IDENTIFY YOURSELF

The educator gets educated

By Scott C. Brown

LAST FRIDAY, our campus rabbi called me in a panic. "Scott, can you give a talk on the first day of Rosh Hashanah [the Jewish New Year]? Our original staff member can't do it." What? This invitation was met with silence on my end; you could hear crickets chirping, wind rustling, even tumbleweeds rolling by. Why would anybody ask me to do this?

She probably asked me because I had shown up the week before at the Jewish Student Union welcome barbecue. I show up to these gatherings because it is a quick way for me to meet students, I can bring my own kids, and nobody asks me any questions. But despite my best intentions, I only do this maybe one or two times a year; I actually don't know anybody in the Jewish Student Union that well.

However, the rabbi knew of my interest in helping students develop different parts of their identities. She has sat on panels with me and heard me speak at great length about developing holistic education. She probably thought that I knew a thing or two about Judaism. She had no reason to believe otherwise; I could pass. Little did she know that I referred to my religious or spiritual self with such confidence-inspiring terms as "starter Jew, remedial Jew, and junior varsity Jew."

The purpose of the talk was to reflect on some of the last words of Daniel Pearl, the journalist beheaded by Islamic extremists: "My father is Jewish. My mother is Jewish. I am Jewish." His mother, Judea Pearl, took his last words and created a volume of essays to explore the range of Jewish identity in a world rife with virulent anti-Semitism.

The rabbi needed me to speak for ten minutes, and she stressed that the content should be personal, not scholarly. No problem. I know as much about Jewish thought as I do about the Mongolian agrarian economy from 300–500 A.D. That is, very little. I said yes, but said I had no idea what to say, especially during the most holy days of the Jewish calendar.

Before I came to the morning Rosh Hashanah service, I entertained the fantasy that this whole thing would come easily to me. I was hoping that something ancient would awaken inside of me when I entered the service, that everything would be instinctual and known. But I was wrong. When I walked into the service at the appointed hour, I didn't know when to sit or stand or which way to face. I was always three steps behind. I felt proud that I had finally figured out the right-to-left reading, though I had been shamelessly cribbing off of the woman first-year student sitting to the right of me.

Finally, near the end of the service, it was my turn to speak. I grabbed my notes, stained with nervous sweat, and stumbled to the podium. I looked out at the crowd of mostly students, took a shallow breath, and said these words:

"I am Jewish." Perhaps this should start not as a declarative but, more appropriately, as a question. "I am Jewish," best captures the very complicated anxieties and questions that are at the core of my own Jewish identity. If you will indulge me, I will share a calico patchwork of experiences plucked randomly from my own history that can help me answer this question or, at the very least, question this answer.

"I am Jewish? My father is Jewish. His grandparents spoke Yiddish and emigrated from Poland before the turn of the century. Though he was never bar mitzvahed, he has always described himself as Jewish. In 1945, he moved with his mother from the Jewish section of the South Side of Chicago to East Los Angeles. He was miles away from 'Borscht Belt West' in the more affluent Jewish section of LA and regularly got beat up.
for being a 'Jew boy.' But not once did my father deny it. He always had a steadfast, quiet pride in his Jewishness.

"I am Jewish?" My mother is Jewish, but she didn't start out that way. My mother is from Malta, a tiny island ninety miles south of Sicily and, in her words, 'more Catholic than the pope.' My grandmother, who spoke very little English, observed what my mom described as a 'seventeenth-century variety of Catholicism,' with her long gray hair pulled back in a tight bun and a rosary always in her hand. My mother rejected Catholicism at every level, and for her disobedience, she would get her knuckles smacked with rulers by the nuns. My mother, uncle, and grandmother fled Malta during World War II, went to Tunisia, then settled in New York. At her first opportunity, my mother came to LA, where she fell in love with my father, a half-blind bongo player with uncoordinated Hawaiian shirts. My mom was disowned for marrying a Jew, and to this day, nobody from my mother's side even knows she converted.

"I am Jewish? My only memories of being Jewish centered on the Hanukkah parties we had every year, and to give you some indication of my Jewish knowledge, I had to spell-check Hanukkah several times. However, I remember devouring dreidel-shaped sugar cookies dusted with fine flour and baking on which candies in the menorah would burn out first, and once I got a taste for chocolate coins in gold foil, I developed a particular weakness for gel. These annual Hanukkah parties stopped when I was ten years old; then when I got to high school, they were replaced with annual Christmas tree-trimming parties. The lesson I learned as a kid was 'May your gifts come with the duration of Hanukkah, but with the volume of Christmas.'

"I am Jewish? In seventh grade, I hit the bar mitzvah circuit, hard. This was a confusing experience. To a supremely uninformed person like me who was never 'called to the Torah,' these were extravagant parties with themes of ballet, baseball, and magic and lots of weekends lost for my friends. The deeper meaning of a bar mitzvah was largely lost on me; it was seen as a way to get some money and maybe obtain a coveted Mattel Electronics football game. In addition, one of the last times I was in a synagogue was in 1981 for my cousin Steve's bar mitzvah, and the rabbi kicked me out of the service because I was turning around and talking to my friend.

