

“You’re going to talk about Catholicism in a Unitarian church! Are you nuts?” That was what my friends were kind enough not to say, but I suspect they thought when they heard about today’s sermon. I am impressed that so many of you were not put off by the sermon title, or perhaps you hadn’t read your newsletter and you’ve turned up here all unaware. In either case, please bear with me ...

I want to start a conversation today about where we come from, for those of us who weren’t born and raised as Unitarian Universalists. Anna’s story today came from the Jewish faith that underlies the Judeo-Christian heritage of both Unitarianism and Universalism; on other occasions we have celebrated the other faiths that have shaped and inspired us.

Today I will speak about the Catholics among us, among us Unitarians that is. In my twenty plus years as a Unitarian, I have often encountered these Catholics. We recognize one another, sometimes by our names or by the schools we attended, or by the numbers of our siblings, or perhaps we always avoid wearing navy. There’s no secret handshake and we hardly ever forget ourselves and make the sign of the cross before attempting that free throw in the neighbourhood basketball game. But we generally know one another. We don’t talk about it much, where we’ve come from, and more importantly, why. I think we should.

Some of us are bitter – we’ve had experiences where Catholicism hurt us - in its rejection of us as women, as gay or lesbian, or bi or trans, as divorced, as questioner. Or hurt us even more deeply in personal and real attacks upon our bodies or our minds by persons representing the Church. I won’t speak much of those direct assaults because these were not my experiences, and they have been ably documented by others.

I simply outgrew my faith – my memories are more bittersweet. I hope that any of you who may have suffered at the hands of the church will understand my decision to focus on that which I have experienced myself. I must also confess (it’s a habit after all) that the church today has changed from that which I knew in what was a brief flowering of openness; today’s church is far more conservative in most ways.

Why did I leave? I stopped believing, or perhaps, I never really believed. I simply could not accept a god who would condemn my non-Catholic neighbours to a lesser afterlife, an eternity outside heaven, no matter how virtuous they might be. Then, at age ten I spoke with our kindly assistant pastor of my desire to be a priest and was gently told I should aspire to be a nun. Obviously a faith which would have gladly welcomed my very annoying brother to become God’s representative as a priest, but offered me only the convent was not the right faith for me.

However, today I want to speak about how Catholicism shaped me, shaped the Catholics among us and shaped our society. The books and news articles make clear the sins of the Church and its

representatives. I want to speak about the other influences. About how Catholicism has formed the Catholics among us and made us the Unitarians we are. When I began working on this, I would have said that Catholicism is a faith tradition rarely or never mentioned in UU circles, despite the large number of Catholics among us, whom I will term CAUs from here on. However, in the past six months Victoria has used readings from Catholic writers and spoken of her Catholic half-brothers and Mary Ellen spoke of her interest in Saint Francis. So, I hope this isn't all too much Catholicism for this liberal religious congregation.

Now, most of us CAUs would say we are "former Catholics" or "ex-Catholics" or "raised Catholic" but we all remember that the only options in Catholic terms are "good, practicing Catholic", "non-Catholic" – that's *all* the rest of you – atheist, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist or Jew, you are all just "non-Catholics". The final option is "lapsed Catholic" - those are the CAUs among others. The term "lapsed Catholic" represents the Catholic view that our departure from the "one true faith" is only temporary - sooner or later we will all return to the faith of our baptism, via the deathbed confession if necessary. I don't think that is so, speaking for myself at least, though I do harbour a fear that a representative of the Vatican will appear at the door to repossess my soul someday.

However, I do believe that Catholicism is as much cultural as religious. In that sense, we can never become "ex-Catholics". Young Catholics are set apart from their non-Catholic peers. Every aspect of daily life reminds them of their membership in a world-wide (that's what the word catholic means) community. In this respect Catholicism is much more like Judaism than it is like its theological neighbour, Protestantism.

In my family the culture of Catholicism was with us from morning to night, and each week and month through the feasts and celebrations of the church year. We learned to pray and to meditate. Good Catholics pray when they wake, pray before and after every meal. Each evening the whole family kneels together to pray before bedtime.

Any difficulty, or any hope, dream or wish is dealt with through prayer. It's such a total inculcation that prayers still come to my lips unbidden at times of challenge even though, as a devout agnostic, I have no idea to whom or to what I might be praying. Meditation, too, is taught and practiced on a regular basis. In my childhood, I often sought out the quiet, grand space of the dimly-lit, jewel-toned church to spend time in reflection whenever I felt the need. For a child in a large family, and with classrooms packed with 50 or more students, that calm time in a place of beauty was a remarkable oasis. All the adults in my life respected, even admired, this need for peace and quiet. What a gift.

Our church life involved Sunday Mass and communion preceded by a Saturday trip to confession. We went to Mass on First Fridays and on all the holy days. We refrained from eating meat on Fridays, we fasted or "gave up something" during Lent, we followed the stations of the Cross during Lent, recited the Rosary alone or in groups. We even visited churches and shrines

on every trip away from home. Extended families gathered to celebrate the baptisms, first communions and confirmations of children. Some families even went to Mass daily.

