



The best laid plans...

The “Spiritual Seeker” from the last newsletter and I planned to continue our conversation in this issue after he and his wife saw and heard the Dalai Lama in LA. The couple went to California, but the Dalai Lama was ordered by his doctor to stay in Tokyo and missed the LA engagement. Our Spiritual Seeker doesn’t have time to pursue our conversation from another angle at the moment after taking time out of his busy schedule (working full-time, going to school and looking for a new job) for the long weekend away. Nonetheless, the Pentecost newsletter is due, so here we go.

I’ve decided to share the beginning of my thought process about the topics that Seeker raised in our last conversation. How do I begin to build a bridge from where he is to the six-step Crossings’ method? One topic I heard immediately was the gap between religion and spirituality. I know this is something many of us have explored in the past, but in listening to Seeker’s words, I realized more fully how the superiority of personal spirituality over religion is a given for many younger folks. His comments [“Being raised Christian, there was a solid base to rely on when I really needed it. However, my own personal beliefs have strayed from the Christian tradition since then.”] carry no tinge of rebellion or anguish about them, merely a sense of the natural evolution of thought and the rightness of each individual to build her/his own spiritual reality.

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The ethos of our culture has shifted so dramatically that many of us who call Christianity home feel flummoxed by the gulf that seems to have grown up between us and so many people around us. Adding to our confusion is often guilt when folks close to us -- our kids, our grandkids -- are the people looking at us from the other side of this chasm. What should I have done differently? What’s the matter with them? Why has this happened in our family? What do I do now? It can be overwhelming.

An old Irish tale I first heard in Pat Kiefert’s book, **We Are Here Now**, goes like this, “A man decides he wants to go to a very special place in the west of Ireland. Being a total stranger to Ireland, he decides to ask

for directions. He asks the first knowledgeable looking stranger, someone who looks local, ‘Can you tell me how to get to this place?’ The local responds, ‘Never heard of it. But if I were going there, I wouldn’t start from here.’”

Some of us feel like that Irish local. Wherever it is we need to be to engage with the world, where we are now is a difficult place to start. I have to admit that after reading Seeker’s response to me in the last newsletter, I felt a fair amount of the flummox-ery I alluded to before. My knee-jerk reaction was AARGH.

Nonetheless, this is where we are now. I know that God has not given me a spirit of fear, but of power,

love and a sound mind [2 Timothy 1] so I start somewhere that gives me strength, Romans 8:

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.... 28 We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”

O.K., I'm not condemned, I'm in Christ Jesus and I'm called according to his purpose. Here and now, part of God's purpose in my life includes some bridge building toward my friend the Seeker. I start with prayer and then look for some thinking help. I find an article by **Sandra Schneiders** called **“Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum”** from the journal **Spiritus** number 3, 2003. As I read her article, I find language that helps me put words to some of the confusion I felt as I read Seeker's response. This isn't a review of the article. It's my thought process that helped me discover my next step with Seeker. Hopefully, this work will help both you and me connect a little better with folks on the other side of the chasm.

Schneiders' first point that grabs my attention is her comment that this religion/spirituality conundrum is a product “of our unprecedented abundance, leisure, and freedom.” She says that people in other parts of the world where such time and resources aren't available don't struggle with this the way those of us in the so-called first world cultures do. We are having more exposure to other religions and spiritual disciplines than at any other time in history and we aren't staying inside the traditions we were born into. Instead we are shopping for meaning from a whole array of religious and spiritual traditions. This reality is affecting how our culture operates.

These perspectives on the religion/spirituality conundrum remind me to be aware that Seeker and I are speaking two different cultural languages and in such a context, speaking the truth in love takes time, trust and patience. Talking across cultural divides, especially ones that are still in flux, can be frustrating and even seem useless. But the goal of our conversations is not verbal mastery over an opponent, nor a lecturer impart-

ing knowledge to a student, but bridge building between us.

Schneiders says that there are three basic ways that we see this struggle between religion and spirituality played out:

- Religion and spirituality are strangers that really have nothing to do with each other.
- Religion and spirituality are enemies that compete for the allegiance of people questing for something beyond themselves.
- Religion and spirituality are partners, two sides of a single enterprise.

Schneiders explores all three positions, but she argues for the third.

She says that at the most basic level, all human beings are capable of spirituality. She defines this capacity as the human attempt to connect all of one's

self with all that is outside of us. It's about finding our meaning, our purpose, our place in the world. Schneiders then sets out **the criteria of spirituality today:**

- Experience -- personal lived reality which has both active and passive

dimensions.

- Conscious involvement in a project -- spirituality is not an accident or episode or collection of activities, but a consciously pursued and ongoing project.
- Project of life-integration -- it's an effort to bring all parts of one's life together into a whole through growth and development.
- This life-integration is toward ultimate value -- it's focusing one's life toward whatever one perceives to be of ultimate value. It is a positive project, moving toward personal and social well-being.

Thinking about my conversation with Seeker, I see these criteria in operation. He's going to school, trying to figure out what he wants to do with his life in the long run. At the same time, he has to work at something to keep a roof over his head and have enough money left over for an occasional long weekend at the beach with his wife. Beyond that he wants

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to be involved with the well-being of the wider world and he values his connections with others to keep his life on track, to keep from “spinning out.” The smorgasbord of ideas and possibilities open to him helps him do this work.

