

**First Unitarian Church****January 7, 2024**

One night in 2002, when I was 26 years old, as I was on my way home from community college, something really unexpected happened; something that changed the whole course of my life. It was an autumn evening in Oregon. Not quite dark yet. There was no one in the car with me. I was making a left turn. And I heard a voice.

The voice said, “You’re going to be a minister.”

I said, “What?”

But I didn’t hear it again. I didn’t need to. I had already definitely heard it.

I had never heard a voice before. It didn’t travel through my ears, but my brain registered it as coming from outside of myself.

The idea of it didn’t square with my theology. I didn’t believe in a god that literally talks to people. If you had asked me back then, I would have said I was spiritual but not religious.

I believed in something— a spirit of love, I guess— but certainly not a talking kind of God.

And yet, in spite of my beliefs, I heard a voice. And it only took a few minutes, during which a lot of my life kind of flashed before my eyes, to realize what the voice said sounded... right. That moment became a pivotal point in my spiritual autobiography. It’s why I am up here.

This church is not about me. Yes, I lead. But so do many others, lay and ordained. It’s collaborative, often with a grassroots energy. We don’t have a clergy-centric faith. I don’t issue theological decrees or enforce doctrines. And among us are many different spiritual paths, experiences and beliefs. We love that diversity.

What’s also true is that as one of your ordained leaders, my own spiritual experiences inform my religious leadership. So, I have shared my spiritual autobiography from this pulpit a couple of times over the years. Once in 2011, when Christine Robinson also shared hers. Again in 2017, with our intern at the time, Dan Lillie. My story hadn’t changed much at that time. But now, there has been a plot twist. Unexpected, but nice. A couple of months ago I shared with you that I am becoming a UU who is Jewish. How did that happen? And what does it mean for our church? So here it is: spiritual autobiography part 2.

In case you missed it before, this story really begins not in that car, but where I grew up: on Alder St in Dundee, Oregon. Dundee is beautiful now—rolling hills, vineyards. It’s famous for wine and it looks the way I imagine Tuscany looks. But that’s not the part I grew up in. Alder Street was a blue-collar neighborhood in the grittiest sense, a trailer park—I grew up in an aluminum trailer that had a license plate in the front window. There were some great things about it. I ran in a pack of neighborhood kids and knew the neighborhood intimately in the way only curious children can: each backyard and the tromped grass between them; the hazelnut orchard to the north. We knew the cracks in the sidewalk that would stop your roller skates, the tiny creatures inhabiting the ditch between the trailers and the orchard: tadpoles, frogs, water skippers, slugs and worms. But there was another side too. Drug busts. Violence. Spousal and child abuse.

There were two churches near our street, both Christian, and one held vacation bible school. All of the kids went to it, so we did too, even though my dad was an atheist and my mom wasn't religious. They gave out stickers and candy in exchange for quoting the bible from memory.

I no longer remember what the verses were, but I do remember that my little sister came home crying from it one day, because they had told us that people are born evil. The idea of evil babies was really upsetting to her, in addition to contradicting the bible. I was only a little kid, but I already knew that wasn't true.

Meanwhile, my mom was working on her high school diploma at the local community college. I'm not kidding when I tell you that reading was still a challenge for her when in a history class she came across a description of the rebellious Unitarian church of the 1800's. And she was so impressed, she decided to see if that denomination still existed. It did, and there was a church in downtown Portland.

So when I was about seven years old, my grandmother, my mother, my sister and I started making the 45-minute drive there. My dad went a few times, too, but he was done with it after one of the ministers preached for gun control. I was a pretty good shot by age seven or eight.

At the UU church, I learned about the inherent worth and dignity of all people. I learned that people could be together in theological diversity—in fact one person could be both UU and something else, like Buddhist UUs and Pagan UUs. I learned that if you dissect a frog in Sunday school, you won't find the spark of life in it or a soul or anything like that. Just frog parts. And that made life seem very mysterious and fascinating. And before I left that church as a teenager, I saw a woman minister for the first time.

I don't remember having any spiritual practices at home, or praying, or anything like that as a kid, except when we joined our extended family for dinner. Our family included a variety of fundamentalist and evangelical Christians. One of my aunts, a woman with a loud voice and winged glasses, whose hot-pink lips were always praising Jesus, used to send my dad through the roof. Christians in my family even fought each other over religious differences.

