

## Reflection on Faith and Responsive Discussion

July 15, 2018

- by Norma Bailey

I chose as my reflective piece this morning a selection by Jake Morrill from the book *Testimony: The Transformative Power of Unitarian Universalism*, a collection of personal stories from people whose lives have been changed by Unitarian Universalism.

### The Playground Atheist Gets Saved

It may be that every elementary school, across the whole South, has at least one self-appointed Playground Atheist. You know the type: When all the other kids are showing off their new WWJD bracelets and mooning about how cool the youth pastor is, there's a sharp-eyed fellow, standing there by the slide, not believing any of it for a second. When the typical debates come up – for instance, whether dogs go to heaven – it's the Playground Atheist who explodes the whole conversation. "Heaven!" he'll say. "Heaven?! What are you a moron?" Yes, it's this kind of gentle, persuasive approach that has endeared Playground Atheists to junior Christians through the Southland for time immemorial. And, at Bearden Elementary School, as the Reagan years came into full bloom, the Playground Atheist was me.

From time to time, the Tennessee State Legislature will cook up a wild idea. So it happened, when I was in fourth grade, that a reporter from the local NBC affiliate came to visit, with a cameraman in tow. The legislators in Nashville were considering whether to mandate prayer in school, and this reporter was on a mission to find out what the fourth-graders thought.

To start off, she had us all bow our heads, our hands folded on our desks. Then, she opened it up for discussion. Well, what did we think? To absolutely no one's surprise, it was Matthew who spoke first. Everyone in the zip code knew Matthew loved Jesus. Just adored him. Brought him up all the time. So, his eyes shining, Matthew accepted the chance to lay out his convictions. All around the room, heads were nodding. The reporter gave thanks, then asked if there were others. A girl in the back chimed in to reinforce Matthew's point: This was a world that stood ever in need of more prayer.

Reporters are trained to fish for intrigue, for friction. So, as hands waved in the air, she wondered if anyone had a different opinion. The hands dropped. There was silence. A friend is someone who knows just what lapses in judgment you are prone to make and will leap in to stop you. My lapses tend to involve talking at times when I shouldn't. I recall my good friend Jeff, in those slow-motion seconds, staring at me intently from across the room, shaking his head, and mouthing the word "Don't." But there it was. I had raised my hand. The microphone dangled close. The camera drew near. The room emptied of air.

Later, I recalled having mentioned things I happened to know about the Constitution. I still believe it is possible I uttered the phrase “church and state.” But none of these high-minded words and ideals appeared on the local news that evening at 6:00 and 11:00, and again on the early-morning show. No, instead, what the good people of East Tennessee saw was a chubby boy with thick glasses announcing to the whole world that God didn’t exist.

As soon as the reporter departed, the whisper of scandal began threading its way through the entire fourth grade. And then the whole school. By the next morning, certain classmates were able to tell me just what their parents thought about a boy who’d say something like that on TV. My parents, I gather, also received some feedback. What I had was not fame. It was outright infamy. Before, my atheism had been an occasional source of wonder to others. They felt the kind of pride you feel when a neighbor happens to own an exotic bird of bright plumage; it was a thrill to be in proximity to something so odd. The Christians even seemed to enjoy my earnest challenges, see them perhaps as a kind of a trial. But this time, it seemed, the Playground Atheist had taken it too far. To say something hateful about Jesus at recess was one thing. To broadcast it so everyone could hear it? Unacceptable.

The week dragged on, as I found myself shunned by my classmates. But then, on Thursday afternoon, two handwritten letters arrived, both from the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist church. One was from my Sunday School teacher, the other from the minister of religious education. Without even opening the envelopes, I knew what to expect. And sure enough, there it was: They were proud. Not of my atheism, per se. But of the character they said they saw in what I’d done. Like the ancient prophets our Sunday School class was studying that year, said one, I had stood my ground and had said what I thought. The next day, the purgatory of exclusion continued. But somehow, I didn’t mind it as much – a cold shoulder was nothing beside what Jonah or Amos had faced. And by Monday, it seemed, all was back to normal.

In the years since, my theology has evolved. I have taken Communion, stopped in awe before mountains. I have prayed till tears came and sat in meditation for long hours in a dark Buddhist Zendo. But, truth be told, it was as an atheist that I first came to see, in a way that was real and has not failed me since, how I am part of a love wider than my own life, and how that spacious embrace makes itself known to me, most often, through a community like the one that first told me, “You are not alone.”

### ***My Reflection***

When I first read this story, I was taken back to a playground in fifth grade at my elementary school. I was out near the football field, anticipating playing for a half hour, when the boys told me I couldn’t play because I was a girl. I remember arguing and then yelling, “to hell with you then,” clearly unacceptable language yet what I had learned at home. I was then sent by the playground supervisor to recess detention for a week. I felt so alone and not understood; I just wanted to play football!

My next thought triggered by the story took me to a religion class about the New Testament that I was taking at Kalamazoo College. We were discussing the notion of salvation and if you needed to believe in God in order to go to heaven. One of my classmates Bunky V. said that while he wasn't sure, he certainly was going to profess that he did "just in case." I remember arguing that that wasn't honest and didn't make any sense to me, but the others agreed with him; some of them did believe in God and the rest said they weren't going to take any chances. I felt so alone and like a fish out of water.

There have been a good number of other times in my life where I felt alone, like I was the odd ball, like I didn't fit, like people didn't understand me. I am a lesbian in a heterosexual world. I was a teacher who allowed students to take a test as often as necessary to master the material. I was a professor who didn't believe in letter grades. I am a woman who doesn't like to cook or shop or dress up or paint her toenails. I am a 71-year-old who plays on a softball team with 25-35-year-olds. I could go on, but you get the idea. Many times, the "different one." I imagine many of you have felt that way before.

Yet, I have found a place where it doesn't matter how "odd" I am. I belong, and I am not alone. I belong to a faith (Unitarian Universalism) and a place (UUFCM) that is grounded in love for all, a love so great that it cannot be eclipsed by any other force. It doesn't even matter what my theology is; I can be Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, pagan, humanist, atheist, or agnostic – or nothing. I belong to, as Meg Riley says in the preface to this book (show book), "...the companionship of dreamers who dare to imagine acts of justice and compassion and painstakingly seek to create the world we want to live in. It's the fresh air in the room when minds are open to learning and change." This reading reminded me that I am so thankful to be part of "a religious community, guided by love, transforming our lives and our world."

So...my question for you all is: When have you been in a situation when you stood your ground and said what you thought (as in the reading), particularly when you felt alone, whether it was regarding religion or some other arena (preferably other than political)? And how has being a part of this UU Fellowship helped you feel that you are not alone and that you belong?