

## The Shifting Role of Faith Community across a Lifetime

I was born into a religious community. As far as I know, my ancestors on both sides, for several generations, were mostly Roman Catholic. My family would pile into the car every Sunday. My Dad would drop my Mom and six LaGory children off at church, return home in defiance of the requirement to attend every Sunday, but would always be waiting for us in the car when everyone spilled out the doors. Church often seemed torturous to me. It was usually hot and stuffy, even in winter. The mass was in Latin in my early memories. Father Leugers' sermons were peppered with metaphoric war stories and tales of a one-armed man. The church ladies in the rows in front of me often had mink stoles draped around their shoulders, one mink head with beady fake eyes biting the tail of another mink in front of it, as the gruesome garment wound its way around the lucky lady's shoulders. The thick, still air would mingle with the heady odor of incense, the drone of Latin, the biting minks, the one-armed man...and more than once I had to dash outside, quietly vomit in the bushes, and wait for a while before finally heading back inside for more fun. My Mom would teasingly say that it was the devil that made kids get sick in church. One summer, barn swallows must have taken up residence in the eaves outside the balcony. The sleek birds would suddenly dart out of seemingly nowhere, through the balcony and out into the open body of the church. It was the coolest thing and was something that spurred a feeling of awe and reverence that I did not get from the sermons or the ritual.

That was just Sundays; every school day began with Mass in the church. I went to Catholic schools from 1<sup>st</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. In those days (60s and 70s), there were probably as many Catholic schools as public schools in Cincinnati. There were three Catholic churches within a two-mile radius of my parents' house and each had a grade school (1<sup>st</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grades) on the grounds. I was in the Catholic community trenches for most of my day. I was (and probably still am) an introvert. Not the best social quality for embracing and blending with the community, but it did make me step back a notch, look at things critically, and hang onto those observations long enough that I would try to make sense of them. Consequently, at the ripe age of seven, during practice for my First Communion, I had a realization that my perception of church experience had moved from uncomfortable and intimidating to "this stuff makes no sense to me".

I learned that if, during Communion, the priest put the host on your little Gene Simmons tongue and it fell down your front, you had to wait for him to retrieve it from wherever it had landed and place it back in your mouth. Only the priest's hands were consecrated to touch the body of Christ that the host represented; if you touched the host, the priest would locate you immediately after mass and chastise you in front of your whole school.

But I also learned that the nuns and priests were just people. The priest would often come out to the front of the church when morning mass was over, to speak more directly to the kids. He would sometimes show up at our intramural (playing against kids from one of our city's gazillion Catholic schools) kickball games wearing no priestly garments, just a plaid sports shirt and regular pants. Back then, nuns could not walk in public unescorted, and I ended up escorting my 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher to the dentist. She was nice and funny and made me feel as if she cared what I had to say; when I got her safely back to the convent, she gave me popcorn that her family had grown that I later burned on the stove top when I tried to pop it at home. We had no idea at the time, but Miss Bartusch, the young teacher who we all loved, who introduced us to the music of Gordon Lightfoot (no, he's not Catholic) and the distinctions of a Canadian accent, was a nun-in-training who was taking some time to decide whether she wanted to really become a nun. The austere nun/principal Sister Iranae Marie came into our classroom when I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade and read *The Little Prince* to us in installments. I have had a place in my heart for that book ever since.

Then came high school. Religion classes were a required part of the curriculum, but it no longer included tales of martyrs and canned answers to canned questions. These classes were more introspective, historical, and philosophical. With titles "Eastern Thought", "Comparative Religions", "Judaism", it was a time to put things into context, see how ideas had changed over time, and see how much of organized religion had developed out of response to the times people lived in, how they struggled to make sense of it all and to be good people. I was interested, but still did not want to make that be a big part of my life. I wanted to participate more in life before I came to major conclusions. It was in high school that I stopped going to church, which did not go down well with my parents. There were enough services, that at first my brother Kirk and I (who is now Unitarian also) told my parents that we were going, but instead drove off to go birdwatching. We were such rebels.

