

“Being Born Again, and Again, and Again”

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It is always a joy to be with you, for certainly I feel at home here. I was last present sitting in the congregation when you celebrated your 175th anniversary. I knew it would be a grand occasion, and it was, and I especially wanted to hear Bill Sinkford, a person whose words I have read and quoted in other pulpits.

One of the most joyous occasions in this sanctuary was when we all gathered after the defeat of the Article XII of Cincinnati's City Charter and Sharon led us in a most glorious burial celebration of that blatantly discriminating policy against our gay, lesbian and bisexual neighbors. And some of you were present this past week in City Hall when we celebrated City's Council's vote to include "homosexual and transgendered" persons to our City's human rights ordinance. This was one of your congregation's goals. You are indeed a most important congregation in this city and I only can pray that you will advance your ministry even more.

So I was pleased when asked again to preach, this being my seventh such occasion. As to what to share with you, I really had to do some soul searching. But when I was told your year's theme was on Life cycles – rites of passage, I thought why not? Why not share why a Presbyterian minister feels right at home in a Unitarian Universalist congregation.

Of course, I have for many years been familiar with the Principles and Purposes of your association and I endorse them. But how does that all fit in with my present ordination in the Presbyterian Church which is a confessional Christian body of the Reformed tradition going back to John Calvin who if, he were in this pulpit, would certainly denounce you as Christian heretics.

To reply to such a question is where the life cycle comes in – my own. And so I wish your indulgence as I lift before you a personal journey. In some ways I apologize for doing so. A preacher ought to be very cautious about being the subject of his own sermon and when doing so keep in mind what Reinhold Niebuhr said. "Sin is the result of undue self-regard – the general inclination of all persons to overestimate their virtues, powers, and achievements." And I might add this is not just the sin of persons but of nations and especially are own.

I might add that Jesus felt self-righteousness the cause of all the hatred and factionalism of his day, as it is today, and is probably why he seemed more at home with sinners than the righteous.

There are two ways to repent of such self-righteousness in our selves, writes Patricia Williams, a specialist in the theory of evolution. “The first is to acquire a healthy skepticism about one’s own rectitude and that of one’s group. The second is to look for truth and goodness in those who have different opinions and customs.”

With that in mind, let me share some aspects of my own life cycle...what may be called my continuous crisis of becoming.

As hopefully for all, my spiritual journey began early in a loving home. I grew up in an extended family of eleven, which including my six brothers and sisters. That we were all loved gave us a sense of self worth. It was an undeserved grace, a gift that many persons sadly did not receive. Folk singer Pete Seeger was right about raising children, “Pour in the love and it will come out from them.”

We were not strong churchgoers but I was baptized at the age of eight in a Russian Baptist Church in Lansing, Michigan. By that time I was convinced that the most significant hero, divine being, friend, companion, call him what you may, was the man, Jesus of Nazareth. He was like an older brother, one of real flesh that I could always count on.

But for years through high school and early college, my Jesus relationship gave me no great theological clarity or direction for my own journey. I left college and enlisted into the army parachute corps just as the Korean War was ebbing. I needed to, as must we all, leave home. The military became a self-imposed exile.

Yet, I was rewarded by this adventure. Early on as I began sixteen weeks of infantry training, a chaplain gave me a pocket size New Testament. I carried it with me in my pocket during those long days of boot camp, reading it during breaks, and memorizing especially Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

These were the same words, I later would learn, that inspired Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. And they lit a small spark in me. I also began to realize that what I was reading in Jesus’ sermon, and what I was being indoctrinated with in my military training, was strikingly dissimilar. I needed a new birth for my life. I had been assigned to post general’s office, but I soon asked, and it was granted, to work as a chaplain’s assistant with the chaplain’s office.

I won’t bother with the details but about midway through my military service, I finally felt a sense of purpose, a calling, and I made an application for the ministry in the Presbyterian Church. I had joined it in high school and I must admit what first got me there was the shallow reason that the church had a basketball team. But by now I had a better reason. I liked what that denomination was saying on social matters, and right at

that time, printed in the New York Times, was a letter by the Presbyterian Church denouncing the tactics of Senator Joseph McCarthy. It was the first ecclesiastical body to do so. The recent movie "Good Night, And Good Luck" focused on that issue and I had vainly hoped that George Clooney would have mentioned the Presbyterians when scoring the film.

But just as I was to leave the military, I spoke to one of the senior chaplains whose faith I was not too sure of. I asked if he felt born again. He answered that he had been born again, and again and again. His answer puzzled me then, but that is what I would soon discover in my own life. So I returned to finish college with enthusiasm and then to San Francisco to attend seminary. Jesus and I were finally on a roll!

