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Sermon at Shoreline

### **Let my life speak**

Each of life's experiences has the potential to inform us about **our** work and life. And so, what will I do with **my** life? Who am I anyway? I know there are gifts here!! But what are they and to what use can I put them? These were some of the questions I was asking myself as I approached retirement from teaching. How is my life speaking to me? I must find a way to listen.

I didn't have to retire, really. There is no rule that you can't go on teaching, I guess forever. All in all it was a rewarding profession. But did I want to continue?

I started making lists of all the ways I could use my teaching profession, but it wasn't quite enough to lead me to the next step in my life.

I stepped back even further to look at my whole adult life, not just the teaching part. What had really sparked my passion? Certainly parenting was my first vocation. What was in **that** experience that energized me? There were two elements that emerged. Maybe they would go together. The first I will call the ministry of service ---connecting to others in gratifying ways. And the second was my own growth in spiritual values. You might say, that throughout my adult life, I was "building my own theology." I pondered, What is my next step in life? I wanted to find ways that expressed my **heart's** knowing. I was on a journey to find myself!, my real self. Just like the minnow in our children's story, I thought about other people and their lives. Was I like those other people? I had to ask "what have my life experience's told me about who I am?"

I thought back to one of my earliest adult life experiences, which left a lasting impression on me. And here's how the story began: I had married a young man - we were college sweethearts. He decided to join the Air force. Out of training, his first assignment was to the Philippines. Frankly, I didn't know where in the world the Philippines was! I had lived all my life in Los Angeles, and traveled once to Santa Barbara. Where was the Philippines? What would this be like? I had no idea, but off we went.

This turned out to be an experience that would change my life forever, but not right away. It was not so much that we were in the Philippine Islands, but what called to me about the experience. Where was my inner teacher leading me? His assignment was to a Rest and Recreation base, with a full 19 hole golf course, and amenities, located near Baguio City, far north of Manila. So what's wrong with that? We soon realized we were living in a fascinating country and had no way of actually meeting the people of this country. We had no connection to Filipino neighbors or friends. What to do? How could we connect? This frustration led to a possibility.

We had both attended the Methodist church as we were growing up, and we learned there was a church in Baguio City, a Methodist church!! We thought, this could be an opportunity to meet young couples; Filipino couples...regular folks just like us. Anyone here ever search out a church in order to find community of like people? I hope so. The people in the church were not the same ones coming to the golf course; they were middle class families, just like us. We began attending this Filipino church and found the community we were looking for!!

I told you this church was in Baguio city, which is also the gateway to the Mountain Provinces. One of the members of the church was a midwife serving the mountain tribes. She approached my husband and I, offering to guide us on an adventure of trekking into the mountains where there were many small villages of tribal people. She also asked if we might help her with some of the things she needed in her role as midwife. She needed simple medicines and a stretcher capable of carrying people over the mountain trails. The government did not provide these needed supplies to her.

We were excited about this opportunity. I was unable to go at that time because I was pregnant with our first child. However, my husband embraced this adventure eagerly. And along the way, he saw things he had never seen before in the human communities of Los Angeles. He saw strong older men and women carrying large baskets of potatoes on their backs to deliver to far off markets. He saw families gathering together for the joy of having their pictures taken, something they had never experienced, photos of themselves. He saw children with gross health problems, which led to high childhood mortality. He came home with photos and stories.

I listened intently to his stories and was moved to action by his photos. Yes, there is a way to respond to the midwife's request. I went to a local charity group, comprised mostly of foreign women who did projects to benefit the community. It was fairly easy to convince them of the need we had found in these remote mountain villages. It took a while to raise money, complete the creation of layettes for the babies who were served by the midwife. And we were able to buy the correct needed stretcher. When it was all done, my husband and I presented the gifts to the midwife. But this was not the most important event that impacted me. After all, I knew of other people who had discovered a need, raised money, and answered the need. It's a mixed bag really --- of privilege, ego, and self-satisfaction. I remember back to the first element that stirred me, the call to a ministry of service ---connecting to others in gratifying ways. And then the other part ---my search for my own spirituality. It is what happened **next** that pierced my heart and changed me forever.

An invitation came from one of the most remote villages along the midwife's trail. By this time our baby was old enough to leave her with friends. They were to have a village Canyow, a big event, sort of like a Potlatch. We were invited to attend. Wow, this was really big. No white woman had ever been to

their village. A few men had been there during the war. This village was extremely remote. Should we go? Could we go? What would be the dangers? Where would we sleep? What would we eat? Obviously there were health risks. When my husband had gone earlier, the waters were so high he had to walk on large logs suspended over rushing rivers. Oooh. This is not for me.

After all the questions were probed, we decided to go. It was at least an eight hour hike after the bus dropped us at the end of the line. When we got to the village, we were welcomed and provided for. We stayed in a very simple guest house they had. Our meals were served by the men who had caught fresh fish and meat from the local stream and countryside. Each day we visited the Canyon, my husband took pictures. I looked on in amazement at the rituals performed. This photo shows the elders dancing, using ancient blankets saved from their families. They are honoring their parents and ancestors, performing the dance to assure that the "gods" are taking care of their family.

The family presenting the Canyon went to the river to bathe on the first day. This ritual of cleansing reminded me of the renewal of baptism, practiced by many faiths. They came back to the gathering then and prayed to the "spirits" believed to be present with them. I kept thinking, these rituals are universal expressions of a belief in powers greater than they are. How did they get this knowledge? They are so remote here. They know nothing of the Bible or the Koran, and yet they are participating in religious ritual. This is a ritual that has been repeated in **their** community for many years; this is not new age, nor modern ideas imposed on them.

