



Spiritual Journeys

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My Spiritual Journey

Dan Schneider

My ideas about what is spiritual have changed over time, and many experiences have influenced my spirituality. Becoming a Unitarian Universalist could never have been anticipated by me or by anyone who knew me for most of my life. But here I am, and I know this is where I belong. As for being co-chair of our social justice committee, a great deal of what has happened in my life has prepared me for that role, and I have throughout most of my life connected a concern with social justice with being spiritual.

I grew up on a small farm in Shelby County, 100 miles north of Cincinnati. My hometown was the small village of Kettlersville, and that is where our family attended church faithfully every Sunday. I believe one of my strongest qualities is that I take my commitments seriously. I have heard a number of members of this church discuss their spiritual journeys, and many have said they were religious skeptics from an early age. That was definitely not true of me. My first inclination is normally to believe and accept what I am told by people in positions of authority, and that is a major reason it took me so long to become a Unitarian Universalist. My life story is a story of a gradual process of learning to question those established truths that are accepted by most people in our society, and related to that process of learning to question established truths has been the process of questioning injustice in the United States and in the world.

My church home as a child and adolescent was the Immanuel United Church of Christ, a conservative congregation. My dad had wanted to be a minister but was not able to go to college because he could not come up with enough money to pay for college. Later in life, around the time he retired from farming, Dad became a lay minister, finally achieving his dream. As a lay minister, he especially enjoyed visiting those in prison, just as the Bible said he should.

My upbringing influenced me to look at life and society differently from others. There was the heritage of Rumley, a town that no longer exists except in the memory of a few. I very well recall, as though it happened yesterday, comments by my parents after I came home asking about racially derogatory terms I heard from other children. My parents told me firmly that “our family does not use that kind of language.” I was told the story of Rumley, a community of African-Americans that was established before the Civil War for freed slaves, and that existed one mile from our farm until early in the twentieth century. I learned that when my grandfather was born in 1884, the woman who gave him his first bath was an African-American neighbor. I was told that when my great-grandmother knew she was about to die of cancer in 1909, she was especially unhappy because she knew she would be buried in the white people’s cemetery rather than in the cemetery where her friends would be buried. Rumley is a part of my family’s heritage. That heritage combined with the influence of the civil rights movement of the sixties led me to believe in the principle of the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

My Vietnam experience influenced me to challenge the status quo. After graduating from Wittenberg University with a degree in history, I was drafted into the Army and served more than a year in Vietnam. Fortunately, I qualified for clerical jobs and was not involved in combat. However, like many of my generation, I was influenced by the Vietnam experience. It was clear to me that the war was unnecessary and immoral.

After the army, I ended up in graduate school in history at Ohio State University, where I developed an interest in the connection between Christianity and social justice. My master’s thesis was on the Social Gospel, a Christian social reform movement that addressed the inequalities caused by nineteenth century urbanization and industrialization, and I was enrolled in a PhD program.

An event in 1976 changed my life and made it possible for me to become a Unitarian Universalist 30 years later. I met and fell in love with Janet, and we were married the next year. We met and were married at the University Lutheran Chapel in Columbus. What I did not fully realize at the time was just how skeptical about religion Janet is, but she has definitely influenced me. I knew she had not been attending church for a while, despite being raised in a conservative Lutheran home, and she told me she went to the chapel that day in April 1976 primarily to find a husband.

After I met Janet, I dropped out of graduate school because there appeared to be few opportunities for PhD’s in history. We moved to Cincinnati, where Janet was offered a teaching job with the Cincinnati Public Schools, and I found a job in retail management. We joined a Lutheran church and attended every Sunday, and we raised both of our sons to be Lutherans. We concentrated on our new home and our new family and spent little time in questioning our religion. We felt a sense of loyalty toward Lutheranism because we met and were married at a Lutheran church. As I said, I take my commitments seriously and my first inclination is to accept things. The questioning came gradually and came later.

In 1983, I began working for Jobs for Cincinnati Graduates, a school-to-work program for seniors in the Cincinnati Public Schools. I was able to transition from intellectualizing about social justice to practicing it. I worked seven years directly with students and later became a supervisor and eventually the director. Working for Jobs for Cincinnati Graduates allowed

me to combine my passion for helping others with my educational and organizational skills. I found a true vocation where I could make a difference in the lives of students.

