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### RS 301 Oral History: Interview With James Gibbs

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Molly Milford  
RS 301: Spring 2021  
Sara Hart, Ph.D.

## Oral History Project

James D. Gibbs is a current resident of Humboldt County and spoke with me about his experiences with religion and spirituality before and during Covid-19. James and I met through mutual friends and we often talk about religion and spirituality and its significance to us so I thought he would be a great person to interview with a unique perspective. To give some background, Derek was born in South Carolina to his mother who was a Southern Baptist Christian and his father who is an Atheist. He moved to Humboldt a little over 2 years ago and has made a lot of discoveries about his beliefs ever since.

Milford: Explain a brief history of your religious or spiritual practice. What was it like growing up in a family with parents who had differing beliefs?

Gibbs: I was raised very confused. I was taught to believe Christianity, and we would go to church every weekend, read the bible, pray, go to Wednesday night services... We did it all. But then I would go home to my dad for the rest of the week, who was an atheist and was open about his belief in nothing. He didn't try to alter my beliefs, like he didn't tell me that Christianity is wrong, he would just tell me that he didn't believe in it and if I believed that was ok. So, that made me really confused, it made me want to identify with Christianity, but left this open door for me to question 'what do I believe? Like, is God even a real thing?

Milford: I could see how that would be confusing as a child trying to decipher your beliefs. So, has that become clearer for you now? What is the name of your community of practice or your spiritual beliefs?

Gibbs: I honestly just identify as spiritual. Because I've had very strong beliefs from very opposite sides of the religious spectrum, it's given me an opportunity to be able to look at all of it and take something from all of it. So that's what I do, I don't take all of my beliefs from one specific religion, I am not a Christian, I won't identify as that. There's nothing wrong with that practice, I take from Christianity as well, but I also take from Buddhism, and Islam, and Hinduism, and any spiritual practice under the sun, as long as it promotes love then I will subscribe to that. But if it doesn't follow love then I will remove myself from that.

Milford: That is a really cool and unique perspective. That kind of leads me to my next question about what your spiritual practice and/or beliefs was like before social distancing began?

Gibbs: I really did not have any real practice or direction before Covid-19 started. Before I was really tied between Atheism and Christianity, I thought both of those were really powerful options, but I felt like I was just trying to fulfill something spiritual that wasn't there. I didn't know how to fill that gap because I didn't have enough time to sit with myself. I spent a lot of time looking outwardly for God or spirituality and just feeling pretty lost before social distancing began.

Milford: So, before Covid-19 began you were confused about your beliefs, so has the pandemic aided in shifting your perspective or clarifying things for you or was it more of the opposite effect?

Gibbs: Covid-19 really forced me to sit with myself... Before this started, I was working constantly and having things take up the majority of my time. But after Covid-19 began I didn't have that; I lost my job,

and I was stuck in my apartment with myself and I had to learn to be ok with myself and in doing so I feel like I found God. I was able to look inward, not at myself but something deeper, and I was able to find the God I had looked for in Christianity in just nothingness. I found it, not through a source of beliefs or written ideals but just from being alone with my thoughts. So, I feel like Covid-19 has really opened my mind and clarified a lot of things for me spiritually. It makes me feel a lot more at peace with myself. It has definitely still been a really difficult time of adjustment for everybody, myself included, but because of that it makes me feel like... because I was able to get through it, and safely, that I was more at one with myself and more at one with my spirituality.

Milford: Do you think that Covid-19 had enough of an impact on you that if you didn't have this time to reflect and not have to work all the time that you still would have come to the same conclusion you have now?

Gibbs: Absolutely not. I feel like if I were to have continued going down the same path of monotonous repetition, whether it be work or just routine of life in general, I don't think I would have been able to be where I am now. I used to feel really trapped by my reality, and then when my reality was shifted into almost complete isolation it definitely forced me to analyze myself and my thoughts and flip how I perceive things.

Milford: That makes a lot of sense, it's really powerful that you were able to take this really negative thing impacting the world and utilize it for your own self-improvement and self-discovery. Since these are strange and challenging times, what kind of obstacles or difficulties have you faced as a result that have impacted your belief system?

