

## WATERS – Faith Journey

With a Jewish father and a Lutheran mother – neither of them practicing – spirituality in my childhood home was effectively absent. Christmas was marked with the decorating of a tree, the quality of which was directly tied to how early in the season my father was forced out of the house in search of a likely candidate. When possible, bald patches were turned towards the corner. When that wasn't possible, we just decorated more. As ornaments were unpacked, the menorah and dreidel collection made their ways to the mantle above the stockings. There was a pleasant schizophrenia to the holiday.

Other than the tiny plastic one in the manger, our Christmases were decidedly Jesus-free. As were our Easters. However, my crafty mother assembled some of the best – if theologically bankrupt - Easter baskets around. Our one attempt at practicing faith was really a concession to the most powerful person in our family – my dutchie Oma; she quietly required that I be exposed to church – if only one night each year. So, at her invitation [mandate], we piled into the family truckster and made our way to St. Mark's Lutheran Church.

I remember this as a sort of seasonal torment, full of endless hymns and dreadful children's theatrics; I used the pew pencils to mark off each song and every talking camel in the bulletin as they concluded. My one vivid memory from those services was of an abstract sheet metal Madonna sculpture in the narthex. An exit ramp routed us close enough to touch the statue. I warmly recall her as *Our Lady of Elated Escape*.

With Oma's death as I began college, so died any association I had with church. I was busy starting my life as husband, father, student, employee, etc. There wasn't room on my head or in my heart for an apostle hat. And yet...busyness certainly never equaled satisfaction. I began to look around for some sense of purpose – for a reason to keep doing what I was doing, other than just to cover the bills.

I began to see my life as divided. I spent about half my time earning a living at a bank. The other half, I tried to live in a way to compensate for being a banker. I recently stumbled across an old saved computer file from this period in my life – I was about twenty-five years old. I had titled the document “By 30 I'll...”. I had made a list of things I had hoped to be able to say I had accomplished by the time I was 30. One of the items was, “Take a minute to look for this God guy”. Clearly, my twenty-five year-old self was uninitiated to the concept of a non-gendered God.

This was the period in my life during which I began to be aware of my spiritual journey. Like a child learning to walk, I was clumsy, experimental, and wholly surprised when I stood on my own – though, mostly I fell down. While working the overnight shift, I would pass lunch and smoke breaks in the dark, empty, parking lot with a friend who identified as Christian. He would challenge my cynicism in a non-threatening way – the way friends can give each other a well-meaning hard time. Though far from a spectacular conversion story, these were my first attempts to discuss faith in earnest.

This was also the period when I first began to attend a church regularly. For a while, my wife took our boys to Catholic mass with her. Each Sunday, she waved an exasperated goodbye at me as she hustled our young children out the door. Eventually, neither child saw the merit of sitting through church while dad got to stay home and eat cereal in his underwear. My wife, tired of wrestling two boys into the car, announced that we would begin attending some kind of church together – as a family. She understood my discomfort with Catholicism; I could either help her determine a new tradition, or live with what she picked.

Fearing something even worse than Catholic, I agreed to participate in the selection process. By the power of the internet, we found a local Presbyterian church. Also via the web, we learned a little about what Presbyterianism meant. It sounded harmless enough, so we visited. In truth, we could have walked into almost any denomination; had it been as warm and welcoming as the church we had found, we would have stayed there.

In that place, our boys grew up with several additional sets of grandparents. In time, my wife and I enjoyed various roles – some with official titles, like “elder” and “deacon”, some less official like “counselor” and “confidant”. Our accelerated life experiences made us older siblings to our peers; it was a privilege to walk with these people.

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While our faith lives became more vibrant, the weight of shoe-stringing our business became crushing. So, I did something I had rarely done before: I prayed. I sincerely, in a Psalmist sort of way, prayed. I told God about how hard everything felt. I complained. I railed a bit. There was nothing grateful or graceful about it. Then, I did what I probably even then understood to be a ridiculous gesture: I bargained. I promised my future to God's service if I could just get some help with my present. Ridiculous or not, about two weeks later, the business was sold.

I gave myself a year to manage the professional transition. I even nursed that a little. But, with the encouragement of my pastor and my wife, the application made its way to seminary. The acceptance letter made its way back to me. Excuses stripped away, I started taking classes in January of 2013.

As I began seminary, I was warned that my faith would likely be torn away and rebuilt by my training; it sounded as much like I was embarking on a stint at boot camp as it did like a graduate program. I never found that warning to have merit. Perhaps because I didn't claim any strict theology before starting, I did not find seminary to be especially deconstructing. Rather, seminary has often served both to affirm my beliefs and to give me language to articulate them. For example, I had never known about general revelation before; I had, however, always believed viscerally that creation was intentional in its spectacular composition.

I have experienced this time of preparation for ministry as a season of exhilarating growth and affirmation. At the same time, I often wonder about the processes I must engage – some say, "hoops through which to jump" - to satisfy academic and denominational requirements. As I continue to mature into this ministry role, I begin to see an important tension between those facets of this process. Part of this peace comes from recognizing and submitting to the wisdom of an evolving tradition.

Aside from my theological education, perhaps my most formative experiences thus far have been my two years spent serving First and Central Presbyterian Church as a seminary intern and my CPE internship with Christiana Care. At F&C, aside from the direct training and feedback provided by the staff and the congregation, I was privileged to absorb the atmosphere of a church so eager to act out Gospel messages of hospitality and social justice. These are themes I am intentionally modeling in my own ministry.

My CPE experience reinforced some existing beliefs, while challenging and stretching others. My core understanding of God is still typically Reformed – specifically Calvin-influenced: God is big, powerful, and mysterious. That is still intact. What is stretched is my understanding of God in the midst of the intimate – of the personal. I still seek to find an intentional balance between my theology, healthcare's clinical understandings, and the patient's and family's needs from intercessional prayer. I expect this to be an ongoing process as I walk with people experiencing crisis.

I am growing into my role as a placeholder for the holy in these intimate spaces. There are values and attributes I bring with me into these interactions, such as calm, good nature, and humor. I am becoming more comfortable with the idea of pastoral authority; I understand it to be how people experience the holy through my presence. It is embodied both in my physicality, as well as in my demeanor. This embodiment can be frustratingly difficult for me to recognize in the moment. However, sometimes I can sense it in the reactions from the people I serve.

Finally, from my experiences thus far, I find myself affirming Henri Nouwen's understanding of the "clown" in ministry. Clowns, for Nouwen, are human bridges, spanning the distance between the impossible acts of the trapeze and the audience. It could be said that clowns occupy the liminal spaces between the amazing and the ordinary. We are clowns in this ministry role, insofar as we often bridge the mysterious of the holy and the profane of everyday living for people existing between those worlds. We are prophets of truth, speakers of prayers, baptizers of babies, holders of hands, distributors of elements, and buriers of bodies. Through this calling, we are not glorious, nor are we entirely common.