In college, the ideas of great religious leaders such as Dr. King, Gandhi, the Dalai Lama were relevant to me, but religion did not have much of a niche in my life. Most of my college friends talked more about religion from a cultural perspective rather than as an actual participant in a religious community. The exceptions seemed to be a couple of friends who had been raised Quaker, some who had been raised Jewish, and people who lived in a collective household who ran the Natural Food Store and Laid Back Motors.

It wasn't until I became a parent that I found myself, in my early 30s, wanting to give my kids some sort of spiritual foundation that was more substantial than my feeble answers given on the fly to their big, curious questions. I did not want them to think for a second that they would burn in hell if they didn't embrace Jesus. Plenty of faiths were ready to fill that void in their lives and they were invited to attend Sunday school and church with

their friends. I attended a Unitarian Universalist Church in Cheyenne where the kids had all been born, mostly because several people who I knew and respected, who had children, attended. The kids attended Sunday school there and I would attend services. I loved the group immediately. There were older couples there, legislators, people from the community, and best of all, lots of parents of young children like me. I saw the older couples as mentors and the younger couples as my people. We were involved in many of the same things outside of church (fundraisers, baby-sitting coop, food coop, etc,) so the social connections fed and deepened the feeling of commitment and connection to the spiritual community.

When we moved to Sheridan I quickly connected with Victor when I called his number listed in the religion section in the Saturday edition of the Sheridan Press. With Janet's support and encouragement, she and I started a small Religious Education program for kids. Though I think that Janet later confessed that they paid Aaron to attend, our little group kept going. Still I thought that it was good for my kids to visit other faiths. Then Aisha returned home visibly shaken one day after she had attended church with a friend and people had been speaking in tongues. I think that it was more traumatic than my early experience with incense and vomiting in the bushes.

Now, let me introduce you to my siblings and parents. There were nine of us, so be prepared to snooze. Working on this presentation has been a great opportunity for me to talk with my siblings and see where their connections to faith communities have led them over the years.

I'll start with my sister, Lisette. Though I love her full name, my sister will always be "Lee" to the family. Lee takes my mom to church almost every Sunday. She has to go farther to get there these days, because the church of our childhood now houses a Montessori school. Our parish merged with another, and services are held at the other church. In a convoluted arrangement that took me a long time to understand, the merged parish shares a priest with another parish, which will soon be sharing a priest with another parish. So, there will be three churches, three parishes served by one priest where there had been four churches in four parishes served by eight priests in my childhood. Lee relates that the reorganization is mostly due to a priest shortage, and because of this more lay people are doing work that priests used to do. More people are more involved now and more deeply connected to each other than they had been which she feels is a good thing.

Lee identifies herself as a free-thinking Catholic. As with me, she found church mostly scary in her early years. She relates that it was too mysterious, that stories from the nuns made her fearful of doing something wrong unknowingly, and afraid of being punished for it. She remembers a childhood dream in which she found a nickel but didn't find the rightful owner; in the dream, the pope tracked her down and made her

make amends. She reminded me of the time that my Mom had been sick, and as we walked toward home after school, discovered that the nuns were at the house visiting Mom. We kept right on walking, afraid to go in with the nuns there. When asked whether she feels part of the religious community, she hemmed and hawed a bit—“don’t know, not totally...”. I think that mostly her attendance has been steady in support of my Mom, but she did soften as she talked and spoke warmly of the church community.

We talked about my Mom’s connection a bit, and also of the relationship of personality to establishing a sense of community. Mom remains a shy person; she was never one of the “church ladies”. I think that she remained a faithful church go-er because she believes that it is part of what makes you a good person and that she is keeping tradition, but she does not judge other people who are not Catholic. The community was very kind to Mom when my dad died, and made it clear that they were ready and willing to help with anything that she needed. Mom does have church friends, people who she chats with afterwards, and Lee tells me that there is one woman who saves a spot beside her for Mom every Sunday.

