

Kids, Religion and Science

John 14:1-6

Thank you for this opportunity to share with you my personal perspectives on Sunday School, science and religion, and how my life journey shaped my views on these subjects.

I must first disclose that I claim no special background in these subjects, other than being a Sunday school teacher of middle and high school students for more years than I can remember (at my age I have some trouble remembering anything. Ask my wife.)

As to science, I studied earth science, biology and physics in high school, and biology in college. At one point in college, I thought I wanted to be a doctor, like my father, and enrolled in a chemistry class. But after skipping numerous lectures and labs to cover student rebellions and anti-Vietnam War demonstrations for my college newspaper and radio station, I realized that psychologically I had already decided to become a journalist or a lawyer, and I dropped chem. So any of my observations on the mysteries of science should be taken with a large grain of salt.

In one way, I did follow in my father's footsteps. He too taught Sunday school to junior high students, in the Woodstock Congregational Church. He was something of a history junkie and collected artifacts dating back to Greek and Roman times, which he incorporated into his lessons. As a navy and marine doctor, he had served in the invasions of Sicily and Iwo Jima in the second world war, about which he said nothing, but which I believe had a significant bearing on his faith.

In some ways, with his artifacts and focus on history, he studied the past to try to find meaning in life. But he also acted out his religious faith in remarkable ways. He would often make night house calls to home bound

patients, who frequently paid him in garden vegetables. Some of my best memories were joining him on these treks, talking with him about the case and then sitting outside in the car by myself listening to Curt Gowdy broadcasting Red Sox games on the car radio until he returned.

My approach to Sunday school is different from his. I rely on the texts provided by Sue Robinson for the topics for to be discussed. I do not recall my father using texts. However, I use those texts, not as gospel, but as a medium to explore with my students what they really believe. I have them illustrate the Bible stories on type writing paper which we tape to the walls—much to Frank Lewis’s legitimate concern. I then challenge the reality of the illustrations and their meaning. I find students are more comfortable having their interpretations challenged by critiquing their drawings rather than challenging them directly.

In this way, I try to encourage them to approach to the spiritual life as a lasting search for meaning, however illusive. In short, a search that embraces doubt. Faith then ideally becomes—not a certainty to them--but a commitment to explore the teachings of Christ from a 21st Century perspective.

In large part this approach is an attempt to short circuit for them the spiritual journey I took at their age. After going through church membership class, I made an appointment with my minister to tell him I was not ready yet to join the church; I was not sure what I believed in. Thankfully he took this news with grace. I went on from there to help advocate successfully for the end to mandatory chapel at Pomfret School. But in some ways rejecting religion was, without my realization, an indication I was subconsciously taking it seriously.

A humanities class at Pomfret School my senior year, taught by an immigrant from the Hungarian revolution, caused me to reconsider the meaning of religion in my life. And as a student at Yale during the Vietnam War, I learned to understand human failing through the sermons of the Rev. Dr. William Sloan Coffin, Jr. I joined his church and ultimately became a deacon in it. Two years after graduation, he married Deb and me.

After law school, I clerked for Federal Judge Robert Anderson—Chip and Freddy’s father—in Noank where we lived for a year. We attended this church, then under the ministry of Jim Pratt. We then moved to New Haven where I worked for a law firm and then the Mayor’s office for several years, before joining a law firm in New London and returning—apparently permanently—to Noank and to this church. (In putting this auto biography together, I recalled Jim Pratt showing up one day at our New Haven apartment and asking us to consider moving back to Noank to manage the Group Home. We decided not to, but it was an indication of our future, and yet another indication of the resourcefulness of Jim Pratt. But I digress.)

I should also note that Deb had by this point introduced me to Camp Wightman, where we became counsellors in Pioneer Camp for many years, giving us an opportunity to introduce junior highs to nature and Christianity at the same time.

Ok. You are scratching your heads. I said I was going to talk about kids, religion and science. Where is the science?

We’re getting to that. Back in college a few of us got together to create a fictitious God major. The first two introductory courses were entitled “Awe” and then “Wonder”. I forget the intermediate courses but the final seminar was something like “Being in His Presence”. (By the way, why do

we always refer to God as a male? We are going to have to take care of that someday.)

However, the subjects of “Awe” and “Wonder” have generally been out of favor as our sciences explain much of the phenomena we used to find mysterious. When I was a child the moon was a distant, sometimes dark thing filled with craters that made it appear to be made of swiss cheese. Now we have walked on it, left trash on it, and are working on international treaties on how we should share it—sort of like zoning in outer space. The mystery is gone.

However, I would posit that we have not begun and probably will never fully understand the nature of our existence. Knowing about the moon does not begin to explain how it got there and why we or it exist. I think our attraction as a congregation—and a reason our Sunday school is so popular—is our willingness to question Christian dogma and the relevance of a person walked on this earth 2000 years ago. For our religion to survive, we must embrace rather than explaining away the implications of our scientific advances and incorporate them into our search for meaning in this universe and perhaps other universes. If we do not I fear we will become irrelevant for my students and future generations.

In saying this, I do not overlook the destructive power of science. The Manhattan Project was a success, but it has resulted in bombs capable of destroying the world. What we must capture is the wonder of science and our life on earth and combine the wonder with a commitment to live as Christ would have us live.

Einstein once mused regarding the universe that he could not believe that it all happened by chance. We are searching for what mysterious force caused the universe to be created and expand. Somehow the equilibrium of

nothingness was disrupted creating matter and anti-matter, and countless galaxies and offsetting black holes. (By the way Einstein posited that black holes would somehow consume each other, and apparently, recently one of our satellites has sent back photographs observing the phenomena.) Einstein was no dummy.

We as Christians need to recognize the mystery of life as revealed by science not as described in the story of Adam and Eve. We also need to question the meaning of our lives in the time we are given to be on this planet.

In sum, just by living we are existentially given a choice. During our life span on this planet, we can choose to hurt others, ignore others, or help others. I hope that by combining the mysteries of life and the teachings of Christ my students will not make the easy choice to live day to day in the real world, seeking what the world defines as success. Rather I want them to question, to be fascinated by the complexity of our existence, and to choose caring for others and spreading the gospel of Christ. Our faith is, by definition, not a certainty; but by embracing it, even in the face of uncertainty, we can be inspired to treat others in this world how we would like to be treated.

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