

Acceptance speech for the Freedom from Religion Foundation's "Emperor Has No Clothes Award," presented at the foundation's annual meeting in November, 2003

Freedom From Religion Foundation staff member Annie Laurie Gaylor said:

"We are delighted to give Natalie Angier our 'Emperor Has No Clothes Award,' which is reserved for public figures for plain speaking on religion. It is inspired by the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale about the deluded (and denuded) emperor, and the child who refuses to be deluded and 'tells it like it is.' "

But What About the Tooth Fairy, Mom? Raising a Healthy God-Free Child in a Hopelessly God-struck Nation.

And speaking of an emperor with no patience for clothing, especially when it happens to be on the women around him, well, the people of California took seriously the request that they Win one for the Groper, and they elected Schwarzenegger as their governor. This, despite the fact that the guy has no political experience, and ample experience in behaving badly, even illegally. He's a gang banger, a compulsive handyman, a fan of Hitler and a zealous drug user who has, in his words, "inhaled and exhaled everything." I wondered how Schwarzenegger could get away with doing things that would terminate the career of any normal, non-steroidally enhanced human being. Was it being a republican? Was it being a movie star with a glamorous Tammy Wynette of a wife?

Those things help, of course, but then I learned that Arnold is a devout catholic, who attends mass just about every Sunday with his family. Catholics have this wonderful little escape clause written into their contract. It's called confession. No matter what you've done, you can go into a little box that serves as a kind of sin shredder, an autoclave for the soul. You just tell the guy sitting behind the screen, forgive me father for I have sinned, and you list your various peccadillos as earnestly but succinctly as you can. The priest asks if you're sorry, you say you are, he gives you a kind of homework assignment to prove your repentance, and voila! You're in the clear. And the great thing about the system is, you can be a repeat offender, you can keep doing the same bad things over and over, and still the priest is obligated, if you ask for it nicely, to give you a pass. Hail Mary full of grace, let me win the governor's race. If you don't, I'll bust your face.

But I am not being fair. People learn many useful things in the course of getting a Christian education. Just the other evening, my daughter, who is in second grade, shared with me and my husband a series of jokes and songs that had a lot of vivid references to body parts, body functions and body fluids, ill-fitting underwear, and, Arnold's favorite, the toilet bowl. Now I am no angel. Sometimes I'm not even PG-rated. If Katherine is around when I stub a toe or step in cat throwup or read the morning newspaper, well, I just might say shit or goddamn it or Jesus fucking Christ, and my daughter will scold me for using bad language, or for invoking the name of somebody she knows quite well I don't believe in.

Yet even with my somewhat lax verbal standards, I was surprised by the vulgar nature of the little ditties my daughter sang for us. Where did you learn those things? my husband and I asked of her. From Michelle, she replied brightly. Ah, yes, Michelle, her most religiously indoctrinated friend, a girl who spends every Sunday in church and every summer at bible camp, who once made for Katherine a lovely drawing with hearts and flowers and birds and butterflies that on one side said, I love Katherine and on the other, “I love the Baby Jesus, too”. Now, Katherine has many friends, but whenever she’s come home with some really juicy Maxim-worthy material, it turns out she’s learned it from Michelle. So the question is, who is tutoring Michelle? She doesn’t have older siblings. She and Katherine attend the same public school during the week. I can only conclude that there is more to bible camp than the canonical gospels, and that perhaps Katherine really is missing something by growing up in a pleasant, tree-lined Norman Rockwellesque town like Takoma Park - which is just over the border in Maryland, a couple of miles from here - without the benefit of Sunday school. How is she supposed to learn about the glories of the gutter? The only smutty poems I know are ones I learned growing up in the Bronx decades ago, and they’re far too stale for today’s savvy young consumer. So all I can say to Michelle is, Amen!