To me, the theology of Christ and the cross always seemed more like a barrier than a door to faith. I just didn't get it. The UU church taught me Jesus's point was love and justice. That seemed like enough.

When I became a teenager, everything changed. My parents divorced and my mom had a breakdown. On public assistance, we moved into a small, dark apartment in Portland, just blocks away from the church. I had often felt out of place among the other kids there because of my blue-collar clothes and our inability to do things that cost money. Now that my family was in crisis, it felt like a very lonely place to go. All the other families seemed so normal, with houses and parents who were teachers or doctors.

I tried joining a couple of different Christian churches with friends from high school. I even went on a mission trip to Mexico and tried accepting Jesus while our youth group sat around a campfire. I say "tried" because even though I said the words out loud and wanted to believe them, it just wasn't my theology. I prayed and I did begin to experience a feeling of someone or

some spirit keeping me company in my life. But in the end, I was too edgy for those conservative Christians; too put off by the language of the cross; and too Unitarian to think Jesus was really the only way to salvation.

So, I became churchless. But I did have some big spiritual experiences.

One was when I was just fifteen. I was working as a nursing assistant in a care home. It was 6:30 AM on my first day on the job after training. The hallway was bustling. There were laundry barrels, trash barrels, medication carts, staff, wheelchairs, and lights going off above doors. I had 1 hour to get eight people up and ready for breakfast and was panicking, trying to remember everything. A nurse stopped me in the hall. Karen was one of the sternest people I had ever met. Her face was covered with frown lines. She asked me something about being “okay” and “helping with George.” I didn’t quite catch it, but I wanted to look competent so I said yes. A few minutes later I showed up in George’s doorway. Karen was standing by his bed with a washbasin. I saw her wringing out a washcloth, getting ready to give him a sponge bath, and that’s when I noticed...he was dead.

This is why she asked if I’d be okay. I paused to reconsider, then started helping. She moved briskly. He can’t feel it, she was thinking, so what does it matter. She lifted his arms, moved him around with efficiency. I had heard of near-death experiences. I wondered if George was still present somehow, watching us. I wanted to sing to him; wanted to honor the transition he was making. But I was embarrassed in front of Karen. So I stayed quiet as I gently washed my side of his body. Later I switched to the night shifts, where I could sing without other employees around.

Next: when I was eighteen, I became a mother. I got married and a few years later I moved into my own humble but real house. I made friends with other mothers. And I loved it. It was a very spiritual time for me: pregnancy, labor, and birth, tending a garden, nursing my babies, and participating in blessing ceremonies for pregnant friends. I also continued working as a caregiver a few hours per week. When I was about five months pregnant with my second child, I found myself standing at the foot of the bed of a woman in her seventies who was also named Angela. She had advanced ALS, Lou Gehrig’s Disease. She was almost completely paralyzed but still felt everything. To comfort her, I was rubbing her feet. As I touched them, so aware that she was within days of death, I could feel my baby’s feet kicking. The crown of my head tingled, and the hair on the back of my neck rose. I felt like a conduit. Having been raised UU, I had a very open idea of what “God” might mean. I couldn’t have articulated it to you. But I felt I had experienced it, whatever it was.

There would be two other times this kind of thing happened to me. They were a few years later. One was the night a good friend had her baby. She lived fifty miles away and called me when her water broke. She was having a homebirth and she wanted me there for support. The labor was going fast. I was almost there when her husband and sister called me again to tell me to hurry, please, the midwife wasn’t there yet. I could hear my friend’s anxious moans in the background. I blew a red light and swooped into her driveway, burst through the door, and raced into the kitchen where she was kneeling in a partially filled swimming pool. The water was still running. I jumped in with her and not sixty seconds later caught her slippery new son in my bare hands as he emerged into the world. I stared at my hands for days after that, thinking

about how they had held that first edge of a human life, the first breath. I felt I had touched something incredibly holy.

Just a few weeks later something else happened—something very sad this time. My dad’s new wife suddenly became seriously ill. The doctors informed us that she would die of complications from alcoholism within a few days. She’d had a very hard life, and was only 43. I helped my dad arrange for her to leave the hospital and come home. There was nothing they could do there anyway. I was at her bedside, speaking a blessing to her with my hand on her forehead when she took her last breath. The whole room changed. The crown of my head tingled. The hair on the back of my neck rose.

