

Credo for November 22, 2015

Barbara Conrad

Hello and thanks to all for being here this morning, especially to Dave Walsh for giving me my 15 minutes of fame! And to my daughter Katy who is visiting with MY three grandchildren this weekend. I hope I don't embarrass her.

I'd like to clarify three things before starting my talk.

First, as I often do when I write poetry (to make sure I get the right word in the right order), I looked up the word CREDO in my online thesaurus. Here are some of the synonyms I found: belief, philosophy, faith, doctrine, blueprint, cult (love that one) and my favorite – assumption. Please remember that as I proceed, everything I'm about to say regarding my spiritual truth is assumption. I can't prove a thing, won't know for sure until I get to the "other side", and am always baffled by religious folks who think they "know" the truth.

Secondly, I'm very serious about my spiritual truth/assumptions.

And third, a warning, I can be totally irreverent about spiritual matters. So to prove that irreverent part of me, I'd like to read a little religious poem I wrote:

What I Remember Most about God

is that spark in her eye when she'd say  
*Cut yourself some slack there girl,*  
how she'd set her mouth all crooked  
and lean into my face like she knew something I didn't  
but was about to find out. What I remember most about God  
is that her neck had wrinkles, her breasts sagged  
and her breath smelled like Blenheim ginger ale. And the tales  
she told of her misadventures, OMG, that's what I remember  
most: Days lying in a feather hammock -- no  
sunscreen, polka dots stippling her nose. Travels  
untraveled. Souls unsaved. Shelves of books, not even  
dog-eared. (I'm not sure how she got the job.)  
And the hours she spent crafting poems, even a novel once,  
that flickered into mist by morning.

What I remember most about God is her lush garden  
by the gate -- lavender and hydrangeas *made blue*  
*out of missed wishes* (her words), and the way  
she could look me up and down and ask,  
*Now what were you saying, Sweetheart?*

Barbara Conrad

I've divided this presentation into two segments: My personal spiritual journey toward some kind of spiritual "truth" and my core values that have led me to where I am today.

So here goes:

I began this present incarnation in **Winston-Salem** where I was a member of Home Moravian Church in Old Salem. Now Winston-Salem is packed full of Moravians, but often people on the outside of the town have no idea what a Moravian is. As kids growing up in the church, we had a grand time explaining who we were and what we believed:

- No, we're not a **sect**; not Amish or Mennonite
- We're a lot like **Episcopalians** or Lutherans.
- We're the **Oldest** Protestant denomination to break from the Catholic stronghold.
- We came from **Moravia**, near Germany, actually part of what was Czechoslovakia (By the way, that's a hop, skip and jump from Unitarian's homeplace, Transylvania).
- One of our founders **John Hus** was burned at the stake.
- AND THE BEST: Every Christmas Eve we have a lovefeast – so we apparently must worship the sex god.

You likely know Moravians by their Christmas cookies, and since I think every presentation should have handouts, I'll pass out a dish of cookies for you to share.

One problem I had growing up in my church is that we always thought the cute boys were at Centenary Methodist church. This may be one reason that I decided when moving to Charlotte with two young girls to join Myers Park Methodist Church – so they'd get a large energetic, fun youth experience. And they did!!

But, during the twenty years at Myers Park Methodist, I spent a lot of time pondering, questioning, even squirming over the doctrine I had grown to accept. Actually, I had even squirmed a bit during childhood.

- As a child, I glazed over when Sunday School teachers told Bible stories. I even, on occasion, wrote a few chapters of psalms of my own, especially stories about Jesus' growing up years. After all, the Bible was written by a bunch of old men in 300 AD and needed a bit of a updating!
- I never knew what "saved" meant and worried about what would happen to my Jewish friend, Sandy.
- At slumber parties, we often stayed up late discussing whether there was a God.

So there I was, in my 30s & 40s – even early 50's -- finding myself pulling back from the doctrine of Christianity.

