

A Jew With A Dog: Reflections On An Incorrect Faith

Thank you Rev. Briere! I am really happy to be here.

I wanted to tell you a little bit about the column that prompted Reverend Briere to invite me to speak to you today. The column was called A Birthday, a Trombone, and a Question of God. In case you missed it, a little bit about what sparked it.

Back in July, I threw a 50th birthday party for my husband Daryl, at our house in Chickamauga. There were about fifty guests. Our house is small, and so people spilled out into the back yard. Around 8pm we sang a rousing rendition of happy birthday, after which a friend burst out of our kitchen door with a **trombone**, playing *For He's a Jolly Good Fellow*. It was loud, and it was very funny. But other than that, the party was fairly sedate.

But noise carries out in the country, and the next afternoon, there was a knock on our front door. My husband answered it. It was our seventeen year-old neighbor, Joe from two houses away. Would Daryl mind participating in a RELIGIOUS SURVEY?

At first my husband thought that Joe was doing a survey for school, and so he said yes. But the questions turned out to be deeply personal.

“What is your understanding of Jesus Christ?” Joe asked. And, “Do you realize you can't work your way to heaven?”

Apparently, having a trombone at a birthday party is a dead giveaway that you have strayed from the divine fold. Joe, it turns out, had not come to our house to conduct a survey, but to warn us that we were in dangerous spiritual territory. Whatever faith it was

that we were practicing, it was incorrect, and it we would not get to Heaven that way. Joe was there to save us.

My husband, because he really is a jolly good fellow, did not slam the door in Joe's face. He answered Joe's questions, though as noncommittally as he could. While my husband is not a religious academic, he is also not an atheist, nor is he unschooled in matters of philosophy and faith. Any genuine attempt to answer Joe's questions, he explained, would require hours.

Not to mention that one's understanding of God is a wholly private matter.

"I don't knock on your door and ask you about your sex life," my husband told Joe. "You shouldn't knock on mine and ask me about God."

That pretty much ended the survey for young Joe! but my husband and I continued to talk about the visit for days. My husband is a Christian, I am a Jew, and Joe had managed to piss both of us off. But there was something else, too. The visit made me sad. It was that combination of anger and sadness I felt that prompted me to write the column I wrote, which was about the sanctity of home, and the right to practice one's own form of worship free from the prying, pitying, or condemning eyes of others.

A week before Joe's visit, I had been to a literature conference in Pennsylvania, where novelists, poets, essayists, and architects came together to talk about all things home: comfort, privacy and the poetics of space, as well as persecution and discrimination and the politics of place. Keynote speaker Susan Cooper offered the following quote from John Ruskin:

“Home is the place of peace; the shelter not only from all injury but from all terror, doubt and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home; so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, it ceases to be home, it is then only a part of that outer world which you have roofed over, and lighted fire in.”

In other words, home isn't just where the heart is. home is the heart itself. Which is why an outsider's inquiries into it. . . or attempts to assert dominion over it... or suggestions that its makeup is somehow unacceptable, are, and always will be, unwelcome.

My original home—the house I grew up in—was in an upper middle class Atlanta suburb. We lived in a brick rancher set back in the woods, with a narrow, curvy driveway that included both a steep incline and a steep decline. So steep, in fact, that, when I was little, my own father's brand new Volkswagen bug, whose parking brake he had failed to engage, slipped quietly out of the garage one evening and plummeted so far into the ravine that only its headlights were visible, glinting in the moonlight.

“Don't even try to come down the driveway,” we routinely told invited guests. “Just park on the street.”

Well, when I was about ten, our house was robbed. Not once. Not Twice. Three times. Each time it was an ordinary afternoon when my brother and sister and I were at school, my dad was at work, and my mom was out running errands. The first two times the burglars took only TVs and stereos, small things they could easily carry off --while leaving their car parked on the street.

But the third time, in a breathtaking act of daring, they backed a full-size moving van up our driveway, and loaded almost every piece of furniture we owned into it, and drove away. We know this is how it happened because a helpful neighbor, on seeing the giant

van attempt to navigate our rollercoaster driveway, helped direct them out. It never occurred to him that it was a burglary in progress.

“I figured you were getting a delivery,” he said later.

