

# *The Journey Story of Representative Donald Sternoff Beyer, Jr.*

**Donald Sternoff Beyer, Jr.** is an American businessman, diplomat and politician serving as the U.S. Representative for Virginia's 8<sup>th</sup> congressional district since 2015. A member of the Democratic Party, his district is located in the heart of Northern Virginia and includes Alexandria, Falls Church and Arlington. With his permission, the Freethought Society is proud to share his journey story with readers of *The Freethought Society News*.

With humility, I want to take you on my own spiritual journey, introduce you to my demons, and end with why I joined the Congressional Freethought Caucus and why it is so important.

First, let me freely confess I am no theologian or philosopher. I studied economics and physics in college, and have made my career selling and fixing cars. I proudly note I am the only certified automobile mechanic serving in the United States Congress. Yet cars have changed so much in the last ten years I would not know where to start today. I am just a common man, struggling with the same issues as most of us.

I was baptized Roman Catholic in Trieste, Italy, in 1950, by a priest who could not find a saint named Donald. So I was baptized Danielli!

My mother had a profound conversion experience in her early adulthood, and her Catholicism was strong and devout. My father, on the other hand, was raised in a completely non-theistic home, both parents, and I never once heard him mention the word or idea of God in the 67 years I knew him.

His mother, my grandmother, **Clara Beyer**, was perhaps the strongest influence on my life — an extraordinary humanitarian, liberal, and political leader, who died at age 98. She, too, never spoke of a supreme being in all the years I was close to her. I used to call her every day.

I made my first communion early, at age 5, from a Jesuit missionary in Augusta, Georgia, in the basement of a Baptist church. The priest was afraid it might be my last chance. I was confirmed early, again, in Leavenworth, Kansas, because the Catholic bishop only came to town every ten years.

I was educated at Our Lady of Victory elementary school, where I was a reliable altar boy, and could say the entire Mass in Latin, as altar boys had to in those days. I believe I set the record for the number of times I was named Altar Boy of the Month.

I attended Gonzaga High School, the Jesuit high school a few blocks from the Capitol, where I was president of the Sodality. You can see that, by age 17, I was very fully invested in the Catholic Church. My mother had fantasies of my being the first American Pope. Seriously!

But there were chinks in the armor. At age seven, in Kansas, on the playground, I suffered my first existential moment. Holy crap. I was alone. I realized that I was going to live my life alone. And then I was going to die alone.

The Sisters of Notre Dame, two of whom I loved, taught me that unbaptized babies in Africa could never go to heaven; that Protestants were mostly destined for Hell; and that all I had to do to guarantee heaven was take Holy Communion on nine First Fridays of the Month in a row. None of this was making any sense to me. And then there were the church rules! We were not allowed to eat meat on Fridays, and my mother made the most vile-tasting tuna casseroles and boiled shrimp. I still won't eat fish to this day.

The Jesuits made a vital mistake — they hired a layperson named **Nicholas Fagnoli** to teach 12<sup>th</sup> grade religion to us at Gonzaga. He had a huge handlebar mustache, rode a motorcycle, and made us read! We read **Paul Tillich**, **Martin Buber**, **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**, and all kinds of challenging

reads. It must be no surprise, Mr. Fagnoli was fired after one semester. But the damage was done.

*The Phenomenon of Man*, by the Jesuit geologist **Pierre Teilhard de Chardin**, was particularly important to me. The idea that history has a direction, from alpha to omega, the perfectibility of man, the point of Jesus' incarnation to foreshadow that end point, the perfect man, was where we needed to go. This made way more sense to me than the Baltimore Catechism, a Virgin birth, and the assumption of Mary.

I did love "*Ich und Du*," Buber's notion that we must have a personal relationship with our Creator, and that it required a huge "Leap of Faith." OK, I got that, push aside all the craziness of the theology, "Original Sin," etc. and one should just make that leap into a personal relationship with a loving God.

And then college, where someone gave me a copy of *The Book on the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are*, by **Alan Watts**. And then *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, also by Watts. The coup de grace was **Peter Matthiessen's** *The Snow Leopard*. These were very different ways of looking at life and death. So I read *On Being A Christian*, by **Hans Küng**, the Swiss priest who has been censored for his views on papal infallibility (another of those doctrines that made no sense). It was long, powerful, and came down at the end to these eight words. Being a good Christian meant: To live, To act, To suffer, and To die. I was doing all of those — we were all doing all of those.

I took Professor **James Hall's** course on the Philosophy of Religion — it was excellent exposition of all the cases for the existence and the non-existence of God. In his final pages, he writes that we just cannot know. So he chooses to live his life as an agnostic Episcopalian — a modern day **Blaise Pascal**, betting on an afterlife that may not exist.

My greatest dilemma with my historical Christian faith though has always been theodicy. How can God be all-loving and all-powerful, and there still be so much suffering in the world? If he loved us but was powerless, OK, that makes sense. If he was all-powerful but did not love us, that makes sense, too. But powerful love and all this misery? World wars, the Holocaust, pandemics, man's inhumanity to man obvious everywhere. So, of course, I found a book explaining how religions through the ages explained the theodicy paradox. They don't. The best explanation, again, came from a Jesuit, who simply said, "It's a mystery."

