

When Alan first put forth the idea, the suggestion –on July 17th– that we ourselves step up to the place from which so many brilliant people have preached, all I could think of was the years I'd practiced saying “Really, it's such an honor just to be nominated...”

But here I am and I'm going to start by welcoming everyone who may be here for the first time, “wherever you are on your journey of faith – this is a good place for you to be.”

My Journey of Faith began in Baltimore when I was nine years old, on the kitchen floor of my house. A nine year old girl can scrub a kitchen floor...While I pushed a bucket around and sopped a rag here and there I sang to myself, because we always had the radio on, especially on Saturdays during housecleaning. So I'm singing along to The Nearness of You, by Hoagy Carmichael. And I'm thinking about who the “You” is in that song, and because I was a spiritual little kid, there was no other “you” (Capital YOU) in my life other than God, who I was told was always with us, and in us, so that meant the nearness of you, meant the nearness of me, then I thought, well, who is Me? Like, who asking the question? And then it hit me. I suddenly felt like a catch had been released or something huge had come loose and I was no longer attached to my body. In fact I was no longer my body. The floor dropped out from under me and I looked down at my hand my flesh and realized that I was not that flesh. I wasn't even my thoughts. This all happened over the course of a few seconds. It was a very strange and vertiginous feeling and it scared me such that I had to reach out for the table leg and hold on, re-attach myself to this world. But it changed me. I went in search of God, from that moment. I went in search of that moment because I knew it had something to do with God.

Flash forward a dozen years. I'm in church, the very church I'd been brought up in, only now I was Jewish, having converted, through Orthodoxy, and I was there to attend my older brother's funeral mass. At 24 he'd died from an inexplicably accident and while I was no longer technically Catholic, I still thought like one.

Orthodox Jewish custom teaches that Jews do not kneel praying, especially not in a Catholic Church to a Christian God, but as we all know Catholics kneel at various times throughout the mass, and my body remembered how to go up and down like a drill press at all the right times, But I couldn't do it at my brother's funeral service because now I was Jew. The moment came when we – all of us in the very front pew there were expected to hit the kneeler and fold our hands in prayer but I was in deep trouble, not a conflict of faith, but of expression of my new faith in the face of everyone I loved and everyone who knew my family and loved my brother.

So instead of kneeling at the appropriate moment, I kind of sunk down a little and rested about three fingers worth of rear end on the very edge of the pew, while I slid my leg under the pew so it could touch the kneeler while firmly keeping one foot flat on the floor to make a quick getaway if I needed one. But dammit, I thought I'm Jewish now so I popped up, very conspicuously, only to realize that I was embarrassing my stricken family and so shrunk back down on the pew, Only to come to my Jewish senses a few moments later and so I sat back on the pew while everyone else was kneeling and my younger brother looked at me with horror and I pointed to the little gold Star of David around my neck said, “I am a Jew!” to which he replied, “You're an idiot.” Which was true enough, but I kept the faith, the Jewish faith for another two years. Until a new boyfriend tempted me with a killer Bolognese sauce – and I was no longer Kosher.

But religion is more than vocabulary, it is the language of our souls, to me it's the language of faith. And insomuch as language shapes the way we think, I knew I wasn't finished learning about other faith languages because my mind, and my soul, were still being formed.

And, because there are no atheists in foxholes, the next time I found myself in a foxhole, a deep emotional life crisis, I reached for a different language with which to try and understand who God was in relation to me, how I could connect to God. A good and sympathetic friend, and former Catholic like myself, offered me Nirchiren Buddhism, known to lay people as the chanting Tina Turner Buddhism.

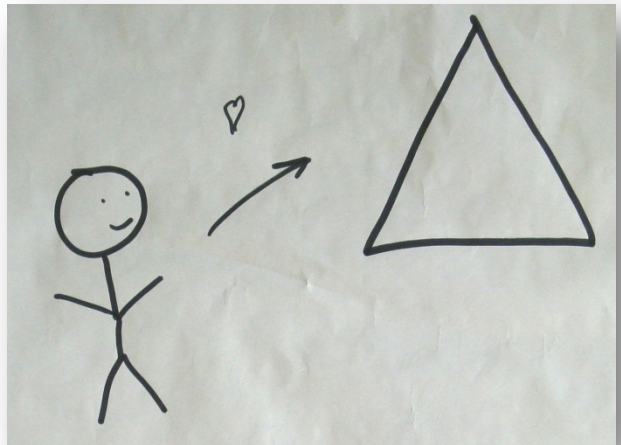
I kept asking for a translation of Nam yo ho rengo Kyo, but the best I could get was “Devotion to the eternal law of what goes around comes around”. Which reminded me of something my grandmother used to say when she’d drop a nickel into the poor box at church. “whatever you give to God, comes back to you tenfold.” I think she was playing Catholic lotto and she figured one of these days, God was reward her for her modest but consistent generosity.

Later, when I studied Hinduism – I’m not done yet folks, I read in the Vedas that when one takes a single step toward God, God takes nine steps toward you. Nine, that number showed up when I became enchanted by the Baha’i faith. Their temples have nine doors, representing the nine paths to God.

Baha’i is a very cool faith.

But you have to step. And you have to keep your lamps trimmed and burning. About those paths to God...

