

TRAIL CROSSINGS ON THE WAY TO MY SPIRITUAL MOUNTAIN
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GRACIA SEARS- LEADER

OPENING WORDS: From introduction by Garry Trudeau

You will never walk alone fits very nicely into my topic today. The author of the book I have used to develop my story, Scotty McLennan, was Garry Trudeau's college room mate at Yale. Here are some snippets from the introduction Trudeau wrote for this book.

"As Scotty looked at a world gone mad around him, his passion for social justice carried him into divinity school and law school (simultaneously!), and then out into a challenging legal aid ministry. Trudeau goes on "For those of us with broken rudders and low draft numbers, Scotty's direct path seemed unreal, all the more so because it was illuminated by a faith that so many of us had long ago abandoned.

If you were twenty three, and it was 1971, you couldn't make up someone like this, so as an aspiring artist, I didn't try. I simply appropriated him, ordaining him on the spot (so as to fulfill one of his personal goals before he could). And in filling out the character of Scot Sloan, I also borrowed from Scotty's mentor, The Rev William Sloane Coffin, a campus hero and antiwar activist of near-mythic reputation. But the caricatured likeness was of Scotty himself, and in my mind, it was him I dragooned into service as the "fighting young priest", dropping him into a coffeehouse where the other cast members could come for spiritual, temporal, or caffeinated sustenance."

With this preface, I repay my debt—if only by confessing how miserly was my portrayal. If you haven't guessed by now, the journey that Scotty had embarked on all those years ago was imperfectly observed, to say the least. My view had been one of moral glamour without the struggle. It didn't account for the ferocious integrity with which he had always challenged his most cherished articles of faith, and it certainly didn't anticipate the collapse of spiritual goals and loss of heart that beset him as he approached thirty. Scott, as it turned out was human, and it's his humanity that's at the core of this book. Having stumbled, badly, on the mountain, Scotty picked himself up, and in the long but fruitful process of exploration and recovery, he began to notice how much company he had. " He learned he will never walk alone. Scotty McLennan is currently Dean of the chapel at Stanford University and a UU minister.

Main body of talk:

I tend to buy books and tuck them away. It was such with Scotty McLennan's book, "Finding Your Religion" when the faith you have grown up with has lost its meaning". Though no beginner to spiritual questing, I continue to be a seeker and at the time I took this book down from the shelf I was feeling very restless. One of my major concerns centered on whether or not, this was the right church for me. Could this community provide me with the spiritual companionship that I crave? In

this little volume I found support for my theories that religion like art is more about process than product. It is a journey not a destination.

Scotty McLennan's journey spoke to me on many levels. He used the metaphor of spiritual quests being like climbing a mountain. I had been very fascinated with trying to capture in paint an experience I had while hiking on Mt. Baker near Bellingham, Washington, so was open to this metaphor. In my journals I had often sketched mountains and pondered the spiritual implications that mountain climbing implied, so felt this book and its message very timely.

McLennan writes, "The Mountain beckons. This book is intended for personal exploration. It is full of stories of seekers on the spiritual mountain. It does not offer answers. Instead, it offers a method of exploration. There are many paths or trails up the mountain. Yet they are all on the same spiritual mountain and ultimately all converge at the very top.

One quote in this book that caught my attention is by Mireca Eliade, a famous theologian, He states, "-Every culture has had a sacred place that it considers to be the center of the world. called the Axis mundi. These are places where heaven and earth are said to meet and through which the axis of the world is believed to pass. . For some it is Mount Sinai or Mecca, for others it can be the cross, or even the Christmas tree, or a sacred circle called a mandala as our window is. It can also be a mountain, as I will discuss today. I have even read of a UU who finds we have our own unique contribution in the chalice. He sees symbolism of reaching to the heavens and reaching the earth through the stem at the base. That is something to think about.

A version of axis mundi, where one feels heaven and earth coming together, happened for me at Camp Hebron, a Bible Camp, where I went to the altar and was saved. I was 10. After this service I was surrounded and embraced and felt truly one with the universe. It was a wonderful experience for a spiritually hungry child.. Then I returned from camp and announced I wouldn't do dishes on Sunday because it was the Sabbath. My father said fine, but I wouldn't eat either. That was the first of many adjustments my spiritual quest had to make in order to be part of a family.

McLennan continues, "Religion grows from the heart as much as from the head, and it cries out to fuse body and mind. Faith, is an orientation of the whole personality, a total response, it is the ability to experience the universe as meaningful. Therefore your religion is something you not only, think about, but also dance, sing, eat, paint and sculpt. To find your religion you must engage all of your senses. Well I felt much of this at 10 when I was at Camp Hebron. I have felt many of these sensations when I paint, but I have not always felt them in church. I have wondered if it is because For many UUs, the head wins over the heart. I would like to see a better balance between the two. I sense a trend in this direction which I hope continues.

While climbing my mountain, I have found many companions and inspiration in books I read. One is, Carl Jung, the Swiss psychologist, whose teachings have resonated for me over the years. Our rose window beckoned me from the beginning of our membership here. This current book adds to my fascination with all the religious icons in our window because of McLennan's involvement in a variety of religious communities while on his year long sabbatical where he traveled around the world. Reading it gave me an opportunity to have my own arm chair sabbatical with the author.

