

How I *May* Have Become Who I Am
Sermon delivered at
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Danbury
Sunday, July 6, 2008

It may have been the food.

I started life with breast milk but ended up being fed starch as an infant.

My mother did not think I was a fat enough baby.

So I was carted off to the best pediatrician in Budapest to see if he had any ideas for how I could best be fattened. Starch was deemed to be the filling food but to this day, being the literalist I am, I do not know if starch was meant as synonymous with carbohydrate or starch meant for stiffening clothes. And there is no one left today that I could ask.

I do know that the prescribed diet might have killed me had another even better doctor not prescribed intense supplements of iron and better nutrition, including the breast milk of a wet-nurse.

This was how I started out to become who I am.

But I could have started out anywhere.

I could have started as the adored child of Holocaust survivors, freed from the concentration camps just four years prior to my birth. Where a father lost his first wife and 2 out of 3 children, and a mother who lost most

of her family too, not children, but a mother and other relatives.

This could have been how I started out to become who I am.

Or, as a 7-year old in Hungary, singled out to stand in my seat in first grade, upon being asked by the principal who walked into the class room, Who is Jewish? This was a communist country and religion was not the rule of the land. But a 7-year old is not aware of this. Or, that my father nearly lost his job as a bookkeeper upon being questioned about his daughter attending religious education after school.

My being who I became could have started right there.

Or, traipsing from country to country over a span of two years, until finally my parents found the freedom to be whatever they wished was attained. And learning several languages in the process and being given a camera at an early age to record all the experiences. Well, really all the places that only in my mind have become the experiences that have led me to who I became.

To speed my life ahead several decades, past meeting an idealistic, humble boy who became a husband. Past the stages of motherhood, (which of course is ongoing!) and past almost four decades as a teacher, to a retirement that hasn't quite happened yet but is continuing to make me who I am becoming, past a too-long marriage to the

idealist, humble boy who, as a man, forgot how to support any burgeoning attempts on my part toward self-knowledge and discovery and finally, past years of restrictive religious constraints that left me stifled and unquestioning,

I have reflected a great deal on how "the religious years" may have contributed to who I am now, today, at this point in my life. In order to fully understand this I have to make reference to aspects I have already touched on. The parts about my parents surviving concentration camps during the Holocaust; the parts about them re-starting their lives in a Communist regime in Hungary, the parts about my family emigrating from that same Communist country to Italy, where we lived with a wonderful Catholic family. It is here that I learned to speak Italian, as I was placed in second grade for the second time in my life. This family who had a cross hanging in the bedroom above my parents' bed that my father removed every night and replaced in the morning so as not to offend the owners. And then arriving right smack in the midst of an ultra-orthodox Jewish community in Montreal, where strict adherence to the almost 1,000 laws of thou- shalts and shalt- nots was the prevailing order of that community. It was here that I learned English, French and Yiddish, and was once again, for the third time, placed in 2nd grade. In this community the roles of men and women and boys and girls were, and to this day still are very clearly delineated and defined.

Let me give you some examples. Due to all the religious restrictions imposed on my parents during their experiences in Europe, my father, in particular, was very comfortable in finally being able to freely practice the religion he was raised in, and to the extent that he wished. He very quickly got involved with being a leading member of an ultra-Orthodox, Chasidic group that accepted and welcomed him, even though he was not Chasidic himself. He wore the requisite head-covering while in that environment, but felt equally comfortable uncovering his head while dealing with his Canadian or French-Canadian business associates. Because of the aforementioned thou shalt-nots, members of this ultra orthodox group did not own televisions in their homes, nor did the married women walk around with their heads uncovered or the girls in pants. But, so long as the large TV console was removed from our living room and hidden in a bedroom if a rabbi or other such "dignitary" should come and confer with my father in our living room, or my mother covered her head with a kerchief when she went out of the house and if I only wore my pants around the house and the alley way behind the house where I rode my bike, all was fine. In public, however, I had to wear a skirt that covered at least my knees, stockings or long socks, blouses that had at least $\frac{3}{4}$ length sleeves and watch TV on the Sabbath only at my non-observant friends' home upstairs on the third floor (we lived on the 2nd floor of an apartment building of one of the modern Jewish neighborhoods in Montreal). When my father died

