

Spiritual Autobiography
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My faith journey is not one of trial and tribulation, but of love and privilege, from the day I was born, I was surrounded by the love of doting parents, and a protective older brother.

My father, Horton French, was an Episcopal priest, and my mother, Margery French, was an accomplished soprano soloist, and the director of the church choir. My brother, John, was kind, patient, and brilliant, so a great role model.

Growing up my brother and I never left home for school without being showered with hugs, kisses and compliments, and a sense of self-esteem to deal with whatever lumps, bumps, or boulders we might encounter along our way.

I adored my parents, and my brother, and worked hard to make them proud of me. I was polite, well-behaved, a good student, and I believed in God, because my parents told me He existed. Basically, if Mom and Dad said something was true, for me, it was true!

The negative aspect of always believing what I was told, and doing what was asked, or expected of me, was that I never became a seeker, a questioner. My parents never crammed religion down my throat. Sure, I went to Sunday school and church every week, confirmation classes, and youth groups, of course, but nothing more.

As a result, I have actually never read the Bible. I did try one time, but just never got past all the begats in Genesis. Then some years ago, I decided to try again with the New Testament, but since it wasn't a requirement of any kind, I didn't see it through. So basically, I had belief in God, but not personal faith, and little likelihood of getting it.

This brings me to the part of my story, that I rarely share, and do so now with some reluctance. My fear is that rather than simply being considered the Name Tag Nag at church, I will be known as the Kook-Among-Us Church Lady.

I believe, since I wasn't reaching out seeking God, He decided to send the Holy Spirit to me. I didn't understand the first encounter at all, and it freaked me out. It happened in the bedroom of my previous home in Edina about 48 years ago.

Having just hung up the phone from a very contentious, upsetting conversation, one of a repetitive kind, instead of just bemoaning and complaining about the call, I decided to try to do something for the person on the other end of the line, and placed another call to someone I thought might be helpful.

The call did not bear fruit, but the moment I hung up, I was surrounded by a sense of being hugged, enwrapped in kindness and praise. It was so eerie that I immediately left the room, but what really unnerved me, was the same sensation occurred every time I went into my bedroom over the next three days. It reached the point where I dreaded going to bed. I didn't tell anyone for fear of being thought a fruitcake.

I did not connect the dots that this had been any sort of religious experience, just freaky, so my personal faith status remained unchanged.

I had taken communion since confirmation at age 12, because it was expected of me, but despite years of Sunday School, I didn't have a meaningful grasp of its significance, until, of all things, watching a Hollywood production of the Easter Story.

In the scene from the Last Supper, Jesus said, "It is for this Passover that I have come into the world," and I finally grasped what Jesus being the Pascal Lamb really meant.

Since my body is the house that holds my soul, and my mouth is the doorway to that house, when I take communion, eating the bread, the flesh of the Lamb, and sipping the wine, marking my lips with His blood, I am performing the function of the Passover that saved the Jewish children from death, and ultimately saves my soul, as well. Finally, in my mid-thirties, I had a personal religious revelation, a beginning grasp of faith, not just belief.

As I have told you, I am not a seeker, but my husband Terry was. As a young man he wanted to be a priest. Though I would have fulfilled every expectation of a priest's wife had he decided on that path, I did my best to dissuade him. Terry was a wonderful person, but early on, he was far more at ease in the company of men than women. I could not see him sitting and chatting, as my father easily did, with all the ladies of the guilds of that era.

Having been persuaded there were many ways, besides the priesthood, to serve God and the Church, Terry did exactly that, ushering, serving on the Vestry, being Junior and Senior Warden, lay reading etc. So, when he told me that there was a religious renewal weekend for men he wanted to attend, a Cursillo, but that he could only do so, if I agreed to go to one for women, of course, I agreed.

Terry was in the Army Reserves back then, which meant losing one weekend a month together for his military duty, so the prospect of losing two more for these Cursillo weekends was already a negative in my mind. Then a friend from church, St Stephen's in Edina, starting telling me that people who went to Cursillo came back changed, secretive, cliquish. I didn't like the sound of that at all, and was completely shocked, when Terry returned from his Cursillo weekend uncharacteristically ebullient, and gave me a hug and kiss the likes of which, I had never received in all my 39 years.

Hence, as I embarked on my Cursillo the following weekend, it was with mixed emotions, but with a definite chip on my shoulder.

