

Spiritual Autobiography

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My family of origin (grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles and cousins) includes a mix of religious backgrounds: evangelical Christian pastors, Mainline Protestants, Roman Catholics, Native Hawaiian animists, Latter Day Saints, strident atheists, and agnostic seekers. My mother was not raised as part of a religious community—disconnected from both her Native Hawaiian and Irish Catholic roots. My father was raised Presbyterian but drifted away from the church after high school. My parents discussed religion frequently with my sister and me, mostly to help us understand others and how to behave with relatives during family gatherings. My parents' primary teaching (directly and indirectly) was to be respectful and to ask a lot of questions. This is still my primary way of operating in the world even as my worldviews and my religious experiences have broadened and deepened.

During my senior year in high school (1995), the pastor of Mayflower Congregational United Church of Christ in my hometown of Billings, Montana wrote a letter to the editor of the *Billings Gazette* denouncing proposed legislation in the Montana House of Representatives that would have required same-gender-loving people to register as sex offenders. My dad saw the letter and suggested we try out the church.

That first Sunday, I attended the high school Sunday School class taught by Ann Hanson whose infectious laugh and sassy personality made me feel right at home. A few weeks after I arrived, the youth were planning a worship service. I assumed I would not be involved because I was new, but Ann Hanson had other ideas. She asked me to speak about my first impressions of the church during the “sermon” time. This helped the congregation know who I was and to extend their hospitality, beginning at coffee hour right after the service. During my last months of high school, with Mayflower UCC, I worked at a food shelf and participated in the first Pride event in Billings. I was still far from identifying as a Christian myself, but a seed had been planted.

College

College (at Macalester in St. Paul) was a time of exploration—both inside and outside of the classroom. Unlike many of my classmates who had grown up attending religious services and were now moving away from religion, I was moving in the opposite direction—attending church services sporadically and retreats hosted by college chaplain. As I dealt with three of my four grandparents' deaths between 1997 and 2000, and with the beginnings of my mother's alcoholism, I was seeking something solid to stand on. But I was also not looking for easy answers or exclusionary theology.

Slow Conversion

Right after college, I started working in a church-based shelter (for families without permanent housing) at the St. Paul Area Council of Churches (now Interfaith Action). I worked with Black, Indigenous, and white colleagues who were working as police department chaplains, organizing food shelves, and developing culturally specific youth programs. I also began attending Minnehaha UCC in South Minneapolis.

At the suggestion of my supervisor, Margaret Lovejoy, I enrolled in one class at United Seminary. I was not planning to become a minister; I was skeptical and snarky and not sure what I believed. One class became two. Soon I was exploring liberation and process theologies while working at the shelter. Over time, I became less interested in articulating everything I did *not* believe about G-d. Instead, I started to spend more of my life energy alongside people who were building the church and being the kind of people I wanted to become.

Conversion was a slow process for me—and a relational one. I often reflect on the etymology of the word *conversion—to turn with*. I saw the purpose and joy that infused the lives of people at church. I wanted more of that in my life. This was not abstract. It was grounded in the experience of being in community. Less individual salvation, more compassion. Less brimstone, more fire. I fell in love with the idea of incarnation—that the Divine could live physically in the world and that bodies were holy. As a result, I wanted to live differently.

Baptism

After much wrangling and wrestling with both the history and the present reality of the church, I was baptized at age 26. During the service, I gave a testimony, describing why I still hesitated to describe myself as a Christian because there are so many versions of Christianity to which I have to say NO. At the same time, there was so much to which I wanted to say a full-throated YES. YES to incarnation and including outsiders. YES to death not being the last word. YES to sharing bread.

My resistance to becoming a Christian became twofold:

1. I did not want to be associated with bigots, opportunistic televangelists, colonialism or homophobia. Or even just the regular smug self-righteousness of many of my Christian high school classmates.
2. I was not sure I was up to the task of trying to live as Jesus lived. If I was going to say yes to becoming a disciple of Jesus, this meant living in a different way--perhaps in a way I was not prepared to do.

