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Introduction to JAEPL Volume 26

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SPECIAL SECTION: LOCATIONS OF SPIRITUALITY—FINDING IDENTITIES; FINDING COMMON GROUND

Introduction: Losing My Religion

Wendy Ryden

This special section, I must confess (pun intended), is by accident, not design (unless you are someone who believes there are no accidents). As the contributions for this year's issue began to coalesce, I saw a pattern emerging in which so much of the work, either directly or indirectly, is steeped in human spirituality as being fundamental to our existences. This fortuitously created an opportunity for organizing the pieces, so I took advantage of that to offer readers this categorical grouping. I am thrilled by the work and the insights these individual contributions provide, and yet I found myself somewhat uneasy assembling them under this banner. *AEPL* has long recognized spirituality as part of our expanded perspectives on learning, and yet I wondered what it means for an academic journal to focus on this topic—and for me as the editor to facilitate such an emphasis. I decided to devote this brief introduction to an exploration of those nagging feelings of uncertainty by considering, as our authors explicitly and implicitly ask us to do, my own identity, attitudes, and relationship with the spiritual, especially in conjunction with my academic and professional sense of self.

I begin by telling you that I am an apostate. I was raised as a Lutheran (ALC) but currently follow no organized religious practice. My father inherited his religion from his Scandinavian parents, and my mother converted from Catholicism when she married my father (although when times were tough, she always reverted to praying to that Great Mother goddess Mary. Apparently, mom did not see any contradiction.) As a child, I enjoyed (usually) going to Sunday school—the ritual of church not so much. I liked to read Bible stories and learn the history of the Reformation. I was confirmed in the Lutheran church, served as an acolyte, even taught Sunday school. As I grew older, I simply went a different way. The parting was mostly amicable, with some minor existential crises here and there, generally around issues of sexuality.

Today, I am, I suppose, something of a cultural Christian, but my sense of spirituality is fluid, residing somewhere in the camp of eclectic pagan. As an environmentalist, I “commune with nature,” something my father used to say when asked about his conspicuous avoidance of church except for Christmas and Easter. I still love Luther’s “This is My Father’s World” with its celebration of the natural world and devilish hint of animism (phooey on the patriarchal title). I celebrate Christmas with lots of evergreen boughs, and I love the sacred music and art of Europe inspired by the Christian tradition. I also have an abiding interest in learning about other traditions, especially the myths (by which I mean sacred texts, oral and written) that undergird those belief systems and histories.

The problems associated with religion’s role in society are legion, ranging from supplanting science and evidence-based inquiry with supernaturalism to justifying and enabling ethno/genocide and gender oppression, to name some highlights. Despite the redemptive and sustaining ways religion has existed in some communities, such as the

African American tradition of Christianity where the church has been an integral part of the struggle for emancipation and equality, it's certainly not hard to see why many folks reject religious belief, both on social and individual levels, to embrace atheism/agnosticism. I often count myself among that group. Religious identification as metonymic displacement for racism, oppression, imperialism, and political struggle are perhaps as old as religion itself, but we are made aware of this phenomenon again and again in the contemporary world, in which we see sizable, seemingly insurmountable rifts forming among us. On the American political scene, the so-called religious right, evangelical nationalism, Opus Dei, among others, have acquired increasing influence over the affairs of state and our daily lives, raising the specter of theocracy in our troubled times. For many of us, faith or no, these prospects are simply horrifying.

Like it (some do) or not (some don't), this is where we are, as the saying goes. We are not operating in an exclusively secular society, and religious beliefs or lack thereof are profound shapers of our identities, both past and present, and mediators of our social existences. Many of us are familiar with the religious student who resists our instructional efforts because they see a conflict between the University's humanism and their own faith-inspired ontology. But I have found the reverse also to be true where students vehemently reject anything that smacks of what they recognize as religion. For these students, sacred texts have been so stigmatized that reading Genesis, for example, means betraying their commitment to a rational order. "I believe in science," a hostile student told me in a world literature class (and I note the irony of expressing what is ostensibly an objective reality in terms of "belief"), as she explained her disinterest in the Hebrew story of creation. The poetry, the philosophy, the cultural and historical impact, for better or worse, were off limits to her as objects of study because the story for her was inseparable from a dogma and religiosity she found abhorrent. Religion or what is perceived as such, whether one professes faith or not, seems to be, like politics, a taboo subject for some students, as though separation of church and state requires public silence about it altogether. In many ways, this makes sense as a measure to protect First Amendment privacy. But religious identities and orientations are not simply private matters. They are often potent public forces that require our reckoning both in our work with students and with ourselves.

The essays and interviews that follow here differ in focus and intent and offer us many ideas and insights about multiple topics and issues, not only spirituality. But they share nonetheless an intrepidity that takes us beyond the anemic realm of tolerance and diversity and other multicultural appropriations from politically correct culture as they ask us to investigate our spiritual orientations in the way we think about ourselves and the way we think about each other. What role do these aspects of our lives play in our reading, writing, teaching, learning—our being and our becoming? The work in this section asks us to be generous in our outlook and open to new ways of experiencing the spiritual dimension of our existences, our mindful practices, our relations with others. What does it mean to take these aspects of people's lives seriously and with the intent to truly understand? Can we bring a liberal, inclusive yet critical relativism to bear productively on our differences to find commonalities or to allow our beliefs to change, evolve? Can we avoid the toxic morass of siloism and group-think that repels us from

one another to engage, without unacceptable sacrifice, with this very human dimension of our existences?

The work in this section invites, perhaps even insists, that we do so, that we embrace our senses of being and spirituality with *capaciousness*, to use the term of our essayists, as we take stock of the effects of our own attitudes, beliefs, practices and those of others.