pursuit of profit?

That spirit, that feeling, can't be controlled—"it bloweth where it listeth"—so maybe I can unclench, lighten up even—we don't always have to be the straight man, the "feed," the stooge in the double act. We can throw the doors wide open, and shout out: "Enter, *Rejoice* and Come In...don't be afraid of some change," and dance like crazy, like King David did before the ark of the covenant as it was carried down the dusty streets long ago. (2Samuel 6:12-14)

And religion? Maybe not always spiritual. Maybe that house we're carrying on our shoulders like those people in the Philippines on the cover of the order of service just feels heavy, an obligation, an expectation. But the practice of *Bayanihan*, of communal house moving, is a revered and intrinsic part of rural, Philippine life for a reason—because something happens when it's done, some feeling, and satisfaction arises in the achieving of it—that's real religion; that's what religion and its power is for me—not the kind of self-spirituality that Douglas Todd of the *Vancouver Sun* observed is so prevalent in our neck of the woods; but the communal spirituality I witnessed and felt volunteering as a kid on my congregation's welfare farm: that was my first, unforgettable religious, visionary experience—we were equals—old and young, women and men; everyone set aside their selves, their professions, their status, and hoed rows of beets and corn not for ourselves—but for someone else—and to make real the beliefs and dreams and hope we shared.

Feeling is not one note; it is a chord; notes surrounded and played in concert with others. Sometimes in a simple major key; others times blued and minor, or discordant. But when it all comes together....

We may be "states of tangled wanting." The human animal may be an "ambassador sent forth by an unstable coalition," but the emotions that give rise to and that are cherished and

cultivated by a religion worthy of its purpose, in a community like this, those feelings are neither alien nor freakish, neither embarrassing nor immature. They're utterly familiar and recognizable to whoever has "made their way across the common ground of human experience as an adult."

(see Spufford, *Unapologetic*, pp. 22, 32-3)

I'll end with this: the German philosopher Schopenhauer called architecture "frozen music." By that I think he meant that a building can arrest and hold the flowing melody of life. And yes, I'm thinking of this place and of us here and now. If we were to swoop up into the heavens and look down from that lofty perch at 49<sup>th</sup> and Oak what would we see? From so far away, no movement, no discernible life, nor all the conflicted and fabulous feelings, thoughts and experiences of those gathered in this room. But swoop down again and enter this place—there are those in this room who saw the walls of this building rise up fifty years ago. There may be infants in this room who will one day be married here, grow old and die here, their life remembered and celebrated. And go deeper still into the tissue of each living cell of our bodies and keep diving; and deeper still into the seemingly immobile, unmoving stone, wood and glass all around us and—and what do we see? The swirling movement of matter in motion to the great dance, the music of everything. "The poetry of earth is ceasing never."

There is nothing so ordinary or glorious than this—and that from it we build a world and sculpt our lives. And it is the work of our religion to both affirm the reality of the universe that is given to us, and to assert it has *meaning*. We can't prove it. But once we feel it, it cannot be pushed aside; it illuminates the world and reorganizes our lives.

Feelings—mercy, numinous presence, solidarity for the decencies and values of being fully human—we affirm that they have *consequences*. And thus we build and sustain this place; we set aside time, and assemble here as a community in faith, hope, justice and compassion because of the feelings we share and the consequences that flow from those emotions.

May we be as true to them as we can; and as we look around and feel the past and future of this place and the presence of those beside us, may we value and rejoice in the fact that we are not alone.