

Flowers in the Desert
A Spiritual Journey
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Good Morning

A few months ago, I was scheduled to give a “This I believe” talk. This is my first time sharing as a main speaker. A week or so ago, I spent some time in Borrego Springs at the state park. It was truly delightful to see so many wildflowers, with beautiful colors among the rocks and in the desert. The next day, I realized that no matter how harsh the climate, how much heat and dryness, the flowers can bloom in the right set of circumstances. This seemed to fit my journey, a climate at times harsh and dry, yet at other times so many wonderful flowers.

I began the year sharing with you the story of the Little Prince and the lesson that makes a flower special is the time you spend with it and asking the question “What will be my rose this year?”

During one of his sermons a few weeks ago, Rev. Tom Owen-Towle referred to our fellowship as a place available where we can be supportive and authentic with each other. This was inspiring, as I thought all truth is welcome here. It meant sharing not only the successes but also the challenges of my life. Rev. Tom said when we are walking together there need be no surprises.

I don't always attend church services to find a place of comfort. My personal growth has come from those times when I would take a risk and challenge my beliefs. It is my intention to share my truth this morning. In our short time together, I think it is important that you know some facts to give you context on

what has happened while I have walked the path. Some of my sharing will be very personal, yet this is the dirt, the foundation upon which I have grown.

II. UU Experience / Religious Experience

I grew up in the First Unitarian Universalist ("UU") Church in Orange, New Jersey. I have always been a UU. Growing up UU, I considered myself very agnostic bordering on atheism. At that time, there was so much anger about the Vietnam war, nuclear weapons, three mile island, and a sense that we were so vulnerable. No one taught me to believe in God. I was free to come up with my own beliefs. This was a gift and at the same time I had a yearning for someone to say, this is what you should believe. But no one ever lied to me at Church and said Jesus was this or that. I learned of the mechanics of other religions, but not the feelings that were within those churches I went to visit.

I met others joining our religious movement that had rejected their church or synagogue's beliefs and have felt betrayed about lies or were seeking a different truth.

I was suspicious of God or people that talked about God, being around "Born Again" Christians filled me with such anxiety. I think I took on some beliefs of the adults around me that these "Born Again" Jesus people were delusional. I took on some underlying hostility against certain religions growing up UU. I don't think the adults who were hostile to some religious beliefs did this intentionally, or tried to influence me, they were expressing their feelings, which I thought were absolutes. Because I was young, it was hard for me to make the distinction. I did however love singing the hymns, listening to the Sermons, and meeting my friends from Sunday school. Christmas hymns were some of my favorites because they were generally upbeat and happy.

III. In the Desert

In growing up I had many days of great joy, and lots of fun. I went to a UU Summer camp, I acted in plays, spending many days playing in local parks, and doing things with friends.

I also had many challenges, much financial scarcity. I have learned over the course of my life, that my circumstances don't make me special, and that other people have had to face life challenging situations. I will share a few of the bigger challenges I have faced.

In our responsive reading this morning: Mary Oliver writes "tell me about despair yours and I will tell you mine." How that poem resonates with me. I was born in early 1960's. My father George was institutionalized in a mental hospital diagnosed a paranoid schizophrenic. Growing up, I visited him from time to time with my two brothers. The visits were very hard for me, but looking back I am glad I went to see him and talk with him. This caused me great sadness, as I felt very powerless around the relationship. I was very happy that there was a place to take care of him.

Also, I grew up as minority, the only white child in my elementary school besides my brothers, and lived in all black neighborhood and attended schools in East Orange and Orange, New Jersey. At some periods in middle School and high school, I was physically attacked, had my life threatened, was the subject of extortion and generally was scared of a certain group at school. These events were not every day but happened over a period of time.

Beginning at age of 13, I was sexually abused over a period of time by a man who was trusted by me and my family. At the time, I did not share this with anyone as I did not feel safe in my environment and thought nobody wanted to

know this truth. It took some years before I would tell anyone of what happened. This sexual abuse was a terrible betrayal, for I believed the lie inside my head that I was damaged that somehow I deserved this action.

