



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

My Journey to Unitarian Universalism

Jen Raffensperger, Intern Minister

15 September 2019

frederickuu.org

A few months ago, as the spring semester and the church year were winding down, a friend of mine from seminary shared a game on their Facebook page. The idea behind the game was to look up what the #1 song on the Billboard Top 100 was on the week of your 14th birthday - because that very song would be the *key to your life's destiny!* Well, social media games are pretty silly, but a lot of us were feeling tired and worn down by the school year and the church year, and it was fun to let off steam by sharing and laughing about our fate as foretold by record sales.

I went to Google and typed "billboard top 100 march 6 1986" and discovered that the #1 song in the country on my 14th birthday was "Kyrie," by Mr. Mister. If you are not familiar with this track, it is indeed a catchy pop song whose chorus is based around the phrase "Kyrie Eleison," which means "Lord have mercy" in Greek.

Of course I knew this. I was raised Roman Catholic, and every week we intoned, "Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison" - Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy.

I was ECSTATIC that this was my song. The internet was telling me my destiny and I was HERE FOR IT. I loved this song so much. I have sung this song at karaoke as a grown adult. I rushed to my friend's post to share the good news: "Kyrie eleison, down the road that I must travel / Kyrie eleison, through the darkness of the night / Kyrie

eleison, where I'm going, will you follow? / Kyrie eleison, on a highway in the light"

Traveling, roads, darkness, light, companionship, and mercy. All right there in the chorus.

I could tell you another story about the spring of 1986, when I turned fourteen. In that spring - the spring of my *destiny!* - I was preparing to receive the sacrament of Confirmation. The last of the sacraments of initiation - after baptism, confession, and communion - after confirmation I would be considered an adult in the eyes of the church.

I took my faith very seriously as a child. It frustrated me how little that felt reciprocated - I wanted to be taken seriously so badly. And I thought confirmation, symbolic adulthood, might help.

When it was time to select a confirmation name - selecting a saint whose life would be a model for you - I also took that seriously. I read about different saints and wondered which of their lives would be something I could possibly emulate. At last, I made my selection. When my teachers and the parish priest saw that I had picked St. Augustine, they gently asked why. I explained that he'd lived a fun and interesting life and then converted when he was older and had had all the fun, and then became really important, and wrote books! (I feel like this was a pretty sound understanding of the man who cursed humanity with the concept of original sin for a 14-year-old without Google.) Clearly impressed by my thorough research, my choice was approved.

On confirmation day, my class gathered at the church, wearing our white robes with a dove design outlined in red, to symbolize the Holy Spirit. In the order of service for the Mass, there was a list of everyone being confirmed, sorted along binary gender lines - boys on the left-hand side, girls on the right, in center-justified columns. Many of the other students had picked names they liked, or had chosen a name to honor a favorite relative. On the girls' list, there were a lot of short sweet choices: Mary Elizabeth Brown.

Sarah Joan Smith. And then three-quarters of the way down the sheet, there was an entire line of text devoted to: JENNIFER AUGUSTINE RAFFENSPERGER.

Which of these stories revealed my true destiny? I suppose my standing before you here, today, makes the answer fairly clear.

The actual answer is that I don't believe in destiny. There are honestly hundreds of stories I could have told you about the start of my faith journey. One of my favorite books that I read in my first year in seminary was Thomas King's *The Truth About Stories*. In that book, which was originally a series of lectures (you can listen to them on YouTube), King makes the assertion again and again that "Our stories are all we are."

The truth of my standing here today with you, nervous and happy and excited and just a little bit overwhelmed, is not just one story but many. Just as each one of you has your own stories that you tell about who you are and how you came to be in this world, I could make this story a comedy or a tragedy. I could project a happy ending or a somber one. The truth of me is, I AM Jennifer Augustine Raffensperger. And I AM a person who will get up and belt out '80s songs at karaoke. And I AM your Intern Minister for the next two years.

I want to begin the journey of sharing these things with you, so that you all can start to know me. And as you start to know me, I will also start to know you. We are at the beginning of our journey together, and that means we'll also get to write new stories together.

The story of leaving the Catholic church is not an uncommon one. I was fortunate not to leave under a cloud of animosity. My father was ordained a permanent deacon in the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C. in 1983. Deacons serve as volunteers, my father worked a full-time job at the U.S. Department of Education, but his vocation - his call - was to serve the church. I lived surrounded by the strong faith that he and my mother shared. At times it felt downright disappointing that I couldn't share their faith, and they

mourned that with me but never pressured me to return. The church was gentler with me than it was with far too many, and I rage and mourn for them and with them.

When I stopped being Catholic, I was nothing at all. I thought of myself as spiritual, but did nothing to sustain that part of myself. Instead, I tried to subsist on a diet more suited for the intellect. In my undergraduate studies at the University of Maryland, I majored in English Language and Literature with a concentration in Mythology and Folklore.

To me, one of the most fascinating things about faith is its ubiquity. What artifact resides within human consciousness that spurs us on to ask the big questions, to seek meaning and the tools of meaning-making? Is that artifact human consciousness itself? Can we narrate its being in a way that satisfies us? Or will we search forever?

I suspect, strongly, that we will search forever. I suspect, strongly, that if anything at all can be considered sacred, it is that search.

So I studied the stories humans tell about the world and their place within it, and eventually I even finished my degree (only four years ago, in 2015!). And in the meantime I became an atheist. After some struggles with my physical and mental health at the turn of the century, I attended the Godless Americans March on Washington in November of 2002. I was excited to surround myself with like-minded folks and hoped for a spirit of solidarity and community, but I did not find it. I wondered if I had to return to an idea of God that didn't work for me to find the sort of community I seemed to long for?