But the greatest changes took place when I first served in San Quentin Prison, and then on to churches in California, Michigan, Wisconsin and finally, a few blocks from here, in Cincinnati.

What I learned through these forty-five years is that to remain the same is to renounce existence. As Cardinal Newman, a great Roman Catholic had said, "Life is change and to be perfect is to change often." I learned that dogma could not be fixed. That theology had to always be open-ended since its subject is God, and who can claim finality about the mind of God except those who have created God in their own image? As some one has said, "The sacred is an infinite mystery and its truth is still being revealed." (Nurya Parish) Or even as one of your hymns warns us, "The Spirit floweth free, high surging where it will."

Perhaps what happened to me these years in the ministry can best be summed up in another of your hymns, which we will sing at the conclusion of the service. It's by the wonderful Unitarian hymn writer, Samuel Longfellow. He writes:

The seekers of the light are one:
 One in freedom of the truth,
 One in the joy of paths untrod,
 One in the soul's perennial youth,
 One in the larger thought of God.

"O Life That Maketh All Things New"

Well, my first ministry on paths untrod, was to serve as a chaplain in San Quentin Prison while in seminary. What I learned is that prisons are not great places for rehabilitation and our growing prison population, the highest of any country, is blight on our nation's soul. And let thank you, Al Gerhardstein, for all the just considerations you have defended on behalf of Ohio's prison inmates. Well, frustrated, I asked the senior chaplain, who ministered to all those on death row, why was it what I studied about rehabilitation wasn't happening here? While he was sympathetic, and I admired his own efforts, he gave me some sage advice warning that I will soon find that when I get to my first church all the ideal values I learned in seminary will not be necessarily true in the

local church. He was right. Institutions, as necessary as they are, are not faultless. But working within institutions, I learned, is a must. Unilateralism, as we have found in our present foreign policy, is dangerous.

In my first church in the Los Angeles area, I learned that congregations, while not perfect could be wonderful agents of social change. I also learned I needed to do more than Praise and Pray to God. In that church in the early sixties, racism was the main challenge and regarding that we needed to plot against it.

When I began my ministry in this church California was growing like a weed. Adjacent to the church a whole city had developed with a population of 14,000 within a decade. But there was not one African-American living there! They were excluded due to a law the realtors had backed under the guise that anyone should be able to sell their house to only those they decided were acceptable.

Our little local group of clergy decided, as did others around this state that something must be done. After attempts at persuasion, it was decided in our church to confront the issue head on with a press conference, which surprisingly got a lot of press. The realtors were quite angry and one called me the very next day. "Why didn't you consult with us before you went to the press?" A little intimidated, I could only reply "why didn't you first check with the religious community before you developed your racially prejudicial policy?" It was then I wore my very first campaign button, "Would you let you daughter marry a realtor?" I even sent a button to my realtor father back in Michigan. Thankfully, California's law assuring housing equality came a year later – a policy of hospitality.

This was also the time that Martin Luther King was reminding us all that the most segregated hour of the week was Sunday at 11:00 AM.

And that segregation was also true in my church, an all white congregation of some 800 members. But it was there I learned something about hospitality that still brings me to tears. The other minister and I had just gathered for the early worship service. As we entered the sanctuary we looked out and saw a tall black woman, the first ever, walk forward and sit down in the empty third row pew. We looked at each other with some anxiety because we knew that at this early service, in our rather long sanctuary, no one sat that far up front. We knew it meant that during the whole hour this woman would have all the others way behind her, staring at her back.

We gave the call to worship and prayed but our hearts were heavy. And then an incredible kind of miracle happened. Immediately after the Amen, we looked up and watched as two separate couples came forward and moved into the pew on both sides of the woman.

That congregation taught me a lot, as most will if we clergy will let them. And I might add, the reverse is also true.

That is what a sanctuary should mean, a welcoming place, “A house of prayer for all the peoples,” to quote someone whose whole life was an open table of hospitality.

In my second church in the later sixties, also in the Los Angeles area, I learned even more that it was not a question if the church should be involved in the political, social and economic orders of the world but it was only a question of how. After all, this is the only world we have to exercise our faith. I began to realize we were meant to bring Heaven to Earth not Earth to Heaven. I also began to realize that the common hope of praying for Jesus’ Second Coming was off the mark for several reasons.

