

## Credo

Edie Gelber-Beechler, November 2017

This Credo isn't exactly a "This I Believe." It's a story of my spiritual path – the twists and turns that have been moving away from, and at the same time revolving around, my core beliefs. And it's a story about how my parents' spiritual and actual journeys served to form those beliefs. This credo isn't exactly "That to which I give my heart," either, but it begins with a little bit about my parents, who created my heart.

My parents were Holocaust survivors, although neither was in a concentration camp, thank God.

My father, David, was born in 1907 in Skalat, a shtetl, little town, in Poland. When I was little, I pictured it like Anatevka, from *Fiddler on the Roof*, but without the song and dance numbers. My father's family was religious, and although he had no formal education, he did attend religious school, cheder, which he didn't much like. When Bar Mitzvah time came around, there was no rabbi in town to tutor him, so they hired a tutor from a neighboring village. The first time the tutor schlepped into Skalat, my father scrambled up a tree, and wouldn't come down until enticed with sweet fruit preserves.

During the second World War, my father escaped the Nazis by being conscripted into the Soviet army. By the end of the war, most of his family had been killed. Of the 3000 Jews in Skalat, 300 survived.

On the boat to America, the Golden Land, my father stood at the railing, and was going to fling his prayer book and Tefillin (phylacteries) over the side, but didn't.

My mother, Herta, was born in 1920 in Leoben, Austria, a small mining town with only 20 Jewish families but plenty of antisemitism. Her family was middle class, and conservative. She went to public school, and had some religious training after school. But her true religion was music; she had a beautiful operatic soprano voice, and accompanied herself on the piano. She performed occasionally at recitals, but when she was about 15 years old, her music teacher told her that she'd better stop appearing in public because of the worsening antisemitism. Her family eventually all escaped Austria; one brother and his family Exodus-style, wading into Palestine at night, another brother to Belfast, her parents and her third brother, to America, but only after mistreatment in an English internment camp. They were considered "enemy aliens," because of their Third Reich passports – albeit stamped with "Jude," Jew. My mother, herself, fled first to Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, and finally, to America.

When my parents were introduced in New York, and married four months later, my mother dutifully asked my father if he wanted a kosher home. "Nah," he said. And that was that. To the best of my memory, neither of my parents stepped into a synagogue again, except for weddings and Bar Mitzvahs.

But they were spiritual, loving, compassionate people, without being told to be by a rabbi on a weekly basis. My mother, who was a saleslady at Lord & Taylor, did all of the cooking, cleaning, shopping, and raising me, but found the time and energy to help some of our more elderly neighbors, even housebound Mrs. Pentham, whom nobody liked. At my mother's urging, I frequently brought Mrs. Pentham her quart of milk, and stood, listening to her relive her memories for an hour. Selfish child that I was, I dared not sit down, for then it would have been

two hours. Around that time, I read *Gone with the Wind*; my mother reminded me of Ellen, Scarlett's mother, who selflessly helped others. And I was Scarlett, who yearned to be like her mother, but knew she wasn't.

My own spiritual path began in the synagogue. Well, actually, that's not true. It started before that, when I used to watch my mother lighting the Shabbos (Sabbath) candles on Friday nights. She'd light the candles, wave her hands over them three times, cover her eyes, and sing the blessing. But then she'd stand there for a few seconds, her hands still covering her eyes. I sensed mystery and awe in those seconds of silence, my first feeling of the spiritual.

But back to the synagogue. Just because my parents didn't attend, didn't mean I would escape. First, my mother took me to Shabbos services for 5-6 year-olds. Later, I was enrolled in Hebrew school. I went three times a week – plus Shabbos services, of course. I enjoyed the classes, the services, and especially the friends I made. The synagogue was large, and had separate services for little kids, pre-teens, and teenagers. I loved the services, the plaintive music, all of us singing, I felt, from the heart. And when the Ark opened and the Torah scrolls were carefully lifted out, I often felt a direct line of communication to God. But there was one flaw – one major flaw. The teenage services were teen-led – no adults. But they were always led by boys. I knew that service backwards and forwards, and I had a pretty good voice, but girls were relegated to leading the closing prayer. Most weeks I watched enviously - which didn't enhance my spiritual growth – watched Matthew up there, swaying, singing, praying, reading the Torah, holding court, as it were. Oh, he was good – and he eventually became a rabbi – but I could have been good, too.

When I turned 18, I got a Saturday job, and I became one of those High Holidays-only synagogue Jews. Up to that point, I had never questioned the concept of God, but then I started to explore.

I got a book on Transcendental Meditation, which was big in the 1970's. It described how to meditate, and said that your teacher would give you a mantra to repeat during meditation, and that you should never reveal it to anyone. There was a picture of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi on the cover, and, well, I didn't know anyone like that in Flushing, so I made up my own mantra, and occasionally meditated. It gave me a sense of peace, and sometimes helped me fall asleep, but I never meditated regularly, even though I wanted to.

Then I started believing in reincarnation. I felt that one's soul learned more and more with every incarnation, and that eventually a soul could rise to an extreme height of compassion and wisdom and light and could then be some sort of intermediary between people and god. (By now god had a small "g.") I felt Jesus was such an advanced soul, bought a used crucifix from an antique (read "junk") shop, and slept with it under my pillow. Of course, I had to sneak it back into its hiding place in an eyeglass case in my desk drawer immediately upon waking up, so my mother wouldn't find it. She would have fainted.

