

“To the Point”

Sermon by Rev. Rebecca Bryan

March 27, 2022

Nancy Crochiere had asked me if I would prefer to read the piece you just heard, since I wrote it. I told her it would be preferable, by far, if she read it, because I have learned that pain is not meant to be held alone and that it certainly can't be healed alone, at least not in my experience.

And that's what I'm offering you this morning – my experience. It may or may not have similarities to your life experiences, and I'm not trying to persuade you to believe anything. This is my way of letting you get to know me better, specifically from the perspective of my faith journey and interior life. I hope we can all find ways to share our truths with one another, be it in word, art, or intimate conversations. If not here at church, then where?

I am moved to share with you my Journey of Faith for several reasons. First, I have been impressed by the Journeys of Faith I've heard here in the last four years and by the testimonials shared over this past month. Every time one of you tells your story, I am made better. Your truths enrich my experience and understanding of life. Your stories make me laugh, cry, question, and wonder. That then is my hope: that each of you may laugh, cry, question, wonder, or in some way be changed by what you hear this morning.

I am also sharing this morning because I cringe whenever I hear someone question whether this church has spirituality at its center, along with caring for one another and working for social justice. “Do they know me?” I ask myself when I hear that question. It would be impossible for me to be a minister without being spiritual. It is foundational to who I am. My spirituality and faith are the sources of my strength, energy, and inspiration. It is essential to who I am: it's time for me to be perfectly clear about this aspect of myself.

Last, I am sharing today because I want to model authentic connection. I hope my words and truth help even one person. I am no longer willing to hide.

Before I go on, let me set down on the proverbial table a few facts, that are not easy facts. You've heard many of them over the last four years

although I've never put them all together nor been quite as specific as I will be now.

I am a survivor of child abuse that went on for years, including sexual abuse at tender young ages. Those experiences made lasting impressions and deep wounds on my heart, my psyche, and my mind. But they do not define me. They do not have the final word. I survived. I heal and thrive, every day, after years of transformative and sometimes grueling work.

The abuse and alcoholism rampant in my mother's home where these things occurred caused many painful patterns I have had to overcome, including addiction, PTSD, and faulty thinking, about myself and the world around me. I turned to food as a source of medication and dissociation when this all started when I was four.

Later in life, and for a much shorter stint, I turned to alcohol. Not surprisingly, I was a magnet to sick men, particularly those in power, such as bosses and professors, resulting in further mistreatment and abuse.

Through it all, what saved me was my faith that things would get better someday, and they have, beyond my wildest dreams. For that I am grateful. I will always turn around and look for those who I can help know freedom. I have deep gratitude for the many people who have loved me and supported me, some of whom are watching this online, my father who always believed in me, and always my beloved children and husband.

The framework within which I experience and express my spirituality is multifaceted. I was born a mystic and religious naturalist; I just came out that way. This means that I experience the God of my understanding daily, sometimes in small ways, sometimes miraculously, and always in nature, as well as in relationship.

My sensitivity to and awareness of the unitive experience of life started young. In my earliest memory of seeing a spirit, I saw an Indigenous person on the land where I was living. I was three years old. This shamanistic experience of life, the connection to the nonphysical and intuitive realms, is second nature to me. It is an important way that I see the world.

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My parents separated when I was four, after which time I was raised by my mother in the Methodist church. I loved church, as I've mentioned before from this pulpit. I loved its red carpets, safe feelings, and people all around. We rarely went to church though, so I was never indoctrinated in its teachings. Most of what I knew about spirituality and God came from within me.

I converted to Unitarian Universalism at the age of nine when I first heard a UU minister preach at my grandparents' church in Brewster, Massachusetts. "This just makes sense," I thought. I later converted to Catholicism for seven years while married to my first husband, so we would share a faith in which to raise our children.

But I never left any of my earlier threads. I wove them into the person I was becoming - shaman, mystic, religious naturalist, Christian, and Unitarian Universalist.