Spiritually I felt dead inside, I had been pretty much grounded in the facts that I had to do everything myself and solve my own problems. I thought anything around God helping me or the existence of a force on the outside was a big time lie. I withdrew inside and basically thought I needed to wait things out until I became a bit older.

There were adults in my life, that sensed something was wrong and reached out to me. However, I was unable to share or connect with them. On an emotional level, I felt what had happened me was my fault or somehow I was gay. This kept me separated. Words of adults in my life meant nothing to me. I did not feel safe to be honest.

Sexual abuse, other feelings and thoughts, caused me great confusion about my sexual identity - Was I Gay, Straight, or Bisexual? I entered to counseling for a period of time. What a mystery sexuality was to me. In my late 20's, I moved to Seattle, and I was in a gay relationship with my boyfriend for about a year or so. In some ways it was a good relationship, yet in other ways something did seem missing in my life. But I knew I did not have all the answers, but deep inside I did want to be happy.

I then moved to Houston to study the law. I met my wife had a strong love for her and we married. I felt so happy and accepted, However, because of choices I made, devastating sexual addiction issues that rose to the surface in my life, and other circumstances, would ultimately led to a divorce in 1999.

I then was in desperate state, my relationships with everyone in my life were distant, non-sustaining. Friends were worried about me. Sadness was everywhere. I was despondent and had some suicidal thoughts. I was drinking alcohol to numb the pain. I had no job, money was scarce, and I was in debt. My thinking was cloudy, and I was self-centered and judgmental. Resentments and anger kept me from finding true happiness.

I had hurt people by my actions, and also by the fact that I was not available to them. Many times, I thought by my actions, I was only hurting myself. That is the selfishness. As one of the UU principles state, we are part of a web of existence. Even today as I speak to you, I sometimes struggle and don't believe at times, there is a beautiful soul, a flower within me. But not seeing the beauty within, that is the BIG LIE, that is what has kept me at times spinning inside the gerbil wheel or ruminating on the problems in my life. I had hit some bottom(s) and was ready to find a solution.

IV. Flowers in the Desert

I entered into a 12 step program in 2000 and this represented a turning point in my spiritual life. At the time, I wasn't sure what this God thing was about. Previously, I judged that 12 step programs were for weak people, people that could not make it in life, that somehow they were defective. These judgments were all based on great ignorance of the truth.

But for the first time in my life, I had the opportunity to be totally honest about all the aspects of my life, the good and the not so good. I was not judged and people were sharing and working with me at no charge. Many of the men and woman who shared had a belief in God and in a higher power.

I was not alone, I did not have to run everything myself. I could accept myself. A

shift took place in all aspects of my life. Before I was more concerned about material things stuff and control. I then shifted from a world of scarcity to a world of abundance. There were many ups and downs along the way. I found deep love within and without. Connecting with others made me feel so alive.

In my recent past, I have met people struggling with relationships, pornography, alcohol, gambling, spending, mental health, being on probation, and other issues. I found in some, wonderful beautiful caring people that were looking to heal and become whole persons.

I have worked with healers, been to counseling, meetings, retreats, attended men's groups to help me be honest and find my truth. I have spent thousands of hours to truly see the colors of the beautiful flower within myself. I was told by my healer that because of my struggles that I could offer a gift of compassion to others.

As Sharon Salzberg writes in her book Lovingkindness Meditation: "Compassion is not at all weak. It is the strength that arises out of seeing the true nature of suffering in the world. Compassion allows us to bear witness to that suffering, whether it is in ourselves or others, without fear; it allows us to name injustice without hesitation, and to act strongly, with all the skill at our disposal. To develop this mind and state of compassion is to learn to live, as the Buddha put it, with sympathy for all living beings, without exception."

Today, I feel so much more comfortable with myself. I have made small steps on the path of forgiveness and making amends. It is a wonderful process.

