

I can't believe I'm agnostic: One Woman's Search for Meaning

The Title of my talk is “I can't believe I'm agnostic” and the title is what got me up here. It's funny. Once I thought of it, it made me laugh and I thought, ‘There's a talk there!’ So here I am.

But I can also say **I can't believe I'm giving this talk:**

Because I'm really not all that sure what other people who call themselves agnostic believe. If you came today to learn all there is to know about Agnosticism, pack your stuff and go to lunch now so you won't be disappointed. I want to be clear that I'm not an expert on the subject, I'm just an expert on my experience.

And I can't believe I'm giving this talk because there was a time in my life when I could never have imagined I'd be anywhere but the Southern Baptist church I grew up in, or some similar incarnation of that faith. I couldn't imagine I'd have turned out to be “one of those people” who wasn't absolutely sure.

To get started on my talk, I asked friends on facebook this week to answer this question

Without looking anything up, what do you think it means when a person says they are agnostic?

Heather

They do not completely deny the possibility of a God, although they doubt that there is one.

Pedra

Can't prove anything one way or another. I think one particular friend of mine just really doesn't think about it at all. I don't know that he doubts more than believes, just doesn't really spend any time thinking about it.

Sue

They simply don't care to choose sides in the religion debate, it doesn't matter to them either way.

Kristen

Indecisive. And not willing to take the time to discover what they truly believe.

Pam Maine Johnson

Not sure.

Jace

It just means you know religion is a thing, but Athiest or Thiest, you don't really care. And for me personally it just means that you don't care either way, you're not denying the "science" or "faith". You are only doubtful and can't prove it either way, so why concern you're self with trying to find what the truth is. Also, I guess it means you're un-biased.

Tina

no such thing = if you say you dont believe in darkness, then you are acknowledging the existance of light, Same with God - by saying you dont believe in a God, you are also acknowledging the existance of a higher being (to which I add a personal, HUH?)

I was amazed in a way, that of the people who added to the conversation, some who I thought to be most open-minded, used terms like “lazy, don’t care, indecisive, not willing to take the time, no such thing, it doesnt matter to them,” all pretty negative statements. I wondered if they would have answered that way if they’d realized they were talking to me about me.

So how can I say I’m agnostic, if I don’t even know what that means.

I heard that agnostic referred to those who believe it’s not possible to know the truths about the big questions, **You** know, the really BIG questions:

What is the nature of the Divine if there is such?

If Divinity exists, how can humankind know and interact with it/them?

How did we get here?

what is our meaning and purpose?

where are we going?

and who gets to decide who ends up where when this life is over?

While reseaching this week, I read this,

“at a bare minimum agnostics don't claim to know for sure if any gods exists and thus what exactly a god might be like”¹ *Today*, at least, that’s me.

¹ .” from Atheists and Agnostics on the Word of God, “Some Atheists, Agnostics Think the Bible is the Word of God” By Austin Cline, About.com Guide
<http://atheism.about.com/od/Atheist-Agnostic-Belief-Survey/a/Atheists-Agnostics-Word-Of-God.htm>

What my facebook friends were referring to in most cases was more

“Apathism: The term is a portmanteau -- a combination of two words 1 -- either "apathy" and "Theism" or "apathy and "Atheism." An Apatheist is a person who regards the existence of a God or supreme being as a relatively meaningless and irrelevant question”.² To put it in my Southern family’s vernacular: An apatheist just don’t care.

Mark Twain once said:

“I know I don't believe in atheism, but agnosticism is something I've never been too sure about”

In reading up, I was surprised at how often Agnosticism was misunderstood as Atheism.

One of the responses on my facebook (from my nephew Jace, who some of you met!) helps me explain they aren’t the same at all, “Atheism and Theism deals with ones beliefs about whether there is a higher being(s), and Agnosticism deals with ones knowledge, or belief about what is knowable.”

So what is Agnostic?

Every talk has to have a dictionary definition, so here’s mine.

