



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

“My Journey to Unitarian Universalism”

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Like Dorothy’s journey, my twists and turns to the place where I stand right now have been more emotional and spiritual - more internal than external. This is not a story of hardship, in the sense that I have always had privilege. Like Dorothy, I had a pretty average upbringing, and also like Dorothy, I have been looking for home for as long as I can remember. It’s so good to finally be here.

Religion has always been a huge part of my life. My parents were Baby Boomer hippies who found Jesus. I say that they “were” because although they are both still alive, their lives have been marked by constant movement and journey, and the Jesus-freak hippies that they once were are now long gone. Shortly after I was born in the late 1970s, my father, an Episcopalian priest in northern Virginia began moving ideologically to the right. It was a slow creep, but looking back all of the signs were there. Over the years first crucifixes and then Eastern Orthodox icons began appearing on our walls. My dad’s Episcopalian congregation, who in the 70’s had dabbled in things like speaking in tongues and the laying on of hands to heal people - started complaining about my dad’s affinity for incense and his growing insistence on a very Catholic-looking, high-church liturgy. At home my mother pulled out of her local women’s rights group, for a while

rising high in the ranks of a national organization called “Feminists for Life” until one day she set her jaw and defiantly declared that she would be leaving that group too, as she could no longer call herself a feminist.

My brothers and I were put into Catholic school. Jesus was slowly taking over my house, and he wasn't the kindly shepherd-Jesus of my youth. This new Jesus didn't ordain women, insisted that we “pray constantly,” and appeared physically in the bread and wine that we consumed every week in church.

I realized that none of us were in Kansas anymore when my parents had us all baptized into the Antiochian Orthodox church - I was 13. I don't know how much you remember about being 13 but... wow. 13 is such a complicated and confusing time for a kid, and my mother sat me down and literally explained to me that I was no longer to believe in lots of things, including a lot of my own rights as a woman. My name was changed, because Megan is not an Orthodox name, in church I would be Marina. It was also at this age that I was realizing that I had a terrible, agonizing, embarrassing secret: I had a crush on my best friend. Another girl. The realization that I was gay was too scary to consciously accept. But the self-hate certainly began to grow at that point, encouraged by the fertilizer of my parents' newfound faith.

I hope that none of you are too offended if I refer to Eastern Orthodoxy as fertilizer. It's kind of like that thing where I can make fun of and say things about my family but I'd be upset if someone else did it.

After my family converted I remained Eastern Orthodox for over 20 years. Eastern Orthodoxy is that sibling that I cannot agree with but will always love. And if I

am comparing myself to Dorothy, then converting to Eastern Orthodoxy at age 13 was the tornado that turned my house, and my life upside down.

I've always felt out of place in my family. Maybe we all do to an extent, but my 2 younger brothers just ate up the Eastern Orthodoxy thing. By this time we had moved from Virginia to Maryland and my dad started a small mission church in a Baltimore suburb. It just exploded. Eastern Orthodoxy has recently exploded in the US, as disillusioned millennials have been reaching for something with substance. By the time I was in college, my dad and brothers were renovating a small stone building in Linthicum that was to become Holy Cross Antiochian Church. In a bid to win parental approval and desperately clinging to the belief that I needed to "pray the gay away" I had chosen to attend a tiny, extremely conservative Catholic college in the Virginia hills. I stand before you bearing the distinction of being the only non-Catholic to have ever graduated from this particular school.

When I went to my dad during Freshman year and worried about the fact that at the time no non-Catholic had ever graduated: every Protestant student going to that school before me had either converted or dropped out, my father laughed smugly and reassured me that "Those people (Protestants) were less than Catholic. We, Orthodox are *more than* Catholic."

By the time I had graduated with my Bachelors and moved home, Holy Cross Antiochian Church, under the ministry of my "Very Reverend" dad had amassed a large and devoted, almost cult-like group of converts.

I fell into and enveloped myself into that group as if it were a soft, warm blanket. It numbed me from everything. I married very young, had three kids before turning 30,

and kept hoping that if I could just lock myself into a heterosexual life, the torment of my true feelings, my true self would disappear. I was a stay-at-home mom for 10 years, attending 3-hour long church services, fasting, praying, trying to be “good enough” that God would reach down and just make me attracted to my husband. I would even settle for less. Just, God, please, make me stop being attracted to women.

I have this little flicker of a memory. I must have been 3 or 4 years old. Maybe 5? I’m walking through my father’s church. We are Episcopalian. It’s Sunday but the worship service is over, and I’m walking down the hallway with all of the rooms, with all of the different religious education classes happening, kind of like we have here. And the doors are open and I can hear bits of conversations - I pass a room full of teens, who seem impossibly sophisticated and mature to me at the time - and they are debating something about God. And the next room is a group of adults. They sound like they are arguing, again something about God. And another room and another room and I realize that there a maybe a hundred people here discussing and theologizing about God. And I feel something so clear in my soul - a clarity that I have rarely felt since. A clarity that said this in my heart: “God is love. That is all you ever need to know. Debates are not important. God is love. God is love. God is love.”

I realized many years later that it was at that moment that I became a Unitarian Universalist. I have always been uninterested in parsing the details of understanding the makeup of the Trinity. My God is really, really big. Unknowably big. The word “God” is too small for my God. And I could never get on board with the idea of hell.

All of those years that I desperately tried to be a good Orthodox Christian, I followed the strict rules about fasting and rules against feminism and homosexuality to myself, but I didn't believe that they should apply to others.

It's crazy how we can all do that, isn't it? We can be so harsh with ourselves. It can be so easy to extend compassion to other people, but so hard to love ourselves.

