

Spiritual biography B. K. Fisher

JULY 28, 2013 “OPEN DOOR”

Good Morning.

When David asked me to read my spiritual bio I was not sure about this community's readiness to suffer through my 15 minutes. Then I just gave in and said yes, it would help out David. And Kaye is in Indiana for Arabella's first birthday. As this morning grew closer, I started to second guess my decision. I felt the need to change my bio, update it, and check for grammatical errors. Does it make sense, sound Okay? Nerves. Okay Bert, just sit down, take a deep breath, meditate, and pray. So I prayed.

In the lectionary reading this week, we continue with our readings from the gospel of Luke. We have followed Luke's version of Jesus and his spiritual journey for about two months. Now we arrive at Jesus being asked to teach his followers to pray. He teaches them the Lord's Prayer. Then he teaches about prayers answered: "And I tell you, ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." This seems to fit with my spiritual Journey.

I think my first spiritual memories are of getting dressed in my school uniform: blue blazer, a starched white shirt, maroon tie, and gray pants - and going to church. That church was St. Barnabas Catholic Church in Yonkers, New York. That was the family church; my mother

was baptized there. Everyone went there; it was the center of our universe.

I went to school there. My siblings, cousins, and all my friends went there. It seemed like everyone was a part of St. Barnabas; even President Kennedy was a Catholic. That was important. He must have gone to school there as well.

I was born in Yonkers, New York in 1954. My mother brought me home to two sisters and a brother, a proud dad, and my two grandmothers and grandfather; all living in the same household. I was the baby of the family and would remain that way - to me that seemed forever. As I grew older, I came to realize that my dad didn't go to the same church - it was Seventh-Day Adventist Church. They worshiped on Saturday mornings. 'Nanny,' my father's mother, went to a different church: St. Mark's Lutheran. My dad's church was a very long way from home. They believed Sunday was actually Saturday and we Catholics had it wrong. This also meant Dad was always gone on Saturday mornings. My mother's Mom, "Grandma," and husband "Pop" Irish came over - both born in county of Cork, Ireland. Proud and strong Catholics owned the house we grew up in. I remember they both always got on their knees every night to pray, and the same every morning.

The house was a large three-story Victorian, white with GREEN - Irish green trim. The neighborhood was a mix of relatives and friends. We were Irish Catholics. Pete, my best friend, was Italian. His

grandmother always wore black and spoke differently, but was always nice and made great cookies. They went to St. Barnabas too. My other friend was David, and he went to temple – their service was Friday night. Billy - he was Polish, Frankie was German, both catholic. Nationality seemed to be important in Yonkers.

My home always had uncles or aunts or cousins staying with us. They were from the “ole country.” Grandma used to say, “We will help them till they get their feet on the ground.” We always seemed to have priests or sisters [nuns] with us for family gatherings. As you can guess, religion was always a topic of discussion. I remember going with my grandma to the convent (Dominican Sisters of the Sick and Poor.) Gram had friends there, so we went often. As a kid, I thought this place must be as close to heaven as you could get on earth. It was always polished clean, and had a fragrance of incense, and candles always burning - the sunlight streaming through stained glass windows. All the sisters, dressed in black and white frocks, were always happy and joyful. We would stay for mass sometimes - to hear all the prayers, the bows, and the signing of the cross done in unison. Oh, and the sound of their voices - I truly knew what the angels sounded like. All of this is etched in my memory.

I felt very lucky to have those moments. My Mom periodically hosted the Catholic confraternity meeting. This was a gathering of adults that would get together and talk and study issues of the church. This was

led by our monsignor or priest. What always amazed me was that Dad - not catholic -was invited. Questions would arise about the Bible, and as always my dad would be asked for a direct quote from the Bible, or an interpretation of the Bible. Even the priest would ask questions of dad. He was, it seemed to me, an expert. I was supposed to be in bed. I would hide and listen to all that adult talk. Later I found out Mom knew, but didn't mind.

We moved to Lynchburg in 1964. I was sad to loose friends, but happy to have a new home with woods and a creek in my back yard - a young boys dream. My oldest sister stayed in New York with her husband and little girl. My brother finished college and went into the Navy. He was drafted at the height of the Vietnam War. My other sister went to nursing school here in Lynchburg, but lived in the dorm. My two grandmothers came to live with us.

