

SPIRITUAL BIOGRAPHY FOR EVE MAHR

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I think I've always had my faith. I've never really doubted God's presence in my life, I know he helps me in a myriad of ways. I don't remember, even in my college years, ever yielding to the question of God's existence. Neither did I think this was different than anybody else I knew, at least those in church. But in my young-mother years, I became interested in spiritual gifts. And I've consistently been identified with the gift of faith. So this is sort of a recitation of how I learned to use my faith to help others, thus far.

The Transient Years

I suppose the first segment of my life is more about church and less about faith. I was lucky enough from an early age to have “nagging” grandparents who thought I “ought to be in Sunday school.” Mom and I stayed with her parents and Grandma took me with her to a small Disciples church in northern Missouri. I only vaguely remember going there with her because our family moved to Muscatine, Iowa, when I was 3-1/2, but I continued to go with her when we visited.

Dad had become manager of the local Goodyear store and, as was a corporate trend, young managers were transferred every few years. My paternal grandfather advised we go to the local Baptist church, and I became one of those kids who were sent to Sunday school. When we moved to Ottumwa, Iowa a couple of years later, I continued to attend Baptist Sunday school partly because the church was only two blocks away, and I could walk there by myself. I remember it was very important to me that I go every Sunday.

Going to church as a family came a year or two later. Some friends of my parents had attended a summer “revival” program at the Disciples church on the south side of Ottumwa and encouraged Mom and Dad to attend church there with them, so they did. And I was back in Disciples Sunday school for a year or so.

Transfer time came again, and it was off to Decorah, Iowa, but there were no rentals there for a family with five children, so we lived in Cresco, about 20 miles away. It's a heavily Czech-Catholic town and there were no Disciples churches, so I went to Methodist Sunday school. What I remember most from that year's experience was learning about Old Testament kings.

Stability at Last

My Dad wasn't real happy with that job, traveling from one small-town dealer to the next and taking their tire orders, but he was befriended by the Decorah dealer who encouraged him to go into business for himself and helped him find a franchise to buy....in Vinton, Iowa. I was 10 years old when that happened and our transient years ended.

Mostly what I remember from those transient years is learning Bible stories. That began to change at First Christian Church in Vinton, partly I'm sure, because of my age, but it seems like Sunday school and Sunday sermons asked questions about meaning and relationships of Bible passages. Church became a family activity, too.

Before too long, my paternal grandparents moved to Vinton. They became active in the Baptist church, but what sticks in my memory is that Grandpa was always had a strong consistency between his beliefs and his behavior. He and Grandma took food and other necessities to families in need, some in an on-going fashion, and visited folks in the local hospital. Yet they hardly ever spoke of it. We might not have known, except for all the folks that told us at his funeral. For me, he led by example.

In Disciples tradition, at the age of twelve, I confessed my faith before the congregation, and was baptized by immersion. Even though that was a long time ago, it remains a powerful image in my soul ---owning responsibility for my faith.

Two things stand out from my high school years. First I went to summer camp several years. I don't remember specific topics anymore, but I know that my understanding of Christ deepened there. I also had a great curiosity about history and I read several books about the founding of the Christian denomination. This intensified my faith, in what now seems a bit curious manner. The immigrant Scotsman who settled on the Kentucky frontier questioned a teaching about who should partake of Communion. This eventually lead him to the conclusion that "where the Bible speaks, the church should speak, and where the Bible is silent, the church should be silent." This lead me to the conclusion that God was capable of judging who should and shouldn't share in the bread and wine. (Like the Methodists, they were concerned about drunkenness and use grape juice to this day.) Another choice disciples founders made was to offer Communion at every service. They dispensed with infant baptism, looking to the baptism of Jesus as an example. Because it was an era when creeds were highly disputed, they determined there would be "No creed but Christ." These last two teachings caused me a great deal of soul searching when I joined the Episcopal church.