In 1999, I moved to my current position at Clermont College. I serve as director of two federally funded programs in which we work with low-income middle and high school students whose parents have not graduated from college and help them to enter and succeed in college. This job allows me to fully realize my calling to promote social justice in a practical way. We work with students who remind me of myself when I was the first member of my family to go to college. I also was elected by my peers to serve a term as the president of our state professional association. As a leader in the association, I advocated with legislators for educational opportunity for low-income students and became a social justice advocate.

For almost five years, Janet and I have been teaching English as a second language. Our work with the immigrants whom we teach has been a labor of love and a spiritual experience. We admire our students' work ethic and their determination to succeed in a strange place. We believe we are helping them to contribute to a better Cincinnati and to a better United States.

In 2002, I combined an interest in singing with my interest in social justice by joining the Martin Luther King Chorale, a multi-racial, multi-faith choir that sings every year at the Martin Luther King Day celebration in Cincinnati. Being a part of this choir has been an inspirational and spiritual experience, not only singing at Music Hall but also singing with and for prisoners at the Warren Correctional Institution. For a couple years, Janet sang in the choir also. One day, we heard remarks from a young minister who really impressed us, the Reverend Sharon Dittmar. Janet asked me what kind of church Sharon represented. I replied, "Unitarian," Janet asked, "what's that?" and so I investigated. We were becoming unhappy with our church home, which seemed to us to be very conservative and not very welcoming. We were looking for a place where we could feel we belonged. Over the years, I had been studying Christianity and other religions from an historical perspective and was therefore preparing to accept the questioning spirit of Unitarian Universalism. We completed an online religious survey and realized that we were both liberal in our beliefs. In August of 2006, we visited this church for the first time, and we have been a part of this community ever since, even though we did not officially join until the spring of last year.

When Carol Carlson told me she was moving and asked me to consider being a social justice chair, I knew I had to do it. Now that I am getting close to retirement, I want to continue to be productive in ways that will benefit others as individuals and as parts of a national and world society.

Over my life, I believe I have kept faith with the principles I have learned from my parents and from my experiences. In defining spirituality, I think of the Latin root word "spiritus," meaning breath of life. I feel most spiritual when I feel within me the breath or spirit of life, and I feel that spirit when I am serving others or serving the greater good. I believe I am able to carry out as a member of this church the principles of justice, equity, and compassion, which for me are at the heart of spirituality.

My Spiritual Journey **Martha Stephens**

Thanks for having me to speak, but let me say that as some of you know, I like to write, but I'm not a good speaker. You also know, I expect that it's hard to say NO to el cubano, Jorge Vila (sitting beside us on the stage) if he asks you to do something -- so here I am. (Laughter.)

For many years I did not speak to audiences at all, and people wonder at this because they say, *You're not shy, you're out there on the streets, you carry the banners, you were out with Occupy*, and yes, I was, but I'm also subject to trauma. So please let me explain.

You know from my vowels and consonants that I grew up in the South. I grew up in Waycross, Georgia, and when I graduated from the seventh grade, I made the graduation address. I had a copy of my speech memorized, but I had a paper with me, and when I had spoken almost my whole little exposition, I decided to look at my closing remarks. I held up my paper in front of me -- and I could not read a word on it! The footlights shone through my paper. I walked back a little, and forward a little, but the lights shone through . . . I could not read a word.

On the front row that day was a grandmotherly person, and she began to laugh out loud at my plight. She thought it was the funniest thing she'd ever seen, and after that, my voice disappeared. I could not get my breath, and finally I tried to mumble something and walked off the stage; and for many years afterwards I felt I could not speak to audiences at all. Other writers, for instance, read their stories, but I did not. Even before new classes at U. C., I was always sure to provide students, on the first day with them, a paper they could look at instead of me.

So try not to stare today. (Laughter.) It sometimes seems funny what happened to me at Williams Heights Elementary School and what a scare it gave me, but I suppose that's the tragi-comedy of life we all suffer.

Okay! Waycross, Georgia, is piney woods country on the coastal plain, not far from Jacksonville, Florida. My mother took me and my two sisters to the Disciples of Christ there, and I loved the music, I loved the Broadman Hymnal, and two of the novels I've written have titles from songs we sang in that hymnal. Eventually, my mother went to work as a secretary so I could go to college, and when I got there and learned about other faiths, I quickly became a Unitarian, so to speak, a free thinker, one could say. I said, *My gosh, all these Christian miracles and stories -- why, it's all a fairy tale.*

Still, I will say that in the past ten years, after my retirement from U. C., I have spent many winters in New Mexico with a daughter and granddaughter there. They live in Cincinnati now, my granddaughter's here today, but I still go back to Las Cruces for short periods, and I go to the First Christian Church there, a warm-hearted, quite progressive little church I just happened onto some years ago now -- my own childhood church, you know. I go to a women's group there with women who see the world pretty much as I do. In fact, I sometimes say that the main difference between that little church and this one may be the timing of the potlucks! But not quite! (Laughter.)

