

RIDING THE ELEPHANT  
The Condensed Story of a Unitarian Universalist's Journey (So Far)  
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During one of my visits here, it was suggested to me that people might like to hear something about me and my life in the real world. Although I considered the suggestion, it felt a little too self-referential to use our time on Sunday morning talking about one individual, not famous, not newsworthy, still living, and not even a well-known person in the denomination. But you know, that description fits most of us, if not all of us, and each one of our stories is worth telling. What really made me decide to talk about myself today, though, was being in a service recently that was conducted by an interim minister on her first Sunday in a new church.

This is an accredited interim minister. Her work is to go from church to church, where one called minister has left and another has not yet arrived, and serve for one year as the transition person. The interim minister helps congregations to name their hurt, to search for their vision and identify, to build on their strength. And it's also the interim's job to stir things up, change the order of service, mix up established routines, so that the next called minister won't have to take the blame for all that. It's an intense job---a professional stranger in a strange land---and I admire the people who can do it.

This particular interim minister always begins her time in a new church with the same sermon, about who she is and how she got here. By now, after fifteen years of fifteen first Sundays, the sermon has been edited and revised and added to and subtracted from so much that the only thing about it that's still the same is the title.

But, as I listened to her deliver that sermon on this particular first Sunday, I realized how much sense it made for her to do exactly what she was doing. She was telling her own story, telling this congregation who knew nothing about her something of who she was and where she came from and what brought her to this place at this moment. People wanted to know that, wanted to know something about this person that they expect to trust for a year to guide their church. As I listened to her, I thought to myself, "Now I get it!"

So, today, I'm going to tell you something about what brought me to Unitarian Universalism. Some years ago, I was in a dark place on my journey, and this was before I realized that there WAS a journey, and that everybody is on it. I was working in the public school system at the time, as a teacher assistant, after spending my children's preschool years (and beyond) teaching in the preschool that they attended. That was a good time in my life, when my son and daughter were small.

After they went on to elementary school, I continued my part-time preschool job and went to their schools as a parent volunteer. I fought the good fight for public education in state and local PTA, and spoke at City Hall every time the school budgets got cut.

But all was not well, and I knew that my marriage was not what I wanted it to be. For a long time I told myself you don't get everything—I had two wonderful talented children who were funny and sweet and loved each other and were each other's best friends, and I knew of people whose children tormented them day and night. So, I had the best children I could have, and I was glad. Maybe, I thought, if you get one thing good, you have to accept something else not so good.

One week-end I went with a friend to a state PTA convention, and the minute we got to our destination and put our bags in our rooms, she went to call her husband to tell him she had arrived safely. "Do you want to call first?" she asked me, thinking to be gracious. I told her I wasn't going to call my husband, and she was astonished. "Won't he worry?" she asked. I told her, kind of laughing, that not only would he not worry, he wouldn't remember that I was out of town until it got late and he realized I wasn't home. Even then, he was likely to not remember where I was or why.

I was so accustomed to living that way that it had little effect on me. Watching my friend, though, watching her reaction to what I told her, had a powerful effect on me, and I realized how deeply I longed for a husband who would wait for my call to tell him I had arrived safely at my destination.

That was one event, one moment, but untold numbers of moments like that one accumulated over the years. I heard a speaker once talking about marriage, and he said it was like a game of catch. Sometimes you have the ball, sometimes you don't. You can't have the ball all the time, you're always throwing it back and forth to each other.

That allusion evoked in me a clear picture of my marriage: I would throw the ball, then run as fast as I could to the other side and catch it, then throw it again and run back and catch it again, and I was throwing, catching, running until I was ready to fall down exhausted on the ground while my husband stood off to the side and watched. Or not. He, of course, would tell a different story from mine, and I don't know what his story would sound like. But the short version of how it all turned out was that I finally could not live that way any more, and when my children were in high school, we separated and then divorced.

My children went to a fairly small high school whose students were for the most part very good, bright kids, and one night I was asked to come over for a school dance and be the bouncer. Since the kids were well behaved, there was not much crime to fight, and the teacher whose assistant I was had a plan worked out.

Whenever several kids went outside, we walked to the door and looked at them, which evidently prevented them from smoking. In between trips to the door to put our evil eye on somebody, we talked. This teacher told me more about life in that school than I had ever heard from my kids, naturally, and she talked about the principal. "I love her," she said, "but she drives me crazy. I understand why, though. It's because I see the trunk,

and she sees the elephant.” I did not know at the time what that image would come to mean to me. I only know that it did not go away.

During that same time I was taking my daughter to counseling on a weekly basis. I had discovered that she was in love with somebody on the computer, and she was withdrawing her interest from the world she lived in and investing it in her computer life and her computer sweetheart. I felt unable to manage on my own, and took her to a counselor. I didn't know the person, but felt on our first visit a sense of deep calm in him that I knew was missing in me at that time, and before long, I became his client as well.

During this time, my daughter was becoming involved with the Mormon church, and I don't want to sound judgmental when I say that I was sick at heart. What I discovered eventually was that her computer sweetheart was a Mormon, and that's why she was becoming involved. We had gone to the Methodist church when the children were little, but as I've told you here before, I left the Methodists, then went back for the sake of the children, then left again.

