

Credo: Courtney McLaughlin

My name is Courtney McLaughlin and I need to let you in on a secret.

I'm here because of a game of chicken. Well not here in this room here. I'm here because Dave asked me and because I've heard it is good to do something every once in a while that scares you. And truthfully, this is scary.

I'm here at the UUCC because of a game of chicken. I'll explain.

Several years ago my then husband Glen – I think then is better than ex -anyway, my then husband Glen and I had our friends Janet and Kevin Haas over for dinner.

As the night progressed we got to talking about religion and spirituality and raising children in the church. They told us about the UUCC and the positive and supportive experience they had here. Towards the end of the evening and perhaps a few drinks later they invited us to join them at Sunday service.

The next morning as Glen and I were getting dressed and getting our three-year old daughter Bella up, we slowly pieced together what we thought had happened. I think we promised our friends we would go to their church this morning.

As that realization slowly sank in Glen turned to me and said “Are you still going?” It sounded like a bit of a dare so responded, “Yeah, I’m still going. Are you still going?”

“Yeah,” he said most likely hearing the same thing.

So not wanting to be the chicken who bowed out is the game that got us here. And here was the right place.

It was a long journey to finally walk through these doors. I was raised Catholic and attended Catholic school, an experience and education I am most grateful for. That community was my educational and social life.

I went through the sacraments and church services and found comfort in the routine, the songs, the stories, the predictability and rhythm of the year.

At 13 I began questioning God, religion, Jesus and all the stories that had been presented as the ultimate truth my entire life. Reaching the pinnacle of my doubt I didn’t ask my parents, friends or teachers about it. I decided to go straight to the source.

Christmas Eve 1988 after everyone had gone to bed, I was alone in my room with a candle and my Bible. I lit the candle, read a few scripture readings then bowed my head. I asked God to send me a sign that all of this was real and true.

I realized just asking for a sign was most likely a mortal sin. Religion is about faith in things you can't see after all. But still, I needed to know I was on the right path and why I felt like I couldn't buy it. Any sign would do - a rattle of a window, a shuffle of papers, an overwhelming feeling of peace or calm, a cool breeze, an apparition...anything.

I waited and waited. Nothing happened and I went to bed disappointed and confused.

After mulling it around for a few weeks, I decided I wasn't trying hard enough. Everyone around me seemed to get it, I determined there must be something wrong with me. I joined bible study groups in high school and read different religious text trying to find the phrase, the words, the message that would finally click with me and allow me to blend in with everyone else.

It turned out the phrase I was looking for came over 15 years later from Jay during my first service here. Quoting Rumi he said "There are 1000 ways to kiss the ground, 1000 ways to go home again." That was it. That was what I needed. That made sense and spoke to my heart. I believe there are 1,000 ways to kiss the ground, to show thankfulness and joy and this was the spiritual home I was looking for.

Being part of a religious community that includes the word "joy" in its Ends resonates with me. "We are a joyful, dynamic community of people who care about and are connected to each other." That is what speaks to my heart, what I follow, what I honor everyday. Joy. It is who I am to my core.

Gratitude is my prayer and joy is my practice.

Not just the large joys which are important and should be honored, but the small, around the corner, in between the cushions, up on the top shelf kind of joy.

The sound of my favorite person coming down the hall, the smell of sun on a ripe tomato, the blessed rain on a summer night, time with my writing group, a sunset walk with my dog off leash, those five minutes where if you would have been anywhere else you never would have met.

I believe in the practice of joy in times that are hard. While I watched my best friend die of ovarian cancer there was still gratitude and joy in the smile of the medical personnel who took care of her lovingly and offered me a place to help and feel useful in a situation where I felt completely out of control.

In the difficult breaking up of a relationship and family, there is the gut wrenching pain and what seems like impossible disappointment, but there is also the realization that I was blessed to love someone so intensely and be loved in return so intensely to feel a loss like that one. Some people never have that.

The practice of joy might be a Pollyanna outlook on life, but the longer I live, the more I am convinced it is a needed one. We have heard in this space that it is easier to tell people what you

don't believe than what you do and we and are often challenged to find those words and truths that do speak to us.

In the same vein, I think it is easier to find what is wrong, what won't work, what is ugly, what is mundane and boring and simple and miss those special in between moments that make life rich. I challenge you as I challenge myself to find joy despite the weight of imperfectness, the frustration of injustice and the heaviness of day-to-day life.

My practice of joy has become richer with the more difficult discipline of enough.

It is easy to be joyful when all your needs are fulfilled, but how do you keep focused when there isn't enough. Not enough time or money, resources, influence or breaks that go your way.

My dad once told me if everyone threw their problems in the middle of the room, I'd fight to get mine back. A very true statement and a reminder that however bad I think my not enough is, there is most likely someone nearby who has less and that my responsibility in having what I do is to be joyful and grateful and share the opportunity for joy with everyone I meet.

I also learned about enough living with two girls who's father was from the Netherlands. He was older and not in great health and their mother was a schoolteacher. There was never enough money or resources or enough of anything. Living with them I noticed their joy despite having to make harder decisions to make life work.

They accepted they had enough and made due when they didn't. In the two important years we all lived together I put together that accepting you have enough in a world that continually tells you that you don't is imperative to joy and gratefulness.

Lastly, leave it to Texas televangelist Joel Osteen to help put it all together. I'm not sure if it is the slick hair or the large gold globe spinning in the background I find so mesmerizing, but I admit, some times I can't help but listen to him.

This one particular morning he really spoke to my heart. "Maybe you have a friend," he started. "Who can eat all the desserts she wants and never gain a pound." I say preach on Joel. "And you can eat salads for a week and have to work out at the gym everyday and never lose a pound."

Yes, I do have a friend like that, actually lots of them. And if you haven't guessed, I'm the salad person in this scenario. I eagerly waited for Joel to give me the weight loss secret, but that is not what came next. "No matter," he said. "That is not your race. You need to run your race."

I think about that often. About running my own race and how when the temptation to look over and compare myself or life to the person next to me I am dishonoring my path, I begin looking at the not enough's and I deserves and I miss out on the joy that I know is my truth.

When I was 13, I should have looked on my bookshelf a few shelves higher above the religious texts to find direction to my ultimate path of joy and enough. I had a book "14,000 Things to be

Happy About" by Barbara Ann Kipfer. I highlighted it and read it and quoted from it. It for me is a spiritual text and includes things like:

- Getting a really good haircut
- Butter mints
- Your favorite airport
- Buying summer sandals
- Friendly aliens from outer space
- Construction paper

I encourage you to include this book or another one that reminds you of life's joy in your top shelf collection.

After this talk today, I am happy to add being at this church and sharing with you is now number 14,001.

Thank You.