But the police were not impressed by the burglars’ daring. The way they explained it to us, the burglars knew exactly what to do and how much time they had to do it in.

“They were most likely watching your house,” the police said.
“They knew your routine.”

Forty years later, this is what stays with me. Not the theft of belongings. Not the terror I felt upon exiting the school bus and walking into the suddenly-alien landscape of my house, with sunlight flooding the empty rooms, and lines cut into the carpet nap where our furniture had been tilted and dragged away on two legs.

No. What stays with me is the idea that the burglars—for days or weeks or possibly months—had been watching my family come and go, making note of our routine, until they knew for sure what time my father drove away to his office downtown, and we kids ran for the school bus in a flurry of homework papers and loose, flapping coats, and my mother set out to the grocery store or to carpool, and then what time we all re-descended upon the house in the afternoon in a reverse bustle of activity. Without our knowledge, they watched us until they knew us as well as we knew ourselves.

Joe’s arrival on our doorstep to set us straight about Jesus reminded me of that early burglary. I had the same prickly, disconcerting feeling that my movements had been subject to secret monitoring, possibly for months. And I wondered: was there something, besides the trombone, that gave us away? When we

walked the dogs on Sunday mornings, or on the Sabbath, was that evidence of lapsed worshipfulness? Do we somehow mow the lawn in a blasphemous way?

As I struggled to understand what was really behind Joe's push to rearrange our faith, I was forced to realize that, lurking in the shadowy firmament of neighborliness, there was in fact another kind of watch going on. This time it was a watch that purported to return to us a faith we had misplaced. But I would argue that the act of witnessing, or proselytizing, is in fact *theft* of a faith whose whereabouts are not unknown. It was not WE who felt we had lost something, and it was not WE who invited scrutiny into our spiritual lives. **Any attempt to mold another's spiritual understanding is in fact first an attempt to divest them of the one they have.**

I want to forgive Joe. I want to forgive Joe, and forgive and all the others who have felt called to witness to me or who have made me feel I was living an incorrect faith over all these years. The neighbor who appeared on my doorstep a week after I bought my house, bearing a Hebrew New Testament and suggesting I consider what it had to say to me, as a Jew. The ads in the classifieds, when I was looking for a house to rent twenty-five years ago, which stated Christian Persons Only needed apply. These same ads also made it clear that DOGS were not allowed. I was twenty-two years old at the time, about to start graduate school, and I can remember lamenting to my mother that I was the worst kind of pariah: **a Jew with a dog.**

And then there is the group I recently came across online called Tzedakah, whose ministry is the converting of Jews to Christianity, and whose game plan states that, in laying the groundwork for conversion, members should first

“Develop a friendship [with the Jewish person] that is genuine, relational, and real.”

What? *Really??* “A friendship that is genuine, relational, and real!”

These outreaches, these conversion agendas hiding behind a mask of caring, are counterfeit authenticities, oxymoronic injunctions which are both laughable and disgraceful. At the heart of the Tzedakah injunction to “be a friend” is the goal of divesting another human being of his relationship with God, and supplanting it with one thought to be superior. Surely the gates of friendship are guarded by a higher morality than this. The core of Tzadekah—just as the core of a zealous, Bible-thrusting neighbor, or an invitational flyer from the local Baptist church timed to arrive at thousands of Jews’ homes on the High Holy Days—as it arrived at mine a few years ago—is an indefensible lack of respect.

But there is something else at the heart of proselytizing as well. In that same column about Joe, I wrote about how my husband had recently tacked up a sign on the door of our studio, which read, FEAR EATS THE SOUL. In my mind, this was a message about how to go forth into the world, but also about how not to go forth. We should NOT go forth into the world with fear, because fear is destructive. It kills our passion...our spontaneity...and our joy. But worst of all, perhaps, fear kills broad-mindedness. As we have seen throughout history, at the heart of the push for conformity, for homogeneity, there has always been fear of the ‘other.’

Recently someone forwarded us an article that had supposedly appeared in a Spanish newspaper. The title of it was, All of European Life Died at Auschwitz. The gist of the article was that the Nazis, in exterminating so many educated, sophisticated, artistic, outspoken Jews, eradicated European culture. Meanwhile, the article went on to say, we are opening our doors to 20 million

Muslims who “refuse” to pull their weight economically, socially or culturally. While the column purports to denounce the Nazi regime of ethnic cleansing, in fact really it is just a message of intolerance and fear, repackaged and retro-fit to a new ethnic group. Fear is fear, but so is prejudice... discrimination...and bigotry.

