

Faith Journey: Rick Davis

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Bethel is a place where people come with a wide variety of understandings about faith and religion. Some of us come with traditional stories and understanding while others, shaped by progressive Christian thinkers like Richard Rohr and Diana Butler Bass, walk the edges of our faith. A few of us seek to stretch the boundaries and understandings of our faith. I fall in that last group, but I didn't start out there.

There's a saying – "What you are is where you were when." I grew up in Portland in the 50s and 60s when the religious landscape was very different from today. Nearly everyone was affiliated with a Protestant or Catholic Church. Buses ran through my neighborhood Sunday mornings picking up children for Sunday School. I wore attendance pins that marked my years of perfect attendance. A neighbor lady fed us cookies each week and had us recite Bible verses to earn points for summer Bible camp.

My brothers and I attended an evangelical church where the Apostles Creed was recited every Sunday. Dancing, playing cards and movies were discouraged. The Bible was the inerrant word of God. Faith was assumed to be true and unchanging - the same yesterday, today and forever.

So how did I get from my Evangelical upbringing to straddling the edges of Christianity? The 60s were a turbulent time to grow up in. It was a time when young people increasingly questioned authority. By around the fourth grade, I was already arguing with Sunday School teachers about Bible stories I found impossible to believe. By the time I went to college I'd rejected religious teachings in favor of a secular and scientific understanding of the world.

I have a nerdy left-brained personality that favors thinking over feeling and intuition over sensing. Discovering new ideas excites me and I enjoy arranging and rearranging old and new ideas to shape my understanding of the world. With an abundance of youthful arrogance, I started out seeking to understand the world using the tools of science, particularly the hard sciences. I thought that science could squeeze religion down to where it could be ignored.

Like many young couples raised in the church, Judy and I gave church another try after we had our children. We joined a mainline church that didn't require acceptance of a fixed set of beliefs. Over time, as I added understandings from history and the social sciences to my thinking, I began to see the importance of religion and churches. Social institutions that provide the norms and values that successful societies were built upon. In graduate school I studied the evolution of cooperation and used game theory to explore how social motives might promote the common good over individual self-interest. It's not an accident that all

the major religions include some version of the Golden Rule. At this point in my faith journey, I thought of myself as religious but not particularly spiritual.

The scientist and skeptic in me believes that you can't take something seriously if you're unwilling to look at it critically. That meant bringing the same level of critical thinking to our faith stories that science applies to its theories and understandings. To ring true for me, both science and religion needed to mesh with one another. No divide between the secular and the sacred. Over the past 25 years, that goal has caused me to spend a lot of time reading and thinking about faith and science and the future of progressive Christianity. Judy would likely say an obsessive amount of time.

We live in an unimaginably large universe. A universe with trillions of galaxies, each with hundreds of billions of stars and planets. Tens of thousands of stars for every grain of sand on earth. We humans occupy an unimaginably tiny speck of space and time. Even knowing this, religion often clings to Creeds and faith stories that many no longer believe. Stories too small and too outdated for the universe we live in. Our dated stories can be a barrier to someone considering joining a faith community. Not just for the unchurched but also for our children and grandchildren.

Many of us at Bethel follow the daily meditations and writings of Franciscan Father Richard Rohr. He suggests an alternative orthodoxy that walks the edge of Christianity while both including and transcending tradition and Scripture. I'd like to touch on a few of his ideas that have helped shape my faith journey.

I'd like to first reread this morning's scripture from John.

In the beginning was the divine word and wisdom.
(In the original Greek, the logos or divine template)
The divine word and wisdom was there with God,
And it was what God was.
It was there with God from the beginning.
Everything came to be by means of it, nothing that exists came to be without its agency.

There is so much packed into those verses.

Rohr suggests that they speak to the divine becoming incarnate in everything from the beginning. A view shared by other progressive Christian writers. That the Christ isn't something that came into the world with Jesus, but that the Universal Christ has existed in everyone and everything from the beginning. He calls this the 1st Incarnation. This understanding gives us a God as big as the universe and connects us with everyone and everything from the beginning of time. A God before, within and beyond all space and

time. A faith less earth and human centered. A faith better aligned with my understandings of Creation.

A second idea from Rohr is the belief that the Universe is built on an ongoing cycle of Order, Disorder and Reorder. This is the cycle of change and evolution built into logos of the universe. The pattern that creates order and beauty out of chaos. We are a community of both physical and cultural memory; constantly evolving. Our DNA passing and evolving from generation to generation. Our new stories woven from the threads of our old stories.

A faith always including and transcending, sometimes slowly and at other times, like the time of Jesus or Protestant Reformation, dramatically. If we look for it, we can see change playing out again and again in the books of the Old and New Testament and over the past centuries of church history. In the words from the Parable of the Sower, by Octavia Butler- "Everything we touch we Change, Everything we Change Changes us. There is no lasting truth but Change, God is Change.

A third idea from Rohr is the importance of doubt and unknowing. That's an understanding I wouldn't have envisioned 50 years ago. Consider the Big Bang, Dark Energy, Einstein's Relativity theory, quantum entanglement the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The more science discovers, the stranger and more mysterious the universe becomes. Heisenberg foreshadowed my faith journey when he wrote, "The first gulp from the glass of natural sciences will turn you into an atheist, but at the bottom of the glass God is waiting for you." A God clouded in a mystery far above my pay grade. One we can never fully know or name.

So here I am at Bethel. A skeptical believer. Questioning, and doubtful but willing to put my trust in a community of memory grounded in the teachings of Jesus.

I could have stopped here, but felt the need to add a final thought. A bit of confession. I found writing this reflection harder than others I've done in the past. Retracing my faith journey has forced me to recognize how my search for knowledge has sometimes limited my spiritual growth. Everything casts a shadow. All the ideas and stories I have gathered over the years seem a bit like Ezekiel's dry bones. Waiting for the spirit to incarnate them into living faith.

This is an unfinished part of my faith journey. Letting go of my need to pile up knowledge. Making the difficult journey from head to heart. Moving from intuition and thinking about the future to sensing and feeling in the present moment. Still on my faith journey. Thankful to be traveling with the faith community surrounding me here at Bethel.

Amen