Though all the religious icons in our window intrigue me and I have studied some of them, I knew in one life time I would never fully understand them in enough depth to be significant. McLennan writes, about advice from his Hindu guru. At the time he was seriously considering converting to Hinduism "Be open to all religious traditions." The Guru said. "Pick and choose from what rings true for you in each." Yet the priest kept emphasizing getting on a path, following a discipline, becoming committed to a teacher and a set of teachings. He also emphasized going back to the religion where McLennan's roots were which was Christianity. "There are many paths up the mountain and they all reach the top but you need to follow a path and you can't be on more than one at a time. So it is important to be on a path where you have the deepest roots.", the Hindu priest stressed. This resonated for me and I felt I had found my focus. These thoughts remind me of some of my favorite hymns, "roots hold me close" and another "tis' a gift to come down were we ought to be".

For me the path where I have the deepest roots is also Christianity. It is at approximately 11:00 in our window. The cross depicted there doesn't speak to me as much as a little Celtic one I wear which has equal sides and a lacey pattern that is symbolic of going more to the center of our beings for inspiration. I am finding that many see in Jesus' teachings that same centeredness. A UU minister once told me that when one reads the words of Jesus closely, one finds, that he was a humanist. So why do I find that many UUs shy away from any mention of Jesus or UU Christians? If he was good enough for Gandhi, I would think he would be appealing to UUs. This I suspect would be material for a discussion another time.

As I have mentioned, Jung's writings have always been very meaningful for me and more so when I came across the story of his experience on a mountain when he was 14. He had participated in his first communion shortly before that trip which he had not found at all meaningful. Then his father, a minister, treated him to a solo train ride up the mountain. This youthful experience at the top of a mountain in Switzerland opened him to the connection between all religions, which he would go on to spend a lifetime studying. Jung writes, "I was speechless with joy." My mind was wide open. "It was all very solemn, and I felt one had to be polite and silent up here, for one was in God's world. This was the best and most precious gift my father has ever given me."

I have experienced some of the same feelings of the sacred that Jung wrote about when we have hiked on the various ranges of Mt. Baker in Bellingham, Wash. The last trip, time stood still for me as I sketched and savored the distant glacier and the

flock of birds that seemed like specks in the valley below the mountain meadow we were on. I felt caught in a universe that I had not experienced before.

When we returned home I sat out to capture that experience in a larger painting. Doing this gave me an opportunity to reflect on what I felt on that mountain meadow.

As I reflected on this experience I remembered another time when I was blown away, that time it was the writings of Emerson and Thoreau. I discovered them in a literature class and had the feeling of coming home, back to where I belong just as I felt on Mt. Baker. Emerson and Thoreau represent an earlier trail I followed on my journey up the spiritual mountain, one that brought me to this congregation.

I have often wondered if I was craving another conversion experience such as the one I experienced at 10? As wonderful as that time was I knew I couldn't go back and accept many of the beliefs taught there. I had moved on but had also lost something on the way. What I feel I have lost is the ability to be totally emerged in a communal life, to be submissive. I subscribed to The skepticism that is so prevalent in our congregations. One that I learned while growing up in a family of skeptics. All of this is definitely a problem when one is considering a spiritual journey.

I feel conversion need not refer to changing from one religion to another, or from being non-religious to religious, it can also refer to a process whether sudden or gradual, whereby religious impulse and energies become central to one's life.

That is the way my involvement in an art field has been for me. The Canadian artist, Emily Carr, coined the phrase Art and Religion are one. It was so for me. At times I had glimpses of the numinous when I painted. For me these were moments of connectedness in which I felt my linkage to WHAT IS and involved a rediscovery of sacred mystery. I came to believe the meaning of God refers to the sacred at the center of existence, the holy mystery that is all around us and with in us

I have experienced epiphanies in nature and in art. I have enjoyed and been enriched by the implications of the connectedness of all the religions depicted in our window. But I feel very deeply that I must get on a path. . My thinking has crystallized as I repeatedly revised this piece and as I reflected on my climb up this special mountain.

I have concluded that, I want to integrate all of these, nature, art, religion as I take the path that emphasizes what rings true for me

In summary, I want to read the concluding words from McLennan's book, " The most important thing to remember is that you can do it. Each of us has a rich, complex, dynamic story of our own to tell and develop. Each of us can perceive the mountain

in the distance, open ourselves to the possibility of mountain climbing, approach it, pick a path and start walking. It may be a familiar path from an earlier time in your life, or it may be a brand-new way for you.

Taking time to develop some spiritual practice like prayer or meditation will make a big difference. And it won't always go smoothly. There will be tough times ahead, but they can strengthen you. Finally, you'll find a lot of joy on that mountainside. If you keep your sense of humor and your willingness to celebrate, the journey will enrapture you and change your life. The mountain beckons.

MAY IT BE SO

Gracia Sears is a lay leader in this congregation. She has been president and worn a variety of other hats. Currently she co-chairs the Adult Enrichment Group. She is also a volunteer lay chaplain at Crouse and University Hospitals.