

Who Am I? Personal Spiritual Past and Present

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

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Reflection on the Annual Pledge Campaign by Courtney Best

Hi my name is Courtney Best and I would like you all to take a moment and go back to the first time you attended UUCV. Do you remember the first member of our community that came up and welcomed you?

I do. It was Tracy Riley-Kelly. Right at the end of the service she came right up to Mark and I to say hello, then she looked at me and said, “you look like you know how to cook.” I thought to myself, how on earth did she know that. After a brief chat about something called Family Promise, I was signing up to help prepare a meal and found myself scheduling dates to help set up Coffee hour. It was a great way for me to feed my desire to be of service and connect with others.

It has now been one year since Mark and I officially joined the church. I am still helping with Family Promise, signing up for coffee hours, joining committees, and I give Tracy a hug every time I get to see her. I remember sitting in our UUCV history class thinking to myself, “this is exactly where Mark and I belong” and knowing in that moment that I wanted dedicate more time and money to support our new church and keep it thriving. I am a firm believer in our campaign theme this year, Together We Rise and we are giving twice as much this year. Every time I attend church, either in person or virtually, I see the direct impact that giving has on our whole community.

From our staff members that plan our services, church events, and send out bulletins each week, to our tech crew that make our services more accessible, to the Religious Education and OWL programs for our younger members, to having time to chat over coffee or tea with brand new members and those of you who have been around for a couple of decades. I see the importance of pledging annually to support our church and giving what we can through our weekly offerings to help our community in addition to local and global organizations.

So, if you are like me and want to see our UUCV continue to thrive, I encourage you to do two things: One- give to the pledge drive and two-be like Tracy and make it a point to introduce yourself to a new visitor or member you do not know yet. Thank you.

Who Am I?© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

This morning, as promised, I want to share a bit of my own spiritual journey as an invitation for you to reflect on your own.

We’re sort of changing gears with regard to our themes this month: You may have noticed. Our guest preacher last week, Seth Moran, didn’t mention our theme of blessing last week, though I think we can agree that he is one. Likewise, I’m not really going to unpack the theme this morning or in subsequent weeks. In fact, since we’ve returned to in person worship following the shut-down, I’ve found the theological themes a little dated. Themes like authority, evil, freedom, and this month it should be blessing, next month, mercy. I love the idea of our talking across a community about similar theological

ideas – so that the chalice circles, for example, are talking about freedom around the time I’m preaching the topic in worship. It’s just the particular themes were using which I’ve been working with for many years, don’t seem to inspire as they used to, and fall flat in this complicated world we live in now. When I brought this idea to the chalice circle facilitators, they told me they were also tired of these themes and were going to approach me to change them.... Next year, while we decide what to do next, we’re going to explore the values at the center of our faith. These seven values are on the ballot at our General Assembly this year as an update to what we have called for years the seven principles.

So perhaps I’ll begin and end my story there, in 1983 when the General Assembly was in Vancouver, British Columbia –when the Canadians were still a part of the Unitarian Universalist Association before they became independent in 2002. I was a youth delegate to that General Assembly. I was a member of the First Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City, Utah, and attended GA with my father, who might have been Board President at the time, though I’m not sure if that’s the timing. On the table for discussion were resolutions against nuclear war, a resolution to support the Equal Rights Amendment, and discussion of the bylaws, including Article II which were adopted beginning the next year at General Assembly.

This is where, if you have a grey hymnal in your hands, you could open it up to the pages immediately before hymn #1, where it says *We, the Member Congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote*. These are the words we were discussing that year, getting ready for a vote. I remember that I objected to the laundry list of sources because I thought it would have to be added to constantly since we draw from an infinite number of sources – or a finite number, but as many as, it seemed to me, the thousands of people who claim Unitarian Universalism as their faith. But it passed, and I stayed with my faith.