According to The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition (online)

ag·nos·tic (ăg-nŏs tĭk) *n.*

1.

a. One who believes that it is impossible to know whether there is a God.

b. One who is skeptical about the existence of God but does not profess true atheism.

Word History: An agnostic does not deny the existence of God and heaven but holds that one cannot know for certain whether or not they exist. The term *agnostic* was fittingly coined by the 19th-century British scientist Thomas H. Huxley, who believed that only material phenomena were objects of exact knowledge. He made up the word from the prefix *a-*, meaning "without, not," as in *amoral*, and the noun *Gnostic*. *Gnostic* is related to the Greek word *gnōsis*, "knowledge," which was used by early Christian writers to mean "higher, esoteric knowledge of spiritual things";

In coining the term *agnostic*, Huxley was considering as "Gnostics" a group of his fellow intellectuals "ists," who had eagerly embraced various doctrines or theories that explained the world to their satisfaction. Because he was a "man without a rag of a label to cover himself

² http://www.religioustolerance.org/at_ag_hu.htm

with," Huxley coined the term *agnostic* for himself, its first published use being in 1870.

The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition copyright ©2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Updated in 2009. Published by Houghton Mifflin Company. All rights reserved.

Agnosticism is not a religion, it's a philosophy. A belief ABOUT belief if you will.

I found good information, something basic and understandable from the website religioustolerance.org

Comparing non-theistic belief systems including: Atheism, Agnosticism, Free thinking, Humanism and other Non-theistic beliefs, spiritual paths, etc.

One of the problems in the field of religion and ethical systems is that certain terms have multiple meanings. Perhaps the most impressive example of confusion in the field of religion are the terms "Witch" and "Witchcraft." They have at least 17 different definitions, some of which are mutually exclusive. This confusion carries over into non-theistic or secular belief systems, like Atheism, Agnosticism, Humanism, etc.)

One member of the organization that sponsors [the website] describes his theological belief as Agnostic, his religious affiliation as Unitarian, and his ethical system as Wiccan. When asked "What is your faith tradition" he might answer any of the three, or all three.

A strong majority of adults in North America are theists: they believe in a personal God or supreme power that intervenes in human life. A surprisingly large minority of adults believe in a remote deity, and have beliefs close to Deism even though the vast majority are unaware of the term. The site relates Deism as belief in the God who created the universe, set it going, left, & hasn't been seen since.

Theists may regard God as a unity (as in Judaism, Islam, and Sikhism) or a duality (a God and Goddess as in Wicca), a Trinity (one entity with three persons as in most Christian faith groups), etc. But there is a growing minority of adults

who have abandoned traditional organized religious beliefs about deity and define themselves in various ways with a confusing series of labels:³

[Again, according to the site:] Agnosticism is not a religion or complete ethical system. **It is simply a belief that we cannot prove either the existence or the non-existence of deity;** (i.e. of one or more gods, one or more goddesses, or combinations of the above). Many Agnostics, sometimes called "Strong Agnostics" or "Positive Agnostics" believe that we can never know about the existence of a deity. Others, often referred to as "Weak Agnostics" suggest that we cannot know anything about deity or deities at this time using the currently available evidence, but that this could conceivably change in the future.

I found similar information with a decidedly more intense attitude at UrbanDictionary.com.

An agnostic is a person who believes that the existence of a greater power, such as a god, cannot be proven or disproved; therefore an agnostic wallows in the complexity of the existence of higher beings.

Agnostics on religion (Christianity, Islam, Buddhists, etc): Religious zealots are often viewed as ignorant by agnostics' because of their blind following of a supreme being which may or may not exist. Agnostics will often question the existence of a supreme power because a lot of modern religious beliefs have no basis in modern logic; therefore blind following of popular religions is viewed as an easy out for people who chose not to think for themselves.

Agnostics on atheism: On the other end of the spectrum, unlike atheists, an agnostic uses a more scientific approach to their belief system. An agnostic knows that just because there is no physical proof of the existence of a higher being, it does not automatically mean that one does not exist. An agnostic views an atheist on the same plane as a religious zealot; often because the belief that human beings are the pinnacle of intelligence and there are few things that we do not or have the potential to understand.

