

My Truth in Labeling Story

by Lauren Swann

I was raised Roman Catholic during the 1960s/70s in mostly white suburban areas of Bucks County, Pennsylvania. In 2nd grade I went through my 1st Holy Communion, and in 4th grade, Confirmation at St. Christopher's in the Somerton section of northeast Philadelphia. Sometime before 5th grade I recall being taken with all the girls in my class to the Sisters of Mercy Mother House to hear about "the calling" to be a nun. I was also exposed to diversity early on, attending many Quaker services and events into my teens because I lived in Concord Park — the country's first intentionally integrated community established by Quakers — until I was 10 years old; the local neighborhood church there was Methodist. In 1969 we moved to a block in Warminster with many Jewish neighbors.

As a teen, I transferred to public high school where a group of born-again/saved Christians tried fervently to rescue me from what they saw as a Catholic-ruined spirit. Hanging out with them was actually the worst spiritual time for me...ever. I didn't experience the "southern gospel" styled (usually Baptist) service so familiar to many blacks until I attended a historically black college in the late 1970s. My exposure to southern style gospel wasn't due to my relatives — my maternal grandparents were Episcopalian and the Catholic legacy came from my dad's side. My fellow students took me on that journey.

About 20 plus years ago, while in a couple of relationships — one with a Nigerian, another with a Navajoan — both asked me the same question. They asked how can black Americans cling to a belief that was used to abuse, exploit and manipulate them? I've heard this question before many times, but for some reason during my mid-30s hearing it asked within two personal relationships (with whom I shared some common ancestry) suddenly clicked something inside of me. I asked myself, why do I still believe? The only answer I could come up with was because my parents had reared me that way.

I'd read about Pantheism (native spirituality for the indigenous) while exploring discussions in the growing online forums of the mid to late '90s and it described what I've always felt — that the "greater power" is nature and it is within all of us too because we are a part of nature. I identify as atheist because I believe in nothing supernatural. Scientific (or secular) Pantheism is about experiencing "spirituality" as emotions and feelings that result from interacting with, appreciating and understanding the symbiotic connection between various natural elements on Earth and in the Universe.

I've noticed that it is not unusual for atheists to ridicule, disparage or demean a nonbeliever who also feels "spirituality" and I've frequently observed rude criticism of those who consider themselves to be "spiritual but not religious."

It simply does not make sense to me to ostracize others like that. They are just on a journey and they are moving closer to atheism. Please don't send them back to belief by shunning the notion of spirituality. It is better to let people identify with nonbelief in their own way.

I think I actually first questioned the concept of a supernatural deity as a very young child when my older sister and brother tried to explain how "God" was real — even though you couldn't see, feel, hear or touch him. I think I first figured out that God could not be real when I began taking Holy Communion and my mom along with my older sister corrected me when I said the host only represents Christ's body. They, however, insisted that the communion wafer actually becomes the flesh of Christ once blessed. No, I never believed it and I wondered how they possibly could.

It has been so liberating to get rid of it all! Sometimes I really resent my religious upbringing for the way it warped my thinking, especially when establishing my own values and morals while transitioning from teen to adult on my own.

Sometimes the resentment I have pushes me towards being more of an anti-theist, but I try to be respectful because I do believe that some people get positive value from their religious inclinations. I'm all for happy people, not telling them exactly how to get there. □



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