

A Rooted Life
November 10, 2013
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When I began to think about the monthly theme of sustenance,
The gardener-farmer in me immediately
Thought of the importance of roots.
To live, to be nourished,
plants need roots of some kind.

I believe that we too need roots to survive.
Roots are a key source of what sustains us.
Roots can nurture us by connecting us
To people, places, and events beyond our
Individual lives.

Spiritually and religiously,
We need roots to sustain and nurture us.

In the first reading,
Kathleen Norris offers a way of thinking about our religious roots.
She explains that the Latin root of religion is linked
Both to *ligature*—a cord that binds us—
And to *ligament*—a linking connection
That enables movement.

Religious roots, she insists, do not need to be enslaving bonds,
That can also be ligaments that help us to move.

To illustrate, she describes the ligaments with her two grandmothers.

Norris does not hold back her critical words—

She describes the faith of one grandmother

as “easy answers of fundamentalism” and

the faith of the other grandmother as

“over-intellectualized banalities.”

Although clearly she does not agree wholeheartedly

with either of her grandmothers,

she still claims a connection—a ligament, a root—

to her grandmother’s faith.

She claims that her own faith is what it is *because*

Of her connections to her roots....to her grandmothers

who represent two poles that she sought to avoid—

Easy answers or a trite banal faith.

In my life, Psalm 91, which Penn read for us,

is a religious root that links me to my grandfather, Harold.

Before leaving for World War II,

Harold’s minister claimed the promises of Psalm 91

for Harold to keep him safe in the war.

The Psalm was to be both an assurance of God’s protection

And a challenge to hold on to his faith in God.

But would the promises of safety actually come true?

As a soldier in World War II,

Harold became a part of the First Special Service Forces,
 The forerunner to today's Green Berets and other special forces.
 Specially trained, the Force—as Grandpa called it—
 was sent to do work others could not do.

For example, in December of 1943, they scaled the steep mountainside
 Of Mount La Defensa in Italy at night.

They surprised the Germans and took the mountain—
 A battle that would eventually help
 Open the way to Rome.

This battle was reenacted in the 1968 movie, *The Devil's Brigade*.

Quentin Tarantino also cited the Force as an
 inspiration for his movie *Inglorious Bastards*.

When Quentin Tarantino picks something as
 inspiration for one of his violence soaked films,
 that's not a good sign.

Indeed, the Force suffered a more than 50% mortality rate.

My grandfather Harold?

He returned whole in body if not always in spirit—
 suffering, like many combat veterans,
 from nightmares that sometimes wracked his sleep.

But he *did* come home.

For the rest of his life, he would continue to claim
 Psalm 91 as a promise and ground for his faith:

*A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.*

That story of the Psalm and of the many, many times
My grandfather should have died in World War II
helped to shape my religious imagination as a girl.
Such a story made it easier to believe in a personal God
who took care of those who had faith in Him.

Harold never spoke much about his faith,
But I knew that story.
I also watched him as he lived out his faith in service.
I watched as he ushered
at the Central United Methodist church
with a white carnation tucked into his lapel.
I watched as he stood on a ladder repainting the parsonage
Or as he sang hymns so sweetly in his rich baritone voice.

Sitting beside him in church as he sang...
Is one of my favorite childhood memories.
He and I also sang hymns together at my grandmother's bedside
As she died from cancer.
And, when I sat alone in the pew
for his memorial service,
I wept.

During a trip to Italy the summer after he died,
I decided to make a pilgrimage to see Mount La Defensa.
Studying a map, I found the mountain
Then headed toward a small town at the foot of the mountain.
When I arrived,
I drove slowly through the town and looked up.
Uncertain of what I was seeing,
I stopped and asked a young couple out walking
if that was La Defensa.
Although they spoke a bit of English,
they were a French couple visiting her grandmother,
and didn't know the area.

When they brought me to her grandmother, she exclaimed
That the neighbor would know!
Walking in a small group, we approached a villa.
The woman who answered said, *Ci, ci*,
her husband, Angelo, could help.

Angelo, as it turned out, was a retired Italian paratrooper
Whose hobby was to walk the mountains
collecting remnants of the war.
The lower-level of his house
Was an amateur museum dedicated to the Force
Proudly, reverently, Angelo showed me around
The relics of canteens, helmets, and shrapnel.

Sixty-five years after the battle,
The reality of Grandpa's stories
Lay there in a basement in Italy.

Angelo explained that La Defensa has a sister-peak, Mount Camino,
which the British overtook as the Force took Defensa.

He was about to lead a group up the mountain—
the neighbors and their visitors whom I had just met—
did I want to come?

Following a caravan of cars,
we made our way around rustic back roads of the mountains,
then parked before setting off on foot up a trail.

There were 16 of us from school-age kids
to an older, gray-haired grandmother.

As we followed a well worn, but by no means flat, trail,
conversations in Italian, French, and English flowed.

When we arrived at the top, there was a small stone chapel.

