

20 Questions and A Turkey

Early in life, I had a number of negative experiences with church-going people. When I was born, a nun in the hospital approached my mom about changing my name from Jeremy to Jeremiah because “Jeremy” wasn’t in the Bible.

Both of my parents had their own reasons for not belonging to a church. In my mom's case, it was because her father was not thrilled with the way many churches always wanted his money. In my father's case, it had a lot to do with his strict upbringing, and a situation that occurred after his mother died. Apparently, my aunt (who is about my age) was tied up in a custody battle with a preacher and there were accusations that the preacher’s sons were watching my aunt in the shower.

So, at an early age my perception of religious people was tarnished. Then, in high school, I watched as a prominent local holy man drank himself to death in front of young children. History class served to further cement my distrust of religion as I learned about the many crimes committed in its name. And don’t even get me started on Pat Robertson.

During my grade school days, the meaning and importance that people placed on going to church often confused me. I was largely ignorant of the cultural and social meaning behind the religious labels that people used. The only time I really went to church was for funerals and weddings, so I had problems relating to people when they found out I didn’t go to church for services every week. Catechism was a complete mystery to me. I later learned that it was a mystery to the people who actually went too.

The bottom line was that my parents didn’t go to church, and they felt it was important for me to figure things out for myself. To this day I look at that as the best gift

they could give me, and the worse curse they could inflict. If I asked her why we didn't go to church, my mom would say, "Be good and believe in God."

So the question of religion - or spirituality, as I prefer to call it now - has always been important to me. In my early teenage years, I embarked on a quest using books to learn more about this thing called God. I read everything from Plato to *Dianetics*, from Pramahansa Yogananda (author of *Autobiography of a Yogi*) to Aleister Crowley (a ceremonial magician made famous by his controversial beliefs and creed "Do what thou wilt"). An early interest in Eastern philosophies stayed with me until adulthood. My reading included the Bible, but I never finished it. The Old Testament bored me to death. The New Testament stories that I have read are disjointed. What little I know about the Bible comes mostly from the History Channel and from being married to a "fallen away" Catholic.

During the fertile years of high school, my self-inflicted labels included: Existentialist, Kabbalist and Secular Humanist. I don't recall ever being Atheist, but my biggest problem with Western thought was viewing God as a personified being. I viewed God more in terms of *the Force* and karma, and somehow knew that we returned to this plane of existence.

My quest for spiritual meaning brought me into contact with a number of interesting characters along the way. One of my older and closest friends was ordained as a minister in the Church of Christ. He claimed to have read the "original" Greek texts of the Bible, and was quite amazing at quoting passages. Mike often approached God like a used car salesman, trying to make a sale by getting me to agree with his side of

things. In college I worked for a small newspaper run by a Jewish family. I was always treated well, and reflect on that experience often as the best job I ever had. I played string bass in an orchestra led by a Catholic priest, tooted a flute in Lutheran ensembles, and even auditioned for a Fundamentalist rock band.

I once had a pen pal that I met through a New Age magazine. She went from Wiccan to Druidic over a number of years. One day at a Friendly's, after we started dating, I choked on my pistachio milkshake as I listened to her explain how she wanted to pursue Tantric sex with other men while still maintaining our relationship.

Through all of this, music became my religion, with its own set of rituals, deities and sonic canon. The musical analogy would turn out to be critical as my spiritual exploration unfolded. I listened often to groups and artists like Jethro Tull, Rush and Cat Stevens who questioned the concept of divinity and the human condition in their song lyrics. My philosophical studies ran perpendicular with my musical studies, eventually colliding in the writings of Hazrat Inayat Khan (a Sufi mystic), Hindu devotional music and Buddhist mantras and chants.

Religion (or the lack of it) determined whom I could or could not see, and was a key issue in my interactions with people. Over the years, I had grown used to answering certain questions posed by the Catholic majority around me.

