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Walk the Walk, Talk the Talk: Exploring my Spiritual Struggles in a Heterogeneous College Environment

By Amanda Weldy

A UCLA college senior, Amanda Weldy, shares some first-hand encounters with her own spiritual struggles as well as observations from her peers' lives. Through exploring multiple spiritual issues through a narrative of conversations with others and her own reflections, Weldy presents a personal perspective on how to approach one's own spiritual development within a diverse college environment.

"How is your walk with God?"

This question caught me off-guard when one of my college friends shared that her boyfriend's mother had started off their conversation by asking her just this. "Quite frankly, I don't think that's an appropriate question," my friend exclaimed with an expression of indignation. I squirmed uncomfortably, in response, perhaps because I wasn't sure how I would (or should) answer this question if asked or maybe because of my own secret conviction that evangelism is best as a transaction between two willing – or at least closely associated – people.

If someone asked me about my "walk," I certainly would have confessed extreme guilt in my reluctance to evangelize, and then I would have quietly simmered in resentment that someone would dare to call my shortcomings into such public notice. I grew up singing the B-I-B-L-E song with great relish, spent time in the church choir and as a Sunday school teacher, and still pray pretty regularly. But even with organized religion as an established part of my background, I still struggle with being directly asked about my "walk."

This conversation got me thinking about how other college students would describe their “walk” with the deity of their choice to an acquaintance, friend, or potential mother-in-law. Curious, I sprung the question on a good friend whose faith permeates her life in a way I wish to emulate. When asked her how she would respond to an acquaintance’s question about her walk with God, she laughed somewhat abruptly saying, “I’d be taken aback. Usually I only talk about stuff like that with people at my church, but I’d try to give a good testimony. I would share about what God’s doing in my life but I maybe wouldn’t share all of my own struggles [with a stranger], but it wouldn’t be all sugary either.” Another of my closest church-going friends from childhood said candidly when I asked: “If that was an opening statement, I would wonder what she was looking for. Is she searching for a deep spiritual conversation, and is it more about my salvation or questions about her own salvation?”

I am told that questions like “*How is your walk with God*” are supposed to indicate spiritual accountability, where people of the same faith can share their trials and successes in an encouraging environment. Frankly, I think that it is a beautiful thing to have someone to hold my hand or console me when I fail at what I take to be my moral duty, and to have that same person cheer me on when I believe I handled an opportunity in a way which glorifies my Lord. I would estimate that just over one-half of my friends here at college have the same or very similar beliefs to my own, and so I should be at no loss for people to help me along my path.

Going back to why it is that I should feel so reluctant when a stranger inquires into my relationship with God, I remember pondering it deeply with a great sense of shame, when it suddenly dawned on me: my friends and I have been looking at this question incorrectly! Rather than becoming uncomfortable about answering honestly or feeling like someone is invading our personal space, we should take it as a great compliment if someone asks about our walk with God because either we have manifested those external signs of one who walks with God, or the person is simply concerned about our spiritual welfare. Either is a positive sign that the Christian spirit is alive and well.

From my experience, I think a majority of religions support their members’ association with other members in order to strengthen faith. Since arriving at college, my spiritual journey has in some ways become stronger because I have faced challenges to my perspective. Interestingly, my biggest moments of “spiritual revelation” have occurred through interactions with friends, and not with people who are actively looking to disillusion me or lambaste me for my beliefs (although this too has occasionally taken place).

For example, while my political beliefs are largely dictated by my spiritual values, I have found myself accepting other stances as valuable or valid, without necessarily accepting them as my own. I have also begun to ponder the Bible as analogous to the Constitution, viewing as a living document which was meant to be interpreted according to the current generation of guidance-seekers, a text which held the capacity to develop in order to encompass the particular people whose lives were subject to its rule.

