Venturing Ahead Following a Retreat

by Frank J Angelini

I don't place much emphasis on identifying the "causes" of taking a certain path in life. I've often struggled for an answer when asked "what made you decide to become a psychologist?" I usually find myself offering some contrived response:

It's inspiring. It's a way of combining multiple interests. I love having a career centered on public service, etc., etc.

While all those responses are true, "settling in" and finding a good "fit" with a way of living, like a career, is something that happens over time, through multiple experiences and decision points. That has been the case in my settling into life as a non-theist. There have been no epiphanies on my journey.

The first time I realized that the word "church" represents something more than a building came around the age of four. While running errands with my mother, I spied a church other than the Catholic one we attended. I think I was taken by its red doors — they held such allure! I asked my mother if we could start going to that church instead. She fumbled for a response. With no irritation she said, "No, it's not our church."

When I asked why it wasn't our church, she answered, with amusement, "It's not the one we go to."

It was then that I realized different groups of people go to different churches. That was my first experience with religious distinction.

Religion is cited by many as an important source of comfort during difficult times. While I respect — and when younger, perhaps envied that comfort claim — I always puzzled over how abstract religious concepts (particularly those that are endemic to Catholicism) could come close to the immediate support and love of friends and family. Frankly, the potential for religion and a god providing "support" and "stability" did not square with my personal experience.

How many times, for example, during my Catholic school years did I hear the exhortation to cope with pain and disappointment by "offering it up to the holy souls in purgatory," all the while knowing that I'd get much more comfort from talking to friends, going for a walk, or escaping into music or literature?

After nearly 30 years of work as a mental health treatment provider, I have seen countless examples of people helping one another thrive without making reference to a god or a particular religion. I have witnessed individuals successfully grapple with the most challenging existential questions — those related to personal responsibility, what a "good life" should look like, commitment, and sexuality — without consulting dogma. At the same time, religious responses to these questions have often felt detached and abstract, at best, and cruel, at worst.

The discrepancy between the comfort and love arising from individuals supporting one another in the "here and now versus the wooden, contrived, abstract, and sometimes bizarre notions from religion about how to cope with life's challenges was perhaps the first evidence that, for me, religion was lacking and did not have all the answers. At the very least it was not the only answer.

That discrepancy helped further another line of thinking within me:

Is the notion of god an essential aspect of a happy life? Might it be superfluous?

The very willingness to even begin asking such questions started the "loosening" of my belief in a god.

As I moved through adolescence into early adulthood, my critique of religion became more pointed: perhaps religion and the idea of a god is not only superfluous but also harmful? Such questions came to the fore in the context of various activities in my Catholic church and high school.

In preparation for the sacrament of Confirmation at the age of 14, I participated in a day-long retreat. What I recall most vividly is the constant reference to the dangers inherent in sexuality. Eternal damnation always loomed as the ultimate price of giving in to sexual temptation. The facilitators of the retreat hastened to add that even thinking about sex was an instance of such. I concluded that my peers and I were likely doomed.

In retrospect, that retreat was an opportunity lost, a missed chance to help adolescents develop a mature, caring, responsible attitude towards sexuality. Mostly, I recall experiencing horror at the way it was handled and consider that instance to be the beginning of my revulsion towards and rejection of religion.

We were told that "souls are falling into hell like autumn leaves" due to sexual impurity. On another occasion, it was suggested that nuclear war is a fitting punishment for a sexually impure society. What monstrous things to say to children, particularly in reference to so elemental an aspect of our selves. I'm grateful for the sense of revulsion I experienced as it prompted further inquiry on my part.

Around the time I was starting to experience a growing sense of revulsion towards religion, I happened to come across the *American Atheist Forum* television program on our local access cable channel; it was hosted by **Madalyn Murray O'Hair**, **Jon Murray**, and **Gerald Tholen**. Watching the program was affirming in many ways. For one, it greatly reduced my sense of isolation. I was also bolstered by the confidence the hosts demonstrated. Evincing no diffidence whatsoever, this gang sure could throw some punches back at the evangelical Christianity which was ascendant in the society of the United States at the time and had a strong foothold in government, particularly the Reagan White House. The program suggested I did not have to be a helpless witness to all of that — I could be confident in my views and argue right back. I was especially impressed with the force and

clarity with which O'Hair expressed herself. "Damn," I thought, "this woman doesn't mess around."

From my high school years in the mid and late 1980s until my early 30s, I had a clear understanding of myself as something other than religious, more often than not describing myself as agnostic, given my respect for a stance of doubt. In retrospect I was lonely in that stance, but never felt that joining any sort of organized religion would be acceptable to me.

Then, in 2004, in the midst my opposition to the Iraq war, I found myself drawn towards Quakerism. I must admit that there is much I like about the Quakers. They are socially progressive, antiwar, and have no specific creeds. But what convinced me to "give them a try" was a survey which found that 20% of United States Quakers also identify as atheists and consider themselves "post-Christian." This left me feeling hopeful that I might find with them a supportive, inquisitive community. I attended Quaker meetings for about a year. I met thoughtful and insightful individuals, none of whom did anything but make me feel welcome. Over time, however, I decided that the friendly, congenial atmosphere of the meeting was necessary but not sufficient: being part of a meeting with roots in Christianity evoked a refocus on my rejection of religion. While I appreciate the Quakers' warm welcome and respect their focus on questions rather than answers, I decided I might feel more "at home" among friendly, congenial individuals who are more explicitly nontheistic.

Over the past several years, as the pandemic and middle age have brought life's finitude front and center, I have found myself wanting to come "out of the closet" and more explicitly express my nontheism. Visibility is important: nontheists have an obligation to counter audacious statements such as **Josh Hawley**'s recent insistence that "without the Bible, there is no America." We, too, are citizens with a stake in our country's (and, more importantly, the world's) future.

To conclude, I want to share are few insights I've gained from **Humberto Maturana**, a Chilean biologist and philosopher. His ideas have impacted my work as a psychologist as well as my overall view of life, including the role of religion and the concept of god in our civilization. Language is at the center of Maturana's thinking. He points out that this world only exists in language, without which we have no contours to our individual and shared lives. We create our world(s) through the stories we tell each other and ourselves and the distinctions we make through language. We have created god and religion, along with countless other cultural features.

Maturana also emphasizes that humans are loving creatures, noting that we become ill when deprived of love and connection. The foundation for our existence as loving beings includes, among other things, the neotenic path taken in the evolution of our species: our relationships, even as adults, are characterized (at their best) as ones involving total trust and reflecting the parent-child relationship.

Finally, Maturana points out that as animals who engage in reflection on various aspects of our existence, we have used language to invent systems — including political, religious, and economic ones — that help us justify our actions. He notes that these systems have often alienated us from our nature as loving beings, and that we have begun to live through them rather than through our basic loving nature.

Maturana's ideas leave me feeling optimistic. He reminds us that we can take a step back from our lives and reflect on the superfluity of the idea of god, and through conversation, invent more loving ways of living together as a civilization.

About the Author:

Frank J. Angelini is a psychologist whose work focuses on substance use and misuse. He received his PhD from the University of Pittsburgh and is a member of the Constructivist Psychology Network. He lives in the Main Line suburbs of Philadelphia with his wife and daughter. He is an avid photographer and an "apprentice" printmaker. In his free time he enjoys music, taking long walks with his daughter, and watching sunsets with his family.

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