My internal resistance to becoming a Christian was strong--both because of how others defined Christianity. AND my resistance was just as strong because I honestly was not sure I was up to the task. Nevertheless, in March, 2003, 100 people gathered in the small sanctuary at Minnehaha UCC as sunlight streamed through the stained glass that read *Make a Joyful Noise*. I told those gathered about my nos and my maybes, so that they might understand what it had taken for me to stand there and summon a yes.

Mom's Death

Right before Thanksgiving, 2014, as a 37-year-old mother of a one-year-old, my mother ended her own life. Even during the painful phone call from my sister, I understood that I would be broken open by the experience and I sensed that I would rise to it somehow. I knew that it would be a defining moment of my life.

Kids

After several years of infertility, my spouse, Tim and I now have two creative, kind, inquisitive children. I am honored to have a role in guiding and supporting their growth. Parenthood has stretched me and forced me to face my own limitations and inconsistencies. The world we inhabit also forces me to explain painful realities to my children as I answer their questions and try to raise compassionate human beings. Mostly I am grateful for the conversations that originate with their questions. I track their questions in a note on my phone. I include them in a letter to each of them on their birthdays, in our family Christmas card, and they often spark my sermons. A few examples from the past year (from my nine-year-old and eleven-year-old):

- *Who was Satan before he was the devil?*
- *Did God create my traits, or did I get them from my ancestors?*
- *Is death different depending on how you die?*
- *How is a holocaust even possible?*

My children also ask many questions about their own bodies and about my mother's death, which allows me to practice part of the parenting legacy I inherited: trust children with the truth.

Heart attack

In 2017, when I was 40 (and my children were one and three), an essential coronary artery split open and blocked all blood flow to my heart. Luckily, I was at home and started to have symptoms before my heart stopped beating. I received CPR and surgery quickly. As a triathlete nonsmoker with low cholesterol, this was not a possibility I considered at my age.

In the hospital, my heart did not recover as quickly as expected and the cardiologist asked me if I had experienced extreme stress or grief lately. After more testing and discussion, the doctor said that I had something else going on in addition to the artery dissection. The cardiologist also diagnosed me with *Broken*

Heart Syndrome, also known as stress cardiomyopathy--temporary damage to the heart caused by extreme stress, which makes it difficult for the heart to pump blood out of the left ventricle like it should. Broken heart syndrome. The pain of losing my mother was not simply an abstract idea or a metaphor. Heartache's physical manifestations made it difficult for my body to function properly. Losing my mother literally broke my heart.

After a week in the hospital, I was directed not to drive, work, or lift more than ten pounds. During the previous four years, I had lived with children inside or attached to my body in some way. Now, I could not lift my baby and toddler (which is pretty much what parenting is at these ages). While communicating with my Christian employer, I learned that my recent move to part-time meant that I no longer had short-term or long-term disability benefits. After my communications challenging the ethics of the policy were met with corporate lawyer language, I knew that I would also need to find a different place to work as soon as possible--while waiting to learn whether I needed another heart surgery. I felt both unmoored by my physical and financial precarity while also peacefully grounded in the cosmic sense. My relationship with courage and fear had just been completely rearranged. There is a bittersweet freedom that emerges when you have looked death squarely in the face. Eight years later, this sense of freedom is not quite as acute, but it still profoundly shapes me.

Practicing Resurrection

My years of infertility, my mother's death and my own brush with death have compiled to humbly and painfully readjust my sense of agency related to my own body and my life. Even if you wear your seatbelt, exercise five days a week, eat your broccoli, and try to set boundaries with your alcoholic mother, heartbreak can and does still happen. This confluence of events has made me paradoxically more brazen and more compassionate. Speaking directly about difficult subjects or confronting injustices feels much less scary after facing death head on. I feel a deep connection with others' suffering, and I strongly resist simple platitudes and problematic theology about why some people die and why some people live. Recovering from my heart attack (and all that preceded it) has been a process of ongoing physical, emotional, and spiritual cardiac rehab.