“Do you go to church?” they would ask.

“No.”

“Do you believe in God?”

My answer was usually, “I’m not sure.” Then I would ramble about the whole personification issue and how proselytizing felt wrong to me.

How people reacted to my answers often determined whether they became friends. Anyone that stuck around long enough was either in the same religious boat, or doubted their upbringing. Let’s just say that I made friends with a number of recovering Catholics.

As I began dating and making friends, the questions got more complex and my answers more scrutinized. Eating meals, even with our own extended (religious) family, became a traumatic affair. When it was time for grace, I quickly learned how to play along, folding my hands and bowing my head, then waiting. Since I didn’t know the words to the typical Catholic blessing, people just assumed I was Protestant. After much practice, I was ready for the big time when I started dating a girl from an Irish/German Catholic family.

For the first few years that we dated, Audra and I would attend a series of dinners at her family’s house in Beaver Meadows, PA. My parents held a separate dinner with my own grandmother, and it wasn’t until after marrying that we started to integrate the two families.

Audra's family has better dinners than my side of the family. There’s Holy Supper, served Christmas Eve and then Christmas dinner on December 25th, both of which feature a good amount of seafood and vegetarian dishes that I can stomach. (Easter, on the other hand, is a total washout with loads of red meat, egg dishes and beets.)

Another reason to show up is that my wife's side of the family is more entertaining. There's Uncle Billy, who's actually just the next-door neighbor like you'd see in a sitcom. He can tell a story like no one else I've met. Even when he tells stories we've heard before, it is almost impossible to keep from laughing as his voice reaches a higher and higher pitch toward the punch line. His are the stories that can't be duplicated on paper; the stories that are best heard from the teller himself. Let's just say one of them involves a Cadillac, a deer, a mobster and a gun. And it is true.

Other characters include my brother-in-law Jimmy, who likes to wind up the elders by saying, "I think I'm gay," which worked for a few years until he brought home Kim, a drop-dead gorgeous blonde. Then there's Uncle John, a member of every volunteer fire company within a fifteen mile radius, who wears no less than six items on his utility belt at a time (*Mag-lite*, pager, cell phone, retractable key chain, *Leatherman*, and an assortment of noise-making communicator's ala-Captain Kirk).

Part of the entertainment included the volatile chemistry of Grammy Hearity and Aunt Gina (Grammy's sister). Grammy and Gina disagreed about practically everything, and were always in competition. Together they were complaining and bickering heavy weights. The conflict started when Gina was young. Grammy Hearity had taken care of their ailing mother and later their father. Shortly after their mother's death, Grammy Hearity decided to accept the marriage proposal of a young Irishman just back from the war. In the meantime, Gina had to come to terms with the responsibility of taking care of her father, robbing her of the otherwise pampered existence she enjoyed. Gina never married, and as she grew older, Gina became the scorned cow... I mean crow, resenting

Grammy Hearity for marrying a “Shanty Irish” man and having a long (if not always happy) marriage.

Grammy was a die-hard Republican and in her old age she would swear at the TV as it showed Clinton in his latest sticky position. She had a Slovak fire in her belly that I respected, and many of her qualities rubbed off on Audra. Legally blind from severe diabetes, and with balding white hair, Grammy had a long list of ailments, from being overweight to blistered sores on her legs. She would usually hobble into the house dressed in one of her one-piece floral dresses. With the help of her cane in one hand and Uncle John's arm on the other, she would shuffle toward the table. Grammy didn't give a hoot what anyone thought about how she looked or what she said, but she still had more tact than Gina.

Now in her late sixties, Gina is a short, gluttonous woman. Stocky and stiff, her squinty eyes peer from behind her thick glasses. Her little slit of a mouth spews a hint of arrogance with everything she says. Gina isn't very feminine in her manner or speech, and always wears her characteristic old-lady perfume and a ratty wig. Gina is the thirteenth wheel that shows up for dinner, then wolfs down a couple of plates of food, uses the bathroom and leaves. Like a gremlin, it is best to keep Gina well fed before midnight, otherwise her mouth will run and things will get ugly.

