

Spiritual Window Shopping

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I find myself very anxious to let you know **who I am**, in the hope that our relationships will become intimate quickly, and that together we can do good work. To that end, I have chosen to share with you the story of my own faith journey. To say that it is in progress is such an understatement that it hardly needs to be mentioned. This is what is true for me today. It may not be fully true in a few weeks.

I have been told by my former congregations that sharing my own journey was a worthy use of time in the pulpit. I am actually a bit uneasy about it. Who am I that my story will be of any interest or help to you? My theoretical, **Universalist** answer is that it does matter, profoundly, as we are created from one another's stories. Who I am in the world is inexorably linked to who you are. And how I travel, the pilgrimages to which I commit myself, inevitably and deeply affect the passages of those I journey with, **and** those that I may never know in any direct way. We are all linked together in a great system of being, that some refer to as God.

I usually identify as a humanist and have generally avoided *God* language because it has such wide possibilities of meaning, and I find stopping to point to what **I** mean has been cumbersome and slippery. Still, may the record show that I am not opposed to *God*, or even *God* language, just frustrated by the way we as humans struggle to capture the unnamable in language, and then think that what we have said can even begin to touch the wholeness of things. It always frustrates me when metaphor is mutated into concrete.

The truth is also that I am still immature about *God*. If I use that word, often I think of an old and often vengeful man. After all of these years. After seminary training at what must be one of the finest schools in the world, Starr King, I have not freed the word "God" from bondage. Traditional *God* language can drop me right back into that limited, rigid image. I should also tell you, that I am working internally on my relationship to this kind of language. I don't ever want to make decision solely out of my hurt places. Or fear. I am committed to

continuing to grow, and it could lead to a reclaiming of some of these ideas that feel usurped from me and are surrounded by bruised and still tender places.

There is a parallel conversation in my head about flying the flag. I grew up in Atlanta but my folks were from New England. Think of those Norman Rockwell villages of white houses on village streets, flags flying. That was my parents' home. And we continued to fly the flag on all national holidays. The night before, my Dad and I would go out on the grass and look for the end of the pipe that would hold the flag pole. It was often nearly buried under grass. If I found it first, I was really proud. Then the next morning, dew on the lawn, we would go out and raise the flag.

Now, flying a flag makes me uncomfortable. It suggests to many people that I am in favor of the war in Iraq or the military budget or the current administration. I am not. I'll have get an earth flag to fly instead.

So, I began life in a very high Episcopal church. I was born before almost anyone had a television. My children say that I was born before color. I think perhaps that is a little too far back. Church *was* what held the patterns of life. Fish or macaroni-and-cheese on Fridays, penitent and somber seasons before major celebrations, amazingly rich altar decorations of predictable colors. If it was green, we were in Trinity. Red, Pentecost. This marking of sacred time and the ritual observances were things I could lean into and find order and beauty. I loved the high altar and the incense and the choir singing and the vestments. It was lovely.

But as I entered early adolescence, I realized that I was not a true believer. Here is the nugget that forced me to re-evaluate the church's teaching. As I understood the theology, it said that without the church, we are not enough. That we are born in sin and that it is an uphill road to wholeness. In fact, we can never get there from here except by gifts of grace. Now, I put those teachings onto my perceptions of my mother. She was not a saintly woman, but she tried every day of her life to do the right thing. She had a temper, and she yelled rather a lot. I was evidently talented at pushing her over that edge. But her commitment was to doing good works, and telling the truth and dealing with others with fairness. How dare the church tell me that my mother was not "trailing streams of glory" . . . even with all

of her imperfections and all the times she was mad at me. How dare the church say that she was not enough.

My father was sick most of my early life; he could not work, and Mom worked as a nurse at night so that I would have a Mom at home while I was awake. As she understood it, suffering was an intended part of life. This is the way she was able to stand all of her disappointments. Now I am enough of a Buddhist to understand that there is suffering in our lives. And, I know that I suffer as a result of my wrongdoings. But, I *do not* believe that the point of human life is to suffer. This is a huge theological distinction. I do not believe in sin offerings. I do not believe in a God who would send his child to suffer and to die for my salvation. I do not believe that suffering buys us anything in and of itself. It is not a good thing, though of course it is interwoven in all of our lives and there are profound things to be learned from the obstacles on our path. It is the ennobling of suffering for its own sake that makes me mad. That, and my respect for my mother's daily and most worthy efforts, led me to leave the church. What a paradox. My mother loved the church and because of my admiration for her, I left the church and caused her grief.