in 1969, as he was one of the founding members of a religious burial society, my mother or I had no say in any of his funeral arrangements, as by the time we got to the hospital, he had already been whisked away by the society of men, who took care of the prescribed ritualistic burial procedures. My mother and I, as women, were not allowed to go to the cemetery for the burial, because this was something only reserved for males. From 3-year old boys to elderly men and all ages in between. Strangers, friends, relatives, no matter, so long as they were not females. No wife, no daughter. Quite a confusing set of circumstances And I can't help but wonder, was this all in the name of God? What kind of God? A God that equals love? How can I make sense of this? But such dilemmas and questions have certainly shaped who I am today, and certainly my struggle with understanding what God is. I can't help but link all of the above-mentioned experiences as somehow having a major connection to how I experience that concept. Friends have suggested that I just think of the word God as "love" or "spirit" or "mystery", but they don't work for me. I link that word to experiences that have confused me, made me resentful and hostile and unable to sing the praises of an all powerful being who oversees all and judges good and bad. Sort of like a puppet master controlling the strings of a marionette. Such constraints do not help me deal with the concept of good and evil even when I am told of free will, and laws of nature, and selection of the fittest and, yes, even the fact that bad

stuff happens to good people and it has nothing to do with God. Not the good and not the bad. Then why the huge praise of this omniscient being? The only concept that has made any sense to me, something that I can sink my teeth into as explaining connections and mysteries that I puzzle over, is the Unitarian Universalist principle of "Respect for the inter-connected web of all existence of which we are a part".

And that too helps to explain how I may have become who I am.

I guess to some extent I do have some bitterness vis a vis the God issue. A few months ago, in my writing class, motivated by some poetry that was read to us about grandparents, I wrote the following piece entitled,

Where I'm from...

I'm from no grand parents which means
I'm from the smoke of gas chambers
Ignited for the belief in god
for those who are or were
from where god led them.

I'm from a belief in God
by those who should not have had
such a belief.

I have never had grandparents

and it makes me feel like I, too,
am from the smoke that arose
only years before my birth.

You're too literal in your
interpretation of God,
those who know me say to me
but they either spent time growing up
with the special love of
a grand parent
or they don't question why they don't have one
or why that god saw to it that they lost them.
Can you lose something that you've never had?

I say I've never had grand parents and
I don't agree with those who don't believe me
I've lost them if I ever did have them.
I don't deal well with loss and so
I'd rather say I don't have
and never did have a grand parent.
One would have sufficed, although
there could have been four.
And I wouldn't even have had to share them
with a sibling,
never having had one of those either.
I'm glad my sons had grand parents,
although not four, only three.
Gone too soon but an influence on their lives
and memories to last forever.

Nothing and no one has gone up in smoke for them.

I haven't asked them lately
what they think about God.

This past April just before we started the Seder in this Fellowship hall, I was speaking with Rabbi Haddon as I had only communicated with him via e-mail while making arrangements for his role in the Seder. He asked me what my Jewish background was and I had told him how involved I was in Judaism, how I journeyed from a very Orthodox background to belonging to a liberal Reform community where our members wrote and conducted our own services, celebrated all life cycle events together and educated our children in our own homes. After hearing this, he asked me, "So what are you doing here?" I told him that I feel the same way about my involvement in this congregation as I had in my former one, but that I don't have to deal with the "God" issue on a regular basis. Interestingly enough, I told him, not having to mouth the words of praise to that all-knowing, all-powerful being, allows me to see the bigger picture of our interconnectedness via the interconnected web of life

So what AM I doing here, given my background, given where I came from? I am reminded of the words of Rabbi Hillel, one of the most influential scholars in Jewish history - "If I am not for myself, then who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, than what am I? And

if not now, when?" Somehow, I think these words relate to my journey of becoming who I am and landing me where I am. Over the past 5 years or so, it has been important for me to follow the first part of Rabbi Hillel's words - "If I am not for myself, then who will be for me?" Gaining confidence in my own identity after a lengthy but failed marriage has been an important aspect of my recent growth toward becoming and being who I am. Because really, who will be for me if not I, myself?

On the other hand, the freedom and independence that I experienced after my marriage had ended seemed to not be enough. Finding meaningful relationships and causes outside of my own sphere became issues of paramount importance. Although Judaism, especially Reform and liberal Judaism certainly afford many opportunities for social action and involvement, they still have the premise of obedience to and reverence of an all-powerful, all-knowing personalized God that I have had difficulty coming to terms with all my adult life.

In my quest to discover how I became who I am, I find meaning right now in being involved in causes that are geared to helping those less fortunate than ourselves, stepping up to take note of, assist and embrace the immigrant community (a community I was at one time a part of) and other needy causes right here in our midst (because we cannot take on the world all at once, everywhere) I find great deal of satisfaction in going on

house builds in the Dominican Republic as well as being involved stateside in the Dominican Literacy Project, a program that supports a newly established school for children of Haitian migrant workers whose children are not allowed to go to schools in the Dominican Republic, even though they were born there, because their parents are Haitian I am strongly identifying with "If I am only for myself then what am I?"