I bounced around. I got more healthy in body and mind. I did more volunteering. In 2004 I moved to Columbia, MD and started forming relationships through a group of active local bloggers. Eventually I thought it important for me to take some time every week to devote to my seeking nature - in short, I went back to church. I went back to *Catholic* church, for the worst reason: it was closest to my apartment. It was nice. It wasn't community, it wasn't what I was looking for, but it was nice.

And then in the summer of 2009, mere days after the summer solstice in fact, my father was diagnosed with stage 4 adenocarcinoma - non-small-cell lung cancer. He died on September 20 of that year, mere days before the autumnal equinox. It was a season of extreme pain and extreme grace. I was with my mother at my father's side when he died. His beloved church community came out in huge droves for his funeral a week later, and a part of the grace of my strange and unexpected return to Catholicism was how much easier it made for me to navigate bearing the grief of that community along with my own.

During my father's funeral, a bird got trapped inside the church, flapping nervously high above the altar where it found an uneasy perch. The priest worked that scared little bird into the leave-taking in a beautiful way. I could ask for nothing more of the Catholic church than the way that building held all the work and heartbreak and joy of my father's life and soul, and that little bird's life and body, in the same gentle hands.

And then, and then, I was done.

My volunteer work continued. My engagement with the world around me built. In 2011 I began to volunteer with Marylanders for Marriage Equality, and one night we held a phone bank in the Owen Brown Interfaith Center in Columbia. The sanctuary we sat in had plates mounted on the wall, with symbols representing all the major religions of the world. I was intrigued - what kind of church meets here, did you say? Unitarian Universalist? I went right home and Googled that. The next weekend, I attended service for the first time.

I'm sure you're familiar with the expression - the "still, small voice"? It's often used when ministers tell the story of their call to ministry. As I sat in the back of the sanctuary during that first service, tears streaming down my face, I did not hear a still, small voice. I heard a shout. Perhaps it was a quiet voice at some time in my life, but I had raised so many barriers between myself and the possibility that voice could even exist that it was

though I'd wrapped my head in a big wool muffler and couldn't hear a thing.

It was unbelievably arrogant to sit in my first worship service and feel a call to lead. But deeply, it was a call for connection. To know more, to learn more, to live more, and to go deeper. I joined the church, I took classes, I read books. I volunteered. I trained as an OWL facilitator. I joined a Reflection group, what we called our small group ministry. I walked forward on the path, uncertain where it would lead but always trusting my foot would find a hold. This is faith.

And this, my new and already dear community, is also my charge to you. Walk forward with your senses open to the unexpected. When someone shares their story with you, receive it as the gift it is. As we each hold and are formed of countless stories both told and untold, it is an act of path-finding and trust to share them with each other.

When I was younger, and angrier, I used to rail that no religion was perfect because all religions were human institutions, and humans were far from perfect. What a dangerous and slightly absurd idea that is, "perfection." I would invite us to consider the beauty of knowing all religion IS human centered, human made, and subject to human faults. Because we are beautiful and awful and together we can shine a bright light and share the pain of our darkest spaces.

Perhaps I will tell one last story for now. When I was very young, perhaps five or six, I have a vivid memory of sitting in that church - the same one where we held my father's funeral more than 30 years later - and closing my eyes during one of the times of silent prayer. I got an image in my head, of something - like smoke, or steam, but less actual, more charged - rising up from each person in that building, meeting together up overhead outside and above the church. For years that was my image of God, arising from all of us gathered together.

Years later, I read Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. A particular passage struck me like the ringing of a bell. "...have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a

bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God.”

“Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me.”

Even as I have, over time, questioned the use of the word God for myself, to speak of my own faith - this has felt true. “They come to church to share God, not find God.” Call it love or light or harmony or community. That artifact of human consciousness that calls us to question that which is beyond ourselves, beyond our understanding. That which allows us to imagine a future where we have all together truly created justice, equity, and compassion. Where in all our names, all oppression shall cease.

My faith journey was, for a good while, a journey away from something. When I started coming out of some of my health struggles, when I started looking for community and connection, that was when my journey really started to be a journey *toward* something. Admittedly, I didn’t know what it was. When you’ve never been a part of a true community, it’s hard to explain what you’re missing. My seeking nature, wanting to see what was around the next bend of the road, figured I would know it when I saw it. And blessed be, I did.

I am sure there are people here today who found this place because they were seeking something in particular, just as I am sure there are people here today by means of what feels like happenstance, accident, coincidence, or pure luck. And it may also be that there are people here who found this place while running from another place, a place of harm or fear or indifference or dissatisfaction. I don’t think it’s destiny you’re here - I don’t believe in destiny, remember - but I do think one of our most important tools for the journey is *noticing*. If you notice the reasons why you’re here today, you might be drawn into your own story. And you might feel called to share it. Maybe today we’ll all ask each other, “Hey, how did *you* come to be here?” Because I promise each of our stories is sacred. Our stories are all we are. You can read that line in two ways; one, the “all” is diminishing, dismissive: “oh, that’s all?” Two, that “all” can be full of majesty and wonder:

“ALL of this is amazing!” Or to quote Julian of Norwich, who would have been a much better choice of confirmation saint, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” However you are here, however you notice your story showing up within you, I am glad and grateful for you.

Our shared story is just beginning. For all of us, I offer this blessing, that we may hold up light for one another when we are unsure of the way. That we receive every person’s story as a gift. That we bring our full selves to this community, celebrating on the days we feel full and fulfilled and honoring even those days we feel we are not enough. We are all enough; we are all beloved companions on this road to wholeness.

Blessed be, and amen.