What followed were about ten years of wandering about and not finding a place where I fit. I thought at first that I could find a creed that I could believe in. Now I believe that if I am attentive to life, my beliefs will continue to change. I wanted to find a place where my questions were welcomed and my great earnestness about the questions themselves was respected. I wish I could report that it was soon after that I found the Unitarians or the Universalists, but that was still twenty-five years away.

What I did was fall in love with a Jew. I loved him and his family and his community and I was happy to raise our children within Judaism, if I could do so without lying about who I was. I never converted, but I have been a participant in Jewish community for the last thirty years and counting. I found in the synagogue many people who were less interested in theology than they were in community. *This* was something I could fit into. "Gastronomical Jews" as the saying goes. "Bagelly Jews" as Annie Lamont calls them. I made a nice Oneg Shabbat after Friday night services, that's like cookies for coffee hour, and I drove endless carpools of children to Hebrew school, and *every* time I said the Shehekienu I cried. The

rabbi understood that this was important to me, that in spite of my lack of conversion, my holding of Jewish traditions was solemn.

Here is the prayer that is said at every Bar or Bat Mitzvah, or on Friday night when the Sabbath Queen arrives, or any other happy occasion:

(In Hebrew) she hek y anu. Ve key aman u, Vhi hig g ia nu, Laz man, Hah zeh

Here is my holding of the prayer:

Out of great mystery we are brought forth.
Here, together in this moment we are sustained,
And, sometimes, we come together in a season of joy. Amen

I love the festivals and the holidays. I love the marking of sacred time and honoring tradition. I love cooking traditional foods and celebrating with loved ones. And I love the people who welcomed me.

I did not love the imagery of a male God. I did not love the emphasis on our failure to obey the law. I did not love the Scriptures that portrayed a vengeful and punishing God. I railed against the omission of women and the lack of women rabbis . . . of course there were precious few women in any kind of ministry or positions of authority in those days. These things are no longer true in all forms of Judaism, certainly not the observances of "Jewish Renewal." If I had found Jewish Renewal thirty years ago, this story might lead down a very different path.

I have lived in times of change. I observed as a young woman how many capable and strong women learned to use their power in covert and destructive ways when their true voices were silenced. Young women now have so much more support for bearing all of their gifts to the world.

Living within Jewish community, I was still a spiritual seeker even if I did not always recognize that that was the name for my longing.

I am indebted to Sufism, which brought me to some clarity. It was through Rumi that I learned to look for what I love and to surrender my life to it. To follow passion even when I have had no idea of where it will lead. "Let the beauty that you love, be what you do." That line led me to a surrender to the earthquake, the whirlwind. Eventually, I let that line change my entire life. I went from owning a small real estate corporation to living in an RV and literally wandering for eighteen months before arriving at Starr King. As the saying goes, "All who wander are not lost."

I encountered Hinduism. Flower pujas, kirtan singing and Kundalini Yoga. And the great pantheon of lesser deities: Krishna, Vishnu, Shiva. Many rich metaphorical aspects of the mystery, but most special to me is Ma Kali, the great mother, the dark and fierce creator and destroyer in one. No pale, soft, frail lady is she, but the most awesome, powerful, generative image of the female divine. Through Kali, I began to see that all of me is required. The idiosyncrasies and the oddities, the fierceness of righteous anger. Everything. Even howling despair is acceptable. It is all a true part of me. My job is to be present in each moment to what is true for me and to name it without a veil or self-deception.

As a come-outer from Christianity, and with at least the usual amount of scar tissue, I didn't read the Bible. But when I was accepted to Starr King as a seminarian, I decided that I should. I resolved to read the first five books of the old testament, the gospels, and all the little books, before I came to school.

It was terrible.

I'd read a little and cry or rage or have to go for a walk to calm down. It was so violent and turbulent and all chopped up. Well, five years of study later, I can say that I love the Bible. It is a redacted and overlapping and messy history of 5700 years of trying to understand who we are in the world and how to make sense of our lives. No wonder it is challenging!

I spent a week at the Jesus Seminar and have read Dom Crossan and Marcus Borg among others. I have come to value Jesus. As a man, Jesus talked with women in a time when men were not even supposed to have a conversation with their wives. Women were sinful creatures who were always ready to lead astray with powerful, seductive wiles.