But let me back up a bit. It’s true that my parents were Unitarian Universalist when I was born. I was born into a family that loved me and taught me **the value of love**. The story is that my sister and father named me in the car on the way to church. So my dad and 6 year old sister apparently decided on the name, Kathryn. I attended church as a baby and preschooler. My mom tells a story of meeting an African American woman in the UU church of Nashville, where we lived for a short time. It was the first African American she had really met – and she was in her thirties! She had to take the crying baby out of service – me- and this woman was soothing her crying baby and they met and talked. Having grown up in the 40s and 50s in Seattle and Everett, she had not met someone who was African American, which is a story that always blows me away, having grown up in an entirely different era and more multicultural context. **That family story instilled in me the value of pluralism.**

The value of interdependence is illustrated by my first memory of church. We were back in Washington state and I remember walking around the Bellingham church picking up acorns that had fallen and then having some lesson or art project inside with the acorns, I presume – it was the walk outdoors and the picking up of acorns that I remember. I have very strong memories of a childhood in nature, walking in the forest behind our house in Bellingham with my mother and she would whisper to point out wildlife we saw – or that she saw and I tried to find.

Then, we moved to Pullman, WA where there was a struggling Moscow-Pullman Unitarian Fellowship that we didn’t attend very much at all. According to the website of the UU Church of the Palouse, “the first part of the seventies saw the fellowship meeting in small groups in private homes and at the Campus Christian center on the University of Idaho campus.” We were in Pullman during the seventies, so that explains why I don’t have memories of going to church from first grade through fifth. We would

occasionally go to church in Spokane where my grandparents lived. From those Spokane grandparents, I learned **the value of generosity**. They lived in abundance – I remember my grandfather saying things like, “there’s not a bad apple in the whole lot” – speaking of his family. There was a sense of enoughness and plenitude, a generous spirit. My grandfather was Catholic and his Catholicism had the meaning from Greek that is universal and world-wide and all-inclusive; catholic with a small c. His faith was so inclusive that he was married to a woman who was decidedly anti-Catholic, but they made it work. **Love was at the Center.**

In my childhood, though I had learned to say I was Unitarian – and that is what my parents said back then – not Unitarian Universalist, just Unitarian - I didn’t really have any idea what it meant. Since the culture at large – or I should say, the Christian culture that dominates American white supremacy culture – defines religion as a set of beliefs, I remember thinking as a kid that I could believe in that Jesus guy, but God? That just sounded too far fetched for me. I hadn’t yet learned to identify religion with a set of values or agreements. I had adopted the larger cultural understanding of religion as creed or confession of faith, the shared beliefs of a community. It was in Pullman that I had friends who spoke other languages at home, who ate strange – to me – foods at lunch. I particularly remember Athena Wong’s dried seaweed. I fell in love with the diversity of the world – the differences that surrounded me. I was learning to **value pluralism. And Love was at the Center.**

So, then, we moved to Fargo, North Dakota. Well, my sister went off to college, and my parents and I moved to Fargo. Religion was a bigger deal in Fargo than in Pullman – or at least, as amongst my peers in school. I remember strenuously arguing with classmates on the school bus that it makes no sense that children in India who have never heard of Jesus Christ would be condemned to hell for not believing in him! I had learned to **value justice and equity**. That supposed theological position just didn’t seem fair or loving. Because of that conversation and other bad experiences with my Christian peers, I decided for some reason that I must be Jewish. Like many children, my world was still black and white, or in this case, Christian and Jewish. I had not yet moved away from the binary.

The irony of this Christian/Jewish binary is that we were now finally attending a Unitarian Fellowship every Sunday, now called the Unitarian Universalist Church of Fargo-Moorhead. I didn’t think of it as Christian or Jewish, but as a loving place to grow up. It was a fellowship without a minister when we attended, and we attended religiously. My youth group put on a Sunday service based on the old PBS series called *Meeting of the Minds* where actors played historical figures in a talk-show format – we played historical UU figures. I think I played Lydia Pinkham. Perhaps my identifying with Judaism had to do with feeling like an outsider as a UU among Christian classmates. To be clear, I never attended a synagogue in Fargo – my Jewishness was just an idea, something I read about. That sounds quite 70’s Unitarian to me.

