



The Reverend Vern Barnett, DMn, *minister emeritus*
The Reverend David E Nelson, DMin, *associate minister*
Margaretha K Finefrock, *chief learning officer*
Josef Walker, *community chaplain*
Ed Chasteen, *amity shaman*

L Joseph Archias, *Chairman of the Board*
Larry Guillot, *Past Chairman of the Board*
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Primal Faiths Restored with Nature
Asian Faiths: *The Self Made Whole*
Monotheistic Faiths: *Community in Covenant*
Liberation Movements: *Finding the Sacred Afresh*

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EXCISED VERSION

THE KANSAS CITY STAR
1729 Grand Blvd
Kansas City, MO 64108

TWO-PAGE "EXIT INTERVIEW"

Dear NameExcised,

Thank you for your calls Friday afternoon. I am grateful for the way you conveyed The Star's decision. I understand The Star's forthcoming change to a smaller size print edition and the need to reconsider and prioritize content. Over the week-end, I've made a list of 17 considerations from many angles regarding the "Faith and Beliefs" column. It seems best to conclude my contributions to The Star at this time. I owe it to you, and to The Star, to offer a few of these considerations. This will substitute for an "exit interview."

Among the reasons I have come to this decision are these:

1. *Credibility.* When we spoke Friday, I initially thought I could continue to be of service to the community with an on-line only column, as suggested. I now think this would reduce my ability to obtain the kind of interviews and contacts that have been a part of the column's history. While journalism is changing, folks still consider print a measure of seriousness. I would be more embarrassed to follow up on the plans and arrangements I've made for future columns by telling the folks I've been working with that "the column will appear only on line" than I will be to simply inform them that I am no longer writing the column. Credibility is extremely important to me, and loss happens either way, but I think folks will understand cessation better than on-line only availability.

2. *Timing.* I understand "on-line" is the wave of the future. But I had planned only to write, Scheherazade-like, 1001 columns, into next year. This does not give sufficient time for my treasured readers to migrate to an on-line edition; and I do not think that perceptions comparing print priorities to on-line commentary will change rapidly enough to overcome this impediment in the time I would have had left.

Specifically, my current experience is that,

whether folks liked or disliked the column, the comments generated by the on-line version are usually markedly inferior to those who write me from the print edition or speak to me as I move in civic and religious circles in the city. I am not interested in writing for most of what I perceive to be the current on-line kind of reader of my column. At my stage of life, one must choose carefully how one spends one's time. I think I can make a greater contribution to the community by using my time in other ways.

3. *Placement and management.* Some at The Star have previously characterized my column as a "spiritual advice" column and it usually appeared near the advice columns by Judith Martin and Jeanne Phillips, fitting in well on that page. I joked that folks could find me the day the food ads appeared — "think spiritual food and read my column."

I would have had no objection to moving to Saturday, as was considered, though I think folks had come to value a mid-week opportunity to think about faith. For me, it was a meritorious sign that The Star did not consider religious concerns simply a pre-Sunday affair, especially when a growing number of readers are not Christians.

The abrupt change of moving the column this past week to Saturday instead of its expected placement next Wednesday without notice to my faithful readers does not indicate the kind of management I could rely on were I to continue with The Star, nor exemplify the respect readers deserve.

Among the reasons I regret concluding the column are these:

1. *Learning to write a column.* I have learned a great deal about writing from my editors, especially from Bill Norton and from you. This is one of the reasons I continued the column after The Star ended financial compensation a couple years ago. I will always cherish the writer-editor relationship and especially your friendship. I admire your understanding of the complexity of religious sensibilities and language, and your commitment to recognizing the diversity of faiths in our area. I will certainly miss your helpfulness in many other ways.

An academic and teaching background in theological disciplines, pastoral experience, interfaith work in the community, training in arts and sciences and devotion to Kansas City do not, I learned, automatically produce good writing. I still do not pretend to be a good writer, but I am much better. I know continuing with The Star would have improved my writing further.

2. *Recognition.* Staying in touch with many areas of religious and civic life in the metro has been a blessing to me, even as I have sought to reflect that in the column. Identifying the spiritual dimensions of art, music, commerce, sports, medicine, and other areas and institutions in the context of the world's great faiths has been an extraordinary opportunity for me to grow, and to demonstrate the conviction that the sacred can be found everywhere.

I'll certainly miss the information people provide me because of the column and the network of relationships developed or deepened through the column.

Although I've received many honors from religious groups, I especially cherish the award I received from the alum of the Civic Council's leadership program, along with, over the years, other awardees like NAMES EXCISED NAMES EXCISED NAMES EXCISED. I am sure that the recognition I received was due not simply for my interfaith work but in part for the range of The Star column.

I have most often focused the columns on Kansas City. Still, I am gratified that the columns were recognized beyond, such as by Ellie Pierce, principal researcher for The Pluralism Project at Harvard University when she said, "At the Pluralism Project, we consider Kansas City to be truly at the forefront of interfaith relations. This is — in no small part — due to the tireless efforts of Vern Barnet, whose work and writings have been an inspiration to all of us at the Pluralism Project."

There were times when other McClatchy papers picked up the column when the column dealt with items of national conversation, such as my column on the "Avatar" movie. I resisted many who asked me to pursue syndication because I wanted most often to speak to Kan-

sas City. I regret not providing this local context and emphasis for The Star in the future.

3. *Lost opportunities.* And I regret that the columns I've already planned will not appear. Some columns I'll miss writing especially, like the one for next year's Valentine's Day, a second column from my interview earlier this year with NAME EXCISED AND IDENTIFYING CONTENT REMOVED NAME EXCISED AND IDENTIFYING CONTENT REMOVED, about love; I thought that, if handled well, it would be a beautifully poignant tribute to NAME EXCISED memory and meaningful to the many who know NAME EXCISED, as well as exploring neglected religious history.

4. *My readers.* I will miss correspondence with readers. Sometimes I've spent far more time replying to them than in preparing the column itself. I've dealt with poignant personal problems, religious prejudice and project assistance. Even in this secularistic age, people find themselves asking the big questions, and it has been a privilege to serve them in ways made possible through the column. Developing an ability to respond effectively to criticism has been an extraordinary spiritual exercise for me. I'll not forget this past week when an extremely wealthy reader, whose name is on a KC landmark, unknown to me personally, wrote she read me regularly. She severely criticized the column on wealth. Finding a way to respond to her that led to her gracious and affirming reply is a skill I probably would not have developed to any degree without the opportunity for such exercise The Star provided. This has made me a better person.

My next column was to have been based on an interview I had last Thursday with visiting Buddhist Br. Chan Huy, a disciple of the Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh, perhaps the world's most significant living Buddhist leader with the exception of the Dalai Lama. It was a wonderful hour with him. And we discussed the Buddhist teaching of impermanence. So I am certain he will understand the transitory nature of a newspaper column even as I am practicing the doctrine of non-attachment to something that has been so meaningful to me as an avenue for service these past 18 years and 947 columns.

The Star needed a balance to Billy Graham in 1994. NAME EXCISED suggested me. What a gift my association with The Star has been! I will always cherish you, NAME EXCISED, and keep you in my prayers.

With admiration and affection,

Vern Barnet

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