

REFLECTION ON A SPRITUAL JOURNEY

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.....uh oh, somebody already wrote that., however I thought what a powerful way to begin relating one's spiritual journey. As much as we credit our parents, in our beginning, God created us, you and me, and I wonder if on occasion God thinks, "what have I wrought?"

We lived in New York City, two blocks from Central Park, and one block from St Ignatius Loyola, a beautiful Roman Catholic Church, to which Peggy Casey took me daily, en route to the park. Peg, my beloved Irish nanny, held my hand as we walked down the aisle in the darkened church. We'd genuflect, sit in a pew and Peg would whisper to three year old me, "Margie Parge, do you see that man up there hanging on the cross?" I would nod and she continued, "That's the best friend you'll ever have in your life". That was my introduction to faith, for whatever Peg said, I believed, and even though I didn't really understand, or couldn't see proof of what she was teaching me, I trusted her and her words.

Having come from a Judeo-Christian background or so we were told, I knew virtually nothing of Judeo traditions, and while my family, as far back as we knew, neither attended temple nor church on a regular basis, I do have a testimonial certificate which my paternal grandmother received for teaching religious instruction to class 3B at Temple Emanuel in 1877. Our immediate family, including that grandmother, celebrated the Christmas, Easter and St. Paddy's Day, of course. One might call this secular Judaism, but that would be oxymoronic, as Judaism is a well establish religion, and secularism is the absence of religious orientation. I am passionate about oxymoron's: giant shrimp, guest host, but not "secular Judaism".

Mom made an attempt, when Betsy and I were 12 and 10 respectively to give us a sense of the Jewish part of our heritage. We were enrolled in Sunday School at Temple Emmanuel, but were so horrified by our rude classmates, whose claim to fame were throwing spitballs, that we refused to go back.

That same year, when Dad was off on some very hush OSS business, the apartment doorbell rang. Mom answered it, and immediately tried to close it upon seeing a stunning man dressed in flowing clerical robes, claiming to know my father. He put his foot in the door as once again Mom tried to slam it. My father had not forewarned her of this visitor and she wasn't about to let him in until he reached into his pocket, producing a small pocketknife, claiming that, "Albert (my father) gave this to me". Dad manufactured cutlery and Mom knew that if this imposing figure was the recipient of one of our pocketknives, he must be all right. Thus she welcomed Bro. Leo into our home and lives.

Bro. Leo was a Trappist monk, a Cistercian, a contemplative, part of a silent order, except that he was their business manager/fundraiser, and there was nothing silent about him. Betsy and I were hiding under the grand piano in the living room, until Mom gave us the all clear and the direction to come out and greet the Brother. It was love at first sight, and for sixty years, we remained extremely close. Part of his mission was proselytizing and conversion, and my parents said, "Leo, if you can get the girls, you may have them." It was Bro. Leo who introduced me to St. Augustine, Thos. Aquinas, Thos. Merton, H. Richard Niebuhr, who was a Christian Theological Ethicist, whose work on social injustice peaked my interest.

At nineteen, I fell madly in love with a German boy, and spent the summer with his family in Germany, ostensibly learning the language, culture and more about the Catholic church through his family's eyes. The following semester, my course load at Columbia included The Elements of Christianity, but in my first class, as fate would have it, I sat behind a very handsome boy,..... and Germany began to dim. Little did I know that just two years later, I would give my heart to and marry Miles J. Schwartz, MD, a reformed Jew, who by the grace of God, gave me three great children, whom I unabashedly adore. When Elizabeth, James and Margaret (very Anglican names) were of age, we sent the two eldest to Sunday School at Central Synagogue, where their Dad had worshipped on high holidays, as had his parents. I loved services there, because the choir was comprised of members of the Metropolitan Opera, and the music was glorious. History repeated itself, when after a few Sundays, the kids claimed that they were not going back to Sunday School. (Mind you, the little darlings tell me that they attended for two years.) I jumped in and stated that it was not negotiable, and because they were always ten steps ahead of me, they announced that they had already spoken with the Rabbi, politely explained their reason for bowing out and their plan to study independently. What's a mother to do?

I was introduced to some of the Jewish holiday traditions, lighting candles at Hanukah and preparing the Seder meal for Passover. The first Seder meal I prepared, in our first year of marriage, was the first Seder I ever attended. I asked Miles what to do and he wisely referred me to the Haggadah, which explains all. He told me that he would lead the service, we would then eat a good dinner and we'd conclude with the closing service. That sounded easy enough. I prepared the prescribed ceremonial dishes, he lead the service for a few family members and friends and gave me the cue to serve dinner, which I happily presented, much to my husband's shock, for the menu consisted of shrimp cocktail and baked ham. For those of you, who might be as ignorant as I was, that's considered about as inappropriate as one could possibly serve for a Seder. Shellfish and pork are absolute no nos. It's a wonder the poor man didn't throw me out.....then. Actually we were married fifteen years and have remained good friends ere long.

Fast forward. After being courted for eight years, I married Gene Irish from Syracuse, and was introduced to the Episcopal Church. I immediately felt at ease. The liturgy was comfortably familiar and I had the sense that I could pick, without

guilt, those written passages, which rang true or enticed me into that amazing thing called faith. I still add or subtract words, as needed for example in the Lord's Prayer, ..."and TRY to forgive those who trespass against me".

When I returned to Stamford fulltime, the void of being part of a faith based community was evident. Following visits to several local churches, my dear friend, Linda Shaffer urged me to join her for a service at St. Francis. After three of them, I called Fr. Mayberry, requesting an appointment, for I felt that it was important to reveal my chequered past: Judeo-Christian background, twice married and divorced, and the proud mother of a gay child. If any of these three appeared to be red flags, I would choose to look and worship elsewhere. Richard Mayberry embraced me and my fragility, and I was home. Two years later, he baptized me. My only request was that he carry me down the aisle as he did with other candidates. I even offered to supply a luggage dolly to lighten the experience.

At one point when I was struggling with life, Richard pointed me toward the amazing psychologist, Paul Donoghue. At the conclusion of our first session, after I had given an encapsulated version of my life's story, Paul offered, "Margie, you do realize that your sister, Betsy was and is the Christ figure in your life!" With jaw dropping awe, I thanked him and have continued to treasure this beautiful revelation, particularly as Betsy, who was my best friend, mentor, idol, and sometimes mother, though she was only two and a half years my senior, succumbed to breast cancer in 1986, when she was only fifty-four..

I feel fortunate because I was permitted to select my religion, my church home, the St. Francis Family, which nourishes my soul, the Rector, who leads us, who inspires me, and even makes me think. I am lucky, for I found a place that works for me and permits me to work for it, for the Glory of God and as Peg said, so long ago, "for that man hanging on the cross, who became the best friend I ever had in life".

Amen

Margery B. Irish

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