In my mind these four issues were the foundation of worship and I became aware that the New Testament was the critical part of the Bible, the Old Testament being important to understanding the place of Jesus in faith, but not nearly as theologically relevant as the New Testament.

Off On My Own

At a countywide youth meeting, I heard a sermon that compared the faith to a fairy tale: young persons often need to go off and slay their dragons or test their limits before they settle into God's plan. It was a powerful permission for me in my college and pre-children years follow that scenario to a tee.

During my first three years in college, I seldom went to worship service, but I discovered the Sunday evening meal and fellowship group sponsored by the Disciple's church. I remember making many friends there and lively discussions. It attracted students from a number of denominations.

I particularly remember a series of speakers from non Christian faiths and specifically the Bahai. I was impressed by the peaceful interaction they spoke of. Now I think, silly me, that's Jesus teaching, too!

This was the mid '60s and the relationship of the church and the world was a regular topic. Some members of the group went to Mississippi to protest segregation. Soon after, Viet Nam and the draft also became part of our conversations.

The group expanded and joined with a UCC group. Eventually, this fellowship presented an opportunity for a weekend field trip to a place called the Ecumenical Institute in Chicago. This was quite an eyeopener for me. They taught about the freedom that Jesus's sacrifice on the cross gives us to interact in the wrongs that happen in society. When we returned, we continued to meet and called

ourselves a Cadre. A number of my friends from that experience eventually formed Iowa State's SDS chapter.

Shortly before the Chicago trip, I had been elected to represent the women's dormitory system in student government. I struggled often with the sense of what is right and what is effective, as well as where I want to be on that continuum. Eventually, I decided not to be on the cutting edge, but to stand behind those who are and push. And I'm still more comfortable there.

Dragon-Slaying Time

Meantime, I met Steve Mahr at one of the early computer matching experiments at Iowa State. In only a few short months, we knew we wanted marry. More likely because we had much in common than the IBM Dance (but after 50 plus years, it's still a fun story to tell). His father worked for Skelly Oil, another of those large corporations that moved people every few years in the post war era. He had already graduated Iowa State, was teaching high school math and science, and working on a graduate degree; I aspired to be a social studies teacher. We both opposed the Viet Nam war, although I had been more vocal about it. We were both fixers, he's good with his hands, built our deck, replaced the ceiling in what's now our office, and laid the hardwood floor in our back hallway. Together, we remodeled our kitchen, removing a wall and hanging cabinets, and we've stripped and finished most of the woodwork in our house.

I think we are both emotional fixers, too, but that doesn't always serve either of us well. I do think time has mellowed us and we have learned that some things require more listening than fixing.

He's good with money and has taught me to be as well. The entire time we were raising children we owned a few rental properties. When there was a vacancy, the prep for a new tenant wasn't always pleasant, but I still think that cleaning other peoples dirty ovens has enabled us to have the comfortable retirement we have.

We married after my junior year in college, living in Pammel Court, a student community of WWII metal barracks buildings with tiny yards and gravel streets. When I graduated went off to southeast Iowa to teach and continued the dragon-slaying time of life. At one point we began to explore churches, but shortly thereafter, Steve got drafted and we spent a couple of years as vagabonds, never in one place very long and far more concerned about where we were going next than anything else.

To this day, we both have an awful, and grateful feeling about the army sending him to Korea instead of Viet Nam. An American military plane strayed over North Korea, was shot down, and all 39 aboard were killed, causing the army to reevaluate troop strength in South Korea. We learned later that orders were recut to send Steve's unit there instead of Nam. I was able to join him for over half the tour.

The seven months I was in Korea influences me today. Because it was pre-Internet, our only communications with our families at home was the mail. We did send cassette tapes back and forth, but we felt very cut off from home. I remember that feeling when I interact with our refugee friends. I often tell them I'm their American mom, or grandma, or whatever.

Return to Community

Finally, we returned to settle in Des Moines, started our family, and began settling into God's plan, just