I want to change notes here a little bit and say that, before becoming an artist and a writer, I spent 15 years working as a therapist and a psychological examiner, most recently at Johnson Mental Health Center and the Hamilton County school system. Because of my mental health training, I feel that no discussion about spiritual safety in the home is complete without talking about our original home, and by that I mean the family we grew up in. It’s no secret that the basis of our positive self regard, the **well** that nourishes our confidence, our intellect, and our emotional security, is the well of stability. It is a well that is filled by loving, accepting, steady role models who themselves are able to move through the world with confidence and compassion and courage. My all-time favorite opening line of a book comes from a memoir called MARS, by an author named Fritz Zorn. The line goes like this:

“I’m young, rich and educated, and I’m unhappy, neurotic and alone.”

Early in the book we learn that Zorn, age thirty-two, has been diagnosed with incurable cancer. But rather than search for an environmental culprit: smoking, pollution, animal fat, plastics—Zorn attributes his cancer, in large part, to his family’s emotional repressiveness, their utter unavailability to him for anything approaching true human discourse. He writes,

“My parents produced in me a human being who was not physically weak enough to die immediately after birth but one who was so thoroughly destroyed psychologically by the

neurotic milieu in which he grew up that he was no longer capable of leading a life that could be called human.”

The book makes sweeping claims about the psychic origins of physical illness, and as I neared the end of it, I understood Zorn to be speaking not only of cancer but of something larger and more sinister: a whole family systems-engendered forest of illnesses which include the obvious ones like addictions, compulsions, and personality disorders, which grow from all manner of marital discord, emotional oppressiveness, sexual and physical abuse, and religious dogmatism.

Obviously the causes-- as well as the impact-- of an unhappy childhood take various forms, but the point is this: **spiritual safety begins at home**. Insomuch as it doesn't, the lack spreads outward, from the individual to the world at large. The effect is a robbery of sorts, a theft of the constructs we have come to hold most sacred: self-determinism, and freedom from inner and outer persecution. Where there is danger at home, there is danger outside; and we will see, and be forced to perpetuate, emptiness, in everything we do.

I want to tell you about an essay in an anthology called *Home*, compiled by writer Mark Doty. The essayist is Andrea Barrett, and the essay is called *A Hole in the Wall*. Barrett and her husband moved from Rochester to Brooklyn, New York, in July 2001. Two months later, Barrett was walking home from the dog sitter's house when she saw the second of the two planes hit the World Trade Center. What ensues is a meditation on the strangeness of Barrett's everyday world after that, a world forever punctuated by a gaping, fiery hole in the skyline.

Two weeks after the towers fall, Barrett's husband informs her that their CD player has been stolen from their car. They have the following conversation:

“Did they smash the windows?” I ask.

“No,” he says.

“Then how did they get it?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “The doors were all locked. I checked.”

We stare at each other, puzzled, until I remember that we have never *had* a CD player. When I point this out to Barry, he says, “But there’s a big empty hole in the dash.”

“That’s always been there,” I say carefully.

A long, silent minute later, he says, “I don’t know. It just seemed like something was missing.”

Which of course, it was. What was stolen was so enormous it repeated itself in the everyday. In the end, perhaps for all of us after 9/11, there was the sense that what was taken from us—our safety, as John Ruskin put it, “from terror, doubt and division”—had been an illusion all along.

I will end with one last story: Two weeks ago my husband and I were discussing the possibility that we might have to move his mother to the Chattanooga area should something happen to his father, who has been ill. My husband’s parents are lifelong Southern Baptists, devoted churchgoers who pray in the name of Jesus and fear for our souls, but who know that trying to get my husband and me to believe as they do would only alienate us from them.

“If your mother moves here,” I said to my husband, “we’re going to take her to the Unitarian church every Sunday.”

My husband nodded. “You mean to try and save her?”

And in that moment I saw it. Despite everything I knew and believed and had railed against, there I was, a “Joe” on the

doorstep of my mother-in-law's house, using religion as a weapon
in my own private war.

Let this be a lesson to me.

THANK YOU