After my multicultural experiences in Pullman, WA – which sounds like an oxymoron, I know, but my friends were mostly the children of faculty and graduate students, and they came from all over the world. After those experiences, Fargo felt very provincial and homogenous, very white and Lutheran. Diversity was being Catholic, and Judaism was, for me, an idea. But interestingly, they taught foreign languages well in the Fargo Public Schools – I took a survey course that dabbled in Greek, Russian, Spanish, French, German,- I think they were all Western languages, but still, I loved it and it fed my love of languages and that **value of pluralism.**

Then, we moved to Utah. My spiritual journey does have a lot to do with where I lived...and every time we moved, I was able to be a little different –because people didn't yet know me. I had learned the **value of transformation**. In Utah, religion is all important, as is transformation, given religious conversion is very important. They allowed you to go to Bible study during the school day, public school – you either walked across the street to the Mormon stake or ward, or to the Baptist church. Needless to say, UU classes weren't an option. There was only one UU church in the entire state at the time. My Unitarian Universalist identity was pretty important in Utah because friends would ask you about your religion and try to convert you. My parents and I drove to Salt Lake City every Sunday – 45 minutes away from where we lived – in order to attend the First Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City.

My Religious Education class at church started visiting other houses of worship and I think that gave me the confidence to walk into a Jewish community for worship, finally. The synagogue in Ogden was conservative at the time, orthodox, perhaps, I no longer remember, but the women sat on one side of the sanctuary, the men on the other. Because I **valued equity**, I found my way to a reformed group that met in the basement of the local hospital and what I discovered there was that it was very much like a UU church service, with Hebrew thrown in. That helped me find my way back to Unitarian Universalism, though I'd never really left. But I did long for more ritual, I think, the mystery that other religions highlighted. Perhaps what my grandfather loved about Catholicism. Maybe I was looking for God. Certainly that was a big topic in Utah. I had pretty much reversed my childhood position and thought I could now believe in God, but wasn't sure about that Jesus guy. Did I mention **transformation**? And I love, to this day, listening to languages other than English – whether I understand them or not. The Unitarian Universalism I grew up with was pretty white, middle class, educated and what we fondly refer to now as the 'lecture and concert series' – especially in that Fargo fellowship without a minister. To be clear, that's not the Unitarian Universalism of today, which I love more, which has broadened considerably and seeks to include a much wider range of human experience.

Salt Lake City was the first time I experienced a UU church with a minister and I loved it. I quickly ditched my youth group that met during church on Sunday mornings so that I could go to services and listen to the sermons by Rev. Richard Henry. It was in a Sunday sermon on the topic of service that inspired me to go into the Peace Corps. I graduated from high school in 1982 and it was the 1983 General Assembly that I attended with my dad, the year after my freshman year of college.

1983 is 41 years ago. Some of you in the room weren't born yet. My spiritual journey up until 1983 isn't close to half my life or half my story. But we don't have the time for me to share the next 41 years. Besides, I believe that my spiritual present is fully grounded in my past journey, that was founded in love. I *could* tell you about the second time I went to General Assembly which was 1995 when, in fact, we modified the list of sources and added earth-centered traditions, vindicating my 1983 conviction that we'd have to keep adding to that list.

Or the fact that it was at that General Assembly that I sat in on the workshop called, "so you want to be a minister?" that led me to leave my bilingual teaching career and begin ministry. I could tell my spiritual journey through non-violent protest and that **value of justice** – from an arrest at the Nevada Nuclear Test Site to service in the Peace Corps, and countless peaceful demonstrations since, including Ferguson a year following the killing of Michael Brown. I could tell my spiritual journey through my love of theater and dance, or through violence and recovery. I could tell you how I became a regular at the shabbat services at the Congregation Kehillat Israel in Lansing as I began my first UU ministry in that town. Or

how the congregation I served worshipped in the local Islamic Center for a month of Sundays. Or I could tell my spiritual journey and **the value of transformation** through the lens of clinical depression, medication, and meditation. Spiritual journeys are those progressions of growth and transformation we undertake as we mature and grow into more fully realized beings – I agree with Martin Buber that we should “live with this constant discovery. We should be open to this adventure in heightened awareness of living. We should stake our whole existence on our willingness to explore and experience.” **And love is at the center.** What has been your spiritual journey? How will you tell your story? Where does love show up in your life?