One way I understand my relationship with death is as a process of practicing resurrection. For a few minutes in July of 2017, I was dead. Now I am alive. Although Christians often celebrate resurrection with trumpets and lilies, I relate to the women at the tomb in Mark's gospel who go away from the tomb silent and afraid. Resurrection is scary and disorienting and beyond the power of words to describe. I am practicing.

Statement of Faith / Credo / What I Give my Heart to

I believe in God, the Eternal Creator, whose essence is relational, and loving.

God IS Love. Fierce, tender, mysterious, relentless Love.

Nothing (***NOTHING!***) can separate us from God's Love.

No power or principality. Nothing seen or unseen. Nothing we do or do not do.

Nothing we were, are, or will be can separate us from God's Love.

God's Love is made tangibly known to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

(But please, please use caution when describing the atonement).

Jesus is the embodiment of paradox: both human and divine,

Speaking truth in the form of parables and questions,

Refusing to be put in a box or to put others in boxes.

The Spirit meets us where we are--inviting and urging us toward healing and wholeness.

The Spirit does not obey the laws of physics or the limitations of human imagination.

The Spirit calls all of creation into right relationship with all of creation, knowing the cost and joy of that call.

God's love language is resurrection; death (of any kind) never has the last word.

God's revelation is ongoing.

Nothing/No one is beyond redemption. Here or in the hereafter.

Section 2: Call to Authorized Ministry

When I started seminary at age 24, I was a skeptical, idealistic young person working at a shelter for unhoused families. Because I kept asking questions about suffering and God, my supervisor at the shelter (a United Seminary alum) suggested that I register for a seminary class. Seminary was indeed a place to wrestle with questions, but it took some time before I would use the word *calling* to describe my life path. Faithful sojourners of all types accompanied me—each with their own mix of wisdom and confusion. As I was introduced to liberation, process, feminist, and womanist theologians, I realized that my understanding of G-d and calling were much too small. Many companions (professors and students at seminary, residents at the shelter, people at Minnehaha UCC and Cherokee Park United Church, and writers across time and space) helped me to live into relationship with G-d in new ways. I came to believe that G-d calls everyone (and all of creation) in every moment into right relationship, into liberation, into Love.

It is in this context of a wholehearted, whole-life call for all of creation that I situate my own sense of calling. I believe that G-d wants to repurpose the challenges I have endured and to use my gifts to add to the healing/love/justice in the world. I feel called to be a disciple of Jesus, to parent my children well, to be a good friend, to teach sexuality education, to grow healthy food, to use my voice to write and speak for justice.

I also understand my calling as my ancestors' living legacy and as an ancestor to those who come after me. My parents, grandparents and great grandparents had complex relationships with church and with their ethnic heritages. Many of my relatives addressed these complications by leaving church and assimilating into white secular America. Inheriting a racialized white identity offers some social advantages, but it also harms relationships and erases the richness of my Scottish, Irish, and Native Hawaiian heritage. I feel called to reclaim and reconstruct what it means to be part of the Christian community, to embrace a nuanced ethnic heritage, and to work toward an antiracist world.

Professionally, in this season, I feel called to work in the area of death, dying and bereavement. Some of that work I have done as a volunteer: speaking as a suicide survivor, facilitating grief groups and being a bereavement companion. I am paid for some of the work (as a retreat facilitator and hospice chaplain).

My emotional stamina for the work has roots in my experiences: many years of infertility, my mother's death by suicide and my own nearly fatal, completely unexpected heart attack at age 40. Each of these experiences undermined (and ultimately strengthened) my trust in my own body, affected my relationships, and realigned my theology. With support, care, and wisdom from many people and communities, I learned to live into a new relationship with death, to practice resurrection. Practicing resurrection (joining with G-d's resurrecting love) is a central part of how I understand what it means to be part of the Christian community. Even in the face of so much death, how do we *live*?