Like me, Lee admits to feeling a shift during High School, when she felt encouraged to think and question, and when the old parish priest left. She feels a greater connection now that has deepened as she has matured. She thinks of church as an inviting place, that she gets something out of the service that makes her a stronger and better person; and these are not her words, but I think that it feeds something in her. She says that she feels as connected to the church as she does to her neighborhood, and she currently sees a much different faith community than that of her childhood. She sees a much more kid-friendly community that is less intimidating, in which the priest has a more human, often humorous connection to those he serves. She spoke proudly of how she felt that they were welcoming and responsive. When a guest priest rambled about loving the homosexual, but working to “fix” them, several people left during the service, and the priest was never asked back. She said that she had read that over 60% of self-proclaimed Catholics support gay marriage, and thinks that probably 90% of Catholic women use birth control. She sees her church as a good addition to the greater community, which works to identify areas of need and responds in a meaningful way.

Now on to the men in my family... My oldest brother, Mark, calls my dad a “Christmas/Easter Catholic” but we both acknowledge that his sense of spirituality was likely deeper than that. He did not attend church during most of my childhood, but began taking communion right before his death from lung cancer. I assumed that it was part of him wanting to get his affairs in order, combined with a bit of fear of death and covering his bases, but that didn’t seem like Dad. Dad was definitely a careful thinker and would not make a good Nazi. He called me his little iconoclast when I was young which made me proud when I looked it up in the dictionary. He found priests

condescending, and tried the Knights of Columbus (the fraternal order of Catholic guys), but didn't even make it all the way through his first meeting before he left, knowing that it was not for him. His mom was not Catholic, but his beloved Irish Grandma was, and she made sure that all of her grandchildren attended Catholic schools. It was probably because of his close relationship with his Grandma that he was supportive of his own kids attending Catholic schools. Mark recalls that Dad would refer to the Catholic Church as the "Church of the Almighty Dollar", a giant sucking machine that took but gave little in return. Despite this, Dad always seemed faithful to a set of core beliefs in the goodness of life, and of people. He admired people who spoke out challenging power, had a generous spirit, and a heart for the poor and downtrodden. Lee tells me that what brought him back to the church before his death happened as a result of the hospital contacting the parish priest after he was admitted. The priest who visited him was cut from a different cloth. This priest was very sympathetic to and encouraging of a questioning mind, and shared some of his own experiences with Dad. He shared his concerns related to his own health problems and relatable stories of his own life. He provided a kind, thoughtful, comforting sort of friendship in which Dad could be himself, and for this, I will be forever grateful to him.

Now, onto my oldest brother Mark, who you may remember from when he attended here a few years ago when he was visiting. Mark relates that the Catholic way of thinking, doing, and being permeated his life through High School. St. Francis has been his life-long hero, "although the dude could get pretty weird and extreme at times". For those of you unfamiliar with St. Francis, I will tell you because I knew him well, Francis gave up a prosperous life to live in poverty and work with the poor. I remember Mark as a kid, with a little altar set up, pretending to say Mass. When he was a senior in High School, he was accepted into a Franciscan seminary, right after he met the love of his life. And no, it wasn't Jesus. He fell madly in love and passed over the seminary opportunity. He says that he didn't really question church dogma until college. Though his early heritage gave him a rather simple view of the world, it also gave him a hunger for social justice. He came of age when the civil rights movement was in full swing, which affected him deeply. He characterizes the faith community of his early years as being dominated by belief. He began to see those ideas as irrelevant to his everyday life and experiences, becoming more and more irrelevant to world problems, and becoming a problem in itself. He finally left the Catholic Church when he felt that they had taken a conservative turn away from justice.

Mark went on to achieve a doctorate in Sociology. He came to see his fellow sociologists as his new faith community, addressing relevant problems of the world. He felt that they asked the right questions and offered sensible, data-driven solutions. Over time, he published books and articles, drew satisfaction from relationships with his colleagues, and enjoyed the challenges of his work. He became frustrated though, that

the fruits of their labor rarely carried weight in halls of power. They were not a boots on the ground group, but a group of scientists that offered some solutions that either failed or were not listened to.

