

At the Beginning

A sermon by Daniel Gregoire

Genesis 1:1-3 KJV

¹In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

²And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

³And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

A long time ago in the heart of Brooklyn there was once a light emanating from a kerosene heater in the cool basement of a wooden tenement building. It was in a large room with a low ceiling. That room was illuminating by rows of florescent lights. There were red carpets on the floor and simulated wood paneling on what would have been bare stone and concrete walls. It was cold and it was night, but the amber glow of the kerosene heater, at least created in the minds of the small group of people gathered there, mostly women in their sweaters and coats and a boy, the illusion of a warm and welcoming place.

The women, all Haitian immigrants, sat in folding aluminum chairs with hand made cushions. In that basement they told stories and sang songs, and clapped their hands, became filled by the Holy Spirit and even raised their arms to the ceiling crying “glory to God” as they made their fervent prayers for deliverance from the ordinary, and the strange and the tragic circumstances, that caused them to leave their homes that night and come worship at the “Assembly of God Pentecost” the first church I ever knew.

The pastor of the church was Reverend Lauraine Gregoire, my grandmother.

The kerosene heater no longer burns nor is the church there in the basement any longer. But the light somehow still glows. In later years that assembly moved up to a storefront church several miles away. And, though my grandmother died some years later with no plan for succession, the church continues to meet. Oftentimes the services are lay lead by the very members who essentially founded the congregation and periodically they will invite guest preachers to come. I seldom return for a visit and I struggle with my reluctance to go back.

The Assembly of God Pentecost is where my journey down the path to ministry began and in a very real sense it is where my *ministerial* “creation story” begins too.

This is a story wherein I imagine, I will always somehow be just at the beginning of it even after I start my Internship, or receive my Ordination or my 40 years Commemorative Plate or my retirement, or my eventual interment.

We are always at the beginning, (and maybe near the best part) of our life’s story. I invite you to look at those paths you’ve take in a life as an opportunity for surprising discoveries about yourself and the people who accompany you on the journey.

Experiences shape our lives:

Sunday mornings at the Assembly of God Pentecost began with the *Ecole de Dimanche* the Sunday school. There was no such thing as an RE program so the children sat with the adults as they basically memorized parts of passages in the Bible and recited them, for points. The few children there usually showed varying shades of boredom and distraction. The adults could become very excited depending on the topic. After the recitation, if anyone had questions about the meaning of the passage they were memorizing they could ask the pastor and she would offer the authoritative commentary on the passage.

One time the Sunday school's verse was perhaps from a passage from the New Testament's Gospel of John. I don't remember the exact passage, but it said that the only way to be "saved", to get to Heaven was through believing in Jesus the Christ. Conversely not believing in this message meant that one would spend eternity in Hell, forever cut-off God and paradise. Most people found the passage clear enough "Jesus=Heaven=Good". However, one person asked what about people of other faiths. The pastor explained that the Christian message was available to all; there were churches, and televangelists and Bibles available in every language and missionaries spreading this true message to all.

Well that seemed reasonable enough to everyone gathered that Sunday. Except me, for the most part. Normally, I didn't really pay attention to Sunday school and I never really gave much thought to the theological or eschatological implications of what I had then professed to believe. Everything that I was taught was a matter of fact and I had never examined the facts until that moment, a moment that would change everything.

Agreeing that anyone alive today could have the opportunity to be "saved" by the Christian message through various means, I asked: "what about someone living on an island before a Christian missionary even existed; how could they know about Jesus?"

I thought surely they would not be sent to Hell for their lack of knowledge of this saving faith? The answer that I along with everyone in that room received was shocking. Those people who would live and die without accepting Jesus as their savior, the same people who could never hope to find a Bible that might be their one and only hope or even intone the right syllables to say "*Jesus save me*", would be punished, for eternity! I sat with that answer, I was 13years old.

Later, I thought of my Jewish school teachers, the Muslim man at the corner store, the Hindu girl in my class. I thought, well they seem like nice people. Surely "my God" would not send them to "Hell". And, what about all of those people on all the hypothetical islands who lived for generations before a kindly missionary could disabuse them of their blissful, pre-Christian state? It just did not seem right. They were created by the same God that created me, yet they were set up, from the very beginning to fail the test and be eternally lost.

I don't know what path I might have gone down had I not asked that question?

How might my life be different if I hadn't considered the other lives, other worlds and other possibilities?

That experience forever changed my life and changed my faith. The journey changed.

What was your question?

What did you ask that led you here?

Where were you when you concluded that there might be more to the story than meets the eye?

At the beginning we all had that moment where there was sudden and unexpected shift in trajectory that led us down untrodden paths. It usually begins with a question, an important one.

This recalls Robert Frost's classic "The Road Not Taken" where he concludes:

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
and that has made all the difference.*

I took such a road, when, years later, having left the church of my childhood, and the home of my childhood. I was living in southeastern Massachusetts, I happened upon the Universalist-Unitarian Church of Brockton. It was a warm December and I just turned 18 years old. The church was a curious looking, modernist building. The walls were mostly clear glass and the roof looked as though something had grabbed hold of one point years ago and has been stretching the roof towards the heavens ever since. There were no symbols that I recognized on the outside except this kind of cup with a flame in it.

I noticed that church for a while before ever going in. When I was riding by in the family car invariably we would stop at the intersection of Belmont and West Elm Streets in what had once been the very fashionable part of the town. You could tell by the very large and handsome Victorian homes around the church. The stop was always long enough for me to read the quirky messages featured in the "wayside pulpit".

