

Spiritual Building Blocks

By Deborah Hobbie

The span of our continent separates the First Presbyterian Church of Ithaca, New York, from Sacred Heart Ministries of Portland, Oregon. The span also represents my 50-year journey of spiritual self-discovery and maturation.

In the mid-1950's our farm outside Trumansburg, New York, branched out from an intersection of two of the quietest roads you could find anywhere. Our 125 acres of good brown soil lay an eternity of six miles from Trumansburg and, if the gods were smiling graciously on me, I'd get a ride there on Saturdays to rollerskate in the school gym, or on Friday nights for basketball games, to hang out as long as possible with friends at Malone's, where buying a sundae for 25 cents was a big deal to a skinny seventh grade girl in white socks, bitten fingernails, and a fierce need to belong.

Also in T-burg was a youth group on Sunday nights at the Methodist Church. We weren't Methodists, we were Presbyterians, but the youth group leaders and my parents apparently were all broad-minded enough to let me belong. That was a rich time in my growing-up years. I don't remember our activities, I only remember that going to youth group and to church every Sunday provided good spiritual food.

Sunday mornings we would all get dressed up and the four of us kids would vie for superior position in our Ford station wagon, our hatted mother in the passenger seat, our father driving us the 12 miles to the Presbyterian Church in Ithaca. A stately old stone church with a slate steeple rising purposefully into the trees, its stained glass windows threw glorious rainbows down on us inside in the oak pews. I sat, eager and attentive, hearing Dr. Dodds preach and the choir sing.

One of my clearest memories of that church shows me reciting in front of Dr. Dodds: the books of the Bible, the Beatitudes, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the 23rd Psalm, the names of the twelve disciples. He told my mother I'd done the best of all the kids in my confirmation class.

That next Sunday I was baptized, along with my two older sisters, my younger brother, and our mother, who unlike our father had not been baptized as a child.

My father always made sure we said grace after church, at Sunday dinner. (Was he more grateful, do you suppose, for the pot roast on Sunday than for the macaroni and cheese on Saturday?)

For some reason I don't remember, even as a ten- to twelve-year-old I'd often be asked to say the grace.

I have only good memories of church and religion till as a freshman at Lutheran-related Wittenberg University in Ohio I showed up for a required course on the Bible. I hadn't yet made much historical or doctrinal distinction between the Old and the New Testaments, so it didn't take me long, reading Genesis for the first time, to say 'enough, already, with this Christianity baloney' and with the way women were treated in the Bible. Remember the story of Lot trying to placate the mob, offering to swap his two virgin daughters for the safety of the two strangers? Remember Jacob having all those wives, and even his first wife got other women for him because it was so important to have sons? Remember the genealogy of Jesus' birth listed all the guys, with only one or

two women mentioned; and Mary, who was specifically enlisted by God to be Jesus' mother, wasn't included? It was Joseph who got into the genealogy. How fair is that?

There was a lot of other stuff in the Bible that made my face hot and my fists clench so tight around my Bible that I creased the cover where my name was embossed in gold.

Mad as hell, feeling betrayed by God and my gender, I stopped going to church. When I came home from college for the first time to our home in Allentown, Pennsylvania, and described all this to my mother, believing she probably didn't know about all these serious inequalities in the Bible, I learned she was in the midst of "Kerygma," a comprehensive 45-week study of the Bible. In a flash I realized two things about my mother: She felt far more deeply about these Bible questions than she had ever let on, and she nurtured an intense core of spirituality that I'd never bothered to recognize in her.

Meanwhile, my father wasn't going to church anymore. The golf course had finally won out, and he no longer made a pose of going to early church so he could be on the green by such and such a time.

I know very little about my father's religious beliefs, but I appreciate his dedication to getting us to church. Did he feel it was his duty as a father to make sure his family got to church every Sunday? Did church for a time provide some spiritual sustenance for him, too, as it did for my mother?

After a couple of years being angry at God in college, I realized I missed going to church on Sunday mornings. I missed singing in the choir, belonging to the community, hearing a good sermon. I missed the felt sense of the Presence in my heart on Sunday mornings.

So back to a Presbyterian church I went, also exploring Unitarianism with a college boyfriend. Then a different boyfriend and a few years later, I found out after I married him that my new husband wanted nothing to do with church. (How could this topic not have come up while we dated for two years? Or could it simply not be heard above the racket my hormones were making?)

At first the differences in our spiritual needs was okay with me, and I just went to church alone every now and then. After ten years, our different views on the need for faith began to be more of an issue for me.

Some years later, after I was single again, I found myself in a Religious Science Church and suddenly, the different pieces of my spiritual beliefs and attitudes began to fit together into an authentic and comprehensible whole for me.

Over the 18 years I was in Religious Science, I came to learn that I was being called to a greater expression of my own authentic life, that I have a unique purpose. I came to learn that if creation had seen that my purpose was already being expressed, there would be no need for my soul to come into this form at this time.

I have come to learn that each of us has been created for unique purposes. Many cells are needed to create a body; many leaves make a beautiful shade tree; and birds need more than one feather to fly. Just as my parents contributed their unique gifts to my spirituality, all of us have important gifts to bring to the altar, and each gift is absolutely necessary.

We each have a ministry--that place where we are called to stand, that spark within us that says, "This is for me to do." That is the way the Divine takes form, "made flesh and dwelling among us."

I left my Religious Science Church to join Sacred Heart Ministries. Here, I meld the Christianity of my youth with the Religious Science of my maturing to create a daily spiritual practice that feels authentic and nurturing to me. In the context of my spiritual beliefs, I'm learning more about myself and the world I live in. My being here in life is beginning to make sense to me.

There are many ways to step up my spiritual life to a higher level in order to make a difference, and each is part of my unique ministry. Rumi said, "Let the beauty we love be what we do. There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground."

I commit to a daily spiritual practice. I join with others in a prayer circle that meets several times a month. I prayer partner weekly by phone with a friend. I read teachings of Truth daily. I pray or take time to speak the truth to myself daily. I spend time with people who want to speak positively about themselves and our world rather than spend time with those who want to complain.

I see how my parents' habits and beliefs contributed to my spiritual DNA. My father's habits engraved my early religious experience and my mother's deep sense of relationship with God helped nurture the intense spiritual longing that characterizes my life. The good brown soil and the Christianity of my youth, the disillusionment of my college years, the explorations of my maturing spirituality--all of it has helped form the basic building blocks of my own unique spiritual life today in Sacred Heart Ministries and in my world.

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