Then I noticed a bowl of water by the side of the woman, who was nursing her baby while participating in the ritual. The bowl reflects the spirits' presence in the community. So here in this very remote village is a ritual which includes cleansing, water, prayer, all done in community, what else? The shared meal!!

The peak of the Canyon ceremony is when the pigs, who have been preserved for this occasion, are released into the walled area where we are all watching. The pigs run, chased by the men. Who will be the first to catch and kill the pig for feasting? Yelling, running, cheering, laughing. Finally, each pig is laying on the ground, killed in just the right way, and ready for roasting. Each person attending is given meat, sweet potatoes and vegetables. What is not eaten right then is taken back to homes and villages nearby. And so the community is sustained through sharing and ritual.

It is the ritual that spoke to me that week. My inner teacher was haunted by what I saw. I brought very little life experience to that moment, and I kept thinking "How do I think about the great Spirit of love and life? The Ultimate mystery, which has no name, but we name it god. **my God** is not limited to those who know the Bible or the Koran. My god is not limited to those who use a special fount for baptism or perform a special ritual of belonging. My God is not

limited to roast beef and turkey served with fancy dishes and silver. My God is big enough to reach every place, everywhere.

I searched for words to articulate what I learned from that experience. Much later, I found these words of Theodore Parker. They express closely how I feel about the mystery we call god. His words were about Unitarian Universalism. I choose to change it just a bit:

“Be mine **a God**, which like sunshine, goes everywhere; its (the) temple, all space; its (the) shrine a good heart; its (the) creed, all truth; its(the) ritual, works of love; its(the) profession of faith, divine living.”

This was just the beginning, a little awareness I took into my heart. I didn't change much in my religious practice, but that spark was there. When we returned to the States, we continued attending the Methodist church. I became involved in a women's group and said "yes" to becoming the worship leader for the group. I got really charged about creating my own reflections, exploring what was on my mind about the meaning of the human experience. This was another little step in thinking about life's ultimate meaning for me.

I was involved in the doing ---caring for two little children, then volunteering for a Vista Program where I could take my children with me. And I was deepening my own spiritual reflections as life presented itself to me.

We moved here and there as my husband launched his career as an attorney. Finally, we moved to the Northwest, and rented a little place on Vashon Island, but we didn't find a church there that invigorated us much. So I took on the task of creating little celebrations whenever it seemed right. My husband played the autoharp and we enjoyed family life just by being together, singing on Sunday mornings. It was good.

So how did I get here? There was another step. Another family move was to Mercer Island, with still no formal church involvement. We now had four children, and there was growing stress in our marriage. One day, I said to myself, "I need church. I need community. I need spiritual nourishment." I knew a little about Unitarian Universalism, but not much. I chose to attend East shore Unitarian, in Bellevue. My youngest daughter went with me. I sat alone in the Sanctuary, which felt strange to me at first, but the experience of that community was so comforting, I kept going back. The amazing thing was....all that previous time, I thought I was the only person who thought the way I did about the ultimate values of life. My own theology had led me to the Universalism committed to in our Principles: to respect the worth and dignity of **every** person.

I remembered my first experience with the tribal people of the Philippines. My God is for every person and every living thing! **This Church** has a set of Principles I can embrace. I have found my religious home!! Here I can continue my journey in ministry and spiritual growth.

This experience in a remote village in the Philippines has been the spark of my religious truth ever since. It began there and has gradually grown to a full blown blaze. My experience is not over. I continue to listen to my inner voice and ask, how does this experience fit into my life and how I make sense of it. Reading books is part of life's experience. I especially like true stories. I am currently reading Obama's book, *Dreams of my father*. This beautifully written autobiography is similar to Parker Palmer's statement about himself: Let my Life speak.

I found this statement especially relevant: Obama is sharing some wisdom from his father, written in a letter he carried with him, "Know where you belong," his father advised. He made it sound so simple. But, "where did I belong? I had no idea what I was going to do with my life." 115. Barack had a special challenge. He looked black, which carried many assumptions from everyone he met, and yet he was equally white, raised in a white family and culture. Where did he belong? He was awake to his experiences -places he did not belong, situations that did not match his own integrity, and what he knew of himself. Through many situations, he kept searching for his true self, "I realized then, that I was a heretic. Even a heretic must believe in something, if nothing more than the truth of his own doubt." 163.

Like Obama, I have doubt about many things. In choosing to enter the School of theology, my doubt has been fed through the experiences of learning with many other students. In this School environment, I have been challenged to respond to deep questions, to articulate what is most precious to me. I didn't know what I would find in that experience. I found much diversity of faiths and cultures in the student body, each person willing to listen as well as speak their truth. I found there, not rejection, but an opportunity to strengthen my voice. I have learned to listen more acutely to my inner teacher to make choices about my life, and to keep on the path, my path.

I have learned about great thinkers from the past who articulated a theology much like mine. Some of those voices have been diminished because of politics and power that claimed a different theology. I have read the words of modern theologians who have words to claim a theology much like mine, catholic and protestant, and Unitarian writers. I am grateful to know that my life is still being informed by the experiences of the last four years at Seattle U. and I have more experiences ahead of me. I look forward to journeying with each of you, here at Shoreline, and I know that this experience will be yet another part of my life in ministry and spiritual growth.

The little minnow is searching. He wants to be like the frog and experience what the frog has experienced. In the end he must be satisfied with his own experiences. He must find his true self.

The water that I swim in, as a Unitarian Universalist feels just right. These are waters that allow me to acknowledge some new ways to assimilate my life experience. I am not bound by old dogma, old rituals and words that have lost

their meaning. I am searching for new words and images that express to me that which is holy and supreme. I need a pond which allows me to swim with all the human family.