

“Polly’s Legacy and 10 Possible Attributes of the Holy”

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Hello Umpqua Unitarian Universalist church. As with much of our lives, the last four months seemed to go slowly and yet felt like they sped by in the time it takes an eyelash to fall to the ground. From the bottom of my heart I thank you for this sabbatical opportunity and I shall try in the coming year to lead you to your own potential, your own individual power, take you calmly and quietly in many different ways to the threshold of your own exploration of the holy. In many musings over the last four months, and I mused a lot as you can imagine, I saw so clearly the power of church. People can find their sense of the sacred almost anywhere; nature, family, loving friends, hobbies, giving to another in love. But there is only one place where you can bring that sense of the holy and find community.

The beloved community. I have heard those words most of my life and never really viscerally understood what they meant until I didn’t have this church community to bounce my ideas around with. Have this community to hug. Have this church community to sing with. Have you, all of you say and reiterate to me and to each other that indeed this way of being religious works for us and we understand that we will change the world around us by being faithful to the 7 principles, our own sense of religious power, because mostly during the week, no matter what is going on in our individual lives, or Iraq or Iceland we know we can bank on each other.

Where else do you get that kind of loyalty, security, challenge and love? Not many other places I can tell you. So, once again during this time away from this loving church community I was reminded, cherish it, feed it, nurture it. We are a gift. Never forget that. Because it is not a guarantee by any stretch of the imagination. Churches are closing all over the United States. My ex-husband’s church closed its Lutheran doors this past Christmas. This group of people is a jewel, a precious commodity I saw that so clearly once again.

We are the sum total of a million decisions in our lives. And also, much of our life is affected by the millions of decisions that others have made either about us or for us. We take these bits of decisions and in our own each individual and unique way and then mold the pattern of a single decision. So, there I was sitting on the edge of my bed, the first week of January, up from a nightmare once again, wondering what 4 months of sabbatical could possibly mean for me. And, of course, I was thinking of this church, that through your generosity you made the opportunity possible. The nightmare had to do with expectations. Of course, you could add,

those wonderful, yet messy, expectations. Could you really have been thinking that I would, could take this time for me? Do nothing? And in the eyes of the work-a-day world, I have indeed done nothing. But in the eyes of the spirit, or the holy, I have been very busy. And this unusual business of clarifying the holy is what I would like to share with you today.

As some of you may or may not know, on Monday, April 5th my partner Bille's mother died. Bille' and I had just returned from the hospital with her medications as the family put her mother on Hospice just that morning. As it turned out Bille' was sitting next to her bed holding her hand and talking softly to her as she took her last breath. The caregiver Svetlana, who had been with Polly for the past 11 and half years was amazingly also there on the other side of the bed. Polly took a deep breath and peacefully died. We had only been back to the house for about 5 minutes. I think she waited for Bille' to be there. There was no pain on her face, no anguish. Just a loveliness that reminded me that living well certainly can also lead to dying well.

I too, in a small way, have been a part of Polly's care over the past year. Now Bille' has been driving to Renton near Seattle for two weekends a month for 3 years and three weekends a month for the past year. Care of her Mother has been upper most in her life for the past 5 years. As a Taoist I am always looking for the principles of the Tao in real life. When I am often hit over the head with real life situations that make the Tao come alive for me, well I am almost always awed. Well, Polly awed me. She was completely bedridden except when we could get her up in a wheelchair on a good day. She had a difficult time talking because of a series of strokes over the 11 some years. And simply by sitting in her bed and being her total and complete self, I witnessed her heal not only me of some of my "Mother" issues, but a friend of ours too, who spent a week with us and Polly in March. Yes, this friend too, I saw was beginning the long and sometimes arduous journey of healing, just because she sat next to Polly and allowed herself to love and be loved.

I was reminded of the Taoist saying that says, the master leads by doing nothing and yet nothing is left undone. Polly smiled every morning I was there. When asked how she was she always smiled and looked right at you and said fine. In her simple honesty, by being so completely herself she became what everyone needed. And she did nothing as the world considers doing things. She was always up for all the activities we offered. She was interested in every magazine you would hold up for her to peruse, every puzzle, every story you told her, and every project you were working on. She was present for you all the time. I have not in my life had the chance to care for anyone so intimately as Bille' and I often cared for Polly.

