

UUFCM Summer Worship Series 2018

“Sharing the Stories of Living Our Faith”

Personal Reflection by Mel Bailey

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I avoided the temptation of writing this as a chronological history of my faith journey. I dismissed the impulse to narrate a reverse chronology from present to past. However, I found it vital to mention a few key points of my sordid past with faith, spirituality, and religion; All this, in an effort to explain why it is important for me to have faith, without being forced to believe in a particular perspective.

I spent 18 years “faithfully” attending Catholic Mass weekly, twice a week while school was in session at Sacred Heart Academy during my 13 years of attendance. During the last few years of high school I often attended St Mary’s Parish on CMU campus; mostly because they had the audacity of hiring a female minister. During this same time I also began attending what was known at the time as Young Church and was later “rebranded” as Grace Church. In early adulthood, I attended several Christian churches, some very evangelical, and even did missionary work. I found myself increasingly drawn to faith-based social justice organizations like “Christians for Biblical Equality”, which used the bible to prove that all humans are equal and deserving of the same rights and respect – fighting racism, sexism, and homophobia. I believed that Jesus was an enlightened revolutionary activist, but felt more and more that those who claimed to follow his example more closely resembled the establishments he spoke out against.

Through traveling and midwifery, I was exposed to a variety of traditions of faith, and began to see them as more or less the same in their form and function. The more I explored, the more commonality of truth I saw, and the further I removed myself from the exclusivity of religion. When a woman in the throws of labor-pains cries out for strength and mercy –it does not matter what name she calls. The prayer whispered into the ear of a newborn holds the same sacredness, regardless of the language in which it is spoken. I began to recognize the divisiveness of religion that insists that there is an “other”; And that in acknowledging the validity of their truth, we invalidate the sanctity of our own. I could no longer buy into this “us” and “them” mentality, there had to be a better way. And THAT is when I found Unitarian Universalism...or rather it found me.

I attended the UU Church in Las Cruces New Mexico for about 5 years. It was a welcoming community for my same-sex partner, our multi-racial children, and me. Being born into a culture that promoted one particular way of being, it was important for my family to be a part of a faith community

that encouraged self-discovery and expression. Because I felt so betrayed when I realized how much more there was to the world than what I had been led to believe, I desired my children to have exposure to all faith traditions and forms of spirituality. I asked a lot of questions, which were not always well received in the church of my youth. I needed a faith community that recognized that on the other side of every good inquiry, is not a definitive answer, but the next question to explore.

When I relocated with my family, back to my hometown, I was definitely in need of a community that provided these things. I also needed to soften the blow of failure I felt in returning to live with my parents after 13 years of independence. Although I had struggled with depression for years, this was a great low, and I became increasingly disconnected from my vitality. In dark times, I need to be reminded that I am not just a producer and a consumer, but a spiritual being having a human experience. When genuine human connection is so lacking in our world, I need people who are willing to see me and be seen by me. There were many days when I would force myself to attend Sunday service, in an effort to plant a seed of hope. This faith community, this faith tradition, which affirms my worth, my dignity, simply for being alive, has quite literally kept me alive. When society emphasizes measures of success, and thrives upon performance-based approval, I need a faith that recognizes my divine nature even when in a disheveled heap of tears and snot under the covers. Covering up that which we see as our “less-than-perfect” self, and attempting to put on display our “better-than” self, is a sure-fire way to build upon shame. This faith has helped me to embrace all aspects of myself and my human experience as holy (h-o-l-y) and wholly (w-h-o-l-l-y) me.

Finally, I desire to be part of the solution, changing the world for the better. I want to surround myself with others who desire the same. This faith has allowed me to connect with other individuals who have a passion for social justice. It has demonstrated to me, what a LIVED FAITH looks like. It flies in the face of my previous experiences of those who professed a belief, but lived a way that appeared contrary. I had the opportunity to attend General Assembly this year, which was a transformative and inspiring experience. I witnessed a group of loving individuals holding a rainbow flag, and singing songs of peace, as a group from the Westborough Baptist Church held signs with hateful messages finally conceded and walked away. This is a living faith; a loving faith; a faith that stands in the face of hate and says, we will not exclude, we will not concede, we will fight for the rights of all, as long as it takes, whatever it takes. I am proud to have found this faith...or did it find me?