While I am now identifying myself with the Unitarian Universalist principles, I will continue to strongly ally culturally with my Jewish heritage, as that is not something that I have any intention of leaving behind. And in spite of my discomfort with the "God" word, I have always been drawn to a particular line in the Bible, Genesis 28:16, the part where Jacob awakens from a dream of having wrestled with an angel. Upon awakening and realizing that there was something significant that had occurred while he slept, he said, "God was in this place, and I, I did not know it." This line has so resonated with me over the years that I was moved by some force bigger than myself to compose a song for my son Jeff's Bar Mitzvah. I, who barely read music and do not really play any instrument, composed a song in Hebrew (with the above Biblical verse); a song that was performed for voice, clarinet and guitar at both my son's Bar Mitzvah's. You'll hear an arrangement of it performed on the piano by Carl Tichler in a little while. I've included it in my sermon today because it still amazes me that,

given my disbelief in a personal God I was ever taken by those words to be driven to put them to music. Urged on by Linda to do so, I have actually given this some serious thought lately. I am taken back way before my son's Bar Mitzvah, in fact to the year he was 2 years old. That year, when I was actually 34, (and not 13) I had the opportunity, with the guidance of a young student rabbi, to have my own so called, "Bat Mitzvah". That is, I had the opportunity to pick a portion from the Bible, or the Torah, and learn how to read the words in Hebrew, in fact, to chant the words, and do this at a special Friday night service, in front of my Jewish community of congregants. Being a liberal Reform community, she gave me free reign to choose whatever passage I wanted. Traditionally, Torah portions that 13-year olds learn to read or chant are arranged cyclically and youngsters learn the part that falls near their birthdays. They don't get to choose. But I did. So I chose Genesis 28:16, the very same portion that I was compelled to put to music 11 years later. Given the background I came from, one I have already mentioned here today, I would not have had a Bat Mitzvah, because those ceremonies were only for boys. I would not have been reading words from the holy book, in front of a congregation, one which mixed men and women, in someone's living room. This was a Jewish group but according to the background that I evolved from, this would have been somewhat sacrilegious. I think the reason that the passage had such impact on me then is that I was trying to point out to whomever, in case

someone was still overseeing my actions, that here I am, in this place, in someone's living room, surrounded by men and women, and I am reading from the Torah. God is in this place too. God is not only for special people who follow rituals and laws and prescribed behavior. Whatever God is, even though I don't quite understand it, God is everywhere; God is in connections and in relationships. While I was researching readings for my son, Jeff's Bar Mitzvah, I came across something that has really had a lot of meaning for me in my search for what God is that I would like to read to you today. When we did our presentation for Building Your Own Theology a few years ago, I quoted from this reading at that time, but I would like to read the whole piece to you today. It was written by Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis one of the best-known pulpit rabbis in America:

God is not in me nor in you, but between us.

God is not me or mine nor you or yours but ours

God is known not alone but in relationship

Not as a separate, lonely power

but through our kinship, our friendship

through our healing and binding and raising up of each other

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To know God is to know others,

to love God is to love others,

to hear God is to hear others,

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More than meditation, more than insight, more than feeling,
between us are claims, obligations, commandments
to act, to do, to behave our beliefs.

I seek God not as if God were alone,
an isolated person, He or She,
a process, a power, a being, a thing.
I seek God not as if I were alone
a thinker, a meditator, a discrete entity.

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I seek God in connection, in the nexus of community
I pray and celebrate the betweenness
which binds and holds us together.

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And even when I am left alone,
I am sustained by my memory of our betweenness
and the promise of our betweenness.

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God is not in me, or you, or in God's self,
but in betweenness
and it is there we find the evidence
of God's reality and our own.

And as I examine how I became who I am, I still have
food issues, but the reverse of when I was an infant and
my mother believed I wasn't a fat enough baby, and

capturing memories and experiences through the advances in photographic technology are still at my core.

And writing down the story of how I became who I am is the force pushing at me now. And thus, the third part of Rabbi Hillel's words: "If not now, when?"

I guess I can say that there are many experiences and events that have made me who I am. No different from anyone else; we just all take different paths to arriving where we eventually end up. And that is not to say that I believe that I have arrived or that I have stopped becoming or that I now have it all figured out.

I would like to end with a poem by Mary Oliver entitled "The Journey". How I may have become who I am, indeed, a journey, one where the road to getting there is far more significant than the end itself. And now, the poem:

The Journey

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice --
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.

But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do --
determined to save
the only life you could save.