

Reading #1 You Must Start With Something Positive, from a homily by Richard Rohr

We can't start a spiritual journey on a negative foundation. If we just seek God out of fear or guilt or shame (which is often the legacy of original sin), we won't go very far. If we start negative, we stay negative. We have to begin positive—by a wonderful experience, by something that's larger than life, by something that dips us into the depths of our own being. That's what the word baptism means, "to be dipped into."

Jesus is thirty years old when his baptism happens. According to Mark's Gospel, he hasn't said a single thing up to now. Until we know we're a beloved son or beloved daughter or even just beloved, we don't have anything to say. We're so filled with self-doubt that we have no good news for the world. In his baptism, Jesus was dipped in the unifying mystery of life and death and love. That's where it all begins—even for him! The unique Son of God had to hear it with his own ears and then he couldn't be stopped. Then he has plenty to say for the next three years, because he has finally found his own soul, his own identity, and his own life's purpose.

After fourteen years as a chaplain in the Albuquerque jails, I am convinced that the reason people make great mistakes is because they have never heard what Jesus heard on the day of his baptism. They never heard another human voice, much less a voice from heaven, say to them, "You are a beloved son. You are a beloved daughter and in you I am well pleased." If we've never had anyone believe in us, take delight in us, affirm us, call us beloved, we don't have anywhere to begin. The word has to come from someone greater than us. That's really a parent's primary job—to communicate to their child that they are a beloved, eternally-existing child of God. Our jails are filled to over-flowing with people who never heard this foundational message—and sadly, so is much of our world.

The only purpose of the gospel, and even religion, is to communicate that one and eternal truth.— You are beloved children of God!

Reading #2 Once You Start to Awaken, John O'Donohue

Once you start to awaken, no one can ever claim you again for the old patterns. Now you realize how precious your time here is. You are no longer willing to squander your essence on undertakings that do not nourish your true self. Your patience grows thin with tired talk and dead language. You see through the rosters of expectation which promise you safety and the confirmation of your outer identity. Now you are impatient for growth, willing to put yourself in the way of change. You want your work to become an expression of your gift. You want your relationship to voyage beyond the pallid frontiers to where the danger of transformation dwells. You want your God to be wild and to call you to where your destiny awaits.

Reading #3 The Way It Is, William Stafford

There's a thread you follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn't change. People wonder about what you are pursuing. You have to explain about the thread. But it's hard for others to see. While you hold it you can't get lost. Tragedies happen; people get hurt or die; and you suffer and get old. Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding. You never let go of the thread.

Reflection, Molly Davis
By A Thread: My Spiritual Journey

My spiritual journey started when I was born too soon. I arrived on October 12, 1953. Weighing in at under four pounds, I wasn't expected to live, and so my parents decided not to give me a name right away. (69 years later I'm still a little mad about that.) My dad called my sister Margie from the hospital to tell her that she had a baby sister. Eight years older than me, she and my brothers were home from school as it was a holiday. As she remembers that day, she hung up the phone, went into her room, got down on her knees, and prayed for me to live.

And I did.

It was nip and tuck for awhile, but thanks to one vial of a still unapproved experimental medication to clear congestion from the lungs, a pediatrician willing to give that one vial a whirl on me, and my sister's prayers, I made it.

To this day I believe that she prayed me into sticking around, and somehow I grabbed ahold of the thread of my spiritual journey when I survived what many did not given my circumstances back then. Or maybe the thread grabbed ahold of me. Who knows how that all works? Either way, my thread started there.

Church was always a part of our family life. In the beginning it was the Episcopal church. While I loved the rituals and liturgical practices, no matter how hard I prayed, I was never sure if the God displayed on high in those stained glass windows heard me, saw me, or accepted and loved me for who I was. Ours was a patriarchal home where dad ruled the roost and the rest of us toed his line. Even back then, I was strong, smart, and independent, and while he loved me in lots of ways, and I loved him, those were qualities that my dad didn't seem to value in a girl. And if he didn't, then the patriarchal God of my childhood probably didn't either. Belief came easily for me, it's just that I wasn't exactly sure where I stood with God or what I could do about that.

But church isn't the thread that weaves my story together.

Jesus is.

When I was twelve years old, my sister was home from college for the weekend. Whenever she was home we always crawled into bed together and talked late into the night. She was then, and is to this day, one of my two best friends. She was involved in a college ministry, and on this particular evening, as we lay there in bed she asked me the question "Do you want to accept Jesus into your heart?"

"No" I answered promptly.

And then switched off the light, turned on my side, and promptly did. I probably didn't tell her that for awhile, but what changed in that moment, in the darkness of my bedroom when I invited Jesus to show up in my little twelve year old heart, is that from that night on, I have never once, to this day, doubted the presence and nearness of God, and that I was seen and heard. Whether I was accepted and beloved by God not in spite of who I was, but precisely because of who I was, took a lot longer.