The books on my bedside table during the pondering period will give you an idea of where I was being pulled: Here are a few of them:

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a lot of progressive Catholic writers: Henri Nouwen, Thomas Merton  
 Care of the Soul by Thomas Moore  
 Spirituality Named Compassion by Matthew Fox  
 Handbook to Higher Consciousness  
 Living Buddha, Living Christ Thich Nhat Hanh  
 Many Minds, Many Masters – Brian Weiss  
 Seat of the Soul, Gary Zukov  
 and finally: A Chosen Faith (a UU handbook)

Once I was asked to teach a Sunday School lesson in my old Sunday School class. I think I did *Life of the Beloved* by Henri Nouwen, nothing too radical. I was struck at those wonderful friends who were still in the class, wearing nametags now yellowed with age. They were had been so consistent while I was zigzagging all over the place – and loving it!

The main conviction I grew to feel strongly about during that reading time, was the reality that there are many paths to truth, and that our world's religions often carry more commonalities than differences.

Anyway, I wanted a piece of it all. So, I became involved with MeckMin where I could be a part of interfaith, interracial, economically diverse community. For five years I attended an interracial Episcopal mission church downtown, Chapel of Christ the King. And though it gave me the racial diversity I was needing, it was still the same doctrine. So for a year I tried Quaker meeting where I loved the concept of "active waiting." Then I attended a Buddhist meditation Sangha at Myers Park Baptist Church. And finally I left all the bits and pieces behind me – or brought them along – and joined UUCU about 12 years ago, where I could have it all, cover all my bases, etc.

So, here are my spiritual assumptions for today. And please know that these are what I CHOOSE to believe. If I'm going to go through this little life we're given, and there's no way I can know for sure about religious matters, my theory is "why not choose what I want to believe?"

I believe:

1. that there is a cosmic meaning to the human experience, that we're not just neurons or energy and that some God, goddess, Spirit of Life, higher self exists
2. that every living thing has a soul
3. that I've come to earth to learn lessons and likely I'll probably come back again and again until I get it right
5. that there are guides (angels, teachers) guiding me
6. that if I'm awake, present in the moment, mindful, I'll see flickers of divine truth
7. AND my favorite UU principles:
  - the inherent worth and dignity of every person
  - respect for the interdependent web of all existence
  - justice, equity and compassion for all
8. that someday in this confused world of ours, good will prevail.

SO that brings me to part two: my core spiritual values – or How did I find myself working in areas of social justice, homelessness, LGBT rights,

civil rights, environmental compassion – or How did I go from chief majorette in high school to jailbird with my preacher? (That last is a reference to a Moral Monday moment of civil disobedience, by the way).

I have to admit I grew up in a white bubble. I never really saw the white and colored water fountains. When we drove our maid, Queen Esther Bradley home in the afternoon, I never questioned why she sat in the back seat. In college, I focused more on fraternity parties than anti-war marches. But somewhere deep inside of me a dissatisfaction was brewing. What seeds informed me? Here are some of my sources:

1. Rod Serling's episodes of Twilight Zone (1959-1964), which I watched religiously. What I didn't realize at that time was that he was cloaking his liberal radical themes in science fiction in order to bypass conservative censors, all the while, investigating moral and political questions of the time. I got the messages subliminally about right/wrong, loving the "other", equity, war vs. peace.

2. My Mother – There was an overused phrase in our household: "those Damn Junior Leaguers." She had moved to Winston-Salem when it was an "old monied" town with a working class, but no middle class. My dad was a proud country boy, turned salesman, but still my mother didn't feel included. Through her, I learned to recognize the plight of the underdog.

3. There were movies that informed me: Imitation of Life (1959) and I Passed for White (1960). With these I began to become conscious that something in our world was very, very wrong.

4. In college there were two factors. First at Chapel Hill, I took several religion and art history courses. In one of those, we were asked to answer a series of questions. The one that I remember most was this: "What would you do if you got to Heaven, met God, only to find out that she was black." I was not shocked but on fire with imagination and possibilities! As a freshman at St. Mary's in Raleigh, we were taught an entire curriculum of something called Situational Ethics, a philosophy written by an Episcopal priest. This advocated a belief that our moral standards are not carved in stone, but must be judged in context of a

particular act. This was a radical premise for me to learn that I could question my entire moral belief system.

So there it is ...and here I am today. As Tennyson said, "I am a part of all that I have met." And I do not disavow any of it. Today, I am proudly part Moravian, Methodist, Episcopalian, Quaker, Buddhist, pagan, agnostic, humanist and of course Unitarian. And not coincidentally, I'm still finding myself trying to explain to people outside of the UU tradition: Now what exactly do you believe? No, we're not a sect... and on it goes!!

Blessings to all...