Gibbs: In finding my spirituality I also found myself feeling really disconnected from a big portion of my humanity; family, friends, and just people who didn't understand my newfound perspective. A lot of people in my life just refused to look at God at any other way or hear what I had to say. Which was really disappointing because I was really excited to share what I had found with the people I care about and they rejected that. So, I felt really detached from them because I wanted to share love and kindness and what I got was hate and pain, which I've seen in a lot of people who are really engrained in their religious beliefs. And it just really hurts me because I just want them to find the same happiness and comfort that I was able to discover.

Milford: It's really hard when you have a new perspective of your beliefs and God and your family and friends believe in something different. Where in having a conversation with them, when you now understand something different, they kind of reject that.

Gibbs: The rejection is probably the hardest, and just the loneliness of it.

Milford: So, you said that you aren't currently attending any religious or spiritual gatherings, but have you at any time during the span of Covid-19 and if so, have you noticed any changes or adaptations due to social distancing?

Gibbs: I recently went to visit family in Arizona and attended a Christian church with them. The building was still really packed with not a lot of social distancing measures honestly. They seemed as though they wanted nothing to do with social distancing and the church didn't require anyone to wear a mask, it was just if you wanted to you could and if it bothered you that people weren't wearing masks you could just not go. But there was no encouragement to wear masks and stand six feet apart.

Milford: I noticed that at a church I attended recently as well and I'm not really sure why that happened or why people didn't want to follow social distancing practices.

Gibbs: Yea, and obviously that's not the case with every church, but I feel like it might have to do with the fact that Churches were not allowed to be open for a while and the attendees were really upset by that so maybe this is there way of rejecting the policies in place that didn't allow them to practice their faith. But the whole point of these safety measures is to protect other people, whether you want to wear a mask or not. I think people are also just really ready to move forward and just leave the era of the pandemic behind us. So not following social distancing measures makes the pandemic less front and center.

Milford: Besides what you've observed at this particular church, do you think there will still be some sort of permanent changes to the way people attend religious and spiritual gatherings.

Gibbs: I think so, I think this has made people a lot more distant from each other, both physically and emotionally. So, I feel like that will be something that carries over into our lives after social distancing is no longer required, including in church. But there's also probably going to be a strong divide between people who are really eager to get out and be with people as much as possible after being socially deprived, and those that have retreated to their more introverted side and want to keep their distance.

Milford: I think that will be really interesting to see what life will look like when things start to return to a more normal, post-covid world. I want to touch on the more emotional impact of covid -19, because I think a lot of people felt disconnected from their community of practice since it wasn't allowed to be open for a while and we were forced to shelter in place. I think maybe this forced separation brought a lot of people closer to their spirituality and others felt drifted from it because they wanted to attend a gathering of their community of practice but no longer could.

Gibbs: That definitely impacted me pretty strangely. Because before Covid-19 began I had planned on attending a Christian church with my friend and didn't go through with it, and I felt really guilty about it. Then shelter in place began shortly after and we couldn't go to church anymore. So that made me feel pretty weird, like 'did I make a mistake?' So, I was pretty worried at first. But with a little bit of time, I thought well I don't need to go to church, I don't want to go and get sick or get any one else sick. So, this led me to think that instead of looking outwardly for a place that offers a place for me to practice my religious beliefs, it made me look inward for my spiritual beliefs and the practices I wanted to be a part of. I had to learn about spiritual ideas on my own and explore other religions and my faith, without a church telling me what was right and what was wrong. So I decided with my own morals about what felt right and what felt wrong to me. I felt like I still had a tie to Christianity before Covid-19, but because of the pandemic I was kind of pulled away from that. But not toward something bad, just something more.

Milford: So, it's not that you rejected Christianity, its just that you found something that worked better for you and that includes Christianity among other religions.

Gibbs: Yes, that's exactly how I feel.

Milford: That is really interesting, you have such a unique perspective and I'm really grateful that you could share this with me.

Gibbs: Of course, I'm always happy to share my beliefs with people, thank you for this opportunity.