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# ON AIR

Magazine

## Still Searching

Bill Moyers  
Looks for  
Enlightenment

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# Bill Moyers: Still/Searching

B Y C L A U D I A P E A R C E

**E**ver since viewing *The Power of Myth* in 1988, I've tended to think of Bill Moyers as a kind of Font of All Wisdom. Now I'm sitting in the back seat of an Acura with Moyers, trying to remain objective as I interview him while we head from Lindbergh Field to the Mission Valley Marriott. And it doesn't help that, with his well-cut sports jacket and blow-dried hair, the articulate public television icon could easily pass for the Baptist pastor he once studied to become. At the same time, I'm secretly irritated with Moyers. He's in town to publicize a 10-part series on the Bible, of all things. As a refugee from the Religious Right, alarms go off in my head whenever the subject of the Bible comes up.

Moyers is on a 25-city tour to promote *Genesis*—his latest public television series and the companion book of the same name, and his publisher and KPBS have scheduled almost every minute of his one-and-a-half-day stop in San Diego (which is why I'm interviewing him en route to his hotel). *Genesis* has garnered so much positive national attention that I'm com-

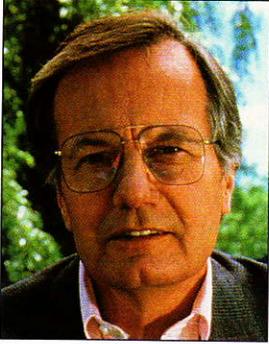
*After three decades  
of tracking  
America's social  
and spiritual  
trends, the former  
seminarian is still  
looking for spiritual  
enlightenment.*

pelled to include it in my interview questions. (And, after all, the *Genesis* people are picking up Moyers's tab.)

But it is another program that I'm here for—*Bill T. Jones: Still/Here With Bill Moyers*, a January special about living in the shadow of death. That would have been a dream interview—straightforward, touching, deep....

*Still/Here* chronicles the process dancer/choreographer Bill T. Jones uses to come to terms with the death, by AIDS, of his longtime companion Arnie Zane, as well as his own HIV-positive status. In the documentary, Moyers follows Jones—who is often commissioned by major international ballet and opera companies—as he travels around the U.S. for a year, holding workshops for people from all walks of life who are facing life-threatening illnesses. The artist asks these non-dancers to express their feelings in words, movements and gestures, which he later incorporates into a dance he christens *Still/Here*. The interactions of Jones and the workshop participants are incredibly moving. And the dance that comes out of the process—*Still/Here*—has been hailed by critics as a landmark of 20th-century art.

"Having just come fairly close to a major heart attack," says Moyers as we glide through traffic (he and his crew filmed *Still/Here* in 1994, the year Moyers had a bypass operation), "but missing it by a beat or two, I was really sympathetic to what these survivors who came to Bill T. Jones's



workshops were discovering as they worked with him. It was quite a soul-satisfying experience to watch them open up their deepest feelings about mortality.”

Trim and slim, Moyers hardly looks like someone who's recently had a close brush with death. If he's at all fatigued by his flight from New York, it doesn't show. And when I see him at a KPBS fund-raising luncheon the next day, he seems as fresh as ever. You'd never know he'd just done four major events as well as numerous interviews at various locations throughout San Diego County in the space of 24 hours.

*Bill T. Jones: Still/Here With Bill Moyers* (which airs Sunday, January 26 at 7 p.m.) and *Genesis* (Sundays at 7 p.m. through January 19) began, says Moyers, as different, unconnected projects. While *Genesis* brings together people from different religions to discuss the stories in the first book of the Bible, *Still/Here* is a dance documentary.

In hindsight, however, Moyers says the two programs have more in common than he realized. In both, people from very different backgrounds and belief systems come together to discuss life, death, art and what constitutes “the holy.” And when they are done, they find themselves unexpectedly bound together—fellow soulmates for a step or two on the path of life. And this binding together of very different people is the thrust of Moyers's latest take on America's internal life.

