

CYBERCOLUMN by Jeanie Miley: Free to question, blessed to grow_71204

July 2, 2004

Posted: 7/02/04

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By Jeanie Miley

My life as a seeker began, appropriately, with my first religion course in college. I was so awestruck at the new information and ideas that I laboriously copied my class notes and mailed them to my parents, asking, “What do you think about this?”

For the first time, I was invited to examine my own beliefs and opinions—all of which I had absorbed from my religious culture and my home—and form a belief system and faith of my own. In that religion course, I encountered my childhood, too-small God-image.

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My father, a Texas Baptist pastor, was conservative and careful, but he had sent me to college to learn. “You’re on your own now,” he told me, pushing me out of the nest of security and dependence, even as he stood in the background, supportive and watchful until I could use my own wings.

Up against the challenge to my childhood belief system, I wanted to know what my dad thought about what I was learning, and after giving him enough time to read my class notes, I asked, “What do you believe about the beginning of the world?”

My father gave me an invaluable gift when he laughed gently and said, ‘Ah, that is Mystery!’ In that one statement and the conversation that followed, I was given permission to explore and discover, to question and challenge and to struggle in that sometimes-scary space between belief and doubt.

Looking back, I’m pretty amazed at the gift I was given, and I know that from that time until this, I’ve been free to question not only because I was given permission from the most important authority figure of my life, but also because he was confident that I had a solid foundation from which to question.

“You’re free to use your accelerator,” he said, “if you know your brakes work.” I don’t know if he told me that about life, in general, or about driving a car, but in either case, the principle works.

I was free to question because I was shown that Mystery is to be respected and honored and that some things are outside the realm of human understanding and, more importantly, control. I learned early that human beings, in our frailty, insist on having things all worked out and neatly tied up in concepts and ideas because it gives us some sense of relief from the anxieties of everyday life. Sadly, we often confine God in a box of our limited understanding just so we can be comfortable and relieve our fears.

I was free to question and push the boundaries of my knowledge and understanding because my father knew that there would come a day when the faith of my parents would not be enough to sustain me in the hard places of my own life, and that unless I had pushed and probed and strained and struggled on my own, my own faith would falter under the

difficulties of life.

Inherited faith is one of my greatest treasures. I call on the memories and the stories of the people who have gone before me to teach, inspire and encourage me, but when I am in the trenches of my own life crises, I need to be able to rely on my own experience with the living God who operates always in the eternal now.

“We don’t know about the beginning or the ending,” my dad finally told me, “and you need to question anyone who tells you that he does know. What we do know is the One who started it all and who will complete it.”

Amen. And amen.

Jeanie Miley is an author and columnist and a retreat and workshop leader. She is married to Martus Miley, pastor of River Oaks Baptist Church in Houston, and they have three adult daughters. Got feedback? Write her at Writer2530@aol.com.

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