

Some of my ancestors were the ones who crossed the big pond from England searching for religious freedom. They had “issues’ with the Church of England. It is somewhat ironic that given this history, I was brought up in the Church of England’s American counterpart, the Episcopal Church, where one day, I too would have “issues.”

I was, more or less, a dutiful child and didn’t protest going to Sunday School. I liked getting palms on Palm Sunday and I had a little plastic Jesus picture on my bedside table that glowed at night. I sang in the junior choir. By the time I was a sophomore in high school, my parents sent me off to a boarding school where we had to go to the church every Sunday. I spent the hours there with my Episcopal cohort counting the number of times the minister rubbed his nose with his forefinger during the sermon and taking note of his wet, limp handshake at the door. I was not inspired and just a little scornful.

Once in college, I was free. I figured that taking a religion course, which was actually challenging and interesting, relieved me of any responsibility to go to church. So I only went when at home on holidays, and by then, I was asking questions. The congregation would rise to say the Apostle’s Creed but I found the words refusing to escape my lips. “Conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary”? Well now. As far as I knew, no one was born of a virgin. “He ascended into heaven and seated at the right hand of the Father.” Literally? Like at a dinner table? I was an English major. Were these words supposed to be metaphor? I looked around. Nobody else seemed confused or troubled by them. I decided I was supposed to take the words literally—and I could not.

It was junior year and parents’ weekend at my college. Out for lunch at a nice restaurant, I got into a discussion with my dad about religion, and snotty English major that I was, I asserted that Shakespeare had more insight into the human heart and greater wisdom than anything I had ever heard in church so what was the point of religion. And my father said, “But without religion, what holds people and a culture together?”

It was a simple question but as I soon learned, profound. A week later, on Memorial Day weekend, my dad died of a massive heart attack. Our minister and his wife drove me back home from college to be with my mother and sister. And the church held us in its collective arms. People came to bring food, to pray with us, to just be with us, to love us. I learned then what I have come to know even more now--church is community. And yes, it is community that holds people together.

During my senior year in college, a young ministerial intern came to our church. I was a cute college student, Jerry an attractive young man, and soon we were dating. It was clear to me that the congregation was hoping for a wedding, and I’m sure if I had shown just a tad more interest, the fantasies of the congregation might have been realized. But as much as Jerry was into the church, I was not. Moreover, could I have for one minute entertained the notion of sitting in the front pew gazing adoringly at my husband in the pulpit. Not me! Uh uh. No way! End of story.

So...many years went by before I was ready for either a husband or a church community. Then one day I was invited to a huge party in Yarmouth where people were encouraged to bring friends, and I almost didn't go because I hate big parties. But being single at the time, I thought, well, maybe among all those people I will meet un-Jerry. So I went. Standing in the food line, a couple in front of me asked if I would like to join them at their table. Grateful that somebody had been friendly, I followed them to a group of funny, smart and sassy people holding forth on everything from politics to a thing called the psi symposium at some place called Ferry Beach. Finally I asked, "How do you all know each other?" We go to the same church, they said. My mind racing, I started to tick off possible denominations. They couldn't be Catholics, they didn't sound like the Episcopalians I once knew, surely not Baptists, so what church, I asked. The Allen Ave. Unitarian Universalist church. Ah, Unitarians. I had had a roommate in school whose father was an Episcopalian who went to bed reading the Bible, but whose mother was a Unitarian who went to bed reading the latest great novel. I had decided back then I was more like her mother than her father.

Anyway, they invited me to church the next day and as I learned later, took bets on the way home to see if I'd show up. I showed up. Mostly because I liked all these people and there was a part of me that finally wanted a community to belong to. Dear Jack Berman hugged me when I came through the door, and as I listened to the Rev. Bob Wolf speak and the choir sing and realizing there were no creeds I had to say to belong, I knew I was home. I had crossed my own big Pond to find religious freedom and I found it here. I had found my community. My community that would wrap its loving arms around me and that I would love back.

Is that the end of the story.? No, it's just the beginning. Finding a community is not the same as being part of one. That story will have to wait for another day.