But I am making light of a very somber business, the topic of my talk, which is the challenge of raising a god-free child in these god-besotted times. Because yes, my husband and I are raising our daughter as an

atheist, in a moderately active fashion. That means not only do we fail to schlep her to church or temple or any other house of “worship” on a regular basis; not only do we expect her at dinnertime to direct her gratitude for the food she is about to eat to whichever harried parent prepared the meal - and so she does, with little ad-libbed prayers like, I beg you, please don’t make me eat these Brussels sprouts! We also explain to her why we don’t believe in god, and why we’re big fans of evidence-based analysis, and why we think that religion is a source of a lot of the world’s misery and strife.

Yes, indeed, I never pass up an opportunity for a good lusty anti-god rant. In August, for example, Katherine and I were boarding a plane for North Carolina, when the person behind us, a woman with white hair and icy blue eyes, started giving the ticket agent a hard time - unfairly, from what I could hear. Their argument got heated, and finally she said she was going to report him to his airline’s management. What’s your name? she demanded. Mohammad, he said.

Mohammad, eh? said the woman. I should have known! Well, I couldn’t help but whirl around in outrage at that remark. Jesus Christ! I cried. I can’t believe you said that! The woman turned her polar-cap glare on me and snarled that I should mind my own business. And who are you to talk, anyway! she added, Using the lord’s name in vain like that!

We were about to come to fisticuffs when I remembered, oops, I have my kid with me. Once Katherine and I were finally settled in our seats, I tried to explain the argument, and the reason why the woman’s slur against the man’s name was so mean and

indefensible. This is what happens with religion, I said, people get into fights over whose god is better and more godlike than whose. My daughter, weissenheimer that she is, politely observed, Yes, Mom, but you don't believe in god, and you were fighting, too, at which point I suggested that she read the Sky Mall catalogue in the seat pocket in front of her. Kids say the goddamnedest things, don't they?

But being an atheist parent is not always fun and games. For a while last year questions about god-belief, death, and the heaven option were big topics of discussion among Katherine and her friends. And Katherine really, really wished there was a heaven to look forward to. For one thing, she liked the dress code there, and all the cool accessories - the white flowing gowns, the wings, the harps. For another, she's no fool. She realizes that, if there's no heaven, no afterlife, then when you die, there's probably...nothing. This little technicality has been and continues to be a very hard thing for her to handle. Not long ago, the three of us were in the car, on the beltway, interestingly enough with the big white tetra-towered Mormon temple that some of you may have seen looming up ahead - by the way, we've told Katherine that the temple is in fact the tooth fairy's castle, and that it's built of children's teeth, a story that for some reason she's deeply skeptical about, although damn if the temple doesn't look like the jaw of some sort of extinct giant saber-toothed rodent. Anyway, all of a sudden Katherine started to scream. What's wrong? What's wrong? We gasped. Have you been stung by a yellow jacket? Are you feeling car-sick? Should we pull over?

No, she cried. I was just thinking about death, and I can't stand it. I can't stand it! I don't want to have to die!

Now this is a tough protest to respond to, and it's come up repeatedly. How can you answer it without resorting to platitudes, obfuscations, lies? We're still in the, um, groping stage. We start by saying, but that's a long, long, long way in the future! You're going to live for such a ridiculous amount of time that you'll be begging for a time out! Rick and I both write about science, biology and medicine, and we tell her of all the wondrous medical advances that will keep her going for, who knows, a century, two centuries, even longer. We also have explained to her that she won't vanish altogether, and that the universe will never let her go. Matter and energy can be neither created nor destroyed, we say, but simply transformed. This isn't fantasy; this is reality. Who knows where you'll end up next, we say. Part of a dolphin, an eagle, a snow leopard - one of the big showcase species, of course, just as everybody who channels their former lives seems to discover that they were an Egyptian pharaoh or a Druidic princess.

Still, Katherine rails against the injustice of our mortality. She's terrified at the idea of personal, if not molecular, extinction. Wouldn't it be better if god were real? she asks. Wouldn't you rather have something to look forward to, a place to go? She says things that really hit home, like how much she would like to meet her grandfather Keith, my father, that is, who died of malignant melanoma when I was nineteen and whom I continue to miss terribly. I reply that, yes,

I wish she could meet him, and I wish I could see him again myself, but spending an eternity with your parents, sheesh! Surely she can grasp the downside of that?