The kids were allowed to pull the bell a few times.

The older woman set to sweeping the interior.

Outside, backpacks were laid open upon large rocks and out came
a feast of breads, cheeses, figs, peaches, plums, sausage,
pepperoni, and, of course, wine (local, without a label).

By this point, the sun was setting over the mountains to the west.

After descending in the twilight, I extended my deepest thanks

And took my leave to return to where I was staying.

That was about 5 years ago...

after I had become skeptical

of a personal God answering prayers.

But on that day I say in the little chapel on Mt. Camino

And prayed from deep within my soul

A big thank-you for my grandfather's safety.

As the Psalm had promised,

Harold had been given a long life.

And, I, his granddaughter could return decades later

To honor him by feasting in joy

With those who lived in freedom and peace

At the foot of the mountain.

For some of us, it might be easy to disparage the notion

that a personal God would protect one man in the midst of a war.

Rationally, it doesn't make sense to me.

Yet, when I sat in the chapel on the peak of Mount Camino

I felt a deep sense of connection across the decades

To that place, to whatever causes and circumstances

That kept him alive...

Which gave him to me for so many precious years.

I felt that I understood something about him and his faith

After sitting there, praying there, feasting there.

....He was glad to be alive...

Whether or not we agreed that he was alive
 Because of Psalm 91 or a personal God,
 his gratitude for life showed in how he lived
 and shaped my own sense of
 gratitude for life.

He never spoke about his faith
 And so he never preached at me about dogma—
 Unlike his wife, Betty,
 my grandmother the fundamentalist Methodist.
 Rather, he showed me faith by how he lived—
 With gratitude and in service to others.
 And that kind of faith is what I hold on to,
 That faith of gratitude and service
 Is a ligature, a link between us.

We all have spiritual and religious roots—
 We are linked to people present and past
 who have shaped how we understand
 and experience our faith.
 We have all received lessons about faith from others—
 Family members, friends,
 A minister, rabbi, or teacher.

I don't believe that our faith arises in an isolated vacuum.
 Rather, our faith and our religious beliefs

emerge within particular contexts of family,
 specific religious traditions such as lighting candles,
 singing songs, marking some holidays and not others.

Whether we grew up Catholic, Methodist,
 Jewish, atheist, or Unitarian Universalist,
 I believe that we all carry within ourselves a living link
 To those traditions, to those roots.

When we sing “Spirit of Life” each week,
 We sing the phrase “roots hold me close.”
 What are your roots that help to hold you,
 to sustain you,
 to nurture you?

I feel deeply that fostering the roots of our own
 personal religious and spiritual pasts *can* be
 an important source of spiritual sustenance.
 Once again, this does *not* mean we can’t be critical of our roots.
 We do not need to be *bound* to the religious views
 Of our parents, our friends, or our former
 church, temple, minister, or teacher.
 But we do need to recognize how we’ve been shaped
 By those experiences and beliefs.
 Our religious roots can be *ligaments*
 Connecting us to our pasts
 Even as we find our own way forward.

This may sound very conceptual,
But over the upcoming holiday season,
many of us will be sitting down to meals with extended family
where we'll come face to face with our roots.
When you find your blood pressure rising,
I encourage you to look for the connections that you can celebrate.
Look for the lessons and the values that you've received
From those roots.
Ask yourself how those roots
are connected to the person you are today.

A number of years ago,
I realized that I have a habit of humming
the Christian hymns of my youth
when I am feeling particularly happy.
Let's be clear,
I *am* critical of much of the
language and theology of these hymns.
But, I have been shaped deeply into my *subconscious*
by the feelings of hope and happiness,
love and gratitude,
which my childhood faith and religious experiences
infused into these hymns.
At first, when I recognized what I was doing,
I would stop my humming—

Disgusted by these remnants of my religious past.

Now, I smile and keep on humming.

I allow my rootedness in the memories

Of singing hymns with my grandfather

To feed my spirit.

Amen.

FIRST READING:

From *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* by Kathleen Norris

At its Latin root, the word religion is linked to the words ligature and ligament, words having both negative and positive connotations, offering both bondage and freedom of movement. For me, religion is the ligament that connects me to my grandmothers, who, representing so clearly the negative and positive aspects of the Christian tradition, made it impossible for me to reject or accept the religion wholesale. They made it unlikely that I would settle for either the easy answers of fundamentalism or the over-intellectualized banalities of a conventionally liberal faith. Instead, the more deeply I've reclaimed what was good in their faith, the more they have set me free to find my own way.

SECOND READING:

Psalms 91 (excerpts)

Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High

will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.

I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."

Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare

and from the deadly pestilence.

He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge;

his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.

You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day,
nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,
nor the plague that destroys at midday.

A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.

“Because he loves me,” says the Lord, “I will rescue him;
I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name.

He will call on me, and I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble,
I will deliver him and honor him.

With long life I will satisfy him
and show him my salvation.”