And Jesus invited everyone to dinner. As a southern woman, I understand that kind of hospitality. You will notice that my column for The Redwood Reachout is titled "Setting the Table."

"Meticulous mercy is the work of travelers," as Angela Jackson says, and in this life we are all travelers.

Treating another life with tenderness gifts us our own, longed for, transformation. Even if we have not named what it is that we are missing from our lives, if we experience a sense of being incomplete and restless, this is where the answer lies: In the moments of genuine meeting and being present to our fellow travelers, perhaps especially those who are held as outsiders.

Now, then, *for one day only*, here are my beliefs and practices.

Learning from other forms of spiritual expression deepens and enriches my life. I enter the exploration with the question: What can I learn here? What here speaks to my deepest heart? And not only what richness and beauty is there in the celebrations, but what disciplines am I willing to take on if I want to fold some of these observances into my own practice? It is the surrender to the disciplines of another tradition that keep a foray into another faith from being simply an appropriation without regard for the significance such an observance has for devouts of that path. Call it remnants of our puritan heritage if you will, but I believe that the honoring must include commitment to the deep work and the hard things as well as the times of celebration.

I celebrate Christmas after the forty quiet days of preparation known as Advent, during which I light candles, and journal. The arching question is "What would I like to bring to birth that would be a gift to the world?"

After many years of being angry with Christianity, I now believe that if I were to meet Jesus on the road, he would love me. He would invite me to sit under an olive tree and break bread. And I would listen to his stories, with my whole being. A great teacher can crack your heart open by their very presence. I believe that, and I believe Jesus transformed those around him who would listen. Charles Francis Potter, a Unitarian humanist, believed that people

followed Jesus because he had become *himself*. The strength of Jesus was his authenticity, and the force of his self-realization is what changed the lives of those around him. I can live with that. I can try to follow in those footsteps.

I celebrate Judaism and observe actually more than half of the 613 laws — after eliminating the 400 that apply only to the old temple in Jerusalem, destroyed in 70 of the common era. We are all, thankfully, excluded from those. I think about tzedakah or charity. In traditional Judaism, that is 18% rather than the Protestant 10%. Like Judith, my favorite Jewish matriarch, I celebrate the holidays and the festivals. Most especially, I love Passover in which we tell the stories of liberation, *our* liberation and *our* continuing quest for freedom from oppression. *Our* hope of finally finding our way out of the tight place and the vast and arid desert to the comfort of home.

I sit pretty regularly in Vipassana practice and am consciously, if not always actually, committed to the eightfold path. I am committed to Sila, a moral life. To Dhamma, learning, To Sangha, the benefit of a community of support. I do not believe in progress, which is the beginning of yet another sermon, but I believe that we must show up in each moment of our lives. That in this moment. and this moment. and this moment, our lives are lived and our living is sacred. My commitment to showing up, mindfully, and with attention to each moment grows from Buddhist practice. I try to notice what I notice.

I know less about Pagan celebration, but it was in nature that I learned to love my life. Like Wordsworth, "*I have felt a presence that disturbed me with the joy of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime and far more deeply interfused, whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, and the round ocean and the living air, and the blue sky and the mind of man.*" It is the constancy of nature's richness that sustains me. I am of the earth and have *always*, given a bit of time, found *myself* again when I visited wilderness, or a patch of grass. or sat with the sun on my face after a time of fog and rain. Pagan ritual takes me back to the most ancient part of who I am and reminds me of the abiding beauty of this planet and the mystery of space.

I know that some of you are now thinking, "OK, so with all of this wandering and window shopping, here she is, *finally, at last*, a Unitarian Universalist where there is room for all of her questions and all of her practices. But, does her story change my world? Does it matter to me and my life?"

And I say, "Absolutely!" Because not only are we all in this together, we are *not even separate*. But, alas, to explain that more fully will take many more sermons. I plan to speak about it again in "The Physics of Angels, or Quantum Theology" I hope that you will stay tuned.

The most constant thing in my wanderings, in my searching for home, has been my need for community. I hope that you will continue to find me worthy of being a minister in *this* community. I truly expect that we will worship and celebrate and work and learn and change and support and guide and comfort one another here. I know that we are in a honeymoon right now, and it is, in fact, a most wonderful honeymoon. I hope that it lasts a long time. But, even when it is gone, I expect that there will be love and trust between us and that we will continue on this journey together.

May it be so.