



Three Spiritual Journeys

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Carol Carlson

In the beginning . . . I was Catholic, taught by Benedictine nuns who became role models for me, models of women committed to teaching and to social justice. I'd like to spend a little time with you this morning, introducing you to the guides, the mentors, and the authors who inspired me on my spiritual journey.

Sister Ruth Yost taught a unit on "Prejudice" in my freshman religion class at Villa Madonna Academy. About a week or two into the unit, she said, "The true test of whether or not you are prejudiced is to think of what your reaction would be if your daughter came home and told you she was planning to marry a black man." I was, frankly, stunned. I flashed back to statements made in *my* family—my cousin Susan telling me in second grade that "colored people smelled like bacon;" my Uncle George saying "Them briars'll keep them n_____s out of Norwood;" my grandmother saying that there was nothing wrong with colored people, but marrying between blacks and whites was "so hard on their children." Sister Ruth had rocked my world. Later that year I volunteered to tutor on Saturdays in Over the Rhine where I first learned that service and spirituality were one and the same for me.

Sister Petra Quinlan was my English teacher in senior year. She challenged us to read and write about a wide variety of topics. I read a little book called *Mr. Blue* about a strange man who found inspiration in the city by retreating to a rooftop. I devoured the autobiography of Thomas Merton, *The Seven-Storey Mountain*, and wrote a term paper later that year entitled "Contemplation according to Thomas Merton." I learned from this experience that there was more to spirituality than service. I became a Benedictine nun at age 17. Nuns were in the air that year, literally, as Sally Field appeared on TV as *The Flying Nun*, and Julie Andrews glided over the Austrian

Alps in *The Sound of Music*. My experience was very different from that of these media nuns, however. I had to be quiet for all but an hour and a half a day! St. Benedict, it seemed, had given us the motto, *Ora et Labora*, pray and work. I was supposed to learn how to meditate and commune with God while mangling sheets, mopping floors, and dusting furniture. Meditation was always hard for me. We got up at 5:00 each morning and prayed until about 5:45 when we were supposed to meditate until 6:00. The best I could do was walk outside and watch a sunrise or a bird in flight. I knew that was not *real* meditation, according to my novice mistress, but it calmed me like Mr. Blue's rooftop.

During the summer of 1965, still in the convent, I read *Black Like Me* by John Howard Griffin, a white researcher who had traveled through the South in the fall of 1959 as a black man. His recounting of the hate stares directed at him, the refusal of whites to give him simple necessities, such as the use of an outhouse or a drink of water, filled me with outrage and a passion to make things right between the races. Someone managed to smuggle into the convent issues of *The National Catholic Reporter*, an underground newspaper that carried accounts of Martin Luther King's protest marches, in which nuns and priests were participating. Since I was not yet in final vows, I was unable to leave the convent and travel, but I longed to be there. My "monkey brain" was filled with images of children being hosed down by police as I tried to meditate, and I knew I would never reach contemplation as Thomas Merton described it.

I left the convent in 1969, and I left the Catholic Church five years later. One day on the campus of Xavier University I had an unusual moment of clarity. I did not feel like going to Mass at Bellarmine Chapel, the only place I could stand to attend after leaving the convent. I thought, how could God have me burn in hell for missing Mass on Sunday? And do I want to be associated with a church that would teach such a thing? I knew that I did not, and that was that.

Two years later, at the age of thirty, I moved to Columbia, South Carolina, to work in a Teacher Corps Project designed to educate teachers in ways to teach in rural desegregated schools. I loved this work. I felt that my life up to this point had prepared me for this work. This was my spiritual destiny.

I met Regina Moody, a friend who asked me to come to the Unitarian Fellowship in Columbia, and I did. I worked with the teen group, and through that experience learned about the Sanctuary Movement. I led the Fellowship in their decision to fund Jubilee Partners, a group who served as a sanctuary for Salvadoran refugees.

This same friend gave me a copy of Ernest Becker's *Denial of Death*. Becker logically and analytically argues that, despite the fact that science has supplanted religion in the modern era, humans still experience the urge to heroism. This book made it possible for me to abandon my belief in God. I don't live my life any differently because I don't believe in God. I am grateful for the significant people in my life who are believers, but the urge I feel to change the status of race relations comes from the creative synthesis I have made of many disparate strands that have woven themselves together in my spirit.

