

A Little Talk On Religion and Science

by Wilson McCreary

Now for the next life, the one without mistakes
—Lou Lipsitz

When I considered what specific material to include in this article, the conflict between religion and science was persistently on my mind. I had recently read Sam Harris's, *The End of Faith*, and Richard Dawkins's, *The God Delusion*. Contention has been swirling around religion, faith and rationalism, in what I perceive as a war between religion and science. There is little in the media that doesn't touch, either directly or indirectly, on the subject. My objectives in this writing are to express a few things of positive and negative value in the various religious or spiritual practices in which I've experienced or am otherwise knowledgeable; and also, to relate some of my personal choices and history.

My experience with religion started with small black churches near the farm home of my youth—churches that were near enough for me to go on Sundays to listen to the singing. In my young naiveté, I thought there must have been someone there with formal training to have created music with such wonderful harmony and rhythm. For the most part, I was unseen by the church goers; although once, there was what appeared to be a lookout posted on the front steps to keep an eye on the little cracker boy who might be up to no good. When I was around age 10, we acquired a car and could go to the church of choice—not my choice—where the music was seriously non-inspiring and the Sunday School sword drills were embarrassing and threatening. Given the Bible verse to find, I didn't know which end of the Book to start, while those intimidating tykes around me ripped right to chapter and verse. I was led to believe that one might go to hell for not being more familiar with the Book, and I was ashamed of others being aware of my shortcomings.

As a young adult, I became enamored of mechanical and electrical things and was reasonably good in math, thus my study of engineering and later occupation as an engineer. My

college training was primarily technical and rational with the occasional elective from the liberal arts in music, classical literature and psychology. Just out of the cornfields of Alabama, I had much to learn from the strange new people I met. There was no thought of religion here. My work after college was technical and rational and rarely required people skills.

Technical things seem rather dry to me unless accompanied by something human. The Nobel prize winning physicist, Richard Feynman, wrote some wonderful books which illustrate a personality that mixed human warmth with a fantastic technical knowledge of the physical world. I don't know anything about his religious beliefs, but I don't think they caused him as much angst as mine have me.

Around the age of 50, I experienced a shift in my life signaled by depression during the prior 10 years. Over time, I became involved in an eclectic collection of people and events called the "Men's Movement." The prominent people involved, teachers if you will, were people like Robert Bly, Michael Meade, James Hillman, Coleman Barks, Malidome Somé and others—poets, mythologists, storytellers and psychologists. Poetry is frequently referred to in relation to the work of Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung. During that time, I gave up my direct connections to the protestant religion, with which I had so long been connected. It would have been difficult not to get more involved in things Jung. So I did.

Malidome Somé, a member of the Dagara tribe of Burkina Faso in west Africa, has described some of his tribe's spiritual practices in some detail. I am particularly enamored of one of the practices of Malidome Somé's tribe. Their practice focuses on finding the intended purpose of a person's life here on earth. The work involves elaborate ritual and begins before birth. A touching example involves the children of the village gathering outside the wall of the expectant mother's home and calling to the unborn child. The work continues through the ritual initiation. This is intended to help with the transition from adolescence to adulthood. As part of this initiation, the initiate is given a new name, which is representative of the initiate's life purpose.

There are many rituals from African traditional indigenous cultures which are in place to help individuals and groups

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through transitions from one state of being to a subsequent state. This concept is evident in the traditional music of Africa. My wife Jeanne and I are members of a drum choir which plays West African music. Each song we learn is associated with a ritual for a particular transition or life issue. Indigenous African cultures are said to spend as much as forty percent of their waking time engaged in ritual “religious practice.” Music is a dominant part of those ritual activities. More detail about this can be found in Malidome’s book, *Of Water and the Spirit*. The rituals I see and hear of in my culture are saccharine compared with those of the Dagara. I won’t deny, though, that some practices by indigenous cultures were, and perhaps still, ridiculous and destructive.

The contrast between the Dagara discovery practice and the way my own life choices were made seems stark. Mine were made with no spiritual considerations at all. It was required that I attend college but make my own choice as to which course of study. I made decisions with little knowledge of what the future looked like and little encouragement to make choices based on what I felt most passionate about.

In retrospect, music brought, and still brings me, the most passion. But one can’t go back. And so, I will never know what differences other choices would have made. In my family, music was too frivolous a thing to consider as a profession. One wonderful thing about being retired, is that I can pursue music as much as I want. However, I still struggle with guilt at spending time on a thing so “frivolous.”

Surely, people would be much happier in an environment where life begins with a question rather than an arbitrary assumption. It’s interesting, even fascinating, that in Malidome’s culture, the focus is on what the person’s natural qualities and abilities are rather than some arbitrary assignment by financial, religious, military or other societal needs. In our culture, life choices are too often made by parents who might want a doctor in the family, or perhaps, are made by the wannabe football player dad. The young are thought of by many as malleable clay for living the parent’s un-lived life. I believe that one of the most destructive ideas in our culture is that a child is a blank slate to be molded to whatever is needed or desired by the parent/community/corporation/country.

An African parent could attempt to make life choices for his or her offspring, although in Malidome’s village, it would be more difficult, since the whole community is involved. Also, from such distance in geography and time, it’s easy to romanticize another culture’s activities. Though, one thing seems certain to me, having lived in a fairly close community in the rural, agrarian South—that we have suffered from the loss of closeness that a nurturing community can bring, though perhaps gained from the freedom that comes from separation from the community.

Southern Baptist and Methodist church activities are no longer part of my life. I now call myself a recovering Southern Baptist. The activities were mostly social anyway. Now, I regularly ask myself what I believe. The word faith has always puzzled me—that thing that says I can believe in the unseen. I believe in the seen. The seen may be illusion but I can believe in it. My big Faith is a faith in the great mystery that encompasses these two big questions: *Why am I here*, and *What comes after this life*. The mystery encompasses my psyche—that huge, mostly incomprehensible cavern, seen through a glass darkly and accessible only through the tiny basement door in that small, bright white, well lighted house, that is my ego. That cavern is where cranky old God and Satan scheme and make life so confusing and interesting.

I have my faith that the great mystery exists: *Why am I here? What happens after?* I have science, including evolution, which is the basis for all modern biology. I know that the physical laws fall apart when we try to say that the earth is six thousand years old. Why would the God create things six thousand years ago, yet make it look like it started billions of years ago? But the religionists and scientists keep up the din. I think I have good answers.

One of the best verbal exchanges I’ve heard regarding life and death was a question and its response during one of James Hollis’s lectures and workshops. The question was put to Hollis and was essentially, “Do you believe in an afterlife?” Hollis responded, “The afterlife is then. I’ll take care of that life when I get there. I’m in this life now, taking care of this life now.” It’s what I want to do, take care of this life now, the next life when I’m there.

I’m doing the best I can ■