

## A Spiritual Side

Nov. 29, 2009

My altar is way too crowded. I just added a vase with blazing orange silk flowers. It seems to have pushed aside a number of shells from a number of romantic walks on a number of beaches. An old CD reflects a small pile of polished stones that are trying to be the center of attention. Painted rocks still roughly sketch out the points of the compass. The Tibetan singing bowl, a Christmas present, has replaced the chimes that used to be there. Surrounding everything is probably a little too much candle litter.

Hmmh... I'm actually surprised that I have an altar. You see, I don't think of myself as an *altar* person. Indeed, I'm quite cynical of the whole altar thing. There is definitely a side of me that doesn't get it *at all*.

This intellectual side of me does not experience a world with altars or spirits or any sort of supernatural. My brain does not "feel God's presence" or "just know that there is a Lord above." The faith that I learned about in my youth has long ago ceased to fit into my current psyche. I struggled with that for some time. It worried me. Shouldn't these ideas of "faith" and "God" make sense to me? Isn't that what everyone else believes?

Well, I came to see that this isn't so and I developed this powerfully cynical voice inside my head. It emboldened me to toss aside any spiritual notions. That was no way for an intellect to properly make sense of the

world.

And My whole life I have been an intellectual. I can never remember a time that my parents weren't telling me about the importance of a college education in order to be a success. I may have taken their advice a little too well because I have spent my whole life in some school or another: learning, studying, teaching. It has become my profession (I'm now a statistics professor at UCSB) and it has often been my whole life. When I think about life after death, I expect that an article in *The Annals of Statistics* is my best chance at immortality.

But now, I have an altar with a small stand in the center where I can burn incense from the little box my mother gave me. The smell of the smoke makes me think of holy places and peace—imagining exotic temples with dim light... creating a quiet bubble for meditation.

Because along with my skepticism, I have another side that craves the spiritual and seeks experiences of awe. A side that struggles with “knowing,” but knows that there is a connection between people that goes beyond anything that I can see. This part of me finds solace in prayer. It creates altars and goes on vision quests—sings down angels and follows dragonflies into the underworld. This side may be harder to talk to, but it is no less insistent on what it needs.

My spiritual practices provide a deep comfort to me. I don't know the source of this need ... maybe it is just a primordial longing of my soul. An ill-formed desire to **experience** the answer to the question, “What is

my place in the universe?” . . . To feel that I am a participant, a cog, a strand in the web of life. My spiritual side embraces the fuzzy edges of my understanding. I don't necessarily know what I'm seeking. My heart just feels comforted when I have found it.

Among the shells on my altar is a sand dollar that my wife and I found while walking near Pismo Beach. It was at the end of a wonderful vacation when we stumbled upon this sand dollar that was remarkably nearly whole and almost perfect. The five pointed star in the center was in two pieces, but only a small sliver was actually missing. I don't remember all that we were doing that day, but it was an especially happy day that I love to recall. Unfortunately, time and handling have broken the sand dollar into so many pieces that I am afraid to move it or it will never get back together. It still sits in almost the right arrangement, appearing to be whole, fragilely reminding me of joy and love. A reminder of how my soul is filled. An imperfect symbol of the shape of my heart.

So. . . . . how do I manage this contradiction between a cynical intellect and a seeking spirit? There is an uneasy balance that I have found by **embracing** my own uncertainty around many questions.

Michael Shermer is a writer for *Scientific American* magazine where he has a regular column called "Skeptic." In a recent issue, he was describing his own skepticism and addressed the question of what existed before the Big Bang. Some people might assume that only God existed before the universe. Some physicists have proposed that our current universe is only

one piece of a multiverse that expands and contracts creating multiple universes. There really is no way of knowing. Shermer wrote

God, multiverse, or the unknown. Which one you choose depends on your tolerance for ambiguity and how much you want to believe.

He continues

For me, I remain in sublime awe of the unknown.

I agree with Shermer, and for me, this unknown, this uncertainty, actually allows space for both my spiritual side and my intellectual side.

A mystic sees uncertainty as a door to walk through to find explanations beyond the observable. An opening to insist that only a more expansive view of the universe can get at its true nature. This is an opportunity that I see.

In contrast, the professional skeptic, like Shermer, can admit that he does not know without being concerned that he has opened himself up to hocus-pocus. His uncertainty is clearly delineated by his belief in evidence and the ultimate importance of testing a new hypothesis against all the available data. I completely agree with him.