³ http://www.religioustolerance.org/at_ag_hu.htm

The realization of knowing that “we cannot know everything” is the backbone of the agnostic belief.

Christian Zealot: God loves you and everyone. He will save you

Agnostic: Prove it.

Athiest: There is no way that a god can exist.

*Agnostic: Prove it.*⁴

People get so heated when discussing these things because it does go to the essence of the big questions and there’s lots of anxiety about who am I and what’s my meaning and where am I going.

“We have a choice. We have two options as human beings. We have a choice between conversation and war. That’s it. Conversation and violence. And faith is a conversation stopper.”
— **Sam Harris**, Co-Founder and CEO of **Project Reason**, a nonprofit foundation devoted to spreading scientific knowledge and secular values in society

“I do not consider it an insult, but rather a compliment to be called an agnostic. I do not pretend to know where many ignorant men are sure - that is all that agnosticism means.”

Clarence Darrow

Leonard Peikoff wrote “ The agnostic thinks that he is not taking any stand at all and therefore that he is safe, secure, invulnerable to attack. The fact is that his view is one of the falsest—and most cowardly—stands there can be.”

Nothing could be further from **my** truth. It took more courage than I can explain to let go of the belief I was raised in. It takes courage to question and think for oneself. I have spent a lifetime in spiritual and philosophical thought, Okay, so maybe philosophy-*light*, but I didn’t come to call myself an Agnostic Universalist without a LOT of thought. In fact, for me, it led to a total change in my identity, and my relationship with myself and others, a change brought about

⁴ <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=agnostic>

through searching and tears, even grief, at giving up **certainty** that what others TOLD me to believe was true.

I did care! Oh YOUR GOD, did I care. :p

It wasn't easy, it wasn't lazy, it was gut-wrenching to consider that everything I'd believed wasn't me anymore. And I cared, I cared down to the marrow in my bones. And letting people who once knew Judy Christian, the girl who sang and praised God, and judged others at every opportunity, letting people know that girl is no longer me, is not safe, secure or invulnerable to attack. My now very-Christian mother is terrified I've joined a cult!

The sub-title of this talk is "One Woman's Search for Meaning," and even as I wrote this I realized that there isn't time to tell you the whole story. No one can explain their journey in a 20-minute talk. But here are the Clif Notes.

I was raised Missionary Baptist, then Southern Baptist. I asked to go at age 6; I went with a little friend and I got my first doses of Hell, Fire and Brimstone. My homelife was... at times dangerous, anxiety provoking, violent, inappropriate; friends who've heard my story say it was "crazy-making stuff." Mom could twist the scripture to shame anyone and my father was an athiest whose journey was punctuated with alcohol and rage. Church gave me a literal and figurative sanctuary. God could fix this stuff and I wasn't alone when I talked to HIM at night.

But along with certain came guilt. I walked down the aisle at age 9 to get "saved." I'll never forget when the pastor said "if you'd been the only person who needed it, Christ would have died for you." I remember as clear as if it were today, my 9-year-old self crying, thinking, "He shouldn't have died for me, I'm not worth it."

In my teen years, I was taught that having the answer to how to get to Heaven and not sharing it with everyone I met was the equivalent of hiding the cure to cancer from the dying. It was hammered in to my tender heart, that someday I would stand before a Loving, but apparently Angry God, with the blood of those I let go to Hell on my hands. I would have to explain to an All-Knowing God why I had been too ashamed to tell everyone, EVERYONE, about the Love of Christ.

I was exhausted, overwhelmed with fear of letting God down. My teen and early adult years were full of shame and contradiction. I lived a public church life, sang solos that touched hearts, and cowered in fear, while hearing people talk about love. I wanted to be loved so desperately. But I didn't feel it.

I found out a single woman in her twenties with a mind of her own was a frightening thing to the people in my denomination. I wasn't allowed to stand in the pulpit at one church, wasn't allowed to teach a class of mixed single adults in another, because I was a woman, without the "covering" of a man. Why not? I questioned. They didn't like it.