One of Moyers's fortes has long been the ability to put words to questions the rest of

us are only vaguely beginning to articulate. He seems to have a knack for spotting spiritual and cultural trends before they enter the national consciousness. The men's movement, healing and the mind, the power of myth, poetry—Moyers created specials on many such phenomena well before they became standard media fare (or grist for late-night comedians).

**W**ith both *Still/Here* and *Genesis*, Moyers has taken an obvious fact—that America is less homogeneous than it has ever been—and faced up to the repercussions—that this cultural clash is making a lot of people very uneasy. In these programs he highlights some techniques that help people deal with this uneasiness at the deepest levels of human consciousness—mortality and religion.

“Some of the angriest people I've seen in America are white, religious conservatives,” says Moyers, “even though they are among the more affluent. I think their anger comes out of seeing a world that used to be dominated by white male Protestants coming to an end. Having to yield the field to people who are not like you is painful, it creates anger. But that's part of the scheme of things.

“I started out in a very homogeneous, culturally conservative, white Baptist church in East Texas. The more I've grown and traveled, the more I realize how heterogeneous and complex the world is. When I ride the subway in New York, I see other riders reading the Hebrew Bible, the Bible in Spanish, reading the Koran. I'd never seen that in Marshall, Texas. There are more Muslims in America now than there are Episcopalians and Presbyterians. It's one of the fastest

growing religions in America.”

And, as is only too obvious from their interactions with each other, many of these diverse religions teach that their way is the one true way; that other ways are wrong, or even evil. This doesn't make living together in harmony an easy task.

“Unless we learn to talk about our deepest religious values with people who are not like us without going for each other's throats, we can't have a successful democracy in this pluralistic society,” says Moyers. “We'll end up like Beirut, Belfast and the Balkans.”

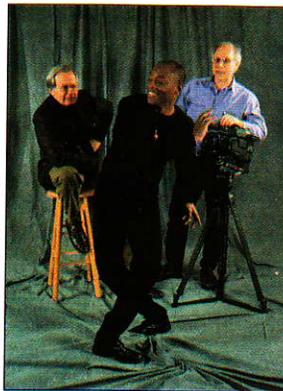
This concept is of more than a passing interest to me. My family became religiously diverse in one fell swoop when I left the fundamentalist fold after college to become an Episcopalian. Since this was basically unthinkable, we have had to make adjustments: at family gatherings we all try to avoid the subject of religion.

But sometimes the topic rears its head—such as on a recent hike when my sister's kid casually wondered aloud why God created ticks and other pests. My son laughed and replied, “God didn't create ticks, they evolved to fill a niche in nature.”

Since most of my family views evolution as a false theory spawned by Satan, suffice it to say, all hell broke loose.

Could a family like mine ever learn to discuss our strongly held differences? And if we, who love each other most of the time, can't discuss our beliefs, is there any hope for the rest of the world?

In Moyers's *Genesis* series, the participants include devout Christians, Jews and Muslims, as well as agnostics. And they all manage to listen and share their differing views of the sacred without blowing their



**Coming to terms with mortality: Moyers, Jones and producer David Grubin.**

tops. No topic is sacrosanct, and it makes for some stimulating discussion. In the flood episode, for example, when it comes to electing a captain for the ark, some in the group vote for Oscar Schindler over Noah. Because, even though Schindler was something of a cad, he had the bravery and decency to risk his life to save his neighbors from the Holocaust, while Noah saved only himself and his family (and quite a few animals).

This is a helpful model Bill Moyers is bringing us, I think, as Moyers talks about the ideas that came out in different episodes. But then I remember the times I've been burned by the Bible (or, rather, my former church's interpretation of the Bible). The years of feeling like a second-class citizen in my church because of Scriptural prohibitions regarding women. And the helplessness I feel when I see my gay friends being demonized in the name of the Holy Scriptures by factions within the religious right. Not that Christians have the corner on this sort of thing—what with Muslim fundamentalists in Algeria shooting teen-age girls in the face for not wearing veils and the Orthodox Jew who assassinated Yitzhak Rabin claiming he did it “for the glory of God.”

