

Living happily without religion

Two summers ago, on a hot Saturday afternoon during a community art fair, my daughter Eleanor was out browsing T-shirt racks with her mother on the sidewalk. She was 12 years old at the time, not much of an independent shopper, and rarely had cash to spend.

Her mother had given her \$20 to buy a souvenir of her choice. She chose a shirt that boldly stated: "I'm Living Happily Without Religion!" Minutes later, her mother texted me with this curious update, and we both pondered our new discovery: We were parenting a young woman who was interested in publicly declaring a secular identity.

We shouldn't have been surprised. Eleanor's mother is an agnostic; she doesn't feel we can ever know for sure whether God exists. I lean on science a little more than she does, and I identify as an atheist. I haven't seen sufficient proof for the existence of gods (or a God), although I'm quite curious about human conceptions of the divine, and the importance of religion to the majority of us.

We haven't raised Eleanor in a religious community, nor have we intentionally sheltered her from religious experience, but knowing our secular identities, it seems reasonable that we'd raise a secular child, right? So why were we surprised?

I wasn't always an atheist parent of a secular teenager. I'm the son of a former pastor and praise leader in a Bible-believing, Protestant faith tradition. My whole world has orbited around religious understandings for most of my life, and my own teenage years were spent singing in choirs, playing in praise band, attending youth group and leading breakfast Bible studies.

My split with Christianity as an adult was long and painful, disorienting and rife with inner conflict. After leaving, I felt alone. No community of shared faith, no kinship of believers, no Higher Power. But I also found that my values hadn't shifted much. My parenting, my relationships and my work are still guided by values of the "common good" — I strive to work diligently, pursue social justice and cultivate respect for all forms of life. These are secular values I take with me everywhere I go, and I'm modeling them for Eleanor, too.

These secular values have brought me back to school as an adult college student, finishing up a liberal studies degree with lots of classes in religious studies. This year, I'm the intern for Grand Valley State University's Campus Interfaith Resources office. The term "interfaith" might be misleading, so let

MY TAKE



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me explain. We bring students together to discuss their religious, secular and spiritual identities — encouraging them to build friendships, increase positive attitudes and nurture understanding across differences of worldview, culture, tradition and creed. It's about dialogue, not debate. The goal is to walk away with a renewed sense of engagement and difference.

As I facilitate these interfaith conversations, it becomes clear that many young people are still trying to sort out who they are and where they're headed. Some of these folks might check the "none" box in a survey of religious identity, and that trend has been growing quickly. A 2015 Pew Research Center study found that 32 percent of Americans under the age of 30 declined to identify with any organized religion, in contrast to the 1970s, when only 13 percent of young adult Americans identified as religiously unaffiliated. The rise of the "Nones" has been a much-discussed topic for those of us interested in religion and culture, and I see it as an opportunity for connection and collaboration.

Instead of the polarization that often occurs between religious and nonreligious groups, I'm noticing some brand new ideas coming up. Reading about a national movement, Nuns and Nones, has led me to attend meetings with their local chapter, Sisters and Seekers, a group that brings together religiously diverse and unaffiliated Millennials with Dominican Catholic sisters to build relationships and engage in dialogue. Despite their evident differences in age, experience, lifestyle, and faith, each group often surprises the other with their similarities in values and vision, and both groups pose constructive challenges of identity that require thoughtful, patient, and loving engagement.

On the lakeshore, the Holland Openly Secular Alliance (HOSA) is building community among humanists, agnostics, seekers, atheists, and "Nones" in the Holland area. It's a group that shares my values. I'll be joining them this Saturday, along with secular students from GVSU, to discuss secular life on campus and secular perspectives on interfaith dialogue. You're welcome to join us from 7-9 p.m. March 23 at 451 Columbia Ave.

— Ben Scott-Brandt is a GVSU student and a professional hairstylist.