

My Soul Story

by Anne Schaum

We Are the People

*Here is the church, here is the steeple.
Open the doors and here are the people!*

I understand a Soul Story is to be one that describes adversity faced and how spiritual resources helped you survive. Though I have had my fair share of challenges to overcome, I think the most relevant story is how I learned to embrace my faith despite social pressure to turn away, and how shepherding my children's development secured my faith as a fundamental component of my daily life. This story is rooted in the finger game rhyme my friends and I used to play as children. It tracks my perceptions of what religion is and how religion can function in our lives.

As a teenager in the 80s, I grew up in a period where faith and Christianity in particular were passé and growing ever more uncool in general society. Several peers openly mocked all faith traditions as an archaic waste of time and money. Even college friends who were brought up attending church maintained an unspecified faith but rejected established religion. More recently, things have gotten worse for "organized religion" thanks to coverups of deplorable behavior by church leaders and extremist groups gaining notoriety for ridiculous beliefs.



I grew up in a devout family where religiousness was an assumption. My brother announced he was an atheist in high school, so participation was clearly not *mandatory*, however, the unspoken expectation was clear. Unlike my contemporaries, our attendance in worship every Sunday was a given; in fact, any absence had to be justified. Acceptable excuses included contagious illness and significant travel out of town. Unacceptable excuses included sleepovers with friends and fatigue from previous day's activities – no matter when they ended. I recall I once visited a friend at her college for the weekend on the contingency that I made it home in time to acolyte at church. I drove the 2 hours home at 3AM with the windows down, drinking Jolt cola (the equivalent of today's energy drinks), and blaring U2's Joshua Tree to stay awake. (As I recall, I did acolyte and then slept the rest of the afternoon!)

Faith is a personal journey. It is ready to be called upon whenever needed, but like an old friend, will always wait patiently in the wings when life's drama interferes. While I was in college, I regularly attended Allegheny's chapel service, but my motivation was more academic than religious since I got course credit for singing in that choir. The services weren't particularly spiritually compelling and the life of a college student tends to make Sunday morning activities a bit challenging. After college, I lived in the Boston area for a few years and did not attempt to find a faith home. I still considered myself a Christian, but while I was away from home, the discipline of worship wasn't part of my life. During this part of my life, if someone had asked me what "church" meant to me, I would have said that it was a place – the one that I was supposed to go to on Sunday mornings. In terms of the finger game rhyme from my childhood, the church was a building with (or without in our case) a steeple. I knew little of the deeper meaning of church, revealed only when you looked inside.

J.J. and I got married in 1996 and moved back to Ohio. Knowing how much I love to sing, Carol Longsworth soon recruited me to sing with the First Church choir while we looked for our own place. J.J. and I moved out of Oberlin for a couple of years as we tried to find our permanent home. Upon returning to the county and purchasing a home, Carol drew me in again. Having grown up in the high-ceremony Episcopal church (J.J. used to call it "catholic mass without the guilt"), transitioning to the more relaxed format of First Church proved to be an opportunity to worship in a new manner. First Church's service was much less choreographed and seemed a bit more contemporary than the Episcopal service. By this time,

J.J. and I had two children and a strong desire to root them in a faith community. Our rationale was that the kids could follow their own faith traditions as adults, but we would provide the discipline, early exposure and relationships so their decision could be informed by personal experience. Once we established Oberlin as our home again, I quickly found myself volunteering for committees and assorted activities in the life of the church. During this time, I still thought of the church as a place for worship in a community of people who share faith traditions.

By my twenties, I had experienced two dozen years of attendance at Sunday school, worship, youth group, church socials, and dozens of weekend youth conferences. By that time, I was well versed in the fundamental tenets of Christian life, but it wasn't until I had children myself that I really embraced what faith means and how the discipline of religious routine can provide benefits beyond immediate spiritual experience. This is when I really learned that faith isn't just showing up at worship on Sunday morning, saying dinner- and bed-time prayers, and occasionally praying at opportune moments in sporting events or desperate situations. The church wasn't just a place that you go to on Sunday mornings, a building with a steeple.

When you find yourself responsible for the development of another human being, you rely on every tool at your disposal to provide the best possible foundation. Establishing the church as a regular part of our lives accomplished several key things:

1. **Comfortable relationships with trusted adults** – our kids grew up understanding that the people they met at church each week were friendly and truly interested in their lives. Brandy, David, and a few teachers (e.g., Sue Flood, and Mary Ann Kershaw) were the first (non-family member) adults whose names they could reliably retain. Later, Miranda benefited from her church family when she started working at Kendal and was immediately acknowledged as a wonderful asset by that community thanks to the First Church members who welcomed her from the first day.
2. **Safe activities** – church programming offered activities not just for our kids but for their friends who were always welcome to join in. When friends came along to activities, their parents never had any worries about oversight or negative influences.
3. **Source of support for a ridiculous number of fundraisers** – the entire congregation has endured a dozen years of school and scouting fundraisers for each of my children. I know children have always been used to bolster tight budgets in schools and organizations, but the volume of these obligations is staggering. Having familiar, potential customers eased the kids into the uncomfortable selling process.
4. **Opportunity to demonstrate life of service** – the children witnessed J.J. and me serving on assorted committees through the years and have both embraced the understanding that service is a meaningful part of life. I am sure that the friendships established and work performed for the church helped get me elected to the school board (and I'm still trying to convince myself this is a good thing! 😊).

The amazing thing is that the experience of intentionally providing a faith foundation for my children has also cemented my own faith. Somewhere along the way, I realized that my journey has extended my faith beyond the worship service, choir rehearsals, committee meetings, potlucks, and other activities with church members. I have learned that the Church is what you find when you look inside the building – it is the people who come together to worship. That image I recall from my childhood game, the one of the interlocking fingers, captures my contemporary sense of what Church is. Church is the weaving together of a community of faithful people, stronger together, each doing our best to follow Christ's teachings during our individual journeys.



I am still embarrassed by the behavior of many Christians, but now I realize that their misbehavior and misinterpretation does not diminish my faith and relationship with God. I am a Christian from sun up to sundown. I am the church. We are together the church.