During the first four or five years that I joined the in-laws for Christmas dinner, Gina would ask me what religion I was. The first year at the Hearity's, Gina started reconnaissance with the following series of questions:

"Jeremy, what is your last name?"

"dePrisco." I answered.

"So, you go to MPB." This was more a statement, not a question.

I replied, "No." Later, Audra would explain to me that Gina just assumed, because I lived on Pardee Street (Hazleton's version of Little Italy) that I went to one of the Italian Catholic churches in town: Most Precious Blood (MPB) or Holy Rosary. Those were the two "correct" answers in this game of Catholic Jeopardy.

So, that first year Gina ruled out MPB. The second year, Gina asked, "So, you go to Holy Rosary, right?" Her tone implied that I had confirmed this before, and she just needed reminding.

"No." was my answer, and Audra quickly changed the topic so the conversation didn't go much further.

With each consecutive year, it became more fun to see what Gina would say, and how she would react. The third year Gina thought that perhaps I went to my mother's church. But first she would need some more information about my family.

"What's your mother's maiden name?"

I answered "Panco," and you could hear the gears turning as Gina swiveled her religious decoder ring around inside her head.

"Oh, so you go to the Greek church." Gina declared.

"Nope." And once again, the conversation was diverted elsewhere.

Gina had ruled out the Italian churches, and discovered I wasn't Greek either. So year number four was more of a challenge for her.

"Jeremy, are you Jewish?" she asked, looking at my nose.

Of course, the answer again was, "No." I was doing my best to fit in, and there I was center stage playing 20 questions. These little inquisitions were uncomfortable for me, and looking back I can't believe they went on so long. You would think after the first year or two, she would have stopped. And as much as I would have loved to tell her off, I never did, so the game just continued.

Her inquiries were based on the limited view that a person had to belong to one of the local churches. In the early to mid-1980s, Hazleton was (and still is) largely Roman Catholic. There were ethnic breakdowns of Catholics such as Irish, German, Polish, Italian and Lithuanian. Then there were Byzantine Catholics, who were usually Slovak, Greek or Russian Orthodox. Of course, there were also Protestants, which fell into a number of categories, including Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist and a variety of "Church of" sects, including Fundamentalists and Christian Scientists. There was also a small population of Jews. Not being Jewish pretty much silenced Gina for that year, and it gave her a whole year to think that I might be, dare I say, Protestant.

So it's Christmas dinner at the Hearity's. Year number five. We put the extra leaf in the table to accommodate the cast of characters, and even set up a card table for overflow into the living room. Space was tight, but we managed. "I forgot my earplugs," I think to myself, as I try to find some solace amongst the two blaring TVs, Uncle Billy telling stories, and everyone else yelling so Aunt Sophie can hear them.

You might hear Jimmy ask, "Where are my shoes?"

Then Sophie would say, "Ahh, eat them, they're good for ya!"

Grammy and Gina soon got into a discussion about the merits of some controversial herbal supplement. I don't remember the exact conversation, but it ended with Grammy saying, "Well, you're full of shit if you think that!"

Also sitting around the table were Jimmy, Molly (Audra's sister), my future in-laws, Aunt Sophie, Uncle John, Francie (another neighbor who is like family), and Grammy.

Now, before I go further, it's worth noting that Grammy and the rest of Audra's immediate family had resigned themselves to the fact that I wasn't Catholic. After we dated a few years, I began attending a zendo in Central PA and dharma talks in Harrisburg. I soon became secure in my decision to answer "Buddhist" when asked about my faith. Grammy was a very tolerant Catholic, and she didn't treat me much differently than anyone else. Aunt Sophie's response was, "Well, at least he believes in something." And when they had questions about my faith, they usually had the common sense to ask me in private, not at dinner.