It was probably the combination of the unusual architecture, the wayside pulpit, a taste for adventure and an ironic desire to please my grandmother in Brooklyn that coalesced and precipitated by venture into the UU church one Sunday morning in December.

I brought my siblings, all younger than I with me. I thought they needed something to do and might enjoy going out with me. I mistook the main entrance and went in through the side entrance of the church. And I was greeted by the nervous DRE, who was thrilled at our arrival. What DRE wouldn't be thrilled at the arrival of four new kids on a Sunday morning?

Especially when it was the Children's Christmas Pageant Sunday!

The DRE placed fliers all over the neighborhood on light poles inviting local children to come be part of the pageant. I look back on that particular marketing strategy and think "how strange". I might never have come had I noticed the fliers. Luckily I hadn't.

My siblings, Victor, Mathew and Priscilla were nevertheless thrilled to come to a new place and get to wear fun costumes and perform. So they choose to be in the pageant. I being a teenager

had different ideas about being in Christmas pageants. I sat in the pews which had very soft, machine-made pew cushions. I watched the pageant which featured the nativity story at a Gas Station. And, I thought, “well, that can’t be right?” but I went with it.

The pageant was followed by the sermon, on a text I thought I knew, but somehow remembered there being a bit more magic to it. There was a manger. Wasn’t there angels and special stars, and a virgin birth, there was definitely more of the supernatural in the story I remembered? It was a story about Jesus, the same Jesus and the same God that was largely discredited in my mind, as a charlatan, a tyrant and merciless dictator/ruler of the cosmos.

I didn’t believe any of that stuff anymore. But it didn’t matter, because it wasn’t mentioned. The minister, Rev. Peter Newport, talked about how every child is special, and each birth is an opportunity to celebrate the beauty and power and magic of life. He spoke about people caring for each other. This time, this story I had heard growing up took on a new and far deeper meaning. It was no longer a part of divine plan to reward some with a static vision of bright clouds and harps and condemn the many to everlasting torment.

I didn’t think at that time that the experience would have been such an exceptional moment or even the start of a new thing that would, in time, become my life.

But, that is exactly what happened. I joined the congregation a few months later and became very involved. There was something more exceptional than the message, which in retrospect wasn’t “that”, profound after all. The thing that *is* exceptional is –“how did I get there in the first place” and “why did I stay” and “how did I eventually hear the call to ministry that I am following today?”

All of this could not be more **unlikely!**

And, that *was* what I told the six members of the *Regional Subcommittee on Ministry* at Pickett Elliot House in Boston right before they conferred “Candidate for Ministry” status on me.

I said “I know that I am sitting here at this large oak table in this posh dining room with you and I still can’t believe that I am here. In my wildest dreams I could not see myself here, but here I am. I look back on the experiences of my childhood and can’t see how any of it could have prepared me for this moment. I grew up in a working class, Haitian immigrant home, going to the segregated and under funded schools of central Brooklyn.” I said, “I could not think of a boy on my block in my generation who went to college, let alone graduate school. Moreover, how did I find a spiritual home in a predominantly white, upper-middle class denomination, coming from so different a background?”

Now, I was really just thinking out loud trying to figure this out. All of this was kind of like the moment on a reality game show when a contestant is making their last appeal before the judges decide whether or not they stay on the island to, perhaps, win the prize or marry the bachelor, or get sent back home with nothing to show for their efforts.

Finally, I said: “nothing could be more unlikely than *this*, but I am here and I believe that I am called to ministry”. There must be something to it all, even if I don’t quite understand it.

And, in the end, it is not entirely true that nothing in my childhood could have prepared me for the path that I am on. I bring with me a rich tradition of impassioned worship, embodied love of the divine. A sense of deep and abiding faith not just when things are going well, but when life throws its most vicious and unexpected curve balls.

I have my grandmother, at least the memories of her, with our morning prayers by the bedside and her daily admonitions to be “good”.

And, like any good Pentecostal, every now and then I too get *filled* with the Holy Spirit and become overwhelmed by joy while watching the sunset, traveling over water or watching children at play.

Just like in the first Hebrew creation myth, God, had materials to work with, the face of the water, and the face of the deep. We all have materials to work with in our creation, despite the limitations of our gender, class, ethnicities, or abilities.

We are all on a sacred journey, and everyday we are at the start of it, no matter what our chronological or physiological age, or our linear understanding of history has to say about it (because Time really isn't only linear). We are a part of creating our own stories.

And, let us remember the places when it all began:

Let us hold on to the important people in our lives: the friends, the mothers, the uncles, and the neighbors, the random and *not* so random strangers.

Let us remember the experiences that shape our faith. And, those that test our faith.

Let us remember the important decisions and the more important questions.

Go and remember: we can always begin again.

I end with this classic excerpt from the motion picture *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. In it the protagonist sent a letter to his daughter reminding of her and us of life's most important truths. He wrote:

For what it's worth: it's never too late or, in my case, too early to be whoever you want to be. There's no time limit, stop whenever you want. You can change or stay the same; there are no rules to this thing. We can make the best or the worst of it. I hope you make the best of it. And I hope you see things that startle you. I hope you feel things you never felt before. I hope you meet people with a different point of view. I hope you live a life you're proud of. If you find that you're not, I hope you have the strength to start all over again.

Amen, May it be so.