

The first question I got was

Belief systems: Why are they universal? What are some features of a good belief system?

So this question is open to some interpretation. I am interpreting it as meaning why is it universal for humans to have belief systems. Here is my answer – take a moment close your eyes if you want because I am going to ask you to imagine something. Remember the first time in your life you experienced something larger than yourself – maybe you were outdoors looking at the night sky, or a sunset, or the vastness of nature, maybe it was listening to music or a poem, maybe it was the safety of being snuggled up against someone when you were a child. Remember how you felt.

I think that is why in most cultures and with most humans there is some kind of belief system, faith system. Our experience tells us that we are not the pinnacle of creation there is something beyond us.

Which brings me to what is a good feature of a belief system, humility. It's that simple and that complex.

I then received several questions, which I will group all together:

How would you describe your Christian faith? I guess I'm asking, "What do you personally believe?" And how does that influence the way you minister our church?

What's a spiritual practice that you're happy you started/learned about as a child, or wish you had started/learned about as a child?

I am going to answer these questions all together in a bit of a round a bout way but hang in here with me.

So first I am impressed that most of the questions that came through were about belief systems and spirituality – I think not only do you want to know more about your minister but you all want to know more about faith or beliefs and that's good because that is the business that I am in.

On the cover of your OOS is a question mark and a comma. I chose these carefully. In answer how do I describe my Christian faith? Well most of

you know that I am both a Unitarian Universalist minister and a United Church of Christ, UCC, minister. I was ordained first in the UCC denomination. And so I bring a deep set of roots in the Christian faith. The UCC has, as its branding symbol a comma “Never put a period where God has put a comma” is their slogan. Meaning revelation is still ongoing – God is still speaking and we should still be listening. The question mark is not an official UU symbol but it should be we are the people of the questions seekers most if not all of us.

So here I am an ordained Christian minister working in a UUA congregation with strong Universalist roots. It begs the question what are my beliefs and how do they influence my ministry here

My spiritual journey has been a Christian one, and yet it has been uniquely quirky at the same time. What church I have attended has had quite an impact on my journey but so too does where I start.

My father was Roman Catholic and my mother was originally Congregationalist. She refused to convert. The Catholic Church being what it is demanded that my mother allow my father to raise the children Catholic. And he did.

So it sounds straight forward enough but there is some interesting implications of this. First my mother taught me not to abdicate my faith, even though she was not the one who was taking me to church. And my father taught me that tolerance is more important than being right. Parenthetically this may be the best piece of marital advice I have ever received. He also taught me that if you believe in something, in his case the Catholic faith, then you best work at it. And work at he did. He took three children to church every Sunday and on Holy days too, by himself. And there was no RE program to break it up for him. Talk about intergenerational worship!!

I learned some things about church. It is a place where you can crawl up on Dad’s lap and curl up for a nap. It’s also a fun place. My brother and I figured out that when people are kneeling with their eyes closed nobody is looking! We used to see how many pews we could crawl under before somebody noticed we were gone.

I learned that church is a place of change and exploration. I trained for my first communion right around Vatican II. I know this because I distinctly remember training one way and then when Vatican II went through I had to retrain.

I went to Catholic school attached to my parish. I received a good education from a good set of nuns, many of whom ended up being happily or unhappily married. And I remember the Principal at one point talking to me and telling me that it was good to question one's faith because it would make one's faith stronger. Honestly I thought all Catholics were taught this.

And I learned that church is about community. When I was in High school I was very involved in my parish's youth group. I did everything. I taught Sunday school, I participated in a Bible Study group, I worked with the social outreach committee, I worked on the retreat program that we had. Without community Faith is theoretical

I remember my childhood being filled with the mystery and movement and art of liturgy. Honestly I looked forward to going to church, to service. But then again spinach was my favorite vegetable. I learned to appreciate the mystery, to dance with it, and to let it be. Paradox means you don't have to have THE answer.

My journey also landed me in the English class of Mr. Reeves. Who besides teaching things like standard freshman English also taught mass Media and The Bible as Literature. He more than any other teacher I had got me started thinking critically not simply reactively.

