

JOURNEYS & PATHWAYS:

My Journey to the Institute for Culture & Creation Spirituality

I have mentioned before how much I enjoy hearing people tell their stories of how they arrived at a Unitarian Universalist Congregation, so I thought today I might tell you a few pieces of my journey that I haven't talked much about in a sermon. I will try not to bore you with too many details, but I do need to go back quite a few years to put some of this in context. A couple of important pieces of this you should know at the start: this is not just my story, but it is the story of Creation Centered Spirituality, not to be confused with Creation Science or other flat-earth ideas. This is the cosmic awareness that has been developed in many books by former Dominican and more recently Episcopal Priest, educator, and founder of the Institute for Culture and Creation Spirituality (ICCS), Matthew Fox. The idea for ICCS is essentially described in Matt's foundational book, *Original Blessing*.

To tell my part of the story, I have to go back to my childhood, and especially confirmation class. My parents were both Civil Engineers, my only brother grew up to be a lawyer, and I was always interested in the sciences, especially astronomy and oceanography. We attended a liberal Methodist and later United Methodist Church. Though I very much enjoyed Sunday school and choir, I had lots of questions about Christianity and the Bible. When I was about 12, probably in 6th grade, I joined the confirmation class. I asked the minister, Rev. Ridell Kelsey, questions about everything and anything, all of which he answered patiently but not entirely to my satisfaction. At the end of the class, I joined the church with most of my classmates, though I still had lots of questions. Through my teen years, I was very active in the UMYF Jr. and Sr. High Youth Groups, and also in Sports, Band and Student Council. I was a pretty good student without trying very hard.

I remember asking my Physics teacher a number of questions around the intersection of faith and science, and he, somewhat exasperated, referred me to philosophy and metaphysics. Those are the directions I would soon turn, but my brother was almost killed in a bad car crash during Christmas break of my senior year of high school, and in the family chaos that followed I ended up only applying to the colleges of Engineering at Illinois and Minnesota. I decided to go to the University of Illinois where my brother was studying. After a year of Engineering, during which I had a close encounter with Calculus in which I only narrowly escaped with a “C” I had decided to switch to Religious Studies. Even though I had almost attained Junior standing on credits, the college of Engineering wouldn’t let me transfer to Liberal Arts, and the University wouldn’t let me out of the dorms. Instead I transferred with a lifelong friend to Northern Illinois University and wrote my own Contract Major in Religious Studies where Ken and I lived off campus and I graduated 2 years later to immediately begin seminary studies.

Among the more important reasons I began studies for the ministry, was a sense of justice that called me to find a role from which I could stand up for justice for youth, for persons of color, for the impoverished and for a healthier world. I wasn’t sure about parish ministry when I started, though I knew that in following Jesus, I could preach for justice. I soon encountered 2 significant injustices during my first quarter in the United Methodist Seminary in Evanston, one categorical and the other personal. I soon learned that two students had been thrown out for coming out during the previous year and later was further outraged that commuting students were not notified that classes were cancelled during a snowstorm on my birthday during which I had tried driving then gotten myself to the nearest “El” station in a four hour effort to get to school. At the end of the quarter, I withdrew, then signed up for the Spring quarter at the Church of the Brethren seminary where I worked on my pacifist tendencies as well as my theology until I graduated.

One other important strand needs to be addressed. Even with quest for higher education and seminary studies, and even though I had loved taking vacations all around the country, I never really expected to leave my friends and family

in the Chicago area. I really thought that Northern Illinois or perhaps Southern Wisconsin would always be my home until I entered seminary. As I began preparations for seminary, I applied for and was hired as Youth Director of 1st United Methodist Church in Elgin. A job which also would change my life and open up possibilities for moving well out of my regional comfort zone. I enjoyed working with the youth, developing curriculum, planning and supervising retreats, and even recruiting volunteers. I soon became involved in a church exchange program that had been going on for a while involving a church in England, for which I would supervise a group of our youth going to visit in the spring of 1979. Even though most of their parents were also on the trip, I often felt like I was the only one supervising the youth! It was a wonderful trip in which we saw Stonehenge, visited several Cathedrals and castles, saw a Shakespeare play at the Globe Theater, and stayed with families from the local Methodist church. Even though I was mostly involved chasing the youth, I still found time to fall in love with the Minister's daughter, Jen, who was then in training to be a nurse!

For me, the most life-changing part of the trip was meeting Jen, but possibly even more in the consideration I gave to moving to England than the short-lived long distance romance in which Jen came to visit a few months later, a fleeting love which I still treasure. In any case, even though I didn't move to England, I did accept a position in Wyoming for my intern year a few months after Jen left me to marry a proper English lad! The hold of Chicago and Northern Illinois was irrevocably broken, though I still go back to visit, support the Bears, Cubs, and White Sox, and claim it as "my kind of a town." The year in Wyoming furthered my cosmic awareness, offered me time to visit Yellowstone, the Tetons, and several other beautiful places, and ended with my marriage to another nurse, Terri, with whom I had 2 children and just under 4 years of not quite bliss! We lived in a seminary student apartment for my final year of classes, then accepted my first appointment to the North Park Community Church, United Methodist, in tiny 8000 foot high, Walden, Colorado.