Confession was a terror to me as a child. My own sins of commission, disobeying my parents, being mean to siblings or classmates, being distracted during Mass; my sins of thought – envy, anger, doubt; and my many sins of omission loomed large in my mind. I feared the priest's scorn or shock at my sins; I worried about receiving an onerous penance, knowing that my classmates would judge me based on how long I had to pray after confession. And yet, I now see a value in regularly summing up my moral successes and my failings and in evaluating how I might improve. Today the church has renamed confession; it's now the sacrament of reconciliation and it is a communal (and silent) rather than an individual spoken sacrament. That doesn't sound like a bad idea to me.

Cultural indoctrination continues beyond the church building itself. I went to Catholic elementary and secondary schools, and on to a Catholic university. I went to Catholic summer camp (daily Mass, modest dress code and folk Mass specialties at the singalongs) and belonged to a Catholic Girl Scout troop. My friends were Catholic except for one or two, my relatives were all Catholic, and my parents' large social circle was almost exclusively Catholic. Our neighbourhood and our city were predominantly Catholic. My father worked for a company which employed few non-Catholics, though no official policy existed. Some of this tribal tightness rose in reaction to discrimination against Catholics in the wider world. Here in Ontario Orange parades sanctioned and reinforced hatred of "the Papists" until relatively recently. When the world defines a group as "outsiders" that group builds tighter bonds for mutual support and affirmation.

My role models were saints and nuns. Now I realize that most non-Catholics find the preoccupation with saints and martyrs a bit ridiculous. I don't. Although the mere facts of history may be more than a little distorted, the saints represented a way to honour virtue. Each day we read stories of the day's saints. We were encouraged to think of the saints after whom we were named as personal inspirations. My name saints are Catherine of Siena a fourteenth century Dominican nun, who advised and bullied the pope into moving the papacy back from Avignon to Rome, Theresa of Avila, a sixteenth century Carmelite mystic and author who undertook a major reform of religious orders where discipline had grown lax, and Joan of Arc whom we all know. Strong women, strong inspirations.

The nuns whom I have known have represented the full spectrum of womankind. Some of them were downright terrifying, some embarrassing, but the majority were women of valour, women who dedicated their lives to a goal beyond themselves. Many were conscious that they had bought for themselves freedom from the domination of fathers, brothers, and potential husbands by giving themselves to a celestial spouse whom they found on the whole far less trouble. My great aunt Mary who was given to God, and sent to the convent, unwillingly, at 14, became far

better educated, travelled and respected than her younger, married sisters, and succeeded in her ambition to walk down the aisles at their funerals.

Priests were generally intimidating creatures, with a stature and power beyond the human. The sermons of my youth were never life-enhancing, but always focused on the negative, the lapses, the failures of the flock to live up to the expectations of their saviour as interpreted by their pastor. At least they were short. Nowadays I wonder how accurate those memories are. Could there never have been a positive message? How much is my memory influenced by the storied fire and brimstone preaching of my great uncle, Father Casimir Schuler, dead before my birth, but long remembered in the still-quaking stories of his nephews and the guilt-ridden dreams of his long-suffering parishioners?

I wanted to be a priest when I was ten, and I wanted to be a nun when I was fourteen. Since I always preferred to go to extremes I wanted to be a contemplative nun, one who spent her days and nights in silence, away from the world, praying and meditating and doing the odd bit of exquisite embroidery. It still sounds appealing, but I could never have embraced that vow of silence, then or now, as those who know me will agree. Then the reality of puberty hit and the vow of chastity became the more challenging one.

So, I abandoned those thoughts and hoped to be a good Catholic before I moved on to just trying to be good, or to find out what good might be, in my life. Catholicism had given me detailed directions, but if I refused to follow the Catholic path in every detail, I was on my own to find my own path outside the Church. No wonder I found Unitarianism, which offered no creed, no detailed directions, but a community and a set of principles by which to seek my own path.

So, we've established that Catholicism has marked me, and probably marked the other CAU's in similar ways. How has it marked Unitarian-Universalism? Well, we could start with Catholicism's deep and broad impacts on Western Civilization and Culture, in which U-U ism had its beginnings, but that's rather a large topic. I will leave you to contemplate in your mind's eye and ear, the great music of Catholic composers, the cathedrals and cities, the Sistine Chapel, the great art of the West, the great literature. We are all of us in the West shaped by a culture that grew out of the might and the ambition of Catholicism in its heyday.

U-U ism primarily draws from the Protestant arm of Christianity; the former Anglicans and United Churchers among us often recognize the hymns of their youth in Singing the Living Tradition and in the format of our services. Our chalice symbol, the candles we dedicate each Sunday, our Water and Flower Communion, the beauty of our own rituals – these all remind me of my Catholic roots.

