How Religion Got in the Way

“Wash your face before bed so the angels will come down and kiss you while you sleep.”

That’s what my grandmother told me when I was a child staying over at her house. I was about five years old, and not only did this information from a trusted authority not faze me, it was a very standard sort of thing for someone to tell me.

I was the first child in a have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too Reform Jewish family who also did Christmas and Easter. Being born into that situation set me up to be told the following:

Once a year, an obese middle-aged man breaks into our house in the least efficient way possible, leaves a bunch of wrapped gifts for me, and then instead of just walking out the door, decides to work his way back up the chimney, where he’s then carried off by a group of large, wingless, flying mammals to do the same thing over a billion other times in a span of a few hours

On Passover, an invisible man breaks into the house silently while we’re all eating because he wants to drink a small glass of wine

That same week, a 10-foot-tall sentient rabbit breaks into the house, possibly by morphing through the wall, and puts a bunch of chocolate eggs that he laid all over the place for no apparent reason

When one of my teeth falls out, if I put it under my pillow, a flying woman will break into my bedroom while I’m sleeping and buy the tooth from me for an amount of her choosing

Let’s add in that no one ever explained that fiction exists, so I assumed that all Sesame Street creatures were actual biological things that existed in the wild

So flying people breaking into my room to molest me while I slept because I washed my face? Fuckin sure, why not. It was a totally ordinary thing to happen—this exact kind of shit happened constantly in my world.

All this information came as part of the same orientation that taught me English, told me what shapes and colors were and how to poop, and explained that it’s bad to stare at really short adults.

It was a lot of information, but I was handling it well, when suddenly I was hit with a disturbing twist. I began to be told, about certain parts of my reality, “Oh yeah no that’s totally false.” Wait. What? I’m a complete amateur at this, and busting my ass trying to gain knowledge and skills, and they’ve been fucking with me? Not only that, I learn that all the fun things are fake and all the mundane things are real.

The more questions I asked, the more of a mindfuck this huge web of lies turned out to be. Dragons are fake but dinosaurs are real. Kings and princesses are real but wizards and fairies are fake. Disney World is real but not Sesame Street. Farm animals do exist but they’re disgusting, base creatures who act and look nothing like they do in fiction. Pirates and Indians are both real but in much less cartoony and racist ways than I’m used to, while witches and ghosts are fake altogether. Touching a toad doesn’t give me warts, my eyes won’t get stuck if I cross them, and no, Michael Dukakis is not a viable candidate despite his 20-1 landslide victory in my first grade classroom poll.

Only able to trust myself from then on, I created two buckets in my brain for “fake” and “real” and started dropping all new information into one or the other.

If there was anything without a clear bucket, I asked someone about it, and one day I asked my dad about God. “Some people believe in God and others don’t, and everyone has to make that decision for themselves.” Yeah nope. Clear fake bucket answer. And from then on, I was an atheist. To seven-year-old Tim, this wasn’t any bolder than saying I was an a-Santa-ist or an a-fairies-ist—I had become cynical about all things that seemed out-of-this world after so many had been revealed to be fake. I developed an “If it seems too fun to be true, it is” rule, and why was there any reason to assess God differently than all the other supernatural characters?

The only thing that was confusing was why my dad hadn’t just come out and admitted that God was fake like he had with so many other things. Why had he been weird about it?

This became even more perplexing as I got older. The “If it seems too fun to be true, it is” rule had hardened into a complete rejection of anything that didn’t fit with the laws of nature. Every single life experience I had had backed this up, so why would I ever question it? And the world agreed with me—with one exception. Most of the Jews I knew believed in God. So did most of the Christians. People older, wiser, and smarter than me believed. Even people who weren’t totally convinced seemed uncomfortable talking about it. I found very few people who would just say, “Of course I don’t believe in God.”

Why was everyone being so weird about this? What the hell was going on?

The more I learned, the more I realized my whole country disagreed with me—I’d read that 96% of Americans believed in God, 90% believed in Heaven, 73% believed in Hell, almost half believed in the Bible literally—talking snake, Noah’s Ark, people living to like 200, etc.—and 61% believed that “a democracy cannot survive without a widespread belief in God or a Supreme Being.” I learned that the deeply religious even included a number of science-minded geniuses like Isaac Newton. Meanwhile, being an atheist was a bad thing to be, something derogatory, something to keep your mouth shut about, especially if you ever wanted to run for office.

What started as an earnest frustration that I couldn’t understand so many other people’s core inspirational force turned into total shutdown on the subject by college. Anything having to do with the world of the supernatural—God, higher powers, spirituality—was not for me. As for Judaism, I happily joined the family for holidays, ate the chocolate coins, and became skilled at eating Chinese food with chopsticks, but the Torah? Not interested. On top of my rejection of divinity, I didn’t like the way organized religions behaved. Where I saw science being humble, collaborative, constantly under revision, and forward-marching, I saw religion being arrogant, divisive, hostile to change, and obsessed with the past. I graduated college as a staunch atheist with the kind of arrogance only a 21-year-old has the naiveté to feel.

What I missed at the time is that “atheist” isn’t something. It’s just “not something.” By declaring myself an atheist and calling it a day, I was basing my whole spiritual identity on what I wasn’t. Yes, I’m an atheist, but I’m also not from Uganda. If someone asked me where I’m from, answering “Not Uganda” would be unhelpful. Likewise, if my only spiritual identity is, “I don’t believe in the divine components of the world’s large, ancient religions,” that makes me a spiritual nothing.

