Missouri adolescents define spirituality

BY PAIGE VARNER pvarner@post-dispatch.com

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A University of Missouri researcher is exploring adolescents’ notions of spirituality as distinct from religiosity.

So far grad student Anthony James has narrowed down how Missouri adolescents define spirituality:

- To have purpose
- To have the bond of connections, including those to a higher power (typically God), people and nature
- To have a foundation of well-being, including joy, fulfillment, energy and peace
- To have conviction
- To have self-confidence
- To have an impetus for virtue (for example, having motivation to do the right thing and tell the truth)

Then again, James encountered a few young people who said they were spiritual but couldn’t define or describe it.

His next step is to determine how spirituality is related to positive and negative behaviors in youth.

What do you think? How intertwined are spirituality and religiosity? Are adolescents likely to carry their beliefs into adulthood?

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Six trees at MU named state champions

By Emily Smoucha/ June 22, 2010 | 7:17 p.m. CDT

A rough leaf dogwood tree, Latin name Cornus drummondii, grows near the corner of Waters Hall at MU. | Andie Tessler

COLUMBIA — The Mizzou Botanic Garden, which comprises several gardens throughout MU is home to about 6,000 trees. Six of these trees, however, are particularly special.

The Missouri Department of Conservation has recognized these six trees as state champions. In order to qualify as a state-champion tree, the tree must be native to Missouri and the largest known tree of its species in the state.

Arborists Ryan Russell and Will Branch, who work for Campus Facilities Landscape Services, discovered that a blackhaw, a buttonbush, a dogwood, a fringetree, a black maple and a sugarberry at MU were all large enough to qualify as champions.

"It's just taken until now to realize those gems are hidden on campus," said Ann Koenig, an urban forester at the Missouri Department of Conservation.

A yellowwood tree sparked Russell and Branch's interest in looking for state-champion trees. Russell said they knew the yellowwood was close in size to the current champion and wanted to see if MU's was bigger. It fell short, but Russell said he and Branch began looking at some tree species that the state didn't list champions for yet, and then expanded to species that already had champions.

Russell said that because of all the construction that takes place on campus, sometimes trees are removed.
"In my mind, we could help protect some of our trees if we had the status on some of these plants," Russell said.

Koenig said that though people might see these champion trees and think they aren't particularly large, they are still the largest of their kind in the state.

"We tend to associate trees of size with their age, and that's not necessarily true," said Pete Millier, director of the Mizzou Botanic Garden. "You can have the biggest one of the species right here in Columbia ... but it may not be the oldest."

The size of the tree is determined by three measurements: the circumference at a height of 4.5 feet, the height and the crown spread, which is the distance from the tip of one branch across the diameter of the tree to the tip of the opposite branch. The height in feet is added to the circumference in inches, which is then added to one-fourth of the crown spread in order to determine the size.

Boone County is home to 10 of the 110 state champion trees.

Russell said that having the sugarberry named a state champion was the most exciting of the bunch.

"It did have a current champion," he said. "We stole one away."

The former sugarberry champion lives at the Missouri Botanical Garden in St. Louis.

"My first thought was this is a wonderful heritage that we have here on campus," Millier said. "The single most important element in the landscape are the trees because they set the stage for everything that we do."

The Department of Conservation plans to recognize the trees with certificates at 3 p.m. Wednesday in Peace Park.
BEHIND THE STRIPES

DAVE MATTER

Big 12 ADs stick with 10-team model

NO MU MENTION

By DAVE MATTER

The athletic directors from the 10 remaining schools in the Big 12 Conference met Monday and Tuesday in Irving, Texas to discuss the future of the conference. In a prepared statement released by the league office on Tuesday, the Big 12 (minus 2) expressed its commitment to sticking with 10 members.

The discussions primarily involved scheduling and championships; and establishment of a process for seeking input from coaches and other governance groups in these areas. Additionally, the group reviewed a range of ideas about future opportunities, including television and branding.

