

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, 405 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12206

5.18.14 “This I Believe” Service

Presenter: Ann Lapinski

My life started with a rich religious tradition. I not only grew up Catholic, I grew up Polish Catholic, adding an extra layer of religious tradition to my Catholic life. We celebrated the usual religious holidays, had processions for every reason under the sun and then honored a separate set of Polish traditions like Our lady of Chenstohowa, having food blessed at Easter (including the fresh horseradish) and getting a blessing at the home by a priest at the Christmas holiday. I know how to sing Christmas Carols in Polish I went to a Catholic Polish Elementary School, the teachers were Polish nuns and all the kids in the school were first or second generation Polish.

The nuns were all you would expect for my generation – strict rules about school and church and we did hear the story about not wearing patent leather shoes because they would reflect up our dresses.

From that experience I learned some lessons – the value of community, the support it provides and the beauty of ritual.

Entering High School was like stepping through the Looking Glass. My parents did not realize it when they sent me but I went to a progressive Catholic School for girls. I took a world religions course in my Junior Year. In a very prescient manner, I wrote my 20 page paper for the course about Zen Buddhism. I fulfilled my senior religion requirement by volunteering for the Cesare Chavez lettuce boycott movement. I had questions about beliefs but was encouraged to question and felt very much at home in that religious setting. I learned how to stretch my religious thought, how to connect religion it to my day-to-day actions and how to respect those in the religious life who were dedicated to the growth of a school full of teen aged girls.

College brought another world of liberal religion with the Catholic community at SUNY Albany. Our Catholic community gave us the opportunity to be involved in the planning of our spiritual celebrations, to participate in community protests and provide each other support while we managed our academic challenges.

Graduate school at Cornell was a surprise for me. I expected a strong liberal Catholic congregation. Instead I found a congregation that at the surface appeared liberal- like having bread instead of wafers for communion- but that was religiously and politically conservative. So I climbed over the Great Wall of China and landed in an Episcopal Church on the other side.

Wow. That congregation was small and liberal and welcoming. I had found a new home and more important, God did not strike me dead. The nuns didn't know and I was enjoying the ever so small changes in the weekly religious celebration. There was a new world out there.

My mother served as a spiritual mentor and support to me until she died when I was in my twenties. She discussed sermons with me, listened to my opinions, and respected my drive to work for social causes as part of spiritual life. She was also willing to challenge the almighty priests who ran the congregations she was a part of. I remember her telling me that a priest once asked her about her sex life in confession. She told him that it was none of his business. Most of all, she epitomized loving kindness. My mother was always finding the good in people. Always caring, even when my politics flew in the face of my parents' republican values. When I worked on the lettuce boycott, she took me to the grocery store, bought bags and bags of food for the farmworkers and drove me to their apartment to deliver the goods. She is a core piece of who I am as a member of this congregation.

I first visited FUUSA on Easter Sunday in 1990. The service finished and I knew I had found a new religious home.

Where am I? My beliefs and practices have migrated significantly.

Poetry is an intimate part of my spiritual self.

Becky Gunn gave a sermon when she was an intern here about the need for daily spiritual practice. It hit me like a brick. Ooh, I said. I did not start then but now meditate every day. Right now it is for 11 minutes, 2 minutes more than the minimum that the scientists say we need to effect changes in our brain (according to Sharon Salzberg). I am striving for a little more than that.

I love the mediation practice that Sam sponsors every Sunday. I don't get there every week but am happy to know it's part of my practice.

I read – a lot about Buddhism but I do have one ersatz philosopher whom I love – Annie Lamott. She dishes out philosophy in a very down-to-earth kind of way. Here is an example of her writing from her book *Plan B: Further thoughts on Faith*:

I do Nia Dance most days in the privacy of my own living space and sometimes in groups. I practice yoga.

I strive not always successfully to be a loving and kind person. I am thrilled that I have this community to help me along in that process.

Mike DeVolder

THIS I BELIEVE

Most importantly, I would like to acknowledge these FUUSAn's: Linda Way, for inviting me to speak here today, as well as Ann Lapinski and Dawn Dana for their efforts vital for this unique service to occur. Thank you ladies, and thank you, audience members, for blocking out about eight minutes so I can gush and blather!

I must confess or even warn you that what I am about to say is the best I am able to vocalize about some aspects of myself at this time. I am one of the folks who show up for many reasons at FUUSA including a search for truth and meaning.

With that admission I feel it's only logical that I see myself as a work in progress on an unfinished journey, so what I attempt to explain about myself here is simply a fair attempt at "This I Believe".

I was born into and originate from the goodness and love that is inherent in everything in this universe. Mine is a life as priest Matthew Fox has described as one of "original blessing". I don't know about you, but I waved aside the religious fundamentalist rant of a punishing god who keeps a list of my behavioral debits and credits in some ethereal logbook long ago. My God is on my side, wanting the best for me at all times.

Yep, I said God. I was raised Roman Catholic in a City of Detroit working class family's working class neighborhood, the oldest of three sons of a police officer and a part-time working mom. I attended parochial school and chose to attend an all-male Christian high school (what was I thinking?!). I took my share of the sacraments, and eventually I did my doubting, especially after high school. God is dead, I blurted out at a friend's party, to the looks of shock and disbelief.

As I have grown, I have acquired seminal experiences which have continuously guided me, maybe as a compass guides a bushwhacking adventurer, and admittedly, lead me in a direction that allows me to comfortably let you know about myself.

For example, I helped build a cottage on a lake in Northern Michigan with my father when I was 14. The experiences I had while enjoying visits to that place have had a continuous effect on my view of the world, the environment, and nature. I did get a degree in geology, too. And of course, being a graduate student in environmental education on a converted school bus, living year round outdoors in a self-directed, travelling, consensus based community for two years definitely changed my consciousness. Those of us who participated called it "the bus". Working for the United States Geological Survey in Western Oregon with a focus on hydrology allowed me to experience the wild and woolly side of the