At the time, of course, I saw no problem with being a spiritual nothing. Spirituality was for religious people, and I was a science guy, so who cared anyway?

What I didn’t realize is that I had inadvertently flushed down the toilet, a critical part of the human growth experience.

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What Is Spirituality?

There’s almost no word ickier than spirituality. It’s vague, amorphous, somehow very annoying, and it manages to turn off both the religious and the non-religious. And if you gather five people who all say they’re actually fond of spirituality, they’ll be defining the term in five different ways.

So what exactly is spirituality, as we’re using the word today, and what do we need from it?

Ever since the human species began opening its eyes into consciousness, it has been an aggressively curious child, hungry to figure it all out. What was this world it was living in, and what did it all mean?

The first part of that question—What was this world?—became the job of science. The second part—What does it all mean?—is the job of spirituality.

Science is what we know, and spirituality is how we coexist philosophically, psychologically and emotionally with that knowledge. Science gives us information; spirituality helps us wrap our heads around it. The two lead us as a tag team, each taking care of their critical halves of the “figuring it all out” puzzle—when science tells us something shocking, like “The Earth is revolving around the sun and not vice versa!” we turn, wide-eyed, to spirituality and ask, “How does that change things? How does that transform the way we should think about ourselves, about the world, and about life?”

Under this definition, spirituality is a secular concept, and the idea that spirituality and science are diametrically opposed to each other is incorrect—they’re two halves of the same quest. As usual, Carl Sagan says it best:

“Spirit” comes from the Latin word “to breathe.” What we breathe is air, which certainly matters, however thin. Despite usage to the contrary, there is no necessary implication in the word “spiritual” that we are talking of anything other than matter (including the matter of which the brain is made), or anything outside the realm of science…Science is not only compatible with spirituality; it is a profound source of spirituality. When we recognize our place in an immensity of light years and in the passage of ages, when we grasp the intricacy, beauty and subtlety of life, then that soaring feeling, that sense of elation and humility combined, is surely spiritual…The notion that science and spirituality are somehow mutually exclusive does a disservice to both.

As humanity continues to learn, science and spirituality should be collaborative, innovative, and forever marching forward in a state of continual evolution as new developments emerge. Science opens pathways for humans to reach higher levels of consciousness and wisdom, but only through the spiritual realm can we grow into those pathways.

On a day-to-day level, one of the greatest challenges facing most humans is the quest to avoid living in an unconscious fog—this fog is where you are when you make big life decisions for small-minded reasons, when you short-sightedly side-step your own integrity, when you continually prioritize the wrong things over the right things, settle for mediocrity out of fear, or waste huge amounts of your precious time procrastinating. And this is one issue science can’t help with—an unconscious fog can only be combated through spiritual growth.

Defined this way, not only is spirituality an acceptable and desirable realm to have in our lives, it is vital in order for humans to grow, thrive, and take fullest advantage of their brain power.

So why is spiritual growth given so little serious attention in today’s world? What happened to that half of our exploration that spirituality is supposed to cover?

Maybe this:

Religion Cartoon

That’s what I think happened to our spiritual realm—it got elbowed out of relevance and into the fringes by religion, for a bunch of reasons:

Fear. Religion grabs people by fear and pulls them into its bosom of definitive answers and immortality. Unfortunately, it doesn’t seem to be doing a convincing job—a recent study found that how close you feel to God makes no difference in your overall life satisfaction. If I were told right now that I could live forever and I believed it, I’d be far, far, far happier than I am as I type this sentence. If a religious person isn’t happier than I am, I refuse to believe that they’re convinced about God.

An evolutionary inclination toward tribalism. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt explains it well:

I mean that we evolved to see sacredness all around us and to join with others into teams that circle around sacred objects, people and ideas. This is why politics is so tribal. Politics is partly profane, it’s partly about self-interest. But politics is also about sacredness. It’s about joining with others to pursue moral ideals. It’s about the eternal struggle between good and evil, and we all believe we’re on the side of the good.

This is only a speculative theory, but it has a lot of backing in the social sciences. And it makes sense. Believing in something bigger than yourself and bonding with your tribesmen over it is going to make you more cooperative, and over time, those tribes will thrive over those who aren’t as inclined towards sacred things. Cooperation is a magnificent species survival tool for ants and bees, so why not for people too?

An evolutionary inclination toward belief in the divine. A similar type of not-totally-proven theory to the one above, this suggests that human tribes who happened to be more inclined to believe in the divine will be more honest, altruistic, and cooperative, because they believe they’re being watched. Over time, those tribes will fare better—i.e. those are our ancestors, not the atheist tribes.1

Sigmund Freud believed that many humans seek God to serve as a strong father figure.2

Against those forces, subtle, secular spirituality didn’t stand a chance of making it to the big stage. But religion also caused it to suffer on the small, individual stage. Spirituality has often been neglected by both the non-religious—because they group it, unfairly, into the “not for me” pile as part of their rejection of religion—and by the religious—because they rely on their religion for spiritual growth, and religions aren’t typically focused on the types of spirituality we’ve been discussing.

But we just established above that spiritual growth is important—really important—so now what?

What we need are good, simple, accessible, non-annoying, long-lasting ways to approach spirituality as individuals. I believe that starts with a spiritual framework that clicks with you and that you can turn to as your spiritual guide. And I happen to have one in mind that’s been working pretty well for me (and which is plastered all over this blog post after post, inadvertently).