First, because it neglected the present time, which is, where Jesus located God’s activity, not in some future hope. Second, I realized his first coming was sufficient and our fault was that we had hardly appropriated his values in our daily lives. And third, those who anxiously wait for his second coming have a dream that God will bring wrath upon this world through a cosmic war of good over evil, with Jesus at the head of God’s army. Jesus didn’t share that dream at all. He loved this world and knew God did as well. God’s concern, Jesus thought, is to ensure equity in society not the survival of the fittest or to divide the world between the good and evil. Jesus knew God was not a killer. I

That church felt the same way. That is why some of our church elders reminded me that speaking against the war in Vietnam was not enough, so we rented the civic hall to conduct a war protest and brought in a decorated Green Beret as our main speaker. After I introduced him, an opposition group threw tear gas bombs. The rally failed but I learned that the church must take risks if ever it was to be a light in this world.

This church was also upset that at that time the state made getting contraceptives difficult to receive. So we decided, a first, to hold a Plan Parenthood Clinic in the church and we advertised its welcome broadly. At the same time we became aware of many women with problem pregnancies. Since abortions were against the law in the US, we helped organize a safe clinic in nearby Mexico.

Also the cold war had intensified, so the Church was pleased to send me on what would be the first of three trips to the Soviet Union knowing reconciliation could not take place without relationships. It was a small effort but it changed me. In this church I had so many rebirths I could hardly count them. But again, as Whitehead has said, “Stagnation is the deadly foe of morality.” Religious bodies, and our own souls, must not become encrusted with mildew.

In my third church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, I learned my theology must change or I had better leave the ministry. I had an interesting lesson there. In the church I was serving I taught a class on the variety of theological positions, offering my critique of each one. When I discussed liberalism I used the writings of Duncan Littlefair, a nationally known radical minister whose church happened to be few blocks from where I was located. I meant to be critical of what he had to say. It seemed most of the city called him not Littlefair but Rev. Little Faith. But as I studied his sermons, I realized he had more truth and grace about him than I first surmised. I would later apologize to my

congregation for bearing false witness against him and told them they would do well to get to know him.

This led me back to seminary in Chicago for doctoral studies in process theology, the very seminary where Duncan himself was schooled. There I was born again into a theology that was far more in sync with the scientific worldview than my own Christian Neo-Orthodoxy. Fountain Street, a liberal Unitarian type of church where Duncan was the minister, became my model for a congregation from then on.

In my fourth church in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, I learned money isn't everything and that the real humans come in all economic conditions. Lake Geneva was a very wealthy community and also bordered on rural farming life. I discovered that financial wealth did not guarantee happiness or wholeness, and that being poor did not mean poverty of soul. I had learned the latter in my own family. What I discovered, when we were able to bring both groups together, the haves and the have-nots, in one congregation, that we were all mutually enriched as children of God, and so would be our ministry.

In my fifth and last church, a few blocks from here at Mt Auburn, I was reborn in several ways. The first had to do with the question of truth and authority. Early in my pastorate there I did a series of sermons on "The Ten Commandments for Today." A description of the series was printed on the bulletin board. One day I looked at it and discovered someone from the congregation had scribbled on it, "The Ten Commandments According to Hal Porter." Well, I didn't need to be told I wasn't Moses but my critic made a point.

So from that point on I sought to make it clear when in pulpit that what I had to say about the Christian gospel was according to Hal Porter. Oh, I believed that what I was saying from the pulpit was combatable with Jesus' teaching, but I wanted everyone to know that I was just a human being, with all the limitation that also implies. I think that is something a member of this congregation can resonate with. You would not expect any person from this pulpit to speak with any other authority other than themselves.

Most know, including this congregation, that the Christian scriptures begin with the four Gospels – gospel meaning good news. What is often overlooked is that the full titles in the Bible are The Gospel according to Matthew, according to Mark, according to Luke, and according to John. This implies that they are each different, and they are, even though the central subject is Jesus, because they all are composed and understood by individual writers, and we may say, by different theological thinkers with their own theological biases.

The larger lesson is that Jesus, being such a remarkable individual, was hard to define even in the Bible. And so I had to learn a new thing, that there is no one orthodox version of Jesus even in the scriptures. Jesus cannot be set in a fixed creed. Churches that claim they alone have the truth of scriptures I find are churches to shun for their message only leads to factionalism and exclusion and, if we didn't have the first amendment to the Bill of Rights in the United States, we would probably have religious

wars all over the place. As some one has said, learning not to throw stones is an endless education. This, too, is one of your congregation's important principles, as you have so stated. That we must be open to ideas and philosophies and values different from our own, with the possibility that from them we may change our minds. So that has been my journey as well. One of my definitions of sin is arrested self-development. It is a form of laziness, the failure to become.

The second thing I learned up the street, of several others, was regarding homophobia, a condition we all have been conflicted with in some measure in our lives. But it was an issue more than any other that changed my life. I really don't need to tell this church about this but since I have it all written out, I might as well.