"There is a great deal of excitement about the future of the Conference," said Commissioner Dan Beebe. "Our member institutions look forward to the continuation of excellent competition and providing outstanding experiences for our student-athletes. The 10-school model is one that is extremely attractive and provides the opportunity for continued long-term success. As I have stated previously, there is no interest in expansion and it was not a consideration at the gathering."
LETTER: There was nothing funny about the MU cotton ball incident, only hatred

By John Zamarripa
June 21, 2010 | 3:58 p.m. CDT

On June 16, the Columbia Missourian printed an opinion column from retired Marine Karl Miller. In that column, Mr. Miller asked why we can no longer laugh at racial differences, much like the way we used to laugh at "All in the Family" and "The Jeffersons."

Mr. Miller did not understand why we could not laugh at the "cotton balls" incident. He felt that everyone at MU was just too sensitive, that it was just a prank, a joke. His quote: "Getting back to the theme of tolerance through humor, the seeming lack of ability to recognize and enjoy amusement across racial, social and cultural lines is a disturbing trend."

This, I guess, could have been funny if it was from one friend to another, what I would call a ribbing or a jab. But these "harmless" cotton balls were left anonymously. They were meant to insult, meant to hurt. They were meant to hate.

These "harmless" cotton balls do nothing but remind us; they remind us of innocent men being hung by an angry mob just for looking at a white woman. They remind us of more recent hate crimes such as a man being dragged behind a pickup truck just because he was black. They remind us that there is still hate and all things are not fair. And that's precisely what the two individuals charged intended. That they were charged with the lesser crime of vandalism speaks volumes for Columbia in general.

Mr. Miller suggests we just get used to that. His quote: "Finally, those who are in the minority, have less influence and differ in ethnicity, race or sexual orientation must realize that there will forever be ignorance and bigotry on both sides of the coin. And though the bias always appears intensified toward minority groups, the vast majority of
today's society is fair-minded and increasingly tolerant. Laughter is still the best medicine."

So, as Mr. Miller advises, the next time someone calls you the N-word or the F-word or any other hateful and racist word, just laugh it off, get used to it — there will always be ignorance.

I say no. I will not give in to ignorance. I will not just accept things as they are. I will work for a better future, a better nation — one that belongs to us all, not to those that just want to keep it for themselves.

One more thing: Mr. Miller, as I understand it, is retired from the Marine Corps. So Mr. Miller, so you must know that you are still subject to the rules and guidelines of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. I do not believe that your recent views would be looked upon favorably, especially those regarding the president of the United States.

Perhaps, in the future, you should choose your words carefully.

*John Zamarripa lives in Columbia.*
Grand Theft Auto Is Good for You? Not So Fast...

Most evidence suggests ill effects from violent video games

By Dara Greenwood

MU mention page 2

If your children are like 99 percent of boys and 94 percent of girls, they play video games. And, if they are like 50 percent of boys and 14 percent of girls, they prefer games with “mature” — read: violent — themes, such as Grand Theft Auto, an urban dystopia of gun fights, car chases, pole dancers and prostitutes, where blood splatters realistically on the “camera lens.” Should you worry whether such a game will warp your children’s minds? A new paper by Cheryl Olson, a public health specialist at Harvard, suggests the answer may be: au contraire.

Olson surveyed children’s reported motivations for video game playing and found that their top rated choices were to have fun, compete well with others, and to be challenged. She then elaborates on the psychological benefits such play might afford, describing how video games facilitate self-expression, role play, creative problem-solving, cognitive mastery, positive social interactions and leadership. Sounds more utopian than dystopian, right?

If only it were that simple. As laudable as it is to debunk negative stereotypes about non-violent game play, it is less laudable to gloss over the negative effects of violent video games. Olson’s rosy spin on violent video games positions her on one side of a heated academic debate with staggering stakes in policy and industry. (See recent salvos here, here and here.)

One contingent warns that violent games reduce empathy and effective anger management skills, and promote aggression. The other contingent rebuts that such research plays into “moral panic,” exaggerates the negative impact and ignores the positive effects of violent game play. Given the sheer popularity of violent video games, their psychological impact is an urgent issue for society, and for the millions of parents whose children dive into virtual worlds for hours every day. Let’s take a closer look at the research in question.

