

August 21, 1999

THE SACRED

Recently I have become aware of what it has meant for me spiritually to have been a living part of this earth for most of the twentieth century.

This awareness is one of the many insights about myself and my life journey that makes me grateful to have been invited to share in revisiting the past to make visible major threads of my life.

I am choosing to make visible only one thread. It is long and all-encompassing -- the sacred. In lifting the sacred from the fabric of my life I realized, after a period of puzzlement, that I was examining two intertwined strands -- two plies -- of the thread I had chosen.

One of the strands composing the thread appeared, in my memory, to have been predominant, even over-riding, throughout much of my life. This was the strand of early religious instruction focused on the sacred nature of the Divine and the creation story of the Bible. This story gave man, meaning white man, excessive power, including dominion over all of God's creation.

The other, less obvious, strand, intertwined with the traditional strand, wasn't named 'sacred' until now when I've been looking specifically at the spiritual aspects of my life. But almost immediately I saw the possibility that this finer filament could become the dominant strand within the sacred thread of my lifetime journey.

I grew up on an Indiana farm where I was part of the vastness of the earth and sky. I was a child of the land who often wandered alone in the woodland and amidst the growing grain, living with the flow of the seasons. A sense of euphoria comes over me as I see her in my mind's eye and relive her yearning to be at one with the forces of life.

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It is a great privilege to have that memory for early on the culture began telling me what I should think and do. That is the way we make 'humans' of our children. All of our institutions, the family, schools, church, and the media, are in collusion to make the underlying assumptions of our society become fact, become our reality, as we live out our lives.

I became incarcerated in male-privileged consciousness. My free-floating child avidly embraced midwestern culture, both secular and sacred. There was that all-seeing and all-knowing male deity, white beard and flowing robes wasting, it seemed, much valuable time watching me.

Guided in my early spiritual enlightenment by my mother who had a special relationship with God I regularly said my bed-side prayer -- "Now I lay me down to sleep." Later on, in my teens, I hit the "sawdust trail" as one of those caught up in the Billy Sunday revivals.

The conversion didn't last. I was the same Lucile the next morning. When I slipped out of their hands as I was being totally immersed in a nearby lake at baptism I decided I was totally rejected by the great FATHER. I claimed to be an agnostic. But the patriarchal god haunted me for years.

My years at Indiana University coincided with the Great Depression. I was an avid learner and won many awards, including the Maxwell Medal Award for scholarship, leadership and service. Afterwards I worked in the public schools: I taught Mathematics and Physical Education, coached the Girls' basketball team, was senior class advisor, and so forth.

In 1939 we were married. We wrote our own vows and said them on the front steps of my childhood home. I became Mrs. O. Hugo Schuck, totally subsumed in my husband's name and his identity. On the home front I was carrying out the traditionally assigned wifely

roles, as well as mother and caregiver -- bearing and nurturing three active and inquisitive progeny. I also began pushing from behind as O. Hugo climbed the corporate ladder. I tried to do it all with a 'no-body' self.

And what of the sacred?

When our children were small we found a church where agnostics could feel comfortable, and where the message of the church school appealed to us as parents. This was the Universalist Church before the merger of the Unitarians and Universalists. We had never heard of either denomination but we explored the Universalist Church which was in our Minneapolis neighborhood where we had recently settled. Before long our whole family was attending the Universalist Sunday School -- the parents as teachers and the children in classes.

Family vacations as the children were growing up in Minneapolis were generally in the great out-of-doors, surrounded by nature. In early years we returned to the farm in northern Indiana. After dad's death in 1946 mother continued to live there alone and kept the farm producing with the assistance of the neighbors, who rented the fields.

Over the years there were numerous tenting trips, including horse-back pack trips in the Rocky Mountains and canoe camping trips in the Boundary Waters between Minnesota and Canada. In a way, on vacation, we went to our cherished home in the world of nature.

We did not then try to name the feelings that drew us to the marvels of the outside world. It seems to have been a fascination with the mystery of the changing surroundings that appealed to us. Even now, I experience the same sense of awe and reverence each day as I look out at my own yard and the surrounding woodland.

Too soon, it seems, the children were grown and out on their own. When the sacred vows of marriage were taken, Susan, our oldest daughter, chose a woodland spot on the Stanford campus in California. Linda was married surrounded by flowering plants in full bloom in a friend's garden in Washington DC.

As I've continued to lift up the thread of the sacred from the fabric of my life I have dwelt on what I had earlier assumed was the finer, less-visible strand within the thread itself: my connection to the land and nature.