I also tell her that the image of heaven a lot of people have put forth sounds like a really dismal place to me. Do you know what angels supposedly do all day? Day after year after eternity? They sit around telling god how wonderful he is. It's like the routine from Monty Python's The Meaning of Life, when a chaplain and his congregation pray, "O Lord...oooh you are so big, so absolutely huge. Gosh, we're all really impressed down here, I can tell you. Forgive us O Lord for this dreadful toadying and barefaced flattery, but you are so strong and well, just so super and fantastic. Amen." No thanks, I say. I'd rather die.

A few people have warned me that my daughter may eventually rebel against her parents by going to the other "extreme," becoming a moonie or a pentacostal or a lubevitcher. They believe that the best way to inoculate your children against religious zealotry is with a nice bland, reduced-fat faith like unitarian-universalist or reform Judaism. My sister is taking that approach with her two kids out in Oregon, raising them as reform Jews. She insists that, with all the right-wing fundamentalist Christians in her area, Judaism is a political statement equivalent to supporting Howard Dean. I've argued with her, saying that it would be an even bolder statement to raise them as atheists. But then everybody would be trying to save their souls, to convert them, she says. This way, they leave her kids alone. Oh, I suppose. Yet I

don't like the dyspeptic narcissistic god of the old testament any more than the infanticidal absentee landlord of the new.

In any event, I can't be bland about my atheism. If Katherine is getting a heavy dose of unalloyed heathenism, maybe that is better, in the end, than vacillation. Maybe that's what kids really crave - strong convictions. And maybe what they don't crave is all the fear and threat of a really terrible punishment that seem to be the essential minerals and vitamins in most religions. I know about the fear from my own experience. I had a very unusual upbringing in many ways, not least when it came to religion. My mother is Jewish, my father had been raised as a Christian scientist, by my grandmother June Dawn. She'd been a silent movie actress, but then turned to heavy-duty religion, becoming a Christian Science practitioner who healed people over the phone. When my parents met, they were both members of the Young Communist Party and distinctly anti religion. My father, however, couldn't shake his faith-based upbringing, and he eventually started shopping around for a palatable religion. He tried episcopalianism, he tried Catholicism, and then, when I was seven, he rejected Christianity again, angrily as was his style, and started exploring buddhism and other eastern religions.

The next year, when I was eight, our family was out west visiting relatives, we got into a terrible car accident that very nearly killed my older brother. As my parents kept watch at my brother's hospital bed, they sent the rest of us kids to various relatives. I

was shipped off to San Diego to my grandmother June, whom I barely knew, and as you can imagine I was in a scared and impressionable frame of mind. She had a small house. I slept on her couch. And one night, she came out into the livingroom, sat down on the edge of the couch in the dark and woke me up. Do you know why your family had that car accident? she asked me. I'm not sure, I said. For some reason, Aunt Estelle lost control of the car.

No, it's because your father stopped going to church, my grandmother said. It's because he stopped asking god to protect your family. So you must do it for him. You must pray every night for the people you love. And you know what? Grandma June succeeded. She scared the bejesus into me so that, even though I had no interest until then in religion, I started praying, frantically, every night, reciting a long list of people for god to protect. I kept this up for seven years. Seven years, and then the bad spell was broken.

I'm not going to put a hex on my daughter. Sure, I'm a soapbox atheist. But she doesn't have to take my word for anything. All she has to do is look around her, every day, to find the bible she needs - in the sky, sun, moon, Mars, leaves, lady bugs, stink bugs, possums, tadpoles, cardinals, the wonderful predatory praying mantises that have gotten really big and fat this year on all the insects this rainy year has brought. Life needs no introduction, explanation or excuse. Life is bigger than myth - except in California.