From the Episcopal church we found our way to an evangelical one that began in a basement in a house and grew to a mega church. The teachings were pretty clear. We're all sinners in need of forgiveness through the sacrificial death of Jesus. Men are the leaders of....well... everything. Women are to submit, and Christianity is the one and only way to God. Even back then, many of those teachings didn't make much sense to me, But I didn't have the words or courage to question, much less challenge, what I was hearing in our church.

But church isn't the thread that weaves my story together.

Jesus is.

Now...Because I am married to Tom, you might assume that I've always had good sense when it comes to men. But I can promise you that he is the one and only wise choice I've ever made in that arena.

I got engaged to my first husband three days after meeting him in a bar. He was handsome, charismatic, and he wanted me, which apparently was good enough for me. We waited three whole weeks to tell my family, but I was in love and there was nothing to be done but hitch my wagon to his shiny, narcissistic star. Had I been willing to pay attention, the signs of anger and emotional abuse were there from the beginning. But like they say, love is blind. And so, it seemed, were the teachings of our church. Now, don't get me wrong, there were wonderful and loving people in that community, and I was surrounded by friends and family who loved and supported me, and I am grateful for them. But again, the teachings were clear. Men are the leaders. Women are to submit. Divorce is a sin. FULL STOP. And prayer and the bible are the answer to any question and the solution to every problem.

Thirteen years and two daughters later, after lots of couples therapy, and trying to pray, study, submit, and plead my way into a healthy and safe marriage, something had to change. At that point I didn't have only myself to consider, but my two strong, smart, and independent young daughters. The marriage and home we had were not what I wanted for them then, as they grew up, or in their own future relationships.

After a particularly difficult and scary day in our home I knew I couldn't keep going. I had to get out. But even contemplating ending my marriage felt like direct defiance against all that I'd ever learned in church.

But church isn't the thread that weaves my story together.

Jesus is.

Standing in our little living room, certain I had to go, terrified to even try, everything else went quiet, and the voice I've come to recognize as coming (for me) from Jesus, showed up in my heart with complete and utter clarity. "It's time to leave. You've done all you can. You need to go now."

And I did.

And I'll be go to hell, if Jesus didn't follow me right out of that marriage. Helped me pack my bags and leave that old story behind, so that I could begin to write a new one. Holding tight to that thread, I began to re-discover that strong, smart, independent girl, and found that she was beloved by God, and always had been. And apparently Tom loved that same girl for too...for who she was and what she brought to his party.

As we raised our daughters together we found our way to various churches, but none of them ever really stuck for me. When we ended up in the Gorge, Tom was the first to discover Bethel. I wasn't ready for church. He and God would head off for church on Sunday mornings, and Jesus and I would stay home.

It was about then that I began to read new writers I'd never encountered before. Nadia Bolz Weber, Barbara Brown Taylor, John O'Donohue, Marcus Borg, Brian McLaren, and Richard Rohr. I began to learn about the many faces and names of God, the power of women, the feminine heart of God,

and the mind blowing concept of Original Goodness rather than Original Sin. Original Goodness, where, in the creation story, the Creator looks out over all that has been made, including us, and proclaims it not only good... but very good. Somehow the churches in my past, and much of Christianity, seem to have hopscotched right over original goodness and gone straight to original sin, and our need to be saved in order to be accepted by the God who created us in God's own image.

But church isn't the thread that weaves my story together.

Jesus is.

I know that for many, Jesus is not their jam, and he doesn't need to be. There are so many different threads that connect us to one another, the natural world, and the Love that is at the center of it all. Jesus just happens to be mine. I also know that tremendous harm and trauma have been done in the name of Jesus, and that has to break his heart. I know it does mine.

So who is this Jesus to me?

He was a carpenter who showed up on the planet, not to save me from my sin, but to show me how to live and how to love. He didn't care about planting a church but about sowing the seeds for what it looks like to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with the God from whom he came. He didn't ask people worship him, but invited them to follow him. He lived on the margins and loved and served all those he found there. He, like many of us, must have loved the wilderness, because he retreated there whenever he could.

From what I can see, he doesn't care who we love, but how we love.

He healed, clothed, protected, and defended, embraced, forgave, and loved with abandon. He spoke truth to power and was willing to die rather than compromise who he was and what he came to do.

In his death and the mystery that came after, he showed us that death isn't the end. It's just a bridge that we all cross over to be welcomed by the Love from which we came and that has been with us and waiting for us all along.

That's my Jesus. And in following that thread, here is how I have come to see it:

We are all created in the image of God. Whoever, whatever force, spirit, deep science, great love or tremendous mystery, brought us to this place, at our core, our irreducible essence, we have a spark of that from which we came.

We are all called to live authentic, whole-hearted lives.

And, we are all called to uniquely love, help, and heal the world that is within our reach.

Somehow, the Jesus I met all of those years ago in my childhood bedroom has never left. His is a constant presence, and a voice that I hear with my inner ear. He is the thread, that led me to Bethel, this place, where I can show up as I am, and be surrounded by fellow seekers. A place where we are invited to weave our stories together into the ongoing, ever transforming community that is Bethel. A place where above all, we are reminded that, as Richard Rohr says, we are beloved children of God, and, we belong to one another.

Amen.

May it be so.