The baths, the changes of nightgowns, washing hair, lotion and the giving of meals, some she could eat, and some she couldn't without help. And through all the rituals of cleanliness and simply keeping her life going, she was easy to work with, hardly ever complained and always grateful. Sometimes she would become frustrated at not being able to find the correct word, or angry because her legs or her hands wouldn't work anymore. But I never felt the frustration or the anger was aimed at us. And this is the strange and wonderful part of this story; I was mothered by her in my opening up to care for her. Everyone softened around her. She became what everyone needed by simply being herself. She did nothing and yet everything was done for everyone in her presence; children, caregivers, partners and spouses of her children, her grandchildren and friends. And there I was in the presence of the Tao once again.

What simple, profound messages are we missing by constantly trying to impress each other? What are we missing by not allowing others the means and the opportunity to let them care for us sometimes? Why must we always appear so self-sufficient at all times in our society? The most annoying piece of our society's need for control at all times, comes when there is grief. If someone is not crying or carrying on at a death we call them brave and holding it all together. But what we have not understood as Westerners is that sobbing, carrying on and general grief is human, often healthy and allows others to share in this process from their own grief experiences. But we don't like wailing, sobbing, convulsions or the deep sadness people feel at death.

Buck up, we are told or we find ourselves telling them. But what we are really saying is –“ don't make me go where I don't want to go because your grief affects me. And I don't want to be affected. I want to be in control.” Well, I say nuts to control. It is highly overrated. So, I invite you to let go and have a good cry if that is what would be appropriate or feel good. My number 8 spot of the attributes of the holy has shown me, and not just because I am woman, but that laughter and tears are allowed to inform each other and my life. Ever find yourself crying and laughing at the same time? They are related and are informative. I still grieve my Father greatly and he died in 2001. There is no statute of limitations on the grieving process. You aren't done grieving just because a book or a relative or a friend says, “Oh for heaven sake get over it.” It is not their call. So, yes on this sabbatical I dealt with some heavy grief that has laid as stones in my heart for years. And I may not yet be done, ok?

Polly's legacy for me is so simply and so profound. And I saw it the most clearly when I was home in Wisconsin this past March with my siblings and my children. One evening we were together and talking about my Mom. In the past I would

have berated her for being a drug abuser and an alcoholic and I found myself telling stories about her art, her garden, her cooking. “My mother was an artist” I was telling a friend of my daughter’s. The words felt so good, and warm and freeing, and true. Polly did not lecture me on how to begin to heal from the pain of my life. She didn’t even remember my name much of the time and yet being in her presence, her allowing me to care for her, has had an immeasurably wonderful effect on my life. She did none of the normal worldly “business” we apply to how transformations come about and yet she did it all for everyone who knew her.

All this personal transformation got me thinking about the basics of life and how I wanted to live this gift that I have been given. I have studied many saints in the traditional sense of the Catholic Church and other traditions of holy people. Many I find could teach us all a thing or two about life. Many had lives that for the life of me, I can’t seem to make sense of or would want to emulate. But after four months of not writing, not working in the sense of a paid job, I got an “aha” experience. And that is, I do want to live a holy life. So what could that mean? Like David Letterman I did come up with the top 10 attributes I feel could describe such a life, but I would like to hear yours too. As I once heard someone say, it would be so great to be able to live the life now that you have always dreamed of living. In other words, what would it look like for me if I did indeed find the strength to be the holy, the good, the responsible, the spirit-filled person I truly believe I was born to be?

1. I would become arbitrary in my rating of what is of worth and what is not.
2. I would maintain an absolute certainty in the possibility of goodness.
3. I would be unconcerned with status or wealth that is not ready to also be humble or shared.
4. I would honor and value the continued volunteering of surrendering my preconceived notions about others or situations that I clearly have no clear or enough information about.
5. I would begin to understand and live a peaceful coexistence between my soul and my ego.
6. I would continue to nurture a blurred and fuzzy vision between sacred and secular distinctions.
7. I would be quick to find some happiness in all situations.
8. Laughter and tears would be allowed to inform each other.
9. Cruelty, or thinking I need to put others down in order to make myself feel better, or to believe I need to be the best in something to find happiness, would be scorned as childish and not worthy of the gift of life I have been given.

