

Affirmation: June 13, 2010

My earliest memories of a church home include a cool rocking horse that actually moved across the playroom floor when rocked. I could also stand on a sort of bridge to see out of a window that overlooked the sanctuary, where my dad played the organ and my mom sang in the choir. If I'd been in charge of my religious upbringing at that time, I surely would have agreed that this was the place to be. It had nothing to do with God, however, but with the idea that I belonged there, my family was there.

My next memories are of a beautiful Presbyterian church, where playing hide-and-seek with friends on spaghetti dinner or potluck nights was magical, given the nooks and crannies, stairways and backways of a classic building; and given the comfort parents must have felt in losing track of children in the busyness of those events. Memories of that church include children's choir, saltines and apple juice (yes, it is everywhere), watching, and envying the sexton as he rang the huge bell that was up in the belfry, by pulling an immense rope that hung down through a stairwell in the narthex to the basement, requiring him to lean way over into the well as the rope came down for each clang of the bell.

Once in a while, while my parents were busy with music stuff, I would sneak out, go down to Carter's drug store on the corner of Broadway and First Street to get the Chicago American newspaper, to read the funnies in the basement during church. It was the place where,

sitting in an almost deserted balcony during service, I dropped a ring, a nice, heavy, round ring, onto the bare wood floor, from the back row...and listened to it make its agonizingly slow way down each step until it reached the first row. I was aware that day of the sacredness of silence in church. Time does, indeed, slow down in those moments, but not from religious ecstasy.

That church was the place where I went through my confirmation with schoolmates, some of whom I still consider to be good friends. It was the place where my best friend Janie and I pledged to come back to when it was time to marry....which neither of us was ever able to do, as the building was razed soon after we graduated from high school.

During confirmation classes, I remember the solemn event when we all went to the sanctuary to discuss the various symbols and elements of the altar, pulpit, lectern, vestments and so forth. My question about the sacredness of that place was to ask why the lights were always dimmed during the sermon. Sitting in the balcony I was close to those lights, so this detail didn't escape me. Obviously, I didn't have a true sense of why most people went to church. I was there because it was the place my family went every Sunday. It was a place of employment as well as worship for my parents, but for me?.

There was a man in that balcony, usually the only person besides my siblings and myself, who never took part in the hymn singing or confessions, not standing and sitting through the rituals. What he did was sit there for an hour each Sunday and read the Bible. Even then

I understood somehow that he was practicing his religion in his own way, he was creating his own way of belonging there.

I do have a very precious memory of that church though, that of being the lucky one to rewind the tape after church each Sunday, the tape my dad always broadcast before service, the organ music he had taped earlier so he could practice with the choir until the last minute before the processional. As he sat up several steps at the organ playing the postlude, I would be down in the tiny music room, rewinding the tape, replacing it in the box until he re-recorded music for the next week; and then I would walk with him, just the two of us, the few blocks between church and home. Those were sacred moments for me. I belonged at that church, too, but because it was a second home for my parents, so it was a comfortable place for me.

As I went through high school and college, and into my married years, I was less and less inclined to go to church, but I did have a sense of my relationship with a God, as I had been, as I thought of it, “awakened to God” during my adolescence by reading Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women, which was full of moral lessons; and a series of books by Catherine Marshall, who was married to Peter Marshall, a chaplain to the Senate in the late forties. Her book A Man Called Peter, affected me deeply, as it described the almost mystical experiences Peter Marshall had had during his life in Ireland, the ones that led him to a life in ministry, before his immigration to the

U.S. I did take a feeling of having a personal God with me through the next several years of my life.

I returned to a formal spiritual life after I had left my marriage and returned to graduate school in Champaign-Urbana. I found there the McKinley Church and Foundation, which was my first experience of a liberal religious institution, and was a place where I truly felt, for the first time, that I had come home, religiously, just for myself....and yet, I was there mostly for the emotional support, the intellectual stimulation, the social opportunities, and a place to have my daughter baptized, my miracle baby, a preemie and the child I thought I could never have.

As I left school and entered my professional life for the second time, I found myself in a small town in Missouri where, when I went to the Presbyterian church, I sat alone among a sea of strangers, none of whom greeted me and most of whom were my parents' age, and I cried.

I then found the United Church of Christ, where I felt more at home, but could not, no matter how I wanted to, feel connected to the religious beliefs and rituals there. I knew it wasn't the place for me when a class on parenting, using a conservative curriculum written by William Dobson, was attended by many other members, none of whom questioned what he had to say about single parents, about working mothers, about seeking and questioning in our spiritual journeys.

So, eventually, I ended up in the Chicago area, attended another Presbyterian church for many years, raising my daughter in that congregation from Kindergarten through High School, when she herself chose to drop out of the institutions of religion, which has turned out to be temporary. When she was going through her confirmation experience, we parents were asked to write a letter to our offspring, detailing our faith, and, presumably, giving them a stronger reason for embracing Christianity. I wrote this letter, but I was unable to read it aloud to the group that gathered to share this ritual. I realized that much of my hesitation in accepting this faith had to do with my anger, my latent rage, actually, at the patriarchal system of a church that taught that women are less than real people, that fed this to little girls from an age at which they are helpless to fend off the images of themselves as inferior, that brainwashed them into a life of always putting others first. I also realized that the inward focus of this faith left me feeling empty. We were mostly about ourselves, our church, our sins, our salvation.

After my daughter left for college, I finally admitted I could no longer say the words of a Sunday morning service, the confessions, the creeds, and believe them. I knew an intern during those years, a seminarian serving our church for a year, who admitted to me that he had returned to school, to a divinity school, to find out why he was questioning his own beliefs, to learn whether he could truly still claim a relationship with Jesus as Christ. This way of facing his doubts, of challenging his doubts by going back to the original languages of

faith: Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek....to find HIS truth, in a seminary, made me know I could leave that faith behind and really begin my own journey.

I had known from the time I first visited the mountains as a kid, then as a teenager, and, finally, as an adult, that I found much solace there. Since I've been returning to the mountains of Colorado each year since my daughter was small, I've begun to call those visits my "soul food". They take me to a second home. The words of John Muir say it for me:

"Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves."

As Richard Louv wrote so eloquently about the renewing energy of the natural world in his book Last Child in the Wilderness, these trips back to nature were heaven on earth for me, and still create a wonderful anticipation in me as I plan each new visit (only four more weeks!). My volunteer work with raptors over the years has strengthened this feeling of the spirituality I find in nature, in the power of the workings of the universe; and one of the most moving experiences of my life was seeing a rehabilitated bald eagle released again into the wild several years ago. But even these rare treats have provided only a partial answer for me in my search for a spiritual life.

So, having heard about UU-ism as an undergrad, from a roommate who attended the DuPage church as a youth, but not able then to grasp what it was to have a religion without a creed, but obviously having nurtured that seed of liberalism somewhere in my being, I looked in the yellow pages about ten years ago, and I've been here at Countryside ever since.

I belong here. I walk through these halls and rooms and feel that in my bones. It's not just the place, which is so beautiful. It is the people, it is the spirit of family, of ethical living, of respecting, honoring and caring for others, of reaching out when people are in need, of turning outward to find our meaning and purpose, and of instilling these qualities in our children: of educating our young people to question, to think for themselves, to serve others. Indeed, the first service I attended here was a Coming of Age service, and I was hooked that Sunday. I belong here because this is the place I feel that, together with others, I can make a difference in this complicated world, because I feel like a spiritual person here, because here I find many of my "chosen family," because, finally, it is my spiritual home.