In the 1960s-1970s two significant events deeply impacted my sense of the sacred. One was the second wave of the feminist movement which crested during that time, and the other was the landing of the man on the moon on the twentieth of July in 1969.

The second wave of feminism was centered on liberating women from subordination and I was both excited and involved. I became much more confident and self-assertive and dared to question religious myths. At first some of us began celebrating the Winter Solstice instead of Christmas and I began thinking of myself as an intentional outsider -- outside hierarchical groups, even outside beliefs of my early religious indoctrination, long considered the major strand of the sacred thread of my life.

Having been challenged to make a difference throughout the Unitarian Universalist denomination I began to initiate and promote resolutions that called attention to the role of religion in the denigration of women:

1977 -- Women and Religion -- pointing out the religious roots of sexism,

1979 -- Battered Women -- seeking the religious roots of violence against women, and

1980 -- a resolution naming Patriarchy -- our male-biased world view -- as basic to women's subordination.

Many women from coast to coast became involved from the beginning. A continental task force was created and by 1980 a Continental Conference of Women and Religion was held at Grailville, Ohio.

I sponsored a workshop titled "Do UUA Principles Affirm Women as They Affirm Men?" The answer of those attending was a resounding "No." Women remained after the workshop and began to revise the principles to be more inclusive and attuned to women's perspective.

Now this was a gutsy conception -- unheard of at the time: to assume that women would become involved in determining the tenets of the church -- even a UU church.

It is a long story. Women indeed became visible. When the resolution to change the basic principles of the denomination came before the General Assembly two years later, the sparks began to fly. Assuming that women couldn't even think of authorizing themselves to take such action, those in power, mostly men back then, began accusing each other of putting women up to it.

When the whole process was completed in 1985 the denomination had endorsed a list of principles. The final one, the seventh, would read:

"We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant to affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part."

A new creation story is in the making. A religious institution, the UUA, has embraced a new reality construct. Instead of hierarchy being the underlying assumption of our world view and patriarchy assumed, the new principles include a sense of connectedness which is basic to feminist consciousness.

The idea of a new creation story wasn't new. Carolyn McDade and I had created a worship service for the November, 1980, Women and Religion Continental Convocation of the Unitarian Universalists in East Lansing, Michigan. We titled it Coming Home, Like Rivers to the Sea: A Woman's Ritual. It became very popular and was used around the world in observances by women individually and in gatherings.

In 1997 we were asked to make copies of the original service available for distribution at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in Phoenix, Arizona. We prefaced the reissued service with the following:

"As we worked to give the service shape, our awareness increased of water's presence and deep meaning in our lives. Water is more than simply a metaphor. It is elemental and primary, calling forth feelings of awe and reverence.

"Coming back to this service again after seventeen years, we see in it a deeper meaning than we had been aware of earlier. Acknowledging that the ocean is considered by many to be the place from which all our life on our planet came -- it is the womb of life -- and that amniotic waters surround each of us prenatally, we now realize that "Coming Home, Like Rivers to the Sea" was for us a new story of creation."

I've mentioned that man's landing on the moon in 1969 has turned out to have spiritual meaning for me. Seeing pictures from the moon of that small orb, our Planet -- in the vastness of space, was awesome. I want to take it in my arms and care for it, nurture it.

Man's dominion over the earth has been careless and exploitative. I'm thinking now of the White Man -- certainly not the Native American who considered the earth -- the land, air and water and all life -- to be sacred.

No longer does the great Father of traditional Christian religion haunt me. In a way I am still an agnostic. The "finer filament" has risen to replace the traditional thread of religion. In recognizing this, and naming it, I have come to realize that it has held a place of utmost importance all along, stemming from my early years roving the fields of Indiana, growing throughout our family's trips into nature, and cresting during the process of considering the mystery of the unknown as I write today. What a struggle it has been for this exchange to take place, for the current nature of my belief to come to the fore and be named, while what I was taught to believe as a child fades.

My feeling of the sacred nature of this moon-depicted earth is best portrayed in the Missa Gaia -- the Earth Mass by Paul Winter which premiered on Mother's Day, 1981, celebrating Mother Earth and the mystery of life.

*"Oh mystery, you are alive, I feel you all around
You are the fire in my heart, you are the holy sound.
You are all of life, it is to you that I sing.
Grant that I may feel you, always, in everything."*

-Lucile S. Longview
August 21, 1999