

Spiritual Journey Narrative for Eve Mahr

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I think I've always had 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. But the idea of an ordained call never really crossed my mind until about 1-1/2 years ago. I was moving through life, trying to do what I could to further God's work in the world, until, we were doing a "practice" spiritual gifts meeting. Since in my young-mother years, I became interested in spiritual gifts, researched it, and taught a couple of workshops, I agreed to be the subject. When one of my friends asked if I'd ever considered the diaconate, I was really startled, and I immediately shook the idea off. But in today's popular speak, God's voice "persists" and try as I might, I could not let go! So I spoke to my rector, and began the discernment journey.

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 dealership 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 Goodyear dealership 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 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 it is the New Testament that makes us Christians.

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. In hindsight, it was also the beginning of my awareness, as James letter says, "I, by my works, will show you my faith."

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, it was because we had much in common than because of the IBM Dance (but after 50 plus years, it's still a fun story to tell).

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 we 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 as predicted at that youth rally eight or ten years earlier.

We listed what we wanted in a church: weekly communion, friendly congregation, nursery for our toddler son, Derek, and Sunday school. It was also vitally important to me that we find a church where we could worship as a family. That pretty much limited us to Steve's loose Episcopal upbringing and my Disciples church. The first Episcopal church we tried was St. Luke's; we were warmly welcomed and decided we didn't need to look at any more Episcopal congregations. We visited several Disciple's churches where we felt invisible. Though I liked St. Luke's I found it hard to let go of my own history just because we hadn't found a friendly Disciple's church. So we searched on and finally located one. When I drive by that building, I often wonder what it would have been like if we had chosen it.

About the time we made that decision, our daughter Sarah was born. My next hurdle was baptizing the children. My Disciple's background told me it was unnecessary, but I wanted them to be full participants in the community we had chosen for them. Eventually I came to realize that full membership in God's family was appropriate for children because we fully intended to bring them to worship regularly.

To a smaller degree, I was uncomfortable with the idea of being "confirmed." After all, I had "accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior" when I was twelve. But in the end, I decided it was OK, because it was also an acceptance in the Episcopal family.

We were quickly incorporated into the community at St. Luke's. "Stay-at-home" moms were still more