

“Secular Testimony”

For The Clergy Project

Raised in the Presbyterian Church near Seattle, WA, singing in choirs and being a youth group leader, it seemed natural for me to end up a pastor (especially since I was born on Christmas!). High school gave me wonderful mixed flavors of Jesus Juice (Baptist, Presby, Campus Crusade, Pentecostal) with endless Bible studies, prayer and praise. At (conservative Methodist) Seattle Pacific University I pursued Biblical studies but was most drawn to Philosophy. My mind was finally being challenged to reflect on my faith among many faiths. I was fascinated by World Religions and read all I could of the scriptures of the world: the *Tao*, *Vedas*, *Gita*, *Dhammapada*, *Qur'an*, *Analects of Confucius* and more. My faith grew to be less exclusive and more curious—unafraid of questions. I hung out at a hip house church led by a “Messianic Jew,” played foosball with Muslim students and had “unchurched” friends. My world was expanding and evolving quickly.

My homechurch pastor encouraged me to try seminary so I ventured off to the “wilds” of California to seek a Master’s degree at San Francisco “Theological” Seminary (is there a non-theological seminary?). Anyway, I found I was immediately challenged to think even more outside the Big Christian God Box. I particularly enjoyed taking classes through the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. I had Catholic, Buddhist, Muslim and Jewish Professors who opened my eyes to a much wider world of faith and the edges of faith. Liberation Theology (Black, Red, Brown, Feminist, Economic) became the only theology that made sense. While an instructor at a private school I attended a progressive Catholic mass and once each month joined a delightfully lively Jewish synagogue in the campus chapel.

In seminary I was intrigued by this fresh and edgy new path called Chaplaincy. As a student chaplain in a local county jail I discovered this felt much better and freeing to me (yes, even in a jail!) than the thought of “serving a church”—the path 99% of my

classmates were preparing for. I worked for a small church in San Francisco exploring a “bar ministry.” The congregation ran out of patience and funds for that, but soon I found a Jail Chaplaincy in Marin, one of the wealthiest counties in America. I grew that for ten years, supported by a diverse non-profit board representing the Interfaith community.

From jail I was “released” to lead a Street Chaplaincy, all the while developing a workable, cooperative approach to service that was never about preaching or trying to be a missionary but practicing a listening presence, leading diverse discussion circles, counseling and helping when needed. It was draining, but I loved it. People in search of home (“homeless”) offered countless lessons I never learned in seminary, the Bible or faith. I was much more honored to be called “Chaplain Chris” than I ever was being called “Reverend.” It always seemed to me that God, and Jesus in particular, was “out there” with outcasts and I wondered why people of faith, by and large, were rarely found in those dark and lonely places.

For 10 years I served as a parish associate for an upscale Presbyterian Church where the pastor encouraged whatever I wanted to offer the congregation. I taught Adult Education classes there, and at several other churches, with an emphasis on “World Wisdom” and “Sacred Scriptures.” People were quite curious and it was delightful to expose people to a wide array of “holy writ” who had never read any other “sacred text” other than the Bible. Now and then I still teach these introductory courses and greatly enjoy the discussions as eyes are opened and minds light up.

It seemed natural for me to say goodbye to the “community of faith.” In 2001 I left my ordination (more on that story in my book, *Life After Faith*) in part because I’d “heard the Voice of the Spirit” for so many years *outside* the locked and guarded doors of the Church, I was simply ready to be honest and move on. In *My Address is a River* I relate about 70 stories from those Chaplaincy years to show the gradual but decisive shift from a faith insider to a disappointed but proudly heretical outsider.

Completing some 25 years in chaplaincy-related work, I moved to a small cabin on Whidbey Island in the Puget Sound. As I harvested vegetables on an organic farm I created a trail system through a dense forest and wrote several books in the evening by lamplight or woodstove. On the island it didn't take too long before I let go of "the Spirit of Nature" and finally the supernatural itself, realizing that for many years that had been both an inspiration and a major distraction from the innate goodness and essential beauty of Nature itself. My next book was a book of essays, *Nature is Enough*, where I explained why I thought it was time to welcome "the end of spirituality."

After a short time assisting a drop-in center for youth, I moved back to the Bay Area to teach classes on "A Wild Gospel of Nature" (Whitman and Muir) in a Catholic university and was asked to become the Director of an emergency shelter for several years. Truth be told, I moved back to marry the executive director of a large interfaith council. We had met when we were both chaplains.

I continue to have interaction with faith communities. After all, I have friends and family who are among the faithful, and my wife Carol is a Minister. Now and then I still get invited to speak in a congregation. I remain interested in building trails, if not bridges, between the faithful and faithless. This seems of greater import than merely building more walls to divide and polarize (one reason I often call myself a Freethinker rather than an Atheist).

I've gone on to write a few more books and to teach in several colleges and a seminary. For 6 years I was the manager of affordable cooperative housing for independent seniors owned by an ecumenical organization. There, I was around people every day who expressed their faith but I wasn't really bothered by that. I understand the feelings, the comfort, the relationships faith can offer. But I'm especially sensitive to nonsense and will often speak out, especially on my blogs (www.secularchaplain.wordpress.com), to confront the nonsense with common sense.

In recent days I have been certified as a Humanist Celebrant and I've been growing the concept and practice of a "Secular Chaplain" with a basis in natural ethical principles of service. Both online and in teaching I draw on the strengths and skills gleaned from those years of innovative, cutting edge chaplaincy. Each walk in Nature and every human encounter reminds me that when all is said and done, there may not be a lot to be said, but there is always more to be done—cultivating common ground is about as secular as you can get. With pathfinders and trailguides— "nature chaplains"— like John Muir and John Burroughs, Francis Wright and Walt Whitman, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Robert Ingersoll, I now seek to center my life on a naturally delightful awareness of the good, meaningful moments that anyone can experience, faith or no faith. Whether looking into the eyes of a person on the street or into the vastness of a mountain range, *Beauty reveals the Good without the need for a God. As I like to say, Nature is "super" enough without any imagined, un-natural worlds beyond.*

Along these open paths I like to keep in mind the wisdom of naturalist John Burroughs who once wrote, the more we allow science, reason and wonder to lead us forward down the trail, the more we find ourselves "at home in the universe."

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