When I went to college, church members warned me repeatedly that knowledge would STEAL my faith. It didn't. It woke me up. I was mesmerized by a poster at Baylor that said "Knowledge is Power." I found out some people believed in God but weren't afraid of Him. I found out some people could work at a Baptist University and be multi-cultural in their approach to talking about faith. As my search continued, I found out some people didn't call God Him, but Her, the Goddess; Over the next... 20 years, I questioned, I learned, I let go of the need to be certain. And here I am.

So, after a long journey from an intense absolute certainty about what I, and everyone else, ought to believe, through the valley of the shadow of doubt, through the crossroads of questioning and confusion, to a place of comfortable, open-minded exploration and appreciation of multi-cultural views about the Big Questions, I adopted agnostic to describe my spiritual philosophy.

Did I say I don't believe in God, The God, any god or goddess. Nope, never said it.. I no longer believe in Absolutes, one absolute truth, absolute Right or wrong, absolute judgement, absolute answers that apply to absolutely everyone. I know longer believe the responsibility of absolute is mine to share with others. I'm comfortable with uncertainty. Some have told me they thought where I am would be a scary place. I say, "What a relief." People aren't going to Hell because I didn't knock on their door.

As **Sam Harris** said, "What I'm asking you to entertain is that there is nothing we need to believe on insufficient evidence in order to have deeply ethical and spiritual lives.⁵"

So sometimes I have a relationship to Devine Love in the world of Nature. Sometimes I believe that if there is a Higher Power, the nature of that power is seen in our collective experience. I find what may be God or Goddess in diversity of all kinds. i want to know what others believe. I try to suspend judgment and to simply hear. I believe that Love and Love Alone is the answer to the problems that humankind faced. Is that Love equal to something Divine. I don't know.

⁵ <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/agnosticism>

To put it in a more whimsical light, I'll quote Richard Dawkins, whose Foundation for Reason and Science supports scientific education, critical thinking and evidence-based understanding of the natural world in the quest to overcome religious fundamentalism, superstition, intolerance and suffering. He said, "There may be fairies at the bottom of the garden. There is no evidence for it, but you can't prove that there aren't any, so shouldn't we be agnostic with respect to fairies?"⁶

I'm Agnostic because I believe that there's no book that has all the answers, no person who defines it all for me. Maybe I'll know right after the lights go out on my current existence. Today, I do pray and I hope a Higher Power (or Powers⁷) hear me. But I'm okay if there's nothing else, because I'm not alone in my search.

⁶ http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/1194.Richard_Dawkins

⁷ I like to say "Powers that Be"

If anyone asks:

Sam Harris is the author of the New York Times bestsellers, *The End of Faith*, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, and *The Moral Landscape*. *The End of Faith* won the 2005 PEN Award for Nonfiction. Mr. Harris is a Co-Founder and CEO of [Project Reason](#), a nonprofit foundation devoted to spreading scientific knowledge and secular values in society. He received a degree in philosophy from Stanford University and a Ph.D. in neuroscience from UCLA.

If anyone asks:

Clarence Seward Darrow (April 18, 1857 – March 13, 1938) was an [American lawyer](#) and leading member of the [American Civil Liberties Union](#), best known for defending teenage [thrill killers Leopold and Loeb](#) in their trial for murdering 14-year-old Robert "Bobby" Franks (1924) and defending [John T. Scopes](#) in the [Scopes Trial](#) (1925), in which he opposed [William Jennings Bryan](#) (statesman, noted orator, and 3-time presidential candidate).

If anyone asks -

Leonard S. Peikoff (born October 15, 1933)[1] is a [Canadian-American](#)[2] [philosopher](#). He is an [author](#), a leading advocate of [Objectivism](#) and the founder of the [Ayn Rand Institute](#). A former professor of philosophy, he was designated by the novelist [Ayn Rand](#) as heir to her estate. For several years, he hosted a [radio talk show](#). [2])

Ayn Rand was a novelist who is known for her philosophy of Objectivism.