I stared at my hands for days after that. Birth, death, blessing.

By then my kids had led me back to church— preschoolers ask some intense existential questions. I needed help with those. We lived in Salem, so we tried out the small church there. And the members were so nice and so welcoming, I just kept hanging around. I started volunteering. I made coffee, showed up at rallies. I spoke once in a service, for about 120 seconds. I was so nervous I thought I would die. I coordinated the soup kitchen, joined the pastoral care team, served on the board. It was starting to get so that I was at church all the time.

Those last several years had been happy overall, but I’d always had this low-level nagging sense of... what was it? Restlessness? Ambition? I couldn’t put my finger on it. I started taking classes at community college. I thought of the painful things I had seen, and the beautiful ones. I thought about the way religion had created tension in my family, and how very opposite this seemed from the potential for love and connection. I thought of my own yearning for depth and meaning, my love for other people, and my readiness to be challenged and to grow. Maybe I would become a therapist who specialized in spirituality and religion, I thought.

This is when I heard the voice. *You’re going to be a minister.* A few moments later, when all of these things had kind of flashed before my eyes, I realized how right that idea felt.

So I became one! That’s a long story of its own. And I’ve been here ever since. There were Buddhist influences along the way, starting with a mentor twenty years ago. I’ve continued engaging with Buddhism and have woven Buddhist teachings and practices into my work. And life has gone on. My kids are grown. One is married. There’s a decent chance I’ll become a grandmother in the next couple of years. I got divorced. And I’ve fallen in love again. With someone whose Judaism is one of the most beautiful things about her.

The first time we experienced a sunrise together, she stood outside and prayed toward the mountains. On Fridays, she chanted blessings, lit candles, and baked challah. We studied the Talmud and had deep theological discussions and debates. And when I accompanied her to synagogue, I found myself held, resting in, the rhythm of a religious service I wasn’t in charge of, for the first time in a very long time. The scriptures were familiar- the Hebrew scriptures have had a big influence in Unitarian Universalism. One of the prayer books was filled with the same poetry I have used here over the years: Mary Oliver, Ross Gay, and others. I found it deeply nourishing.

My partner and I keep a Jewish home together now, with a kosher kitchen and shabbat rituals. I am a Unitarian Universalist minister, with a UU and Jewish life, and soon a Jewish wife. We are engaged.

In a couple of weeks, I will make official what I have already been living into for some time. I will become Jewish. And I will still also be a Unitarian Universalist and your minister. How does that work?

Someone asked me: doesn't being Jewish mean believing that Judaism is the one right path? Does it contradict Unitarian Universalism? The answer is no. Not at all. In fact, many members here also identify as UU and Jewish. Every tradition has its more fundamentalist and more liberal theologies. I am religiously liberal, no matter what labels I wear, no matter what form my spiritual practices take.

The day someone asked me that was the day Bob and I spoke about the war in Israel and Palestine. Some people were upset with me for not calling for an immediate ceasefire that day. I understand. I am also horrified by the number civilian casualties. I have been from the start. Since the first 1200 people were murdered in Israel. The war has been in our prayers if not in the sermons almost every week since then. The thing is, what's going to bring about peace after 75 years of conflict is not opinions, but people seeing each other's humanity. With everyone shouting at each other, the conflict keeps spreading. People right here in this town, thousands of miles away, are torn apart over it. We in this congregation have partnerships with Jewish and Muslim congregations. I have shared this platform in recent months with a rabbi and an imam. That we have been able to navigate these last few months from a place of love and connection, and not reactivity or self-righteousness, keeping both of those partnerships close, is a sign to me that we are doing our part of that humanizing work well.

Being with, tending humanity. That's the theme of this whole story I have just shared. When I was little and I refused to believe babies could be bad. When I wanted to sing to George. When I held someone during their first breath, and blessed someone else during their last. When I was there with my soon-to-be son and the Angela who had ALS, and felt both of their feet. It has been here in my ministry: in thinking with you about how to live in the world and help heal it and take care of your spirits in the process; in the nitty gritty work we do side by side so we can keep this place going, in your weddings and memorial services and dedicating your children.

And it is in my sharing my story with you, authentically and from the heart, in hopes that together we make a tapestry of stories, rich in their humanity and centered in the heart.