Using this perspective to approach my faith, one question I struggle with is considering if there is room in contemporary America, even among people of my particular faith, for gay marriage. I struggle with this issue because I have a close friend who is in a very committed, sincere relationship with a member of his own sex. It is much easier, I have discovered, to uphold a ban of gay marriage in your mind when you don't actually know anyone whose happiness is being affected by the issue. Different lifestyles don't always entail different spiritual beliefs holistically: my gay friend is a member of a Christian church that is progressive enough to accept openly homosexual members into its ranks.

Alternatively, people with radically different spiritual beliefs can co-exist quite peaceably without any dramatic confrontation, pamphlet-waving tirade, or religious intervention. When I was a freshman, I was blessed with a roommate who, in addition to being charming and gracious, came from a different background and culture than I. Generally, the differences were not particularly obvious and we were connected at the hip. However, I remember one weekend where I learned a valuable lesson about the need to broaden my perspective. I was joyously packing my suitcase, getting ready to go home for Easter. My roommate was complacently doing her homework as if it were any other weekend. I asked her whether she wouldn't start packing soon, isn't she going home? She laughed not unkindly and said, "You goon, I'm Hindu."

After some seven months living together, I was well aware that she was Hindu, that she didn't have a Bible and that she celebrated other holidays that I had never heard of. Unfortunately, I hadn't observed that, to her, I celebrated "other" holidays. You see, this perspective never really came up in our room – she let me put up my poster of Philippians and I welcomed her spiritually-infused dances for the annual Indian culture show. Looking back on it, I'm surprised she tolerated me as well as she did. Having grown up in a town where the predominate socio-cultural block was comprised of middle-class white people who believed in a Christian God, at least nominally if not actually, it was a shock to really hear, not just theoretically speculate, that some people didn't actually celebrate Easter.

While my roommate could have taken this time (while I was open to learning) to trample me with particulars about her religion and why it is superior to my own, but she did no such thing. She sat patiently, waiting for me to provide a follow-up, a small smile playing across her mouth. "Will you teach me a little bit about your holidays?" I asked timidly, truly intrigued and grateful that she allowed me to dictate the exchange of spiritual values. While we both knew that the other was too cemented in her own existing beliefs to be significantly swayed, at least we could discuss the differences for the mere sake of knowledge and understanding. And from her example, I saw a great model for approaching spirituality, which is to live according to your own spiritual dictates and always be open to other people's questions, while letting them choose the timing of that exploration.

Still, in my humble opinion, it's difficult to find a balance between neglecting your true beliefs and alienating your friends by ramming your beliefs into every conversation, even if your zeal is designed to draw people to God, Allah, or your deity of choice. As

part of a selection board for an elite club on campus, I witnessed with great sorrow the majority of the committee blackball one candidate because she had crafted her application in accordance with a particularly apparent, some might say strict, spiritual outlook. I stood solely opposed to this secular censorship and other committee members attempted to explain their ban, adding that they would have gladly accepted her if she had mentioned her religion once or twice rather than steeping each answer in it. "She's going to be intolerably preachy," explained one of the members, addressing me almost apologetically, but continuing with conviction, "and we need a cohesive board."

Fro this experience, I began to wonder: *Are Christians, then, truly non-cohesive? Are we an obstruction to unity in our desire to advocate for our God and our moral views? Is this the same with other religions, or something that negatively distinguishes my faith?* So often when I broach the subject of God with my friends, I note the weariness and frustration with which many describe their fear of religious confrontations: "It's really a one-way conversation anytime I can't avoid bringing it up. The more people try to force it, the more resistant I am. I want to come to terms with it in my own time, using my own logic," said my sophomore-year roommate.

Such experiences of feeling out of place or overly preachy – or out of place *and* overly preached-at – have plagued me as I struggle to find a balance between expressing my religiously influenced moral beliefs and not alienating my peers. When I was in high school, I didn't believe that people would dislike you or even avoid you due to your religious beliefs, so I proudly dispensed extremely black-or-white advice on moral issues ranging from abortion to cheating on a test. And as I aged, I found myself developing two sets of advice: an ideal and a less-than-ideal-but-better-than-nothing philosophy of advice, if you will.

