

circa 1968 - I'm about 4 years old. We're driving across Eastern Montana - mom and dad in front, Kate and I in the back. Looking out over the seemingly endless landscape (Montana is really, really big when you drive west to east), I was excited to see a bunch of people moving around on a rise not far from the road. I got Kate's attention and pointed out the window saying "Look at those really big cows!" Kate was around 11 and always pretty sweet to me. She looked to see what I'd spotted and said "did you see something out there?"

I looked at her - and out the window - and back at her...

Out the window there was a lot to see! A whole group of people up above - some of them on horses and some just running. I could see several more below them - at the bottom of a steep drop off. Those were picking their way through the dry grass and bushes and the ones above running and shouting - chasing these enormous furry cows right off the edge of the cliff.

And Kate was smiling at me expectantly. "What did you see, Punkin?"

It probably wasn't the first time that I'd had a vision but it was the first time I realized that what I saw was not the same as what she saw. It was also the very first time I decided: 1) That might not be a good thing and 2) To keep it a secret.

"Uhm... I saw a man... on a horse... up there"

"Oh cool. Maybe it's a cowboy." Kate said, ruffling my hair and turning back to her book.

Summer 1982 - The day after graduating high school, I fled small town, conservative, socially oppressive Missoula Montana...and went to school. In Lubbock Texas. Hey - I was 17 - what did I know? It was a rough summer - no friends, I got sick and had my tonsils out, long work hours, ridiculous weather - heat, tornados, and sandstorms. Lubbock has nothing green, no hills, no water... I was in shock that people chose to live in such a place. Once school started it got better, but I never felt like Lubbock was a real place. How can you feel alive and real if there are no hills and no trees? I was lost and empty and confused. In late fall, I went on ski trip with the Westminster Pres. Young Adult group. Ah - mountains and trees and snow... my soul woke up, took a deep breath, and then wondered how I was gonna survive back on campus. With all the drama and angst of an 18 year old heart, I wrote a song about God being lost to me in the city... my disconnection from spirit... my fears of returning to the brown, soulless campus...

It's a horrid song. Really. Just dreadful. I could only play 3 chords - 2 if it were in a minor key. All the longing and "wisdom" of a college freshman far, far from home. You will NOT be hearing this song. But the words, as cringe worthy as they are, really spoke about something important. Something that is at the very core of my spiritual life.

I'm a social person - extroverted, expressive, compassionate, relatively self-aware. Why, then, did I lose that magical feeling of connection when I was around other people, in the city, in the dorm? I saw angels and visions and heard music in the silences so...why was it so hard to "find myself" and to "speak my heart" while in community?

I knew it wasn't just me. Hadn't I watched my mother struggle with church dynamics? Seen my peers flee from the churches of their childhood? I may have found my connection to spirit alone, but I knew I was not alone in my confusion and hunger.

So there you are. There I was. A ridiculously spiritual soul with no control over the spirit connection - a social person with no meaningful relationship to a faith community. And here I am now - the same person with the same set-up but a more mature, integrated spiritual practice. That spiritual practice is what Alan asked me to talk about today.

It's hard to simplify any human experience into a straight-line and my spiritual path has been long and winding. I've filled years of journals and hours of therapy on why I'm not a Wiccan, why I left my former church, the process of leaving my Presbyterian roots. Each of those steps has all sorts of theological basis, emotional baggage, and political BS, but my ongoing quest really is pretty simple. My journey and practice, in its simplest terms, centers on the life and death of the man, Jesus.

I'll point out that I did not say the life, death, and resurrection...and that wasn't a typo. (Typo? Can you make a typo in a speech?) For me, it was important that he lived and that he was killed. The resurrection part - whatever and however that went down - that's not the crux of the story. I know that's part of his story and I celebrate Easter, but it's much more important to me that this man came and lived - fully human, fully divine, fully aware. It's important that he lived and it's important that the overwhelming human reaction to him was fear and anger and, ultimately, a need to destroy him. I don't end there feeling despair, but I do pause there, knowing that the story goes on but also know that THIS PART of the story - the balancing of humanity and divinity in real time on this earth and also the terrified response to that life and all its potential? That is where my practice and my passion and my prayer are.