In my denomination, that still understands homosexual practice as sinful, back in 1991, Mt Auburn's congregation declared that false. We affirmed that gays and lesbians are part of God's good creation and they, no less than heterosexuals, are meant to enjoy God's gifts of love, joy, and intimacy. At the time we did not know if there were a homosexual person in that congregation, but we knew our policy to be both just and compassionate. You, of course, have made a similar witness.

Well, in that church because of that policy, much happened. Within a few years the congregation nearly doubled with over a hundred gays joining, a third of its membership. It was a rich and contagious communion. As some of you know, since we Presbyterians are all connected under a constitution, we went through several official investigations and some ecclesiastical trials, but we did not compromise on our welcome of gay and lesbian persons, and they became ordained leaders in the church.

And no one was blessed more than I, except I knew I also had to change. Oh, I had long dealt with the inclusion of homosexuality in the church, but only as a justice issue. I, like so many, having not known gays personally, I had not really wrestled with my own homophobia.

But now I was a Pastor to a host of them. Yet, through many counseling sessions with them – hearing their private confessionals – officiating at their marriages before God – supporting them when they went through separations – being with them in sickness and many deaths – baptizing their children – celebrating with them at their parties – working with them in their discipleship – celebrating and being amazed by their gifts and talents – these all had a transforming effect, displacing my own cultural hang-ups and fortifying an absolute conviction within me that whatever a person's sexual identity, they are no different from anyone else. We are all natural biological variants of nature.

So I discovered, far beyond justice, that I actually rejoiced when GLBT persons sought love and found love in return. It was good to see their displays of affection. Their kiss of friendship and their hug of companionship also for me brought me great joy and a depth of the gospel I had not previously known.

It was no wonder that The Cincinnati Enquirer falsely printed that I was a “practicing homosexual.” The paper later apologized, but on Sunday when the news came out, one of our members, during the sharing of joys and concerns during worship, got up and said, “Pastor, several of us want you to know that we are willing to help you with the practicing part!”

As the wonderful William Sloan Coffin has said about the time he spent with gay people, “familiarity has bred only respect, never contempt.”

Yes, life is a continuous crisis of becoming! It is to be born again, and again, and again.

Now I am a pastor emeritus. But I am not sure in telling you a part of my journey that it answers my implied question of why then am I not a Unitarian since I have grown so much? Well, I am, and according to your own definition, but in a Presbyterian Church. Besides we need Unitarians in the Presbyterian Church!

Yes, Jesus remains for me the revelation of God’s unbounded love for all persons and if I were to define a Christian it would be one who seeks to follow in the path that Jesus took. I am still compelled by that life, even as I fail at it, because I think what was truly unique about Jesus understanding of God is that there is no wrath in God, only compassion. I also now realize Jesus didn’t die for our sins, only because of them. And Jesus didn’t consider his death a sacrifice for our sins because God, he knew, already forgave us.

As to identities, I also would agree with Bishop Tutu who said last week at the meeting of the World Council of Churches that “God is not a Christian.” Indeed, God has many anointed ones. Christians do not have a copyright on God’s infinite mystery.

I am sorry to add to this long sermon, but something interesting has happened just this past week that is connected to you. I enjoy reading the sermons on your web page and about a month ago there was one by Robert Jensen, and, if you remember, he was very critical, even thinking that humanity was a failed experiment. He also suggesting that what was good about America was dying or is already dead. I was very moved by his sermon as I suspect many of you were. I know it was a sermon that could not be preached just anywhere.

The irony is that this same Robert Jensen, a professor and journalist, last week joined a Presbyterian Church in his home in Austin, Texas. When he did he said, “Standing before the congregation of St Andrew’s Presbyterian Church I affirm that I: (1) endorse the core principles in Christ’s teaching; (2) intend to work to deepen my understanding and practice of the universal love at the heart of those principles, and (3) pledge to be a responsible member of the church and the larger community.” He also said he considered himself only a sort of Christian, a secular Christian, and made clear that he rejected much of the orthodox dogma of Christianity that many claim essential to that faith.

Let me tell you that countless letters and articles have come out this week denouncing him, as well as that church for admitting him into membership. Well, I am glad he has joined us because we need him in order to be as inclusive in our membership as you Unitarians are with your membership. And let me add, I am never unhappy when Presbyterians, or any one else, having found they have lost faith in their own church have found a spiritual home among you. They couldn't do better.

Yes, it is the grace of Jesus' life that continues to disturb and encourage me, and I know that is true of many of you, but as I continue in that relationship, I want to so with the sound advice from the hymn we are now to sing*

still looking for more light,
and from new truths,
and on new paths,
and hopefully with a soul still young,
realizing there are greater thoughts of God to be known, and by them, to be re-born once again, and again, and again.

*Hymn #12 "O Life That Maketh All Things New" by Samuel Longfellow.