According to Olson’s findings, 28 percent of boys and 5 percent of girls strongly agree that liking “guns and other weapons” motivates their game play. About 25 percent of boys and 11
percent of girls also strongly agree that video games help “get my anger out.” Children citing anger management motivations were more likely to play violent video games because “you can take your anger out on the people in the game.” Grand Theft Auto, the most popular of such games, apparently boasts no violence against children or animals (great!) but does provide “tremendous freedom to commit mayhem,” Olson writes.

Olson then shifts to the purportedly educational function of violent game play. Particularly jarring is an anecdote she cites describing how Grand Theft Auto hones problem-solving skills: a young boy “learned that a quick way to find passengers was to run over pedestrians and wait for them to get up; they would then climb into his cab.”

Also troubling is the speculation that because play-fighting is one way boys negotiate intimacy with girls, violent game play may “have a role in promoting healthy boy-girl friendships.” I don’t think you have to be a feminist social psychologist to imagine that punching half-dressed prostitutes to steal their money does little to prepare young boys for healthy relationships with women. Even brief exposure to these images increases tolerance for sexual harassment among men, according to a 2008 study led by psychologist Karen Dill of Fielding Graduate University.

To be fair, Olson briefly cites research suggesting that game features such as "opportunities for competence and mastery" trump violence in predicting enjoyment. And she devotes one paragraph to cautioning that such games trade on stereotypes of minorities and women. Finally, in sharp contrast to her thesis, Olson suggests that parents monitor children’s game play for “negative effects such as increased anger, irritability, or aggression.” Interesting. If the games facilitate healthy development, allow pre-teens to “purge negative feelings” and to inhabit the role of the bad guy while bonding and competing with their peers, why should we worry?

Here’s a glimpse at the research that Olson doesn’t talk about.

The belief that behaving aggressively gets aggressive urges “out” may persist as lay theory but it has long been discredited by experimental research. A 2001 review by social psychologists Craig Anderson and Brad Bushman revealed that playing violent video games increases aggressive behaviors, feelings, and physiological arousal and decreases prosocial behavior. Further, identifying with a game character can inspire learning, but when that character is violent, "wishful identification" may increase post-game aggression, according to a 2007 study led by psychologist Elly Konijn at VU University Amsterdam. Also, a 1995 study by Brad Bushman of Iowa State University suggests that aggressive outcomes of violent game play are magnified in people who already have aggressive tendencies. Thus, it may be exactly those who chronically use video games as an (inappropriate) anger management tool who are most vulnerable to its negative effects.

Olson notes that young adults may benefit from playing survival and horror games “over and over until the frightening content has been mastered,” but such mastery may come at a price. Exposure to violent video games can desensitize people to violence. In 2006, Bruce Bartholow, a psychologist at the University of Missouri, and colleagues reported that chronic violent game players show less activation of a particular brain wave in response to violent images than non-violent players do, indicating that they feel less aversion. And this lower reactivity...
predicted increased aggressive behavior in a subsequent competitive task.

Brain waves and lab games can feel distant from real life, so let’s follow Brad Bushman and Craig Anderson to the movies. They wanted to determine whether people leaving a violent film might be less likely to help a young woman who had dropped her crutches (a confederate of the researchers) than those leaving a non-violent film. Guess which crowd took significantly longer to help the “injured” young woman? Yup: the violent film crowd.

Are patrons of violent films simply less sensitive than patrons of non-violent films? Bushman and Anderson accounted for this explanation by staging the crutch routine as people were entering and exiting the film. No differences emerged as a function of which movie people were headed to see. Watching violence dilutes our ability to respond empathically to others’ pain.

No media psychologists worth their salt would conclude that violent video games will turn your children into gun-toting sociopaths. Instead, violent media may affect us in countless subtle ways, increasing hostility and apathy to those around us. Rather than straining to rehabilitate an antisocial genre, why not go in search of non-violent but equally exciting, challenging, and enjoyable games? Let the multi-billion dollar gaming industry respond to social pressure and create non-sexist, non-racist, non-violent games that confer as many developmental benefits as violent games apparently do.