I treasure this beloved community. I am at peace here in my role as leader of social justice endeavors. I believe that my spirituality lies in service to you and to the people who still need our advocacy. And, yes, occasionally I still try to meditate.

Ralph Jacob

My name is Ralph Jacob and I have been a member of this Church for over 25 years. But, like many of you, I believe I have been a Unitarian most of my life – I just didn't know it. I think this realization began in my adolescent years when girls and sports and cars were quickly sweeping aside any allegiance to our local Methodist Church – affectionately named the Church of the Cross. I must have been 16 or 17 at the time and I was in love with either Kathy Bolt or Gayle Vogler or Audrey Morrow, although I was having a little flirtation with Marcia Fenyves during my hall monitor periods. Actually, it sounds a lot more exciting than it really was but adolescent romance can get complicated at times.

It was bad enough trying to juggle my emerging social life and maintain good grades at the same time, but my parents were concerned that I was no longer attending church on a regular basis. My mother's insistence on my attending church was being met with an ever-growing litany of teenage excuses. Finally in exasperation, my mother announced she was inviting the minister over to try to talk some sense into me.

When he arrived, we had a cordial visit filled with questions of faith and piety. I, of course, responded to each entreaty with enough smart-aleck questions of my own that the minister finally threw up his hands in frustration and announced that my beliefs seemed to be headed in another direction. From then on, attendance at the Church of the Cross was no longer required.

Two years later I was headed to Denison University to study math and physics and fraternity life and the world of opportunities seemed to lay at my feet. One of my first freshman classes was a course in Philosophy and Religion, fortunately taught in

that order. By the time we had begun to study the Bible in the second semester, we had already investigated Renes Descartes, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche & many others and my mind was expanding with new-found exhilaration. Christianity was still a beautiful message but now it was challenged by scholastic inquiry. The very existence of God was now in question as I struggled to find my eternal footing.

About this same time, my studies in physics were leading me to the enigmatic quantum world where nothing seems fixed or certain. Our search for the so-called “building blocks” of matter led us to atomic particles that were as elusive as a sorority girl and acting more like waves than tiny billiard balls. A beam of electrons aimed at diffraction slits will create overlapping patterns that look more like waves than bullet holes. But at the same time, beams of light aimed at metallic surfaces were producing electrons from the interactions, a phenomenon explained by Einstein as light quanta. So what was going on? Was light a wave or a particle? After four difficult years, it seemed that I graduated from college with more questions than answers. (I shouldn’t be too hard on myself – after nearly 100 years physicists are still struggling with that one.)

But this bewildering journey has never stopped. I returned to school to study architecture, which is a little more concrete and can produce a steady income. It was at this time here in Cincinnati, that I met the love of my life, my wife Sherrey. When we adopted our two children, Erin & Ryan, our family was complete and I thought life had begun to make some sense. I should have known better! Fortunately, it was at this same time that we found the incredible family that is First Church because our family journey began to look suspiciously like Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle! Thankfully, the Miltners, the Kahles, the Wones, the Ragsdales, the Riders, the Lloyds, the Oldens and so many others of you wonderful people were here to share the rocky ride of teenage adolescence with our family.

Today, I embrace the uncertainty that I first addressed at the young age of 16. The world seemed so simple back then – but, of course, it never was. My physics background has taught me that nothing, even on the most elementary level, is fixed. When you look at any given thing – such as your own hand – closely enough, you will find nothing there that can be called a “building block”. In fact, there is nothing there except pure energy!

Now I don’t know about you, but for me, this was a startling thought – especially to my Western mindset. But my journey has also led me to the Eastern world of the Tao, where the dynamic tension of Yin and Yang are very satisfactory descriptions of nuclear and quantum physics. What a surprising place to find clarity for math and

physics! And yet it should not be. It is just a different perspective – and for me a more complete one.

So why have I labored on these anecdotes from my past? It is because they are nothing than a metaphor for the rest of life – and I have found that living a life filled with questions rather than answers is more satisfying to me than I ever thought it would be. Because now, nothing is written and everything is possible! And I can't tell you what a wonderful feeling it is to share this incredible journey with all of you - my First Church Family!

May you all find the questions to your answers.

Lisa Vaughn

So I was asked to speak about my spiritual journey about one week after I became a member here which first made me think, wow, these Unitarians don't waste any time! Second, I went into a full blown panic thinking about what in the world I would say about my spiritual journey. But then I realized that speaking to you today actually resembles other sentinel life events that have been simultaneously humbling, good for my "growth", and a great honor.