I started practicing yoga in my twenties. It has been a continuing and essential way I have learned to be in my body, and it connects body and spirit. It continues to be a daily practice for me, though its forms and lineage have changed over time.

As a young adult, I also began learning and integrating into my life Buddhist practices including meditation and mindfulness. Pema Chödrön and Thich Nhat Hanh continue to be key teachers in my pluralistic knapsack.

Twelve-step recovery programs have been essential to my life for the past fifteen years and are foundational to how I live my life. For me, these programs are both spiritual and humanist, with sustaining approaches to life that I was never taught as a child.

One year after I stopped drinking, I started seminary, which had been calling me for decades. Soon I realized how important it was for me to be clean if I was to grow into my true self. My time in seminary was a dream come true in all ways and led me to ordination in 2015 and to you in 2018.

The older I get the more connected I am to feminism, womanist theology, and to writing as a spiritual, healing, and creative practice. I am

attracted to bold women who walk their true path, like Dorothy Day, Jaqui Lewis, and Nadia Weber Boltz, and to other more reserved women like Julian of Norwich and Sue Monk Kidd.

In my faith journey there are three thru lines which remained through all its twists and turns. These golden threads weave in and out of my every day and life experience.

God is real.

Healing and transformation are possible with authentic love and connection.

There is more to reality than meets the human eye.

God is real. By God, I mean a force of nature always available to us. It is a good thing. It is our choice to connect with it, and it will always be there to help us connect with our best selves and whatever it is that we need at that moment, be it patience, courage, wisdom, compassion, and even rage. I call it Love.

Mine is a theology of a real and loving source which I call God, which embraces all, and with which we can freely choose to be in relation.

In this understanding, God is more of an energy than a person. It is at the same time personal and impersonal, expansive and microcosmic. God does not control but offers itself.

Therefore, as I understand it

God is chosen

God is love

God is brave, forgiving, and compassionate

God is fierce, strong, and beautiful

God knows no gender and

God moves toward justice, compassion, and communal liberation

This evergreening source or love is always available to everyone.

It is experienced through authentic connection within ourselves, between two or more people, and with the source itself. It is expressed through courageous action that works for the liberation and equality of all people, the earth, and its creatures.

I communion or come into contact and

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relationship with this source in silence and in action. I need both for my theology to be grounded and authentic at this point in my life. I am healthiest when I have a rich inner life and outer life. I am up before sunrise at 4 a.m. every day to relish two hours of uninterrupted spiritual practice. It is my soul's food.

My work in justice must, by necessity, be balanced with contemplative practices of centering prayer, silence, being with nature, writing, and connecting to my inner world. The silence calls me to engage in compassionate brave action for all who suffer, and my work in the world demands that I return to silence and connection, where I replenish and restore both my body and my soul.

I am a devoted follower of the life and teachings of Jesus, including giving priority to the marginalized, speaking truth to power, practicing nonviolence and inclusion, and demonstrating radical, radical love. I avoid intellectual debate about Jesus but find his teachings and way of life compelling and interesting.

I am a Unitarian Universalist minister who believes in the necessity and beauty of religious plurality and the right of all people to their beliefs. I am a pacifist and spiritual warrior who does her best to live by the values of love, courage, and beauty. I seek to be rigorously honest with myself and radically compassionate with others.

I believe in and find much guidance and nurturance from the spiritual realm including guides, spirits, and the unseen. There is more than meets the human eye.

Above all, my faith is one of hope. Hope that things will get better and that healing, and transformation are possible. I know this is possible on a personal level as I've lived it in my own life and supported many others in their own transformation. Because I believe that what is true on the micro level is also true on the macro level, I believe healing and transformation are possible on the public level. If, in my experience, we chose God, or love, connect in authentic relationship, act with courage, and realize there is always more than meets the eye.

Amen and blessed be.