During my time of anguish as I watched my daughter take on the trappings of a faith that I knew did not speak her inner truth, my counselor began to ask me about my spiritual life, although he didn't name it that. One day he asked me if I had ever heard of Unitarian Universalism, and I said yes, although I had never been to church there. He told me about a new church that was meeting in an elementary school out in Glen Allen, and he gave me the name of the man who was moderator, or president. “Maybe you'd like to call him, get some information,” he said. I agreed that I would be interested in knowing more. He gestured to his desk and said, “Nobody's using my phone right now.”

So, I called this man, who wasn't there, but I felt kind of interested by then and I called him the next day. We talked for a few minutes, and he gave me directions to Shady Grove Elementary School. It was kind of far, but I was determined to go for one visit, thinking that I could tell my counselor that I was grateful for his suggestion, but I had tried church before, tried his suggested church now, and church held nothing for me. So, one January morning I made the long drive over to the elementary school where Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Glen Allen met, and everything changed forever.

I told you about that teacher who said she saw the trunk and the principal saw the elephant, and somehow, for reasons I don't understand, that image has always been the way I visualize my transformation into Unitarian Universalism. I was seeing the trunk, and not even the whole trunk. I was seeing a tiny piece of skin a few inches from the tip of the trunk, seeing the dust particles in the wrinkles of that skin, and I was furiously trying to rearrange the dust particles, and I was exhausted and discouraged.

Then, all of a sudden, for reasons outside of me...and hear me when I say that, for reasons outside of me...the elephant, with such gentle loving acceptance, wrapped that trunk around me and picked me up and put me right on her back, and I said, “Oh, my

God, there's an elephant!" And I looked all around, and the view from the back of that elephant took my breath away!

It took a while for me to realize, of course, that everything had changed. It didn't happen in one fell swoop. In fact, after my first visit to UUCC, I left not wanting to return the following week. The welcome statement, the music, the principles, the friendly people, were all so astonishing and so gratifying to me that I didn't want to come back and see how things were on a "normal" Sunday. But I decided as the week went by to take the chance, and I went back the following Sunday. It was still good, only this time the minister, Rev. Julie Denny-Hughes, was there and preached. I left that time deciding that I'd keep coming back until they screwed up. Then by the time we screwed up, I was in it too deep to leave, or want to leave, and we just made things right together.

You know the basics of the rest of the story. As I got more involved with UUCC, on the building committee and the worship committee, I got to know the people who were most devoted to the church, and I got to know how it felt to create and participate in church services. Rev. Julie is a gifted speaker, and I remember one day watching her and thinking to myself, "I'm supposed to do that." I have no idea now what she was talking about, but I have a clear visual image of what she looked like. It was a very long time before I paid any attention to that tiny revelation, and then, but by bit, step by step, I made my way to seminary.

First, I let the idea enter my mind. Later, I had coffee with a member of UUCC that I discovered worked at Union/PSCE. I went to an inquirer's week-end. I took an application home. Read it. Eventually filled it out. Just a tiny bit at a time, no more than I could imagine the outcome for, and I ended up in seminary. It was one of the most challenging, and most wonderful, experiences of my life.

There was a young man that I became friends with during the first week we arrived, orientation week. His wife was back home, ready to give birth at any moment, and we became friends after an insurance meeting when I sat with him and made recommendations about pediatricians in the area. He enjoyed being in classes with me because he knew how much I loved to listen to his stories about the new baby. He helped me with a car problem once, when I had no clue what was wrong.

One day after class, he began to tell me some of his own story, and a large component of what he said was that he didn't like to tell people about himself. He completely missed the irony of what he was saying, and I was so moved that I didn't want him to realize he was contradicting himself. But irony was surly the theme of that conversation, because I told him that I had never been happier than I was when my children were little, and now that that time in my life was over, I wondered if I would ever be that happy again. My friend told me, in language that is not mine, but with a conviction that can still bring me to tears even now, that he was certain that God did not work that way, and that there was something wonderful in store for me. By the time I was ready to graduate, I realized that the experience and the community of seminary were the wonderful thing that my friend was so sure of on my behalf.

During seminary, I was invited to speak at Williamsburg UU one Sunday while their minister was on sabbatical. Not long afterward, the office at UUCC called me to tell me there was a message there for me from White Stone. "What do they want with me in White Stone?" I asked, and the office volunteer said she had no clue. So, I contacted the person who left me the message. And, you know the rest.

There's a P.S. to this message, that I said I would add. We are just beginning covenant groups at UUCC, small groups that come together and intentionally create community. The basis for our gathering is reading and silence, using the format that I shared here at a service a few months ago. The reading, the three questions, the responses. Over years, and through a convoluted path, my old counselor, who first suggested that I visit a UU church, started coming to UUCC. He is in a second career now, and just beginning to be active in our church, although his wife joined and became active years ago. When he discovered that I was facilitating a covenant group, he was the second person to sign up.

At the end of our first meeting this past Wednesday night, we had a long conversation, during which I mentioned my relationship with this community. He asked me to be sure to tell you today that now he comes to sit in my circle, to get reassured and to find a more nourishing place for himself in this denomination that he loves. He insists that he is in that group because of me, and I remind him that I'm facilitating that group because, ultimately, of him. Is that a miracle?