Next Schneiders defines religion:

- Recognition of our creatureliness and our dependence on something transcendent outside of ourselves for life. From this recognition comes reverence, gratitude, the need to live in a worthy manner and a sense of failure when we don't. Lastly is some reliance on the transcendent for help in living and dying.
- Spiritual tradition usually starting with some kind of experience of the transcendent that has been shaped into a framework for life.
- An institutionalized system of relating with God or gods, leading to salvation either in this life or another life.

Again thinking of my conversation with Seeker, I see all these criteria in operation, too. His commitment to his 12 step group and his relationship with his sponsor lead to the salvation AA has to offer -- sobriety.

Then Schneiders talks about the ways religion is institutionalized:

- Creed -- what the group believes about self, others and the world in terms of the ultimate reality.
- Code -- what to do or not do to live in accordance with ultimate reality.
- Cult -- how the group ritualizes their dependence on ultimate reality.

Her opinion is that institutionalization as an organized religion is what makes spirituality as a daily experience of participation in a religious tradition possible for the majority of people.

Back again to Seeker. I know in his hour of need before his connection with the 12 step group that the Christian community in which he was raised with its creed, code and cult was not equipped to make the connection between his urgent penultimate need, sobriety, and the ultimate reality, life in the Triune God.

Schneiders says Christianity is struggling with this disconnection from culture; she calls it being “disembedded,” as spirituality is ascending. Her article goes on to emphasize the need for revision of code and cult inside religion (particularly, the Roman Catholic church), so that people who have abandoned a historical tradition for a privatized spirituality can learn to partner the religion with their spirituality.

In listening to Seeker, I don't think his issue is individual vs. group. He is more than willing, even eager, to be part of a group. Going back to Schneiders' definition of spirituality, human beings are hard-wired to seek outside themselves for meaning and purpose.

I believe Seeker's issues are about content, not form. Schneiders only minimally talks about the core of Christian spirituality. As I read Schneiders and think about the next step of my conversation with Seeker, I finally begin to see the question to pursue. He uses a variety of phrases about God -- Jimmy Cricket on his shoulders, internal divinity, God's glory in natural laws, love and compassion that's a given, yet God rejoices when his sins are recognized and atoned for.

With my overly trained ear I hear pantheism, probably a bit of Buddhism, something leaning toward quantum physics, and a dollop of Christian jargon. Who or what is this God? I want to more fully understand.

Though the actual conversation with Seeker is still in the future, this bridge building is already changing me. I'm frustrated because the core of Christianity that is so important to me still seems to be a long way off in our conversations. Talking about a relationship with Jesus Christ and how to use law and promise theology as my lens for life is such a joy for me, but now isn't the time with Seeker. I'm also learning to unpack my faith in ways that can touch the life of someone without a similar theological point of view. My job, at the moment, is to pray for Seeker and trust that the Holy Spirit is working in his life -- and be ready to talk with him when the opportunity arises.

Robin Morgan

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Printing and mailing this quarterly is paid for by your gifts, thank you. If you are a reader but not yet a giver, we can wait. When you are ready to be both, we won't object.

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January 22-25, 2012

Our Lady of the Snows, Belleville, IL

Pre-Conference offers Two Choices

The pre-conference day, January 23, will offer participants two choices for in-depth study. The first is tailored for those wishing to learn and practice the six-step method of “crossing” the Word and the world. The second is divided into half-day sessions: The first a law-gospel study of the Gospel of Mark, the second a discussion of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as disciple, martyr, and prophet.

Choice A: You Can Handle the Truth (*the 6-step method of text study and application*). 9:00 am to 5:00 pm, led by Marcus Felde and Cathy Lessmann.

Choice B:

Morning: **How is Mark Good News for You?**
Jerome Burce

Afternoon: **Disciple Bonhoeffer: Revisiting His Life and Thought** — presented and led by Richard Bliese, Matthew Becker, and Steven Kuhl

[Recommended Reading: **Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy** by Eric Mataxa]

Richard Bliese is President of Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN. Jerome Burce and Marcus Felde are pastors, members of the Crossings board and Sabbathology writers. Cathy Lessmann is secretary of Crossings and a Sabbathology writer.

Conference focuses on Law-Gospel Approach to Discipleship

The conference, focused on Discipleship as it appears from a law/gospel perspective, will be divided into three subtopics, each keynoted by Steven Kuhl (*Crossings President & Prof. of Historical Theology, Cardinal Stritch University, Milwaukee, WI*). They are:

- The Disciple and Christ
- The Disciple and the Church
- The Disciple and the World

A half-day will be dedicated to each and will be expanded upon by other speakers, including:

- **Robert Kolb** (*Mission Prof. of Systematic Theology, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO*)
- **Mark Mattes** (*Prof. of Philosophy and Religion, Grand View College, Des Moines, IA*)
- **Matthew Becker** (*Asst. Prof. of Theology, Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, IN*)
- **Felix Meylahn** (*Pastor and Trainer of lay preachers, Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa*)
- **Martin Wells** (*Bishop of the ELCA Eastern Washington-Idaho Synod*)

Cost of the pre-conference, including hotel and meals, is \$100. Cost of the conference, including hotel and all meals, is \$250. (More for private room.) Register by sending your check to the Crossings office, or call 314-576-7357, or register at <http://www.crossings.org/conference>.