Four or five years ago, since I found myself again in Cincinnati for most of the year, I felt I wanted a church here; I had never had one. First Unitarian was close by, and I had come to like the Unitarian idea, so here we are. I value the work for social justice in this church. You joined us at the Anna Louise rallies -- quite a few UU's turned up for those. You walk for our immigrant friends and in the Gay Pride parades. You host homeless families, tutor school kids, work the food pantry. I've done some of these things with you. That's what a church should be, it seems to me -- an engine for justice in the world. If things get any worse in this country, with more and more people who can't make it, don't even have a place to live, I won't be surprised if there's a mass movement in the streets. But maybe not quite in my lifetime -- I don't know.

Well, I'd like to say something about the family I grew up with, which may have something to do with my interest in peace and justice. My mother grew up in Jacksonville, Florida. She had four siblings, and three of them were seriously retarded. Her mother was not entirely normal either, "not quite right," as the saying went in those days. She could not read and write. Somewhere along the way, my mother's father divorced her mother, took a new wife, and had a child by *her*. He continued, though -- this grandfather of mine -- to care for both these families. He bought two small cottages side by side on a dirt street in what was called "the white slums of Jacksonville," and supported the whole tribe with his job at a fertilizer plant. Each morning he stepped across one weedy back yard to the other, with his basin and his razor, to shave the heavy beards of his two afflicted sons.

When my mother was a girl, she was rescued from this life by a grandmother in Waycross, Georgia. This grandmother ran a dairy farm, and at the dairy there was a small concession where you could buy ice cream and milk shakes. My father drove what was called "a drink truck." He delivered soft drinks to the dairy shop, and it was there that he met my mother and married her.

Over the years of her married life in Waycross, my mother would go back from time to time to the two small cottages in Jacksonville. She went to clean up her mother's little house and help her take care of things. When my sister and I were quite young, she would take us with her. We would drive to Jacksonville on a Saturday and spend the day. What we saw and did there I'm not likely ever to forget. I remember a bathroom with no door. An old sheet had been hung up across the threshold. There was hardly a chair you could actually sit in. My

mother would bring supplies for cleaning the stove, and she would weep for the pity of it -- that no one ever cleaned this stove but her. Our afflicted uncles and aunt seemed to like us very much, so we liked them, and could sometimes understand their speech.

Now my grandmother was a cheerful and effusive person. She seemed to live on cigarettes and coca-cola and the gossip of the street, and as soon as we arrived, she would trip off down the block to buy us some Moon Pies and Orange Crush! Back in the house she would run into the back room and take a big bowl off an old shifferobe in there, singing, "Look at *this* -- what Grandma has!" We would be glad to see this bowl, because she would empty its contents right there on the floor, and it would be full of tiny gems and gew-gaws, broken bits of jewelry, and funny little dimestore figurines. We would line them all up in a grand design!

In Waycross my mother became the clerk of the Juvenile Court in an old frame building downtown, and I remember, for instance, her feelings about the poor despairing grandmas who would come up to talk with her about unruly grandchildren. Certain youngsters had to be removed from the homes they were in, and others had *not* to be removed -- not all that different today, perhaps, from Family and Children Services in the city of Cincinnati.

There's much more to tell about this book, about my nervous, fidgety little father, for instance, but above all, I loved having the chance to make this dramatic reconstruction of the life of my mother. I feel she was a survivor, and that an action of hers at the end of the story, with regard to the crippled children of Jacksonville, will help the reader feel that, too, and know, as I do, that strange and severe circumstances do not necessarily defeat us.

But people ask me, *Who ARE these children of the world you write about?* for the book is titled *Children of the World*. It refers, of course, to the afflicted children of Jacksonville, but also, I hope, to all us children, no matter how grown-up we may be. At the front of the book are the words of the old song "Jesus Loves the Little Children," which is sung within the story that follows. Some of you will know this song, but perhaps I can sing it.

Jesus loves the little children
All the children of the world.
Red and yellow, black and white,
They are precious in his sight,
Jesus loves the little children of the world.

But below this verse at the front of the book is another line from an unknown source: "But didn't you know there *is* no Jesus . . . and no one to save the children of the world?"

But *us*. I would say.

But us!