"I am Jewish? In 1989, after college, I went Inter Rail through Europe, and I traveled to Dachau. What compelled me to walk through the gates of a Nazi extermination camp, I was not quite sure. Once inside, there was no noise. Nobody spoke, and the only sound was the awkward footfalls of people trudging through the gravel on the sterile ground. It was as if once you entered these grounds, in the deafening silence, you had to take responsibility for humankind's collective shame. For a person who prided himself on being able to select a piece of music to appropriately accompany any moment, the choir had been stolen. A visit to this place is upsetting for anybody, but it also brought the issue of my own Jewish identity consciously into question for the first time. Though I do not know if I had any relatives that were part of the Holocaust, I found myself identifying with the event in a way that I also felt outweighed my right to it. Was my outrage simply as a decent human being, or am I allowed to include myself as a target of this atrocity, a circle of hate that included me as well? Did it? Frankly, this question was too big for me to address at the time with the insufficient tools of my own confused Jewish identity and minimal knowledge, a cocktail umbrella against a hurricane. So I walked away.

"I am Jewish? In 1991, I traveled around the southern hemisphere via ship with Semester at Sea, an experience that deepened my relativistic stance on the whole issue of religion. To that point, I had figured 'organized' religion implies that there is a certain 'rightness' to a particular church above all others, which implies a certain 'wrongness' to others. Could all the people involved in organized religion who adhere to this belief be wrong? While my sense that they couldn't had allowed me a

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reap the benefits of confronting spiritual questions, my growing sense of relativism challenged this thinking.

"I am Jewish? In 1995, my wife-to-be Anne-Marie wanted to get married on an island that has served as an open-air church for over a hundred years. To reserve this site, you had to be sponsored by some church group. So we had to pick a religion, which I agreed to without a second thought. What did I care? We picked Unitarian Universalist because the minister was OK with us having our dogs in the ceremony. However, even at the most rationalized and ambivalent point in my Jewish identity, I was uneasy with the large birch cross that was in the background.

"I am Jewish? But after the wedding, my nascent Jewish identity began to grow and manifest itself in some important ways. First, I admitted that I have a warm and abiding affection for any person I meet who is Jewish ancestry. There is a familiarity of deep kinship that calls me at a core level. Second, I realized that much of my worldview was not some random hodgepodge of ideas that I had picked up here and there, but incredibly Jewish. I finally credited much of this outlook I had gained from the quiet and pervasive Jewish curriculum of my life.

"I am Jewish? The issue of religion often gets called into question when you have children, and we are no exception. I would like to say that we have instantly risen to this challenge, shaken our heads to get rid of the fog, stopped dithering, and walked forthrightly toward a spiritual identity. But the truth is, we have been serial dabblers. We have been Jewish wallflowers, hanging on the periphery, accepting invitations but not having the nerve to do something more active.

"Our hesitancy in exploring religious matters has been rooted in debilitating ambivalence. What does it mean to be a Jew? Do I need a card? Do I have to pay a tithe? Is it multiple-choice? Will random or haphazard guessing increase my score? Anyway, at this point, shouldn’t I know more? I am so used to being in charge, to knowing how things work, that I have lost my sense of beginner-hood. I don’t want to look stupid.

"But the truth is, despite all of our hand wringing, our children have none of these hang-ups. Even with sporadic exposure to events, things sank in. One day, our then six-year-old daughter Maddie came off the school bus waving a homemade ‘Hooray for Jews’ flag, for reasons that still remain unclear. Most of my own Jewish education is has not been through a rabbi, but through the sock puppets and pop-up books that were used to teach the children. So I have engaged in a bit of guerilla education while I shored up my resolve. But this questioning of my spiritual identity gives me strength and confidence, and we continue to make small steps. I just bought Judaism for Dummies.

"I am Jewish? I do know that Rosh Hashanah is an opportunity to look back and look forward. We collect leaves and flowers: leaves to symbolize what is falling away in ourselves in order to allow for new growth to happen and flowers to symbolize the new growth of the coming year. As luck would have it, I will be going to California next week for my cousin Steve’s wedding. I don’t know if I will get thrown out of the synagogue again, but I do know, I am Jewish.

I ENDED MY TALK. In silence, I gathered up my notes, shuffled away from the rostrum, and slumped in the pew. I wanted to just disappear. I hadn’t anticipated what it would be like to go through this. It is always a moist-eyed cliche when the educator gets educated. I work with students on ways to explore different parts of their identity, challenging them to articulate who they are and who they are becoming and why it matters. As an educator, I am used to creating environments that transform students. But I myself had remained largely untouched. I was pretty much done with my personal growth. I got lazy. I fancied myself as having a completed developmental scorecard: I felt like I had a good handle on my identity development, could make complex decisions in context, and was self-authored and morally complex. My status was a passive act of hubris.

But this invitation represented the first time I have ever been asked about my religious or spiritual self in such a direct way and have been expected to respond. Though I was comfortable in encouraging students to deal with difficult personal issues, I was terrified at the prospect of grappling with my own spiritual identity at all, let alone in a very public way. In hindsight, preparing for this ten-minute talk significantly changed the trajectory of my own development. I was incredibly vulnerable and exposed my soul, quite literally, to a group of people I hardly knew. But I was so grateful to be asked. Whatever forces conspired to have me there, it is a gift I will cherish, a fixed point in time from which I will measure my progress on this journey.