Although there are many examples that I could point to, a couple remain imprinted. I was raised in a Methodist church in Tennessee. Once as a pre-teen, I was asked to sing in church. And at the top of my lungs, I belted out "You Light Up My Life" which I got away with because I guess the church thought I was singing the song to or about God... I sang my heart out that day not because I was good but because my parents always dreamed of me singing in church (I think for my dad it was more like Loretta Lynn and *Coal Miner's Daughter* and for the church it was more like Amy Grant or a church hymn rather than Debbie Boone and "You Light Up My Life").

The second event was when I graduated from college with no panty hose, hairy legs (thought I was a hippie) and in clogs (which I still like to wear). My mom cried not because she was proud of me or happy for me but because she was embarrassed that I would go to my college graduation so improperly dressed!

Pema Chodron says that "embarking on the spiritual journey is like getting into a very small boat and setting out on the ocean to search for unknown lands. With wholehearted practice comes inspiration, but sooner or later we also encounter fear. For all we know, when we get to the horizon, we are going to drop off the edge of the world. Like all explorers, we are drawn to discover what's waiting out there without

knowing yet if we have the courage to face it” (Pema Chodron from *When Things Fall Apart*)

What I realized when thinking over and over again about what in the world am I supposed to say about my spiritual journey with only one week of membership under my belt is that once again here I am in a situation where my parents would be simultaneously so proud that I’d been asked to speak in church and yet shaking their heads in disbelief that once again it is a further demonstration of what they realized about me when I came out of the womb --- that I was and continue to be a little too liberated, mouthy, fairly irreverent, boldly determined, and curious - which some might call stubborn or bull-headed - and why can’t I just be “normal.” With all this as a caveat, I will nevertheless share a little about my journey thus far.

So initially in my small boat, in this discovery process, what I learned about spirituality/religion growing up:

1. You should only talk to poor minority families at Xmas since our church would give Xmas gifts and these same families shouldn’t actually come to the church on Sundays
2. Buddhists go to hell, which I learned when I very curiously ask my Sunday school teacher why we didn’t have Buddhists at our church
3. If Mary can, then it is possible to be pregnant from immaculate conception at age 11 which warranted the purchase of a pregnancy test
4. Preacher’s kids have the best and wildest parties
5. God likes women to wear panty hose to important events
6. Sometimes preachers have unsavory magazines that they keep in their dresser drawers (what I learned while attending the wild parties)
7. Religion always involves singing even you are terrible at it

I carried all this with me to young adulthood when I began militantly shopping for religion. Thank goodness I didn’t end up in a cult of some sort because I really made sure that I visited every kind of religious institution I could --- didn’t wear panty hose to any of them and the weirder the name the better. This is when I first attended a UU church, and compared to my childhood church, it became very clear that along with my childhood preacher, I too would now be going to hell because of the paganesque things being chanted in a circle. This religious exploration continued to other lands and health-related venues with acupuncturists, homeopaths, healers, witches, chakra whirlers, shamans. So armed with experiences of toes lit on fire, kundalini awakenings, chakras balanced and whirling appropriately, Egyptian goddesses detoxifying who knows what, meridians functioning, heat taken out of all parts of my body, I figured I surely had the courage to journey forward!!

In more recent years, I have settled in a bit more --- I still don't wear panty hose, still love my clogs, I don't really sing but just sort of mouth the words, and I do read about Buddhist philosophy and find comfort in the ideas. I love the idea of meditating but have only gotten as far as reading about it rather than doing it! (kinda the antithesis but I keep thinking maybe meditation will stick through osmosis!)

I wholeheartedly believe that there is some something or force in the universe... maybe God, maybe energy.. .

I also believe that we are all intimately connected and at the end of the day we are all human beings who want to be loved, supported and accepted.

Be present --- life can be both extremely difficult and amazingly wonderful --- all we can do is breathe and know that we aren't alone and that this too shall pass.

I can learn something important from every person and every situation and every event (like speaking to you here today) has at least two sides and usually many more.

I think life is short and fragile and we should relax more and enjoy more.

So I guess you could say I'm still exploring, as Pema Chodron describes, in my very small boat --- which has taken me here to First Unitarian. I feel like I've found a community where I can just be myself with all of my beliefs and experiences and just as I am: no panty hose and I don't worry about going to hell anymore because I figure I'll be in good company if that happens!