Every year in Live Oak's "Coming of Age" ceremony, the youth are given a chance to say what they believe. I'll often find myself thinking about what I would say if I was in their place. . . and I don't know. I don't know what I believe. I don't know what happened before the big bang.

I don't know why I'm here or if I'm living my life the way I should. The best answer I have is "I don't know." And I think I'm fine with that. "I don't know" gives me the room to seek, to experience, to question what my soul really needs.

Live Oak and Unitarian Universalism have given me a place where I can sit with all of my contradictions and uncertainties. I don't have to pretend that the answers to my questions have convinced me, or that I want to be convinced. Live Oak has provided an environment where my spiritual side can develop. It has made me expand my understanding of what a spiritual community can be because it accepts us even with all of our doubts. We sing "even to question is an answer." I have been able to find a path that is right for me. I am inspired by everyone else even while they are going down different roads.

Now, embracing "I don't know" is especially difficult for the statistician that I am in my professional life—more of a mathematician than a scientist. Unlike a scientist who is confident while waiting for the next experiment to provide the data he needs; who sees holes in his knowledge as the next opportunity. My inclination is to create a grand theoretical structure that describes the entirety of the universe (at least to a first approximation). I am looking for explanations.

My work is precise, rigorous, abstract and, most of all, it is analytical. I tear things apart to see how they work. I look at algorithms and stochastic processes to figure out the inner order that must lie below the surface. I

feel compelled in many ways to structure and systematize my world. It often bleeds from my job as a statistician into other realms of my life.

As a result, “I don’t know” isn’t an answer that appeals to my analytical personality. Uncertainty—not knowing—is not something that any of us humans deal with very well. We always want an explanation. We have this need to understand the causes of the events we see happen in the world. It motivates our scientists, our mathematicians, and even our story tellers. How was the world created? What is going to happen next? Why do these things happen to me?

The questions in life demand explanations. There are material ones that are often available. However, mystical explanations are possible as well. The complex interaction of people and minds and souls can be best described through the vocabulary of the spirit. Maybe my intellect finds conflict only when I try to explain the world beyond my knowing.

So that at the end of the day, I must admit that I cannot know these answers, and I find a certain power in that acceptance. There can be a great comfort in uncertainty.

Uncertainty allows my heart to drift in quiet meditation without knowing how. My soul resides in an exotic landscape that seeks not to analyze but to connect my feelings to all of the real people all around me. My UU spirituality connects me to the interdependent web of all people, all humanity, all life. This web of connectedness reaches out from my pain, my fear and across the small space to your fears and your comfort.

There is one particular smooth stone beside the pile on my altar. It is some kind of polished rock that is vaguely rectangular in shape. In my hand, I can feel the corners that are still there even though they have been polished down. When I clutch it in my hand with my eyes closed, it feels like grief—polished down to a manageable level, but still very solid and hard, uncomfortable when I press against it. I can acknowledge the pain that still resides deep in my belly. I can hold it in my hand and imagine that I'm listening to my grandfather's quiet wisdom or borrow some of my grandmother's power.

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Being a professor of probability and statistics also informs the way I think about uncertainty. As a statistician, I have a nice working relationship with the concept of coincidence. We should not be surprised by the occurrence of unlikely events. Every quarter I warn my students that in any experiment *something* will happen. The coin must come up either heads or tails, almost surely. If every possibility is highly improbable then something highly improbable will happen. This often describes our world: highly improbable but no less likely than the alternatives. The whims of chance are such that we want an explanation when there is seldom one available. No searching will overturn that reality.

My statistical training and my understanding of the role and effects of randomness have lead me to bristle at explanations that depend on the unknown will of God. God may work in mysterious ways, but I find

comfort in a world where randomness is the arbiter of fortune. It is natural to seek explanations, to want to understand why, but there is often no reason that the coin came up heads rather than tails. My understanding of the universe assigns no purpose to the whims of chance.

As an aside, I find it fascinating that the theory of probability was only first studied in relatively modern times because of the belief that God was working in randomness. The throwing of lots or rolling of dice was not a way to produce a random outcome, but to determine the will of the Gods. The belief was that the ultimate power in the universe must determine the finest of these details of our life. The axioms of randomness and probability were not even conceived of until the ideas of science and empiricism took hold in society. Only in the last two hundred years have gamblers embraced the idea that the knowledge of odds was just as important as being blessed by Lady Luck.