When I started to plan this service I didn't expect to find Catholic writers in a UU hymn book, but, to my surprise, there were a few. They generally come from some of the great movements in social justice in the last century which were led or actively supported by both Catholics and Unitarians. Some of the Catholics you may recall: Dorothy Day cofounded the Catholic Worker

movement, a nonviolent, pacifist movement that continues to combine direct aid for the poor and homeless with nonviolent direct action on their behalf. Daniel and Philip Berrigan, brothers from Minnesota who became priests and active fighters for peace in the Vietnam era, were on the FBI's 10 Most Wanted Fugitives List for their efforts. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit priest brought his discoveries in geology and archaeology into a new interpretation of the Creation – despite the Vatican's views on the matter.

Then there's Liberation theology which arose as a moral reaction to poverty caused by social injustice. Mary Jo Leddy of Toronto has worked for peace, justice and ecumenism, most actively of late with refugees. We can't forget Mother Teresa; and Sister Helen Prejean, the American anti-death penalty activist and so many others.

For centuries many Catholic religious orders have dedicated themselves to education, health and the alleviation of poverty and have challenged lay Catholics to act on these causes. When I was a teenager I volunteered in a nursing home for the indigent elderly run by the Little Sisters of the Poor, who literally beg for every cent that goes into feeding, clothing and housing themselves and their charges. I scrubbed acres of floors on my knees, and knew that Mother Superior herself would roll up her habit sleeves and join me if time was running short.

Even the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has taken activist stands on ending poverty in Canada, and on the rights of native peoples.

Here in Ontario, we face the challenge of an education system which facilitates unequal rights for Catholic families over those of other religions, which uses our tax monies to promote Catholic views on social issues even in direct contradiction to the laws of our country, and which continues the isolation of Catholics from the rest of the community with the resulting failures of common understanding and appreciation. I long to see Ontario's children of all faiths and of none educated together, even as I despair that any government will ever have the courage to end the separate school system.

The failures of the church are many, and we CAUs and UUs in general have also been shaped by, or in reaction to these. The Church has a history of misogyny, homophobia, hypocrisy and missionary zeal with which Catholics imposed their own religion on peoples around the world. These faults of the church are all deeply disturbing and deplorable, while often representative of their era. Today the misogyny and homophobia continue within Catholicism though cloaked in language which "condemns the sin not the sinner" - not much comfort, is it? Reaction against these failures has formed part of our direction in UUism.

What sort of Unitarians have we CAUs become? While generalizations are always faulty, I will proceed to make some. Generally we seem to be among the more active members of a congregation – we're here most Sundays, we pitch in when things need to be done. We understand the need to support our congregation financially; after all we grew up putting our nickels and dimes in donation envelopes from earliest childhood.

We admire the seven principles to which this congregation adheres – in some cases because they accord with our understanding of our faith of origin, far more often because of the contrast to it.

Most of us found Unitarianism after some years without any religious home. For many of us, our choice has proven to be a source of challenge and discomfort within our extended families. I've been fortunate that my large extended family has generally chosen to ignore my choice in religion. At my nephew's wedding Bruce and I and our sons were the only four of the hundreds of family and friends present who did not go to the altar rail for Communion. Our son Matt later said he felt like he had a red neon arrow pointing from the high Gothic ceiling straight to his head. I reminded him that the arrow was actually pointed at my head, and that he was merely a poor innocent led astray by a sinful mother. At my mother's funeral this isolation from the community of faith was even more painful.

So, what does this mean to us as a congregation and as a denomination? What about those of you from all the other religious, and non-religious backgrounds? I believe that we gain in strength and we enhance our own search for truth and meaning by understanding the diversity of our backgrounds. However, our search can be enriched only if we speak together, honestly, of the religious lands from which we have come and the effects on us of the faiths of our childhood. A greater understanding of our fellow congregants not only lowers the barriers between us and eases the path of the person understood, but greatly expands the possibilities for those doing the listening and understanding. We all have stories to tell, and we all can gain from hearing these stories.

I also believe that there are aspects of our faiths of origin that can be educational, even useful, for us as Unitarians. The emphasis in Catholicism, Judaism and other faiths on religion as part of every aspect of everyday life and as central to the life of the home is one approach we might want to adopt.

The formality of grace before meals can enhance our experience within families and with friends. Even when we are alone taking time to reflect on the extraordinary good fortune that allows us to enjoy each healthy and satisfying meal can raise the mundane to the special, perhaps even to the sacred if that is a word you like to use.

Consideration of the lives of our UU "saints" – those who have led and inspired us can aid us to make choices in keeping with our principles. A personal time for reconciliation, as a time to reflect on our own virtues and failings, can help us to keep to the paths we have chosen.

So, I urge you to get to know the CAU's and all the other U's in greater depth. Whether you have come from Catholicism, Judaism, the many Protestant faiths, from Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam, from a devoutly non-religious household, or even from UUism itself, you have much to share and to learn.

As we search for truth and meaning we start from different points. Let us share both the joys and the pains of our origins in order to better understand each journey.