By this time, we've arrived at the Marriott, where, according to Moyers's schedule, he is to relax for a half hour before his first event—a book-signing at the KPBS Store of Knowledge. It quickly



**Wrestling with the old, old stories:** With help from Mandy Patinkin and Alfre Woodard, Moyers concludes his tour of *Genesis* this month.

becomes clear that Moyers doesn't really want to relax. With my small tape recorder still in hand, he suggests we continue talking in the lobby. So we do. And here I decide to voice my doubts.

“Don't you think that devoting a 10-part series to the Bible validates it as a holy book, thereby encouraging those who use it for bashing others?”

**M**oyers ponders this. “I've had secular people say, ‘What is Moyers doing, honoring religion by spending 10 hours on it!’ But the truth of the matter is that religion is here. For millions of people, it's a reality that they experience. And these stories have so influenced the Western psyche—for both good and bad—that you have to deal with them.

“So many people have had a negative reaction to the imposition of the Bible as an authoritarian, doctrinaire chastity belt. I don't think we can judge God—or the Bible—by the reading of one faction or tradition.

“I wanted to show that it's possible to talk about your deepest religious beliefs in public without politicizing God or polarizing the community, or proselytizing your neighbor. And I couldn't have asked for a better response. People seem to be eager for this kind of discussion of their deepest values and of what these stories mean today.”

“What is *your* concept of God?” I ask, and I *really* want to know.

The usually erudite journalist has a harder time with this question. He speaks of what God is not—the old guy with a white, flowing beard he believed in as a Baptist child growing up in Texas.

“I've had what I thought were experiences with God,” Moyers says, “but I've had long, dry spells too. I have a hard time putting words around those experiences.”

“What one thinks about God is a lot less important than how one lives one's life. When people tell me they've had an experience with God, and I hear them using the Bible to condemn homosexuals or to suggest that women should be second-class citizens or to divide, I have to question their experience.” Later, he adds, “Sometimes I wish that I had never been fated with the notion of religion or faith. It might have been easier to skate through life without ever having to confront, to wrestle in the middle of the night.”

When he has to leave for the booksigning, Moyers says he doesn't feel that he's answered all of my questions adequately, so he'll write. I say goodbye feeling drained, but stimulated, as if I've just had an in-depth session with a wise priest.

Three days later, I receive a letter in unfamiliar handwriting. I open it to find

seven handwritten pages from Moyers, penned while he was en route to Minneapolis—the next stop on his *Genesis* tour.

“I saw the pain in your face when you talked about your own hard-won skepticism about religion,” he wrote. [So much for my journalistic detachment.] “I've seen that look in countless eyes through the years: people who bear the scars of a frightful trauma visited upon them in the name of God. This, more than the silence that often greets my prayers, is the despair of faith. Religion has a killing side—a long record of atrocities, scapegoating, witch burning, pogroms, holy wars, inquisitions and holocausts. But it has a healing side, too. And the test of all faith, or so it seems to me, is: Does it nurture the healing side or the killing side of our nature?”

“We must beware what we describe as divine.”

Skeptics who are still reading at this point, will, no doubt, find all this somewhat melodramatic and possibly grandiose. But tears are in my eyes as I read.

The crux, Moyers says, is, “How can I know my truth to be THE truth when so many others see truth so differently?”

“I put this question to Huston Smith. He thought a while and answered, ‘We listen. We listen to what others say about their experience of reality as alertly as we hope they will listen to us.’

“As for me: I wrestle, like Jacob, and I'm never quite sure who is the adversary. Sometimes I wrestle with my late brother, who died when he was 39 and I was 32, and there were unresolved differences between us. Sometimes I wrestle with the inner demons of my life—my doubts and disappointments and vulnerabilities. And sometimes I think it must be God I'm grappling with. This is a shape-shifting God, and I wear like a life jacket that cry of Paul in the New Testament: ‘I believe, help Thou my unbelief.’”

*Genesis continues Sundays at 7 p.m., concluding with “Exile” on January 19. “Bill T. Jones: Still/Here With Bill Moyers” airs Sunday, January 26, at 7 p.m. (The complete dance airs January 28 at 1 a.m.)*