

A God To Worry About

A minister-friend who is bemused by my lack of religious formality recently asked me in exasperation, “Don’t you have any kind of God at all?” Half jokingly I responded, “Not a God to worry about.”

Bruce and I have been friends for nearly 20 years. He has been a minister for over 50 years and he has a lot of insight into people and unsettlingly ... a good deal of insight into me. But there is something he may never fully understand about me, although I’m sure he has heard similar things from other people. Bruce always had a friend in Jesus. I always had a God to really worry about.

In a nutshell, it’s been a long but worthwhile trip up here from the avenging God of my childhood. Enough scary things happened to me as a child that allowed feelings of real fright to transfer to my religion. Being left alone, a first haircut, going to the dentist ... whatever it was ... I well knew the stomach-dropping feeling when I felt

defenseless and lost forever in a storm of terror I could not escape. I knew the worst could happen. The pit of hell, belching forth a stench of burning with all its demons and fire could open up to swallow me as I hysterically tried to claw my way back up the slope crying, “But I only ate *one* hot dog on Friday!”

Much of my childhood up to age 12 was spent worrying about my moral peccadilloes. I knew that the occasional swear word, disobedience and fighting with my brothers were Venial Sins and weren’t serious enough to warrant a ticket to Hell, thank goodness, but Purgatory wasn’t a great destination either. When I infrequently thought about growing up, I guessed the most prevalent Mortal Sin ... the wages of which were to burn in hell for all eternity ... would have something to do with sex or girls or something like it, but none of these things were of very much interest to me at the time.

One can imagine my shock and dismay to discover at puberty the gaping maw of the Evil One’s kingdom was opening again as I struggled with the terrible sins I found so attractive and impossible to defeat. I spent the entire year of my 8th grade in real panic, dejected over getting so far in life only to crash and burn, my mind in the gutter and my hand too deep in my pocket.



As an adult, I overcame these childish fears, but I found no sustaining interest in the church of my upbringing. I suppose there were many reasons, but one was certainly that the Church had

raised the holiness bar so high when I was an adolescent I gave up in disgust with myself. The disgust might better have been aimed at the Church.

But I also found the mass and worship routine had lost any meaning for me. The organ-grinder sermons, the hierarchy of powerful persons and the massive amounts of money and real estate, all of it represented one of the few power-rich segments of society I could take or leave. I left. I took a resentment I am still not completely over. But to be grateful, I also took the seed planted in me.

Through the years I found men and women like Bruce who were credible individuals, all seeking a spiritual journey. They may have had belief structures very different from my simple axioms, but their sincerity and their realness helped me greatly.

Today, although I seldom go to a church service per se, I have a circle of like-minded friends and acquaintances who are similarly interested in the spiritual side of life and in applying spiritual principles to each day's experiences. We don't care about theology so much as we care about each other.

Some of us attend churches, some don't. We meet often to share a cup of coffee or go out for breakfast and we speak to each other about how we are doing. "How are you?" is a real question, not a greeting. We don't complicate our relationships with a socially mandatory inclusion of spouses or children, although it does occur from time to time. We simply try to be there for each other as we each walk a spiritual journey.

Separately, I meet with a spiritual director every few weeks or so. It's one of the traditions of my Catholic formation I still find useful, because I've learned I cannot be my own temple.

I have found a God I can trust. I cannot tell you much about him or her or it. She is beyond my understanding. When it comes to my welfare, he is beneficent or so I am convinced. I don't know where I'm going after I die, if anywhere. I don't need to know. I have chosen to believe I am in the careful hands of a being who loves me and a being I don't have to worry about offending. I no longer have a God to worry about.

Afterward: *A group of scientists and thinkers, some with more pomposity than our beloved Churchmen, now call religion and spirituality a Memeplex, an intricate mix of behaviors and beliefs, from quark theory to rock and roll to religion, resulting from humans imitating each other since time began. Richard Dawkins coined the term in "The Selfish Gene," one of his many books describing why we are here from a Darwinian point of view. The concept of the memeplex doesn't quite explain why music and sunsets pull on our heart strings and cause us to whisper a little prayer to a God who isn't supposed to be there. Nor could Darwin.*

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