The first night after a brief orientation and supper, we were asked to observe a night of silence to help everyone settle in. For a verbal person of my nature, this is akin to what purgatory must be like. Three of us, unable to sleep, ended up in the lady's lounge. Though we observed the letter of the law, and did not talk, we wrote notes like crazy for several hours, and giggled endlessly at our own nonsense.

By morning I had fallen victim to total laryngitis, I couldn't even whisper. The program for that day involved talks, followed by discussions at each table of 8 women, and then sharing of each table's reaction to the talks. Unable to make a sound, this wasn't just purgatory for me, it was hell.

One woman at my table drove me crazy. First, no matter where I sat, she was always next to me, and secondly, she would start off with what promised to be a really pithy, interesting comment, but then trail off into jibberish. She made me want to scream. She talked all the time, but made no sense, I couldn't talk at all, and a third table-mate had stuttering issues, so had come only with the promise that she wouldn't have to talk. Our table was a mess!

Miserable, and awake by 4 the next morning, I decided to get up and use the lady's room, while the others were snoring away. Even though I still couldn't talk, I had every intention of finding a phone that morning, and somehow trying to tell Terry to come get me. I wanted out.

As I contemplated my predicament, the door opened, and in walked that same woman who had plagued me the previous day. I couldn't believe my eyes!

Before going to bed that night, we had done the Stations of the Cross, using the refrain, "As you do it to the least of your sisters, you do it to me."

Well, in my eyes, she was definitely the "least of my sisters", so when I saw her struggling to scratch her back, I thought what the heck, and I reached over and scratched it for her, and opened a flood gate!

Out poured a life story of pain and heartache, of being the lesser accomplished older sister to the brilliant younger one, of escaping disapproval at home into a young marriage with a man who turned out to be in the Mafia, of finally fleeing the marriage with her two young sons, but one of which, at age twenty, was an alcoholic etc.etc.

At last I realized, I wasn't at Cursillo to share my ideas, or my story, but to be there to listen to hers, and any others, who needed a friendly ear. Feeling utterly ashamed of my previous attitude, I returned to my cot, tears streaming down my face.

Though the room had been totally dark, once I laid down, there was a light so intense, that I had to close my eyes, and I literally felt myself lifted from my cot, cradled, and rocked like a babe in arms, and a voiceless voice telling me that everything was all right, that I was going to be fine. There is no better description for what I experienced than, "The peace that passeth understanding."

After that moment, I felt myself lowered to my cot, the light faded, and when I could open my eyes the room was completely dark again, and silent except for the soft breathing of several dozen

women. Lying there till morning, I finally realized the significance of the experience I had had in my bedroom, that it was the Holy Spirit that had surrounded me with love and praise, and at last I had a sense of faith not just belief.

By daybreak, I was ecstatic with excitement to share what had happened. At that point I could only make the barest of whispers, which probably meant that I should have kept quiet, but my table-mates were very kind, and listened intently to let me both apologize to "that woman" for my unkind attitude, and to thank her for being the instrument to opening my eyes to God.

I have always envied those of you who have a deep and abiding faith, and I still do. I am a very weak Christian, so I take great comfort in the stories of others who are strong. Whether, because I am such a slow learner, or poor Christian in need of reinforcement, God has, though less dramatically, sent His peace to me on two more occasions. It is a peace that "passeth understanding," and the memory of which I call on repeatedly when doubts try to worm their way into my life.

One such doubt involves dying. I don't mind being alone, but I have never liked doing things alone, hence I was always fearful about dying, but I no longer believe we die alone, and an incident, before my brother's passing 5 years ago, served to reinforce that belief for me.

To my knowledge, my brother rarely went to church in his adult years, but he was a wonderful, decent person, and I firmly believe he is in heaven. The day before he died, while the family gathered around him holding, and talking about, a picture of our father, John suddenly announced to them that Dad was there in the room with them. I don't know how, or by whom, each of us will be called home, but I do believe John was called home that day, by our father.

While I have been blessed with many gifts, energy and drive were not two of them, so to my shame, I have to admit that I am still not a seeker, I haven't changed my lazy ways, but at least now I have personal faith, not just belief. And I sincerely hope despite my sharing how I came to have that faith, you will still simply think of me only as the Name Tag Nag, and not the Kook-Among-Us Church Lady.