My belief in reincarnation and soul enlightenment didn't alter my Jewish core belief – that of doing good deeds, being compassionate, healing the world. I still felt there was a god out there – and in here – somewhere, but now it was a more universal god.

But don't think I was wise beyond my years. I was a teenager, and spent a lot of time and energy exploring astrology, psychic phenomena, and a very brief foray into witchcraft, which scared the crap out of me.

By the time I finished graduate school At SUNY-Binghamton, I had lost all spiritual "methodology," for lack of a better word. No Jewish God, no intermedating Jesus, no astrology. Just a seed of connectedness, always present. And of course, the pull of my Jewishness – I think it's in my DNA. So when I moved to Charlotte to be with Ron, my fiancé, I tried going to Temple Israel a few times. The music stirred me, as it always had. And I felt a cultural bond with everyone there, but I still felt out of place, and didn't know why. (It wasn't until a few weeks ago that I realized that it was because I didn't believe in a creator god, and felt uncomfortable when I was there.) In the Young Adult novel *The Fault in Our Stars*, a character says, "I thought being an adult meant knowing what you believe, but that hasn't been my experience." And at that point in my life, although the seed of my belief was still there, I had nowhere to plant it and watch it grow.

So how did I find this church? Laura says I have to tell you the story. Ron and I wanted a small wedding – really small, 9 family members including us. Since neither of us had a religious affiliation – Ron came from a Protestant but totally non-religious home in Indiana – we figured we could be married by a justice of the peace. It would have to be on a Saturday, as people were travelling and had to get back to work on Monday. I envisioned being married in the home of the

Justice of the Peace, maybe a house with a white picket fence, and the wife playing the piano. I must have seen an old movie like that once.

So I called the Mecklenburg County office and explained what we needed. The woman said, "Yes, the Justice of the Peace can marry you, but you have to go where he works on Saturday." "OK – where is that?" I asked. "At the jail," she replied. "But if it's a nice day, you might be able to get married in the courtyard." I had visions of us standing there in the courtyard, with prisoners looking down at us through barred windows, maybe cheering, or raking metal cups against the bars. And, anyway, I really didn't like the metaphor. It gave "the old ball and chain" a whole new meaning.

So I called the rabbis in town. Back then even the Reform rabbi wouldn't perform a mixed marriage. I was teaching at UNCC, so I figured that the college chaplain was for everybody, and asked him, but he wouldn't do it, either. My next-door-neighbor asked her minister; he wouldn't do it. Other friends tried their own ministers – no one would do it.

So I turned to the yellow pages. (Remember that?) Have you ever looked at the list of churches in Charlotte? I started with the A's.

When I got down to the U's, I saw "Unitarian Universalist Church of Charlotte." Hmmmm. That sounded familiar – maybe there had been one in Binghamton? I dialed, and a cheerful voice with a delightful British accent replied, "Unitarian Universalist Church of Charlotte. May I help you?" Really dejected by this time, I said, "I don't think so. We're looking for someone to marry us, but we're a mixed marriage." She said, "Well, if one of you isn't a kangaroo, I don't see any problem!" I knew I had come to the right place.

So in 1981, Sid Freeman married us in the sanctuary, now Freeman Hall. Afterwards, I attended a few services, but not many. And I didn't return until around 1990, when that seed inside me started stirring and needing water. The services spoke to me – the emphasis on the interdependent web of life, influences from varied religions and spiritual belief systems, the music, the sermons, which often called to me so strongly I felt my heart open, and of course, the people. (Did I mention the music?) When I joined the church in 1991, it was like coming home.

I joined the choir, and took the course “Cakes for Queen of Heaven,” which helped put me in touch with the idea of goddess, the strength and joy of the feminine. Womenspirit workshops at the Mountain led me to explore chakra work and then Reiki, other ways of bringing spiritual healing into my life.

But my attendance at UUCC was short-lived. I had begun teaching computer science at Harding, and the only time I had to write curriculum for the new IB course, Theory of Knowledge, was on Sunday mornings. Even after a year, when I no longer had to spend so many hours on the course, I had fallen out of the habit of coming here. But I stayed a member, showed up occasionally (like to see the new minister), and kept up with things through *Voices*.

At some point, I started seeing notices for something called “Lotus Path” and Sunday Morning Meditation. They resonated with my feeble attempts at Transcendental Meditation, years before. I resisted for a long time, but finally, in 2013, I gave it a try. Attending those sessions, I found peace in Eastern spiritual ideas and meditation, a system that supported my belief in the interconnected web of beings. There was a strong correlation between the Bodhisattva ideal of

compassion to heal suffering and the Jewish ideal of Tikkun Olam, healing the world through acts of kindness.

My parents didn't talk much about their hardships. If anything, they were too quiet about it. But somehow, from their silence, I internalized some of their suffering, which, I like to think, has made me more sensitive to the suffering of others, and more compassionate.

When I practice meditation and mindfulness, there is no past, no future, only the present moment. So how do I reconcile this with my strong links to the past? I constantly feel my parents' past in my present. According to Thich Nhat Hanh, our parents, all our ancestors, are in our cells, and when we sit to meditate, we sit with them.

Sunday mornings brought me home to this church, home to the interdependent web of all beings, home to compassion, to trying to emulate my mother, one moment at a time.