In hospice, this is the central question: How do people *live*, even as they move close to death? I feel called to be with people in that space. Sometimes, that means having conversations about what matters most right now. Sometimes, it simply means offering my presence amidst uncomfortable silences and unanswerable questions.

For many years, I have been exploring how to best be of use after living through unexpected loss and relentless ambiguity. My discernment has been both active and reflective. It has involved silent retreats, journaling, many conversations, informational interviews, shadowing people at work, writing a draft of a memoir, entering CPE, facilitating grief groups, accompanying suicide survivors, and embodied practices like yoga and hula.

This move toward hospice chaplaincy and bereavement work has been a deliberate discernment over many years. Those I have worked with at Grace Hospice and in CPE peer groups have offered constructive and affirmative feedback toward my sense of calling. In 2023, Grace Hospice hired me to work as a chaplain while I finished my last unit of CPE.

As a member of the United Church of Christ (a tradition that advocates the priesthood of all believers, acknowledges Jesus as the only head of the Church, and organizes itself with congregational polity), I believe in practicing nonhierarchical forms of spiritual care. At times, assuming the title of chaplain is uncomfortable for me because of the attributes and beliefs that often get attached to ministers. In the presence of clergy, people often express deference or feel the need to behave “piously.” As I move toward the possibility of ordination, I am actively working through my discomfort with the idea of being “set apart.” Some Christian traditions emphasize the special role of priests or clergy in a hierarchical way that feels exclusionary. I do not want to have these assumptions placed on me or my ministry.

At the same time, during CPE, I often found myself chafing when people call me an *intern* because it felt like a label for someone who was inexperienced. I do not want to be seen as *above* anyone else, but I also do not want to be seen as *below* anyone else. Sister Virginia Matter, a Benedictine I worked with at St. Paul’s Monastery would often say that humility involves living fully into your calling—not demeaning others, but also not debasing yourself. Humility was at the center of Jesus’s ministry and is central to what it means to be his disciple. Humility’s Latin root is *humus* (of the earth)/grounded. I want to embody my calling fully without debasing myself or others in the process.

I am actively practicing living into a priestly and even prophetic role—with a willingness to step forward in moments that call for voice and action. This posture begins internally, even more than anything that others experience or notice. Embodying the priestly presence, for me, might involve the same words or rituals, but it involves *how* I say the words or facilitate a ritual. As I preach more frequently, especially during this time when Christian nationalism and fascism are on the rise, I am finding an authentic prophetic voice.

For me, the important aspect of authorized ministry in the United Church of Christ is the covenantal relationship of accountability and support between G-d, the Church (both the congregation and the denomination), the minister and the setting/people they are called to serve. The ordination process helps to ensure that ministers are not working in isolation.

The UCC Manual on Ministry defines Ordained Ministerial Standing as the “formal ecclesial relationship by which an Ordained Minister may represent the United Church of Christ to the Body of Christ and to the wider world.... the Ordained Minister demonstrates a commitment to view their ministry as part of the whole ministry of the UCC.” Throughout the MID process, my circle of discernment has expanded to include a formal group at UCCNB, deeper relationships with the pastors at UCCNB, a chaplain mentor, and the Minnesota Conference more formally. Amidst these discernment conversations, I am continually reminded that the UCC is my theological home. When I do my work as a chaplain, I go into spaces as a person deeply formed by the UCC and as someone whose ministry represents the UCC wherever I am—in my local congregation, in ecumenical and interfaith gatherings, or bedside with families.

The other part of ordination, as defined by the Manual on Ministry, involves “the United Church of Christ (through the Association) commits to an Ordained Minister and claims their ministry as its own.” The UCC has shaped me and supported me in so many ways. I am honored and grateful that the UCC would consider claiming my ministry as its own. At this time, I feel called to the work of hospice chaplaincy, but I am open to where the Spirit calls me. I am not seeking ordination for status or for a title. I am seeking ordination because I am humbly trying to live into my calling as my most centered self regardless of the titles that get attached to me or my work.

More of my personal creative nonfiction writing can be found [here](#).