

Our Stories—Johnette Rodriguez (Spiritual Journey and Brief Bio)

I grew up in two quite different cultures: Yankee and Rebel (or, as you'd say here in New England: Northern and Southern). In the North, I was in the Catholic bastion of South Bend, Indiana, home to Notre Dame's Fighting Irish and a dense Catholic population of Irish, Hungarian and Polish families. But South Bend also had its share of Protestant ethnicities, including German Lutherans and Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, the latter proudly claimed by my paternal grandmother.

Before she got my parents into the habit of sending us to Presbyterian Sunday School, however, I went through a very Catholic phase. At 7 years old, indoctrinated by my next-door neighbor, Donna, also 7, I made shrines with her to the Virgin Mary in my garage; we prayed the Hail Mary whenever we heard an ambulance siren; we covered our heads with a Kleenex, when we went inside a church.

Somewhere around the ripe old age of 8 or 9, however, my sister and I began to be dropped off at Ridgedale Presbyterian Church every single Sunday. My grandparents seldom came; my parents almost never. But there we were, stuck in those boring classes each Sunday morning—though we did learn all the classic Bible stories by heart and from our summers in "Vacation Bible School," we learned to sing all the books of the Bible (set to "Onward Christian Soldiers") and the names of the 12 Disciples ("Bringing in the Sheaves).

That Presbyterian overload happened year in and year out, but there was another religious influence in my life (remember the North/South divide?). I spent a good portion of each summer in northwest Louisiana, and when I was there, I was coerced into attending my cousin's Baptist services, twice on Sundays and once in the middle of the week. I was about 12 when the first "conversion" episode happened. My cousin had pulled me out the door to church without any breakfast and when we stood for the "altar call," with its interminable verses of "Just As I Am," I suddenly felt faint and dropped to the floor to put my head down. My 17-year-old cousin, mortally embarrassed, tried to drag me to my feet, but I kept dropping. So, no altar call for me.

My next opportunity to pledge allegiance to a specific faith happened when I was 16 and my sister 12. I'd waited till she was old enough to "join the church" [the Presbyterian one], so that we could take all the classes together. Yet when the time came to "seal the deal" by swearing our belief in the Apostles' Creed in front of the Board of Deacons, I

walked out of the room, having to pass through the line-up of deacons. Out in the hall, I told my minister, quite tearfully, that I had no idea what I really believed.

Simultaneously, I was reading about other religions, and, in a boring geography class in high school, my best friend and I passed notes back and forth about her Unitarianism. I was fascinated and wanted to attend a service, but somehow we never made it happen.

Once off at college, the religious/philosophical discussions continued at length (remember those 2 a.m. sessions with new dorm friends?). Lots and lots of talk about existentialism, atheism, paganism, agnosticism. The only serious religious thread that ran through my entire teenage and adult life was the music. I played piano for four years for the junior church, I sang in many a choir, and the old hymns and the familiar carols never lost their multi-layered meanings for me. They still stir my spirit.

So, once we were in Rhode Island, I often attended a close friend's Pentecostal-style church, for the music and for the dramatic delivery of the preacher. I was intrigued on one side by my husband's Buddhist practice and on the other by my daughter's dedication to her Quaker youth group, but I made no serious commitments to a spiritual community myself.

Until the fall of 2012, when I kept being invited to hear and/or participate in the music at the UUCSC, and I remembered my teenaged interest in what was then just one U, not two. So I came to Lily Pads...and I felt drawn in by old and new friends, by wonderful music and thought-provoking sermons and, most of all, by the feeling of "community." "Where else?" asked Bill, after each of our first mornings here, "can you get your heart and spirit lifted every week for free?"

As for a bit more bio: attended Kalamazoo College in Michigan; studied in junior year and post-undergrad year in Germany; hitchhiked all over Europe; got M.A. in Comparative Literature at Indiana University and went off to seek my fortune in Boston. Har, har.

Ended up as the assistant copy editor at the Atlantic Monthly for 2.5 years; Bill and I went to CA for three years, where our daughter, Sabrina, was born. (In 2012, grandson Henry arrived; with husband Stefan, they live in Brooklyn and Shelter Island).

Back on this coast in 1973, I was a stay-at-home mom and a freelance writer, then a community organizer for six years; a food coop manager and writer; the director of the RI Women's Health Collective; the Development Director of East Bay Community Action; and,

finally, after 1998, just a freelance writer: for The Boston Globe, Yankee Magazine, Saveur, Ms Magazine, The Providence and Boston Phoenix alternative news weeklies; and 20+ other venues! Still write for Edible Rhody and, on occasion, The Westerly Sun.

Johnette Rodriguez, July 2020