I learned a lot about social activism from him. His mass media class was a place where he could model for students how to engage the system, and how to question it. I learned about Quakers from him. His respect for the silent meeting, and for silence in general was something I understood. It is easy to look at a Catholic Mass from the outside and say that it is about entertainment and distraction all that singing and prayers up and down and incense, but at it's center is an engagement with the Holy through the use of our senses. At the center of the Quaker meeting is an engagement with the Holy through the denial of the senses. For both at their center is not an educational process not an engagement of the mind but an engagement of the soul.

He spoke fondly of his alma mater Haverford College and I decided that I needed to head east. Haverford was not accepting women at that time so I went to Bryn Mawr, its sister college instead. I ended up transferring to Haverford once it went co-ed. The feminism of Bryn Mawr at that time was more militant than I was interested in.

I learned a lot in college, some academic some not. One of the things that I became aware of is that when two groups or people are disagreeing it often devolves into a shouting match even if voices are not raised. Opposing sides are more interested in making sure they are heard than in listening. It may look like a dialogue but it's really only two monologues taking turns, and that is if it is civil.

In some ways by being both a UCC and a UUA minister I became neither fish nor fowl and I discovered that there is freedom in that. It is harder for people to peg you and categorize you. It is not always an easy place to be because sometimes it is nice to say I am this and not that. It can be a lonely place because it is a comfortable thing to gather with like folk and it is hard to gather with like-minded people when you are neither fish nor fowl.

I am also trained as a pastoral counselor, which is less about preaching and much more about prepping. This world we live in right now is in some profound ways broken or at least it breaks people. And in their brokenness it is near impossible for them to see or feel or understand that mystery that some call God. For them their world has become limited, by grief, by pain, by guilt, by loneliness, by many things. As a pastoral counselor it is my privilege to be able to sit with people and be a presence of care and listening and perhaps point the way to healing. I help prep them to be open to the mystery.

So how is it I got here? These tidbits of my life are interesting but they do not tell the whole story. I feel that I am here at First because I like you am on a journey. I am unabashedly Christian. I love my tradition but I believe it does not go far enough. The Christian tradition has some big limitations.

As a faith it is never at its best when it is in charge. So here I am at a place where my faith tradition is not in charge.

And I believe that these days the theological debate within the Christian Community has been completely co-opted by the political debate. This debate has become completely divisive in our country. It is all either or thinking, two sides simply yelling at each other. And I want to be in a place where that does not happen as much. Again I find myself in a way neither fish nor fowl. In this way I can kind of work outside of people's categories and work out of the faith values at the center of my faith:

Acceptance
Forgiveness
Healing
A second chance

The second part of this question is about my spiritual practice.

My perfection honed at my mother's knee and encouraged by some of my Catholic upbringing leads me to a place of anxiety that tells me the questioner is looking for my saintliness. So first let me tell you that much of my spiritual practice over the decades has been focused on accepting and celebrating the fact that I am not saintly. I do not meditate every day without fail. I struggle with regular practice, I struggle with quieting my own voice so I can listen better, I struggle with not letting the noise of this world overtake me.

That being said -

The spiritual practice I learned as a child that I still value is prayer. When I was a child I was taught a very limited version of prayer – a kind of talking to God. As I have lived my life and learned some things I have learned that prayer is listening. When I was a child I had a very short list of what counted a spiritual practice, silent prayer, meditation, lectio divina, the Catholic mass, as I have lived my life and learned some things I have opened that up. So I ask myself this question where is it that I hear or experience the divine?

In writing

In Sunday service

In relationship

In youth work

In service work

In Nature

For me spiritual practice is less about the actual thing I do and more about making the time for it. Making time to write the sermon and then giving it the time and attention that it needs that is a spiritual practice, making time to be here on Sunday – emotionally present and putting aside the difficulties so that I can be present. Being in relationship with you all.

What an honor it is to speak with any of you on your faith on your life, on where the sacred is for you right now. It is humbling and it is part of my practice.

All of this is pretty general. I would say the things I do most regularly are

Write

Making time to be in Nature and look at the beauty around me and stop and appreciate it. There is all the difference in the world in stopping and enjoying the beauty of the odd icicle and walking by it and checking it off my spiritual practice to do list.

Making time to be in relationship – making time for my family, making time for each of you.

So it is that I listen, feel gratitude, practice love. Those are pretty good spiritual practices I think. In a world without end may this be so.