

THIS I BELIEVE

I believe we're all on a journey with God, whether or not we name it as such. This morning I'd like to share a few of the twists and turns of my journey.

I grew up in a Mennonite family, with parents that were intensely devout—they took everything to God in prayer. I learned the central fact that God came to earth in human form and died so that I might have eternal life. I eventually claimed this belief as my own and felt safe and secure within the circle of absolute truth.

This served to anchor me against the rising tide of secular influences until my senior year in college. I had spent three years at Eastern Mennonite College but was doing my final year at Temple University. It was culture shock. Suddenly I was in the minority, and the majority of people around me, by my judging, were outside the circle of truth. But I recoiled at the notion that God would be consigning these vast numbers of people to eternal damnation, and it seemed presumptuous to believe that my way of salvation through Jesus Christ was the only way to God.

The whole edifice of belief came crashing down: through my study of science and of radical behaviorism in particular, I came to understand that beliefs need to be empirically verified. And God and faith, intangible as they are, can't stand up to the rigors of the scientific method.

In a way this felt liberating, but I also grieved the loss of my relationship with God my parent and with Jesus my mentor and savior. Much of the time I felt lost and depressed without the beacon of absolute truth to guide me.

Unwilling to give up without a fight I set out in search of a way to salvage my faith. I spent three months at L'Abri, a center for spiritual seekers in Switzerland, founded by Francis Schaeffer. Later that year, in the fall of 1974, I packed up my questions and enrolled at AMBS, the Mennonite Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. However, I quickly found that my fellow students had sufficiently answered these questions and were off and running, while I was still at the starting gate.

But while I was there a “stretcher came from grace” (this is an image from Rumi's poem, *“Zero Circle”*) in the form of two professors. One was the resident mystic at AMBS. He held a Quaker meeting which I started attending. It was perhaps my first attempt at experiencing God within. The other was a Catholic theologian at Notre Dame whose course introduced me to the mystical paths in the major

religions, and whose imaginative and poetic theology blew my mind.

The old questions about God's existence didn't go away, but a new door opened to the path of contemplative spirituality, to the unknown God, the God hidden in paradox and mystery.

Thomas Merton, Carl Jung, Thomas Moore and others have been guides for the journey. My companions have been poetry as sacred text, meditation as my prayer closet, music as a spiritual playground, and, for the past 30 years, a cloud of loving witnesses here at CMCL.

As I reflect on what has happened on this journey it seems that the being aspects of God—God the parent and Jesus the son-- have morphed into the stealth God—a God of presence and spirit, a God that comes to me when I take the time to look beyond surface appearances. It's difficult to capture in words how I experience this mystical God, but here's an example:

Last Sunday a group of us gathered at an art gallery to sing harvest hymns. As we sang into the evening I was aware that many of the lyrics no longer spoke truth to me, but a holy resonance remained. The harmony we created wove us together into a reverent oneness of beauty. And all of this within the container of the artist's journey from his Amish roots. Church in the art gallery!

I look back to where I started as a child, standing in the circle of truth, beliefs firmly planted. I see how the wind of struggle, doubt and loss that undid my tidy belief system is the same spirit wind that blows where it wants, carrying me aloft to a place where belief is suspended, weightless. I've traded belief for seeing, and on a clear day I can see God everywhere and in everything.

I give thanks for the mothering God that has given birth to this journey and for the mothering Spirit that nurtures my growth of knowing and unknowing.