During that first year of my United Methodist Ministry, Jessica was born at the hospital in Riverton, Wyoming where Terri and I had met and where she had gone to work part-time. The next year, we moved to Great Falls, Montana, where Aaron was born the following year and where Terri and I divorced the year after that. I served several other United Methodist Churches in Montana, 2 or 3 at a time, shared custody of the kids, fell in and out of love with Rita, and received the suggestion to read Original Blessing from my Clinical Pastoral Education supervisor, friend, colleague, and therapist. In 1988 I left United Methodist Parish Ministry on a leave of absence, burned out on Christian Ministry, spent a couple months plowing fields for some former parishioners, then began working in Child Protective Services for the State of Montana.

In the spring of 1989, after a very cold winter in Dillon, MT, having read Original Blessing and all I could find on Creation Spirituality, I applied to the Institute of Culture and Creation Spirituality. I forget the essay question that the application required, except that it caused me to write about everything I did and didn't believe, challenging me in a way that I had not been challenged in years. During the summer, I packed up all my belongings, leaving a homemade trailer full of stuff with my ex-wife, rented a car hauling trailer I attached to my old van and pulled my little Renault Alliance to Oakland, California to attend ICCS.

Going to ICCS and to a sense of Original Blessing was no less of a homecoming than my later discovery of Unitarian Universalism, which by the way also began during my time at ICCS. The curriculum at ICCS was a 2 semester Master of Arts, though it was also taken by many non-degree students for either or both semesters. The studies were far more playful and re-energizing than rigorous and academic, earth centered, creative, therapeutic, and amazing. I studied Dreamwork with Jeremy Taylor, took a course on the Shamanic Journey, studied massage and other creative Art as Meditation courses, worked on my singing, enjoyed Coming Home with Joanna Macy, and immersed myself in the Cosmic understandings that I had sensed in years of camping under starlit skies, on the plains and in the mountains and along Lake Michigan and the Ocean.

Studying with Matt Fox, Brian Swimme, Jim Conlon, and Joanna Macy was really amazing, as were the interactions with the fascinating collection of students. It was a wonderful and creative time in my life, restoring hopes and dreams that had languished in the exhausting work of Ministry and Social Work. It was no small part of the experience to meet Jane at ICCS. We were 2 out of 3 Methodist Ministers attending ICCS that year, with the 3rd being from New Zealand. There were priests and nuns and organizers and artists and almost all were highly creative and energetic individuals. I think there were about 60 of us in all, but I have lost track of all but Jane.

The 9 months I spent at ICCS were creative, restorative, and transformative in ways that even now I find difficult to fully articulate. To be near the ocean and San Francisco, with opportunities to visit Muir Woods and Yosemite certainly added to the experience as well as to my dreams of returning to Northern California. That the things we read and the lectures we heard fit my native understanding of a cosmic faith for all humanity far better than the narrow understandings of Christianity I had so often encountered in the parish was amazing. The four paths of Creation Centered Spirituality: *via Positiva*, *via Negativa*, *via Creativa*, and *via Transformativa*; fit the human experience so much better than the young flat-earth Christian fundamentalism that I had so often encountered spreading through congregations in Montana.

My years in the mountains had deepened my appreciation for the natural world and for the beliefs of native peoples and ICCS re-affirmed the value and wonder of the cosmos and all peoples. Jane studied Deep Ecumenism while I focused more on environmental and ecological issues. We both appreciated the feminist orientation of ICCS and its inclusiveness. Among the tensions of the ICCS setting was its location at conservative Holy Names College, and that Matt Fox was censured by Cardinal Ratzinger of the Office of the Inquisition (who later became Pope Benedict XVI) for liberality and including Starhawk on the faculty. During the holidays one of our peers was murdered, probably because of her gender non-conformance. We struggled to memorialize her. Matt later left ICCS to found a new Creation University in downtown Oakland and to create the Cosmic Mass which is still celebrated periodically.

We each find many important passages on the journeys of our lives. The pathway to and through ICCS was among the most important parts of my journey. The model for UU Thursdays came out of the idea of a community gathering to experience and explore Arts as Meditation, beliefs, and work for justice. Unitarian Universalism offers much of the freedom of Creation Spirituality, and like ICCS for me, UU congregations often serve as important parts of the journeys of many people. When I offer classes, I hope that they afford others the chance to creatively explore ideas and experiences that will help them to grow.

Creation Spirituality is a life affirming approach to the cosmos. It is different for each person, more of a pathway than a destination, more a passage than any set of beliefs. Like UUism, it is an opportunity to explore and discover, to continue on our journeys of life and faith.

May your journeys continue in ways that lead to new understanding, new creativity, and to transformation!

So may it always be! Shalom, Salaam Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!