In embracing the random nature of the universe, I strive to maintain an attitude of gratefulness to the gifts that have been given me because I know that the special circumstances of my life are not deserved. I am thankful for the head start that my place in the world has given me. I strive to make the most of the hand that has been dealt me. I have seen the advantages that I have been given, and feel that impels me to give back.

The flip side is that in a crisis our first question is often “Why me? What did I do to deserve this?” I try to keep in mind that crises are never

deserved. There is no answer to the question of “Why?”

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On my altar, I have some silk flowers in a Raku vase. My wife assures me that the bright orange hue goes well with the decor as well as being very good Feng-Shui in that corner of the room. They are a symbol of beauty and the power to face my fears.

My flowers have an energetic look—a hint of fire contained within a burned vessel. A vase the color of ashes sprouting bright blooms promising life in darkness. Imagine the beauty that resides (however deep) in your heart, having the energy to spread out from the top of the vase. Looking around, I make a note not to be afraid to face what I need to face because I hold that power in my heart.

My typical work as statistician, the process of my research, happens alone at my desk (especially when there are no classes to teach.) I scribble. The actual act is simply pen on paper. I invent abstractions that are too complicated to keep in my head all at once so my scribbles are a sort of map. A map that I need to find my way through the abstract contours of statistical theory. A grand system of thought is sketched onto piles of scratch paper. Etching arcane symbols to guide me to see the connections that I know must be there if I could just look at the picture from the right angle. This is my work as a mathematician, and it is what drew me into this profession.

Because the great brilliance of mathematics is its abstract nature. It

can be daunting, but abstraction is also invaluable. It is the understanding that many questions have the same answer if you just see them through the right prism. What often makes mathematics mystifying, its seeming detachment from concrete objects, is in fact the source of its power.

These abstractions are useful when they are metaphors for measurements of the real world. They are useful when complicated objects are simplified by considering only their mathematical essence. They are useful when they hint at an underlying order. They are useful when they lead us to more interesting questions. They are useful when they are beautiful.

However, in the end, this process of abstraction draws me inward into my head. It is a powerful way of understanding, but it can ultimately disconnect me from anything except that scrap of paper that sits in front of me.

My Tibetan bowl can't be rung like a bell. It needs to be coaxed into a low hum. It sets up a vibration that is very soothing. A clean sort of tone that passes right through you. I can imagine all of my cells humming along to the same tune. Each of my fibers able to let go of tension, anxiety, worry, and fear to join with the low vibration that spreads out around me. At the same time that it helps me find inner stillness, the sound carries me outward to connect to others. Strands of connections in synchronous vibration with a toll that spreads from me, to my family, to my community, to the whole world.

I want a spirituality that connects me out beyond myself like in our

collective Sunday worship. Why do we all sit down here together? With all these people all surrounding us—there is no way that I can feel alone. As we follow the comfortable order of our service. The universe sits next to me and reaches out her hand to hold mine. Joy sweeps over the congregation as we join in song and voices and spirits mix. Each candle that is lit embodies a life with all the twists and turns, ups and downs. Then in the silence, we have been invited to go within ourselves to our centers. I hope that we can also feel each of those people around us that are connected to the same ground as we are. The congregation of souls, each shouting, crying, laughing, celebrating together in that silence. There is more than any one heart could hold; more than any one person could understand. Each of us just touches the rough outer layer of the all that is contained in that space, but this is enough for the congregation together to carry the weight.

So my altar may not be quite what you would have imagined. It isn't really devoted to any particular supernatural entity or deity. The altar holds my love and grief, my fears and ultimately connects me to the world. It is a place where I can seek stillness. Where I can stand silently and let everything catch up with me. I can sit among the pieces that I have dropped during the days and weeks. I can hold all of them tightly to me, remembering, while simultaneously setting them aside. Embracing all the parts of me without confusion or contradiction about what is really me. In silence, I am united with what is me and also the whole world.

And if I'm still not sure what I believe, then I remember that as Shelley Jackson Denham wrote in the hymn "We Laugh, We Cry",

In our search for peace,  
maybe we'll finally see:  
even to question,  
truly is an answer.

May it be so.

Drew Carter, 11/29/2009