For example, if the issue was temperance of an inappropriate appetite, and I was asked by a non-believing friend, I might say: "I personally would advocate that you stop [insert behavior] because it clashes with the moral codes I believe you should adhere to, but if you find that you cannot, at least seek to lessen the occurrences." Such advice is dictated by the idea that if perfection could not be achieved, at least I could cause the lesser of two evils.

Yet, this approach to advice seems too easy...after all, Jesus never allowed gray areas to cloud his advice, and, even before that, the Ten Commandments were designed to create a strong good-or-bad, right or wrong matrix: "Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt not," but alas, no "Thou shalt usually" or "Thou shalt not normally" can be found on the tablets.

So how do you apply faith in a world where so many opinions abound? This is a central struggle I think most college students face, even when two students profess the same faith!

In fact, one of my friends recently commended me on my open-minded advice, saying that as a Christian, “It’s important not to close doors on people, so that they can feel comfortable coming back to you. Make your opinion known, but don’t condemn them if they choose a different path.” I don’t want to close doors!

“I can’t believe you,” announced a close (strongly agnostic, once atheist) friend of mine when I recently explained this ambiguous advice-giving philosophy to her. “If people come to you for the hard truths, they don’t want you to sugar-coat it or give them an option out of it. They wouldn’t come to you if they didn’t secretly want someone to tell them to stop,” she said, dismayed that I had become so morally enervated as to offer an option besides what was “right.”

Still, another friend who leads a notably secular life, choosing to express her faith privately, openly expressed her discomfort with people preaching to her, sharing: “I think it’s a brilliant idea to put the ‘extremes’ piece of advice in context as YOUR choice so that they can’t interpret it in any way as a comment about their morals or life choices, but it’s still put on the table for consideration.”

If I can be bold, maybe I should simply offer the answer I believe the Bible would give. It’s almost as if when Peter was in the garden, and instead of answering that he didn’t know Jesus, he might say, “Well, I may have met him once...” not admitting the true depth of friendship, while the rooster would still crow for omission.¹

My freedom to admit and own up to my personal conception of truth should not ultimately depend on audience, should it...or should it? What is the greater good – expressing your particular belief, accounting for possible differences in belief, or studiously avoiding mentioning your beliefs in order to not close doors?

The Apostle Paul, in First Corinthians², distinguishes between those who do and do not believe in Christianity, dictating that judging others based on the precepts of Christianity only applies to those who profess themselves to be a Christian. In this respect, I should only be administering Christian advice to like-minded friends, while adopting a more secular premise for friends with differing spiritual beliefs. In fact, if I were really to reach out to others spiritually in an effort to not “shut doors,” I should study comparative religion a bit more so I could gently tailor my advice to include aspects of different faiths in my conversations. Not only would this be helpful in relating to other people, it would also allow me to test the strength of my own beliefs by exposing myself to other viewpoints.

Every day, I struggle with minute choices about what constitutes proper work ethic, whether I showed enough respect to my superiors, how I could be more cheerful, all things that I associate with my spiritual duties (and significantly, with being a kind person). Truthfully, I suspect that these types of concerns plague almost everyone to a greater or lesser degree, regardless of spiritual belief.

¹ Matthew 26:69-75.

² 1 Corinthians 5:10-13

Luckily for me, I view my spiritual growth and development as a life-long process, and so I will be able to continually reevaluate how I relate to people of my own faith as well as people with different opinions. As for manifesting my own spiritual side, I can strive to live by example, acting as a general beacon of kindness to all persons, while more specifically helping to guide others who are of my faith. They're not mutually exclusive tasks, being receptive of other people's beliefs and maintaining my own values, as I have discovered throughout my time in college.

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