Gina had good timing, and almost always showed up last. She would show up only after the majority of the meal was laid out, just before grace, limiting the interaction with the family to a pure eating frenzy.

When it came to popping questions that she had labored over since the previous year, Aunt Gina was stealthy. She knew to wait until a lull in the conversation - when it was too late to get kicked out. That year there was no preview. No practice quiz. As

everyone was finishing their plates and Aunt Sophie was getting desert ready, Gina jumped right in.

“dePrisco... That’s Italian, isn’t it?” She said, sitting directly across from me. My name could have been “dePizza” and she was still going to confirm my ethnicity. She didn't make eye contact or address me directly. She didn’t have to.

“Well, yes. My mom’s side of the family has a little bit of everything, but on my dad’s side, I’m Italian.” In reality, I’m about as Italian as someone can be growing up on Ragu. Aside from my slightly olive-toned skin, my temper, and my last name with a “de,” that ends in a vowel, not much else is Italian. My grandfather owned an Italian restaurant, but none of that was ever passed down. My mom, though loving and caring in every other way, always detested complicated cooking projects, so we never had true Italian fare. The language, mannerisms and customs were all largely forgotten.

“Jeremy, are you one of those Italian Presbyterians?” Pause. Forks stopped in midair and jaws froze in mid-chew. As my wife puts it, Gina couldn’t conceive that an Italian would be anything but Catholic.

I chose my response carefully, using every bit of compassion for this ignorant wretch to stop me from reacting adversely, “No, I’d say I’m one of those Italian Buddhists.” I stressed the word “Buddhist” knowing it would crash her computer.

“HAH!” Grammy bolted, slapping the table, “That oughta shut her up!” Grammy was my elder champion.

There was a slight pause as my father-in-law choked on his wine.

In a huff, Gina exclaimed, “Well... you better watch he’s not bringing any of those pipe bombs in here!”

“Aunt Gina?!” blurted Audra, stunned. A fraction of a second later, Uncle John pointed his finger and said, "Gina, behave." Time stopped, and I could not believe what I just heard. Apparently, like so many Northeastern Pennsylvania hicks, Gina thought that anything remotely Eastern was evil.

Jimmy scooped one last pile of mashed potatoes onto his plate and said happily, “I *love* the holidays.” Then Gina finished her second plate of desert and excused herself to go to the bathroom. She went home shortly afterwards.

Later that evening, Audra’s parents sincerely and profusely apologized for what had happened. I assured them that they really didn’t need to, and it wasn’t their fault. In fact it was a bit fun. That night, over a couple of drinks we joked about wrapping some cardboard tubes in wrapping paper, and sending them to Gina. Of course we didn’t follow through, since that would have probably just fueled her ignorance. Though it pains me, I also knew that it would be useless to explain that not all Eastern religions are made up of Muslim extremists, terrorists and car bombers.

Dinner that year was so special. Everything changed in 2000 when Audra’s mom suffered an aortic aneurysm and stroke, and Grammy passed away from cancer. Looking back on the experience, I sometimes think about Gina's ignorance, and then I pause to consider my own. I guess the difference is that I can see evil in people of all races and religions, and I don't view any one religion as having the full story. I also see more potential in people regardless of where they were born.

Gina is still alive, but hasn't been around much lately. In her most recent quest to save souls, she harnessed the power of email to inform us of religious programs on the God channel and web sites about salvation. She even enrolled us in the Miraculous Medal Society. Of course, we didn't give her our new mailing address when we moved.

Life continues to be interesting on the religious front. Audra says she's a Christian between denominations. Aside from my occasional embarrassing incidents in public, my wife and I have few problems when it comes to our respective faiths. The worst part is dealing with household pests. If I find a spider or moth, I will catch it and put it outside. Not my wife. If she finds them – SMACK, they're not so lucky. Life is like that sometimes.