

August 26, 2018  
Spiritual Autobiography by Mark Stang

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I was the fourth of Richard and Barbara Stang's 4 kids. We lived in the North San Diego County town of Carlsbad, California. In that little beach town was St. Patrick's Catholic School, my elementary school, and we were parishioners at St. Patrick's Catholic Church. Despite all my years at St. Pat's, I can't honestly claim that as the beginning of my spiritual awareness. And even though I attended hundreds of Sunday services there, and made a dozen or so confessions, I have no recollection of any faith experiences there. As a teenager I stopped going to church.

After St. Pat's, I attended The Bishop's School, an Episcopal college prep school, and this was my introduction to the Episcopal faith. I'd like to say that my spiritual awareness began at this point, but I remained spiritually rather clueless. Little did I know when I was Judy Ray's student in her New Testament class in the first semester of my senior year, that she would become my mother-in-law 5 years later. Her daughter is my wife Cathy, and we fell in love the last semester of our senior year in high school. At that point in my life what was developing was my agnosticism. I'll never forget trying to have a serious faith discussion with my mother one day when I was a teenager. "Do really believe, Mom, that you have an immortal soul, and that when you die, you'll go to a place called heaven?" "Well," she replied, "I'm not going to hell!" It seemed to me that it was black and white for Mom. My faith remained grey.

Right after college, Cathy and I were married at St. James by-the-Sea Episcopal church. Cathy began teaching kindergarten and I attended medical school. Then we moved to Chapel Hill, NC where I completed my medical training. There was no regular church attendance at this phase of our lives. Knowing that the upper Midwest was where we wanted to raise our kids, Christy and Turner, I took a job as a lung specialist in Minneapolis, and we moved to Eden Prairie when I was 31 years old. Cathy's brother told us to visit Trinity Episcopal Church. He was the best man in the wedding of his friend Peter Waldo. Peter is one of Andrew Waldo's brothers, and Andrew was Trinity's rector at that time. We quickly became Trinitarians, and felt very much at home in this community. Four years later, in 2001, we bought our house here in Excelsior. And after a 20-year hiatus, I became a regular church goer once again. But I did not feel any certainty about God's presence in my life. I began a habit, every Sunday, while walking back from communion. I would pray, "God, if you're there, please let me know". Once a week I would say this to Him. I can't honestly tell you what I was expecting; anything!

And on a different subject, 16 years ago I decided I would take care of the big dead branch on the old Maple tree outside our bedroom window. As I foolishly cut that 75 year-old branch, it snapped around the tree trunk, knocked me from the ladder, and I fell 25 feet onto the front lawn. I fractured my skull in 5 places, and was in a coma for the next 15 days. At Hennepin County Medical Center I became conscious again on Cathy and my 15<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. That accident would eventually necessitate my being declared disabled from practicing medicine. Many people assume that surviving such an injury would lead to a strong faith. This was not the case for me. My agnosticism was not knocked out of my head. Here at Trinity, on many Sundays, as I'd hear announcements for the Children's Formation Committee, I'd lean over to Cathy and say, "Where's the Lost Husband's Formation Committee?" One day she said, "Why don't you ask Andrew that question?" So Andrew and I went out for breakfast, I told

him my Lost Husband's story, and did his eyes ever sparkle! "Mark, let's start one!", he said. So The Lost Husband's Formation Committee was born. We met weekly, and became a reading and discussion group.

After many months, we realized we needed a new name for the group, because we weren't all husbands, and we weren't all lost. Our new name became, "Brothers, Lost & Found". We had a great few years together. The fellowship in that community gave rich soil for my faith to finally start to grow. One morning I asked my brothers this: We'd all heard as kids, "You need to change your attitude". How, I asked the group, do you change your spiritual attitude? Henry Brantingham said it: "Act As If". So about 10 years ago, I starting to act as if I were not an agnostic. And one Sunday morning, walking down from communion, sunlight was shining through that stained-glass window right there, and instead of praying to God that he let me know He was there, I knew that He was, and prayed, "Thank you God". And there was more rich soil for me spiritually in The Tuesday Men's Group during the Doug Fontaine era, God rest his soul. During one of those excellent morning meetings, I picked up another foundational credo of my faith: Respect the Mystery. Respecting the mystery works so well for me. My old desire for God to tap me on the shoulder, or whatever it was I was praying to receive on all those Sunday mornings, has been replaced with an understanding that my relationship with God does not have the kind of personal tangibility that we experience in our relationships with people. Once I accepted that, my faith was in the right environment to grow.

And I'm pleased to report that since then, I have found several activities in which I find my access to God far less mysterious. One which I enjoy as many days of the year as possible is riding my bicycle. We live a block away from the Lake Minnetonka Regional Trail, which provides a beautiful 5-mile ride to Carver Park. Carver is for me the quintessential thin place. I just feel closer to God there. And I go there a lot.

Another thin place is the oratory at the Episcopal House of Prayer, where my Trinity brothers and I have been together on several prayer retreats. You put on a robe, takes off your shoes, and enter this beautiful round room with a high domed ceiling. I cannot leave there without feeling closer to God. On each of our retreats, I have left with a longing to bring that sense of closeness home with me. We've all heard reference to the mind's eye. I had wished that I could learn how to see with my soul's eye.

Well, I'm delighted to say, I've been able to do just that with Centering Prayer. In the richness of our wonderful church community, I close my eyes, let all thoughts drift away, and there in that peaceful, empty place inside myself, I am often aware of my soul, and of God.

So, I offer to you all a concise summary of what I have learned so far on my spiritual journey: Act as If, and Respect the Mystery.

Thank you.