I know that I am related to that man. I am the same stuff as him AND I am the same child of creation. He is my brother - he told us that over and over - and it was never a high-five, "love you bro" kinda of thing. It was Mitakuye Oyasin- all my relations - your Abba is my Abba relationship. "All I've done, you can do likewise."

I also know, in every part of me, that I am Thomas who doubted, Peter who denied, Pilate who washed his hands, and even Judas who thought he knew best. Full kinship - DNA bonded - all my relations.

Because his story lives on, I can keep working on MY story. Learn from that family history. Feed the parts of my soul that I chose to nurture and grow.

So how do I do that? I need to remember that, just like Jesus, I am a divine creation. I am divine. How do I believe that...remember it... live it? Well - singing harmony with Lisa and Kate - that's a pretty good reminder. Creating a piece of art or a casserole for a friend doesn't hurt. Hearing an old familiar teaching torn apart in Hebrew or rephrased in a poem - that helps a lot. To remember who I am, I need a church. A place where I can talk and think and listen and debate about our creator, about our brother, Jesus (and all our other relations), and about what it means to be spiritually alive, fully aware - a divine child of God.

I am spirit.

I am divine.

I am also human. Mortal. A pathetic two-legged walking heavy, slow, and loud through this world. I am not Jesus. I've got all the doubts, fears, angst, drama - plus pheromones, hormones, adrenaline, reptile brained instincts, blood sugar spikes. With all that chemistry and all those emotions, I'm not much better at being human than I am at being divine.

There are some doctrines that deal with this by painting our base, animal side as something to be overcome. Much of Christian church history was colored by those ideas and entire cultures were oppressed and eliminated with those ideas as justification. But as a current, life shaping theology -that's not even on the table for me. Who can experience nature - the smell of rain, the wrinkle of my husband's eyes, the sound of Ned's laugh - and believe that the glory of creation is something to be overcome? I am created by the divine and Jesus came here embracing this very form - so no, a doctrine that vilifies my human self is just theologically unsound. So what do I do? Stumble along gracelessly with no guides, no helpers, no path?

Unable to figure out my nature, I start by honoring all nature. As we at church remember and honor the moving of spirit through the church year, I honor the natural calendar. The turn of seasons - the cycles of planting, blooming, growing, harvest, death. Through ceremony, prayer, and practice - I mark the shifting balance between dark and light, male and female, oak and holly, rise and fall. I study old ways - strip away that which rings false, shine light on what is basic, universal, and true.

In the practice of that honoring, it has become clear that there is a path. A dance, a rhythm, a thread. A thread that weaves in and out of organized tradition, but is separate from them. It is strong and traces a path that my clumsy, confused, graceless feet can follow - even if emotions and hormones and all that noise keeps me feeling befuddled.

An interesting thing happens if you're lost and then you find a path. You may have thought you were alone in the wilderness, but once on the path you start to see other people. I've met lots of people on their paths. They cross my path or our paths run together. Sometimes my path is formed in the veering away from theirs. Either way, their studies and their history and their truths - they all inform mine and that strengthens my path.

I also found that, when I practice my practice and follow my thread, there are guides. Some of them are people who are also striving to figure out how to be human. Some of them are not people. Mitakuye Oyasin doesn't mean "all my human relations." It means ALL my relations. Wolves do not get stress headaches. Salmon do not attend seminars. Badgers are from neither Venus nor Mars. Eagles have no self help books. Elephants do not suffer from negative body issues.

As flippant as it sounds, my body is more than a rental car for my true self. My physical experience and expression in this world - our collective interaction with this material world is, for me, a gift from creator and through us a gift back to creation.

I am human. I am mortal.

So I carry my thread. The thread is not named "Bridgeport" and it's not named "the Red Road". It's my thread connected to something sacred - something Wahkahn.

Sometimes to keep hold of that thread, I need angels to sing. Surrounded by art, stained glass, and candles, I need to hear the words that I'm a child of God wonderfully made - just like my brother Jesus.

Sometimes, to keep hold of that thread, I need to crawl on the mother earth. Surrounded by darkness, heat, and mud, I need to hear the stone sings and remember that I am natural, simple, and pure - just like my relations the willow, the buffalo, and the bear.

There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change, but it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it, you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.*

The Way it Is
Aho Mitakuye Oyasin
Amen

*Note - Closing poem is "The Way it Is" by William Stafford