Occasionally, I ask myself the question: Do I create a space for other people to be honest with me about what they are experiencing? If the answer is yes, then I

am able to listen and have had conversations with young people, struggling with the questions about drug use, dui's, relationships, their sexual identity, with a man whose child has committed suicide, ministers struggling with their path, persons diagnosed with cancer, elderly persons concerned about losing their independence. I also share my truth and share their richness and beauty in our world that is oh so special, so sweet.

These are the holy moments, love with no conditions, no reason, where people are free to be who they are, to be heard. The healing occurs in that moment of sharing, everything else is just an illusion.

I have been able to accept into my heart a loving God that does not judge and realize that she accepts me exactly as I am.

I believe that I need do nothing and that everything is exactly as it is meant to be. I also believe that for you, as you sit in front of me. I love you because you are perfect exactly as you are, there is nothing that you need to do.

Now a few experiences and practices I have taken while on my path.

I had a initially upsetting vision or experience a few years back, where I was with Jesus and he was so peaceful even as the nails were being driven into him. But eventually I was calm around it. I was told this meant I was connected to the humanity of the world and was finding peace within myself.

I love to pray. The first time I prayed with someone else, just the two of us praying inside a chapel, I thought is this crazy or what. I grew up UU, I did not see a lot of praying or chapels in the UU Church. But at those moments of prayer, I realized it did not matter whether there really is a God or not, I was sending energy out to others to be happy, to heal, to be abundant, and to myself

asking for serenity. I was not being selfish, thinking the world should revolve around me and was speaking for others.

I love to meditate and look for the Buddha of infinite compassion. The way of the Buddha has shown to me that there is no good or bad that everything is as it is meant to be. I can be still and has it is written, listen for that whisper of the divine.

I also read and study from a Course in Miracles and learn to look at things in a different way. One of my favorite lessons is "The Hush of Heaven holds my heart today."

I have talked some of my practices some experiences, but there are many roads to the truth. I have no monopoly on the path. If you are interested in knowing of my practices or references, I would gladly share with you, and I am also interested in knowing your truth and practices as well.

I have talked a bit about God. That is a word I use - it has been helpful to me. I think divisions over the word God, and question over whether there is a God, and definitions, such as theist, secular humanist, natural religion, can lead to separation and that separation is just an illusion. We are all connected to each other, each person brings their own gifts.

I have had some very small success in sharing with others. As Rumi writes "Come come whoever you are wanderer worshiper lover of leaving ours is no caravan of despair, even if you have broken your vows 10 thousand times, come yet again come." I step between both the desert and the flowers, and they can exist together. Life is not always one way or the other.

Our UU religious movement has always been loving and accepting of my path and my truth no matter where I am. At times I have questioned should I stay a UU. I have wished others to believe like I do. But is that selfish or what? As Don Miguel Ruiz writes in the Mastery of Love, "Love needs no reason, love allows others to be who they are." In being a UU, there has always been a place for me and a place for others.

I think no matter how bad some situations may look, beautiful colors and love are always present even it not readily apparent. A few years back I wrote a poem, perhaps, it could also apply to those flowers in the desert:

It is called Blind Flower

Water rain sucking

Growing life moving

Cells expanding

Flower color vibrant

Colors. Can flowers see

Their colors? Flowers are blind.

Not seeing, yet the colors are

There. The colors chosen by

Some unseen force.

Blind Flower Blind

Can't you see your beauty?

People blind like flowers?

Colors exist yet unseen by yourself.

To summarize this I believe:

1. Be honest and loving with myself;
2. Allow others to be who they are and be heard;
3. Seek to connect with my higher power; and
4. Share my blessings

Again

This I believe:

1. Be honest and loving with myself;
2. Allow others to be who they are and be heard;
3. Connect with my higher power; and
4. Share my blessings

In Closing. May you find serenity or may serenity find you on your journey, may the flowers in your life grow and may others see your beautiful colors. Amen, Peace, and Namaste.