Then he was injured in a car crash that put him in a hospital for two months, and that would have long term effects on his health. It was a rough year for him; he was working on a book that wasn't out in time, so he was denied tenure. He was soon hired on at the University of Alabama in Birmingham. He had no faith community there, but began going to a Catholic church again. He admits that it offered little more than a comfortable liturgy remembered from childhood. Life was good; he and his wife had a happy home, and they had three beautiful, bright children. He was complacent until he met a couple of progressive Catholics who had worked with the Berrigan brothers on peace issues and homelessness. They challenged him by asking "**What** are you doing with your knowledge? **How** is it helping? **Who** is it helping besides yourself and a few other sociologists who read your publications?" Nothing like a good punch of Catholic guilt to get a person moving. He began to search for a more meaningful faith community and found one in the Episcopal Church, drawn in by a priest whom he respected and who has become his friend. He feels that his faith has come full circle, moving beyond belief into a deep spirituality where questions are encouraged, and in which justice and grace have always been seen as core principles. He has come to rely on his faith community, one which respects questions asked and supports core principles of caring for the sick, feeding the hungry, and housing the homeless.

Mark retired about five years ago from a successful and satisfying career as Sociology professor at UAB. Needless to say, Type A that he is, he jumped in with gusto to what he saw as a new opportunity to do good and affect change. He completed a course of study and was ordained an Episcopal deacon. He is happy in his role as deacon, especially because deacons are meant to be a thorn in the side of the church, ensuring that it does not get too self-absorbed or too involved in its own interests. His role, he says, is to bring the problems of the world to the church, and to bring the church into the world. He directs a community outreach program in an inner-city neighborhood that provides tutoring for kids, works with neighborhood residents on their concerns and supports an effort to develop a community school. In addition they administer a fairly large fund that disburses money to agencies that apply for grants. Mark's wife Mary Sue, is involved in the Episcopal church, but not as deeply. She sees class issues as a barrier there, struggles with the role of clergy wife, and thinks that Mark spends too much time there. He works at least 40 hours a week, without pay, but is reimbursed for expenses. Mark says that as he looks back on things, there is not much he would change about his journey of faith and the communities that he had been a part of; they are central to who he is now, and to all of his relationships.

Putting it all in context:

Though I chose to base my presentation on my personal experiences, I couldn't keep myself from researching a little. I came across a book titled "In the Course of a Lifetime: Tracing Religious Belief, Practice and Change" by Michele Dillon and Paul Wink. The book grew out of interpretation of information gathered in one of the longest running social science studies. Begun as two separate studies—the Berkeley Guidance Study of child development in 1928 and the Oakland Growth Study begun a few years later—these studies began with elementary school students. Participants were studied intensely through a combination of interviews, observation, and self-reporting. Interviews were conducted with over 300 participants during adolescence, early adulthood, middle adulthood, late-middle adulthood, and late adulthood. I also read the transcript of a lecture by Robert Putnam titled "American Grace" and findings of a survey by the Pew Research Forum on Religion and Public Life.

Some of the ideas presented bore out my own observations—the height of church-going in America was during the 1950s, followed by a huge social upheaval in the 60s that resulted in rebellion and exploration of more individual paths. Personality seemed to play a significant role in determining whether a person's religious involvement was more social or a more individual spiritual seeking. About half of Americans have changed religious affiliation at least once in their lives. Most people who leave their childhood religion do so before their mid-20s. Of all people raised Catholic in America, nearly two-thirds are no longer practicing Catholics. As with my Dad, the Pew study showed that many people who leave a religion to become unaffiliated do so because they think of religious people as hypocritical or judgmental, because religious organizations focus too much on rules or because religious leaders are too focused on power and money. So my family was not a bunch of free-thinking trailblazers. We are just a slice of America.

My connection to this group has deepened over the years. You were an integral part of my kids' formative years and you ensured that my years remained formative as well. I am inspired by you, have benefited from your support, and I like to think that I have contributed to the group as well. We are just people, and we gather when we can to make sense of the world, encourage each other, and work to make the world a good place. For that I thank you.