My daughter, my oldest, was a cranky baby. But she grew into a really well-behaved, sweet kid. Next came Adam, and he was different. An easygoing baby, he grew into a tortured, obsessive-compulsive toddler. He was diagnosed with autism at age 3 and autism tormented his mind. He would spend tense hours lining up his toys rather than playing with them, having a complete meltdown when one toy would inevitably roll just slightly out of line with the others. He wasn't learning language, he didn't look us in the eye, he barely looked at me at all. He was inexplicably isolated, completely alone in his head, agonizing, and I could not reach him. It was terrifying.

My faith crumbled. My tiny, desperate faith in Eastern Orthodoxy, which I had openly described as more of a faith in my family and in their religion than as a faith of my own, evaporated. I couldn't believe in a loving God that could make my sweet boy suffer like this. Christianity had no good answer for me, only infuriating platitudes about things happening for a reason and God having a plan. I didn't care what God's stupid plan was for my son. It clearly wasn't a very good plan and God never consulted me about it!

Still, to leave the faith would mean leaving everything and everyone that I had ever known. I had no income, my resume was blank, and I knew that I had to now keep one more secret from everyone.

And one day, when my daughter was about 10, I was agonizing about all of this - feeling stifled, suffering deep depression, the pain of years of suppression and submission - and a dear friend asked me, "What would you want for your daughter?"

From the moment that question was raised, I realized that my life could never be the same. My entire life looked completely different from the perspective of, what am I modeling to Hannah? What do I want her to learn? What do I hope she becomes? Do I want Hannah to learn that a marriage is this - putting up with each other because God said so? Do I want her to learn that being a woman is simply a measure of how many babies you produce?

When I left Eastern Orthodoxy, I left utterly alone. God didn't even come with me.

With no friends or family, I learned pretty quickly what poverty was. It's amazing how fast poverty just rises up out of the ground when you are vulnerable. It just swallows you, and you are alone in it.

All I had ever known was church, and so I sought out a church to find a support system. I had heard of Unitarians - all I knew was that this was a church where it was okay to be gay. I could not even imagine what that could mean, but almost exactly 7 years ago I walked into First Unitarian in downtown Baltimore. If you have ever been there - it's architecturally something. It's not your typical UU church building, for sure. The historic building looks much like an old Catholic Cathedral, complete with an enormous Tiffany mural of the Last Supper at the front.

And Reverend David Carl Olsen was warm and kind and definitely my own personal Glinda the good witch. During the worship service, it seemed like the affirmations just kept coming! From the very beginning, "You are welcome here" was

stated and restated so many times, in the hymns, in the readings, and the mean little voice in the back of my head would say, “except you, Megan, clearly you’re not welcome here,” and before I could fully form the thought, there would be another reminder, now from the choir, and now from the passing of the peace and now during joys and sorrows, that I am welcome.

I have never felt really welcome in a church. Not welcome as I am, without some sort of understanding that I will be more welcome when I’m less of a sinner.

In that congregation, I found, not saints but seekers. Just as Dorothy didn’t find folks who knew where the Emerald City was, but she found folks who were also seeking something, folks who were willing to walk with her. Supportive, welcoming UUs walked with me.

The more I learned about Unitarianism, the more I realized that I was already a Unitarian. And the more I learned about Universalism, the more I realized the same. This was everything my soul had yearned for since that moment as a small child in the hallway of my father’s church, recognizing that in my mind, in my world, God is love and that for me, God is unknowable beyond that. And yet I love the seeking. I love the search. I see the holy not in ancient icons but in the energetic life force in living people. I am focused not on heaven but on this life.

These differences don’t make me better than my Orthodox family, but I have learned that they emphatically do NOT make me worse.

When I began seminary, my stated goal was to make friends with Jesus. He was the wizard of my Oz, the one who had sent me on this bizarre journey and who had turned out just to be some man behind a curtain, and I needed to stop being angry with

him in order to truly find my home. There are two Unitarian Universalist seminaries in the US, but I chose to attend a Christian seminary.

I needed to realize that Jesus is not the villain of the story, and Eastern Orthodoxy has really wonderful, beautiful attributes. The music, the mysticism. My parents brought me up in a strict, conservative, patriarchal religion that also is ethereal and otherworldly and historical and fascinating. The Wizard of Oz was just doing his best.

My dad just retired. Last month, actually. It's been a rocky road over the years with my family. I've been married to my wife for 5 years, but my parents met her less than a year ago. Healing is slow, even when everyone involved wants to heal. My dad just retired and the church he founded in Linthicum is going strong with a young new priest taking over. My parents moved to Tennessee to be close to my brother Steve, 5 years younger than me and a priest in his own Greek Orthodox church in Johnson City.

I was able to visit last March and wow it is hard to get used to hearing folks, like elderly Greek ladies, call my goofy little brother "Father." As in "You're Father's sister?" What? But when everyone went forward at the end of the service, as is tradition, and kissed my baby brother's hand as he blessed them, I went too.

And in that moment, I wasn't kissing the idea of the Orthodox Church or endorsing its horrific patriarchy. I was being a minister. To him and to myself. I was ministering to our relationship. You see, a miracle happened. A small, everyday miracle like clicking my heels. Not only did I realize that Unitarian Universalism was within me the whole time, and like Dorothy, I just had to wish for home, and there it had been all

along, with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Water Communion, and Spirit of Life and you and you and even you Carl.

But the bigger miracle was when I was able to look my brothers and my parents in the eyes and say, "I disagree with you. I think what you have chosen to do and how you have chosen to live can be very hurtful and destructive." And they can look me in the eyes and say the exact same thing to me. And then we can step back and love each other anyway. That is truly a miracle.

My journey to Unitarian Universalism involved following a yellow brick road, and there was a tornado and a witch and wizard, and I had to find courage and a brain and a heart.

And all I have ever wanted was to go back home. And now I am here. Thank you.