We quickly established ourselves in Holy Cross Church, and soon Father Nero was over for dinners, not to mention Sister Foch from the Holy Cross School. Most all our family dinners ended with open discussions: religion, politics, my Dad always in control. With no subject off-limits, religion was always the primary topic. I learned about my family's religious diversity and came to appreciate the differences. In the late 60's, I became interested in far eastern culture as well as Buddhism and Hinduism – my interest being driven by the Beatles and Ravi Shankar - my heroes. Even though my lack of attendance in church

grew, I was never far from a spiritual life or talk of beliefs. I had a close friend, Kevin Gibson. His mother was English and his dad was from India. He was Muslim. They were involved with travel logs in Charlottesville. We would go and learn about different cultures - their foods, arts, and religion. I had always felt the same thing: "Why can't different people with different beliefs get along?" All these people I would meet or read about were so nice; they were just doing life like all of us.

Another friend was Walter Chen. His family was from South Korea. They converted to the Catholic faith but kept a Shinto shrine in their home. I'm not sure if it was the times: "the sixties," or the motley crew I kicked around with, but spirituality was always our topic of discussion. We happened to start going to a coffee house called the "Lodge of the Fisherman." Kids could go drink Russian tea, eat bagels, and discuss the hot topics of the day, listen to great music and poetry. We were "groovin."

I remember sitting one Friday night with friends at the picnic table outside the Lodge looking at the pool. I was overwhelmed with a strong feeling; there was this power, energy, some kind of force that was comforting, good, grounding, a feeling of home, a feeling of security, a Holy Place. We all felt it, and we talked about it for hours. I would come to remember this moment with profound impact much later in life.

My early encounters with the local kids, after moving, always

ended up with questions about the church. “You Catholics get to sin and you go into a closet and the priest just wipes the sins away, right?”

“What’s with eating fish on Friday?” The question asked most: “Haven’t you been “saved? You’re going to hell you know.” So my first encounter with Southern Baptists was not very warm and fuzzy. I felt it was my place to defend Catholics, but did a poor job of it.

I never had much exposure to the Bible, and my knowledge was limited. So my defense was weak. Later in life I would come to know a member of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Now, he took knowledge of the bible to another level. We would debate and talk for hours in the evenings at the fire station. We were at different ends of the spectrum, but respected each other and our beliefs, maintaining a friendship still today. My encounters with different religions continued. I spent about a year of attendance at the Agadeth Shalom Temple, and long talks with Rabbi Shapiro and members of the temple.

My spiritual journey continued. A friend asked Sandy to do some work at her church, I told Sandy I used to go there as a kid. They had a coffee house; it was a nice place. We started the job, at the Church of the Covenant, and on a lunch break, I was having those same feelings I had as a kid. I was flooded with feelings long forgotten. I shared this with Sandy and she felt the same.

We both felt this was a sacred place. At this time, we had been attending Holy Cross. The church has had a long standing policy that

non-Catholics cannot receive communion. I told Sandy and Randy I didn't have a problem with them taking communion, which we did. One Sunday, the head of religious instruction spoke to the church and reminded the community of this rule. I was embarrassed and infuriated. There had always been issues where I have not seen eye-to-eye with the church, and this was a turning point. The friend that had hired us to work at church, Kaye Hicks, kept asking us to come one Sunday for worship. We did, and the sermon that day was miraculously written for both of us. It answered questions we both had, and made us feel good about our own beliefs. It was as if the minister, David Edwards, knew what we needed to hear. And this Christian minister was bringing Buddha into his sermon. This was incredible; we knew we needed to hear more. The rest, as they say, is history.

I have always believed all the great religions of the world were saying the same thing. They were trying to teach us the simple rules to live life by: how to make it, how to deal with things. Try to live with the earth, respecting God's gift to us.

I have always pursued that spiritual strength that my Mother and Father had, that they tried to teach to me. Sometimes I felt I had it, and times I felt lost. It's all part of that journey that we speak of so much here at this church: daily prayer and meditation, being still and knowing God - just as Luke quoted Jesus in today's reading.

For everyone who asks, receives; and for the one who knocks, the

door will be opened. Jesus reminds us to be persistent in prayer. He told Martha in last week's reading the important thing is the word, and interaction with God. Jesus makes it so beautifully simple. The prayers, meditation, and journey lead to your own heart and mind, and there you find intimate relationship with God and all the rewards. I have been blessed, I have knocked, and the doors have opened. Amen.