My Spiritual Journey: from Traditional to Cosmic

For UU Church May 2016 Terry Paul Choyce

Every 3 year old pesters their parents with the word “why.” “Why is the sky blue?” “Why did God make bugs?” “Why do I have to do to bed?” “Why can’t I have a puppy?” As we age most of us get tired of asking hard to answer questions, or questions we know we won’t like the answers to. I was blessed, or plagued, with a personality that never stopped asking questions. And that has led me into some unusual life choices and beliefs over the last 60 years.

Probably my most persistent question has been “Why am I here?” I didn’t mean in New Jersey, where I was raised, or Nova Scotia, where I have chosen to spend most of my days, but “What is the purpose of my life?” “What is the purpose of all life, everywhere?” A scientist or an economist can’t adequately answer those questions. Only a philosopher or a theologian would try to tackle those topics. So, at a very young age, I turned to religion and philosophy to answer my deeper questions.

I was baptised a Methodist, and my family attended a fairly traditional protestant church . I never missed church or Sunday school, not because my parents made me go, but because I had a thirst for knowledge about God. I loved the songs, and singing in the cherub choir. I loved the quiet beauty of our sanctuary. I was fascinated by the watered down Bible stories I was told. I felt like a part of a big friendly family. And I felt a connection with God that has never left me.

When I was 14 I went to a Bible camp and had a born-again experience. It was our last night, and we were singing songs like “Just as I am” around the campfire. We were asked to dedicate our lives to Jesus, and to throw a stick into the fire. I walked up, threw in my branch, and was then overcome by one of the most powerful feelings I have ever had. I collapsed to my knees and began to cry uncontrollably. To this day I cannot really explain what happened to me, but it left me convinced that there is a power that is far greater than I.

The next few years of my spiritual journey were not easy ones. I had a brief honeymoon period with Jesus and fundamentalism, that soon eroded into skepticism. There were three questions that upset me: “How can a loving God condemn anyone to eternal damnation?” “How can the billions of people in the present and past who never heard of Jesus be sent to Hell?” “What’s going to happen to all of my friends who curse, have sex, lie to their parents, and do not go to church?” I did not want to go to Heaven for an eternity without my friends!

And so I became a spiritual seeker. I had to find a religion where God was loving and forgiving all of the time, and where there was no such thing as eternal punishment. I read books on comparative religion. No theology felt completely true to me. But one belief did make sense, and that was reincarnation. That did, and still does, seem like the most logical and just explanation of why there are so many differences in people, why bad things happen to people who don’t deserve them, why we have innate abilities, interests, and fears that seem to come from nowhere at very young ages, why we feel an immediate attraction to some people, and what happens to us after death. It adequately answered many important questions, it felt fair, and it felt true.

Like many people I did not go to church between the ages of 17 and 30. I gave up on organised religion, partly because my husband had a bad opinion of it, and I could not find a church service that did not make me mad. But I continued to read about spirituality and philosophy, I took up yoga and tried to meditate, and I lived with awe and wonder at the beauty of this world God created.

I went back to church at 30 because I wanted my young daughter Sunyata to have a basic understanding and experience of Christianity, since we lived in a Christian culture, and it had meant so much to me as a kid. We lived at Lawrencetown Beach, where there is a small United Church that was friendly and not too theologically oppressive. I stayed there until 1994, when we had a minister who called us sinners every Sunday, and insisted we had to be “washed in the blood of the lamb.” I had to leave, and I am so thankful I did.

Have you ever gone to a place and immediately felt at home? That happened to me when I walked into the Universalist Unitarian Church, this church, in 1994. I fell in love with the theology, the people, and the place. Coming here changed my life. I loved being with people who also asked questions and were open to unusual answers. Beth Miller was the minister at the time, and I found her inspiring in so many ways. And I felt the freedom to explore who I really was, and what was the meaning of my life.

Since I walked through these doors 22 years ago, I have focused much of my time and passion on discovering what I believe, and in sharing the principles of those beliefs with others. I did this first as your chaplain for 6 wonderful years. This was probably the best job I ever had, and I am so grateful to this church for giving me the opportunity. This led to me being the lay minister at Brunswick St. United Church for 5 years, a position which stretched me theologically and emotionally. While I ministered there, I also attended Atlantic School of Theology, to try and make myself look legitimate. Few people appreciated my questions there, and ordination was not even a temptation.

In 2006 I started a discussion group called Spiritual Seekers, which morphed into a website that promoted spirit-based activities in Atlantic Canada. I became an active member of the Brahma Kumaris here in Halifax, an organization that promotes living with loving values, especially peace. This September 17 they are hosting a full day of speakers and activities at Pier 21, to get people excited about living peacefully. I also became a member of the local Science of Mind group, which emphasizes the importance of positive thinking and celebrating our sacred lives. And I became country co- coordinator of Humanity’s Team Canada, which promotes the concept of Oneness and Unity. In 2010 I became very active at Bedford United Church, where I lead an inspiration group called Going Deeper and I often am the Sunday service leader.

Through all of this creating and joining, I still read and asked questions. I yearned for a concept of God that made logical sense to me, and filled my emotional need to have a personal connection to the Divine. The traditional Christian concept of God did not fill my longing. I love the UU quote “We are connected in mystery and miracle to the universe, to this community, and to each other.” That is as close as any I know to expressing the truth of life. But what is this mystery?

Scientists say that energy is the basic component of all that exists. Everything in the universe, known and unknown, is made of energy. No one knows where it originally came from, but it goes beyond space and time and explanation. It is a mystery, **the** mystery. I believe God is intelligent, creative, everlasting, ever evolving energy. It exists everywhere in the universe. Dr. Stephen Hawkins estimates that there are 300 billion stars, and most of them have planets, and I assume some have life forms. God is creative energy, with a sense of humour. It does not micro-manage us, but it is aware and connected to everything.

People personify this energy to make it understandable and worshipable. I am just in awe of it. I feel it. I have experienced miracles and almost impossible coincidences that tell me there is more here than just matter. I do not understand it. I will never know the full power and purpose of it. But I feel huge gratitude that I am alive because of it.

So back to the question, “Why am I here?” I believe I am an energetic soul who is having one of many human experiences. My life has value because I am being the best Terry Choyce I can be. I am loving this precious life that has been given to me. I am here to learn, to explore the depths and wonders of being human, to express my emotions, to share my knowledge, to share my joy. I am, and you are here, to live life to the fullest, with love for everything on this incredible planet. It is that simple, and that difficult.

What about your spiritual journey? I know some of you took the course “Building Your Own Theology.” You wrote a credo of your personal beliefs. I think it is worthwhile for everyone to take time once a decade or more to think about what is important to you, and what makes you tick spiritually and personally. Ask yourself some tough questions, and pay attention to the answers you get back. Explore the depths of your own mind, heart, and soul. Get excited about what you believe, and about who you are. And have fun with the Mystery.