I wanted the direct Path. I wanted the Truth. I wanted unshakable faith and I wanted proof and I wanted miracles and I wanted my questions answered, not my head patted by Father Healy when I was nine years old - right after the floor incident – when I asked him, “Father, why would God send his only son to be killed?” This made no sense to me. No more sense than the resurrection (a man rising from the Dead – yeah, like that’s gonna happen. Or the Virgin birth. But my mother had an answer for that one.



“Virgin, schmirgin,” She said. “Here’s how I look at it. Mary was a Virgin in her soul, she was pure of Heart. That’s what matters, that’s what made her worthy to be the mother of Jesus. Not whether she had sex or not.” Which was probably not the smartest thing to tell a precocious teenage girl, but I tried to stay pure of heart, anyway.

When I came to Bridgeport, I wasn’t looking for God anymore, I was looking for community. I’d stopped looking for God, because I’d read a lot of new-age philosophy, and so far every religion I’d explored or investigated seemed valid to me as a religion, even the wacky ones like Mormonism and and Flying Spaghetti Monster. I knew that God was “too big” to fit into one religion like the bumper sticker said. In fact my faith - no my beliefs - had been reduced to a bumper sticker. Then I came to Bridgeport, and listened to the scripture and heard a lot of talk about Jesus and some of the anthropomorphic language used about God (how God loves this or wants that, and God understands or does that) just made me squirm. And then when I was asked to teach Sunday school – oy, I really felt like an impostor. How could I teach what I don’t know, or I’m not sure I even believe? But over time, six and a half years to be exact – I sat here and asked myself, many times, Christianity, really? My parents stopped pretending to be Catholic 30 years ago, right after my brother died. They never forgave God for taking their son. Now they’re Unitarians.

So among my family and most of my friends, me being a Christian is like, really? or is this another one of your exotic explorations into being religious?

I will insist to anyone I know that I am not “religious!” I’ll deny it three times if anyone asks me.

When I first started coming to Bridgeport I told Susan Leo that I was fickle, that I couldn’t promise to make Bridgeport my permanent spiritual home.

But six and a half years later, I am still here. Not because God is here, even though God is here.



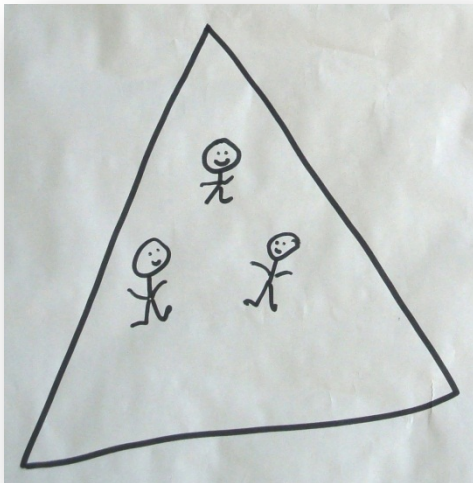
Finding my commitment and renewing my commitment both to Bridgeport and to life itself has much more to do these days with keeping awake and remembering to bring extra oil.

Alan gave me the choice of working with the scripture of Matthew verse 5, where he talks about a light on the hill, and not keeping a light – our light – under a barrel. When I read both scriptures, the second (Matthew 25) was much more compelling and tied in more with where my spiritual path has ultimately led me.

Especially in the light of the changes going on in my life right now, and at Bridgeport, I've been given the chance to really ask myself what I'm choosing, in choosing to stay.

The faith, or the church? After all those years of seeking a path or The Path, what finally led me to Bridgeport was the need to connect (“...only connect,” as E.M. Forster said) through other people. That those other people happened to be Christians (more or less) seemed coincidental.

Thankfully, I'm beyond that, and I deeply appreciate the mystical and allegorical qualities of a good gospel story. I appreciate singing; I appreciate the support and love that is here. And that is God.



There was never a time when what I read in the bible (mainly the Old Testament stuff) didn't all seem like metaphor to me. And reading the bible as metaphor was an easy way to make it all go down. But now I don't need to see it all as metaphor, especially when Paul exhorts us to do everything with love, or complains that he himself sometimes does the very thing he hates, I personally relate to that. I don't need to distance myself from scripture, in order for it to make sense.

Bridgeport never asked me to believe or do anything that didn't make sense to me. Bridgeport celebrates the gospel of Jesus which is the gospel of humanity. We honor the seekers, the faithful, the doubters, the rabble-rousers and the risk-takers.

My beliefs have changed—are still in flux, because I am. And I have been both the foolish bridesmaid and a wise one. I don't know which book or prophet this biblical quote comes from, but I do accept its validity: Wisdom builds her

house, folly, with her bare hands, tears it down. My own house has been torn down with folly, but I'm rebuilding it with wisdom.

I'll leave you with a story about some wandering sadhus, who come upon the Buddha, meditating under the bodhi tree. They are transfixed by his radiant smile, the aura of peace surrounding him and the powerful tranquility he exudes.

"What are you?" They ask, "Are you a King? Are you a God? Are you some otherworldly Being? Tell us, master: what are you?" And the Buddha merely replies, "I am awake."

One of the things I like about Jesus is that he did not spend all his time sitting under a tree meditating, or praying incessantly in a garden. Jesus was a do-er. He acted. I like that.

We should all stay awake, for we do not know the day or the hour that God will be revealed to us. I know it can happen while you're scrubbing a floor or sitting with the dying or looking at a rainbow.

I'm staying awake for the continuing miracle that is Bridgeport. Amen.