10. Meditation would be the accepted form of communication with this new-found holy center in my life. And pretending I don't see, don't understand, don't know, would no longer be acceptable for the mistakes and lapses in judgment.

What is it that is bothering you? Do you ask more questions in a conversation than talk incessantly because you don't want to know the other person? Do you walk away from a conversation with a person and not know anymore about them then you did when you first met them because you did all the talking? Asking someone if they are ok is an invitation for them to go on the defensive. Just ask the simple question; how are you? That is a true invitation for them to share on a deeper level. The holy within us asks that of us; invite others to share in the beauty of themselves. Be the vehicle for them to find their own beauty. Celebrate each person by looking at them straight in the eyes and letting them know they are important. People with pimples, and crooked teeth, people who pump your gas, bag your groceries, or people who come to you for advice. Is this hard work? Of course. Is it worthy work? The holy within us says unequivocally, yes! The seriousness of this admonition to find the holy's attributes for yourself and then live them, may be the difference of a life lived in beauty or regret.

One of my goals on this sabbatical was to try to live a life without judgment for 4 months. Don't judge the weather, or my children, or the government, or my neighbor, or my partner or best of all myself. How did I do? Poorly, actually. But what a marvelous letting go of those darned expectations that only seem to get us into trouble anyway. Instead, living a life where you find the calm, the peace, the grace within yourself and then not be so hard on others or yourself. As I faced some difficult situations in my life these past four months, mostly because I couldn't hide in a busy work schedule, I saw how other's opinions of me has had a profound effect on my view of myself, either positive or negative. Wow. That brought about many tears of regret and pain.

But, as I sat with Polly on those quiet afternoons when she was sleeping and Bille' would be preparing dinner, I would be carefully and gently rubbing her forehead and maybe singing softly to her, sometimes she would wake up and look at me and smile. Holy mother of God, a light of grace and beauty went through me. That smile said nothing and so much. The smile said, "thank you, who are you, I don't care who you are I'm glad you are here," and often with a sigh of contentment she would go back to sleep and I would be saved from my demons once more.

Since January, Bille' and I walked in the magnificence of the Redwoods. We tasted the salt water at Yachtes, we hugged my children and spent time in Florida looking at alligators. We stood on the rim of the Grand Canyon and just were silent because there was absolutely nothing left to say in the face of that grandeur. We rode airplanes, ate at nice restaurants, walked in the desert one day at 90 degrees and the next day in the snow at 29 degrees. We had our tiffs and quarrels, we cried together at Polly's passing. And yet through all of the great and wonderful adventures, scenery and experiences, I think I speak for both of us when I say, nothing moved us more than being at Polly's bedside as she breathed her last breath. The woman who had been mother to Bille, and in a very real way was also mother to me. My thanks are huge. My heart is renewed. I would like to be to others, that kind of person she was to me. I want my particular attributes of the holy to be alive and well in my life.

This idea of the holy is the transformative power in one's life that really allows each of us to make a true, lasting difference in the world. But the real trick comes in remembering the Taoist principle of active non-doing. How does one truly live an egoless life? Letting the judgment, the prejudice, the need to be better than others go, so we feel good, letting all that go. Taking pride rather in letting others shine, letting others reveal, letting others discover.

Polly leapt from this world into the next with the most beautiful, serene, peaceful face I have ever seen on a dying person. She left behind healing, grace, and such a legacy of what a life in the holy can really look like. She is one of the saints I think I was looking for in guiding me on how to live. There are so many saints around us showing us the way, don't you think? When you find your Polly honor them, love them, thank them either in thought, word or deed. There is really only one deep, abiding purpose for our being here on earth. And that purpose is to be the wonderful, the holy, the spirit filled person that your most worthy soul has already known it can be. Forgiving easily, listening, enjoying, playing, being present so you don't miss a thing. No judgment, no fears, no half-hearted flits of maybes. Time is short. The road is before us. Find the holy and hold on. It will be the ride of your life.