I have had one Catholic priest and two Episcopal priests who were dear friends. The Catholic priest drank himself to death in his 40s. One of the Episcopalians is doing fine in retirement. But the other, **Bob Denig**, influenced me greatly. He told me the story of the wandering Jew, whose faith had failed him. He went from rabbi to rabbi trying to find the spiritual wisdom he needed. Each offered him a different interpretation of the Torah and a way to believe and to live. But nothing satisfied him. Finally he met a rabbi who said, "I have been struggling with the same issue all my life. Shall we search together?"

So that is where I am. **Aristotle** said “the presence of timber is not sufficient to build a boat.” But then **Immanuel Kant** wrote, “from the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever wrought.” I want to believe in the power of prayer. But I DO believe in the laws of physics, how evolution is driven to random changes, the Big Bang, entropy, and especially that our consciousness has arisen from wholly physical processes.

So let me please turn to my demons, our demons. We are going to die. As far as we know, we are the only creatures on the planet with an awareness of our own mortality. We are subject to the terror of a mind that can understand the concept of infinity, one that can see back to the beginning of time and to its end, placed in a creaturely body. **Otto Rank** described us as gods with anuses. **Erwin Becker**, in *The Denial of Death* and *Escape from Evil*, writes powerfully about how it is in denying our own mortality that we do such evil things. Why else the need to accumulate indefinitely? The need for golden toilets?

Listen to Becker:

*“What does it mean to be a self-conscious animal? The idea is ludicrous, if it is not monstrous. It means to know that one is food for worms. This is the terror: to have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression and with all this yet to die. It seems like a hoax, which is why one type of cultural man rebels openly against the idea of God. What kind of deity would create such a complex and fancy worm food?”*

My personal observation: every religion is created and evolved to help us deal with our own mortality. Jesus promises us eternal life. So does Mohammed. The Buddha promises *satori*, sudden enlightenment, if only we will let go. But if there is no supreme being, no God, how do we confront the terror of non-being? **Irvin Yalom** wrote a beautiful book, *Staring into the Sun*, on this exact problem. He offers no easy solution — for we each have to find our own solution, one life at a time.

But here is mine, from **Rainer Maria Rilke**:

*“All that the rest forget in order to make their life possible, we are always bent on discovering, on magnifying even; it is we who are the real awakers of our monsters, to which we are not hostile enough to become their conquerors; for in a certain sense we are at one with them; it is they, the monsters, that hold the surplus strength which is indispensable to those that must surpass themselves.*

*“But suddenly we feel our-selves walking beside them, as in a Triumph, without being able to remember the exact moment when this inconceivable reconciliation took place (bridge barely curved that connects the terrible with the tender...)”*

Let me get political at the end. I have four children, none of whom have even the slightest inclination toward God, religion, or church. Religion means 19 Muslims killing 3,000 people and themselves on 9/11, to earn virgins in heaven. It means **Jerry Falwell** and **Jerry Falwell Jr.** and the Moral

Majority, which was neither. It means Shiites vs. Sunnis, Catholics vs. Protestants, burning at the stake because you don't believe in baptism. Religion is equivalent to intolerance — of skin color, sexual orientation, class, and on and on. Religion means imposing your rules and practices and beliefs on everyone else, especially when it comes to sexuality.

Last year, I read *Humanae Vitae*, the 1968 encyclical by Pope Paul the Sixth, which affirmed that Catholics could not use birth control and that abortion was evil. I was looking for the theological rationale that a human life with a soul was present from the moment of conception, the union of the sperm and the ovum. Surprise! It was not there. Yet this has been one of the great dividing lines in our culture for 50 years. Based on what? I DO believe human life is the highest value. But who gets to decide when human life is present?

I was honored to be invited to join the Congressional Freethought Caucus in Congress. Congressman **Jared Huffman** and Congressman **Jamie Raskin** are two men I admire immensely. Together, we will do our best to minimize the impact and influence of religious rules and dogmas and intolerances on our laws and our budgets. If we are a nation founded on freedom, then it is essential that every person be free to think, believe, even worship in their own way — to the extent, of course, that it is lawful and does not impinge on the freedom of others.

I give you one final thought, from **Leonard Cohen**, who died in 2016: “There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.



Representative **Donald Sternoff Beyer, Jr.** is pictured above. He is a proud member of the Congressional Freethought Caucus — a membership organization in the United States House of Representatives established to promote policy solutions based on reason and science, and defend the secular character of government.

Representatives **Jared Huffman** (D-CA), **Jamie Raskin** (D-MD), **Jerry McNerney** (D-CA), and **Dan Kildee** (D-MI) founded the group in April 2018. **Pramila Jayapal** (D-WA) joined shortly thereafter.

Representatives Huffman and Raskin co-chair the caucus. Though officially nonpartisan, currently all 14 members are Democrats. Readers of *The Freethought Society News* are encouraged to tell their Congressional Representatives about the Caucus and encourage them to join.