

Rob Backus

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5th Sunday Worship: Our Stories

Many of you knew my late wife Linda. She and I went to this church together from the time we moved to Vermont until her death 13 years later. It was not always like that for us. We married in 1981 in a church in the decaying upstate town of Ilion, New York. The minister was the reverend Davy Jones. Fortunately, his name was not a portent for our marriage. After that we did not go to church again for over two years. We were each on our faith journeys.

I had stopped going to church when I was seventeen and my faith had just vanished, almost overnight. I completely stopped believing, not just in the tenets of the Lutheranism, but in the existence of god, anything spiritual in the world, anything non-physical. I had that proverbial God sized hole in my heart.

I was not searching for a substitute faith. I was not seeking to become a Buddhist or to adopt some esoteric eastern faith that was somehow superior to the simplemindedness of Christianity. I was just learning to live in this new world, with this hole.

In my early twenties, I read a book that had a profound effect on me, "Autobiography of a Yogi," by Paramahansa Yogananda. I could not accept uncritically all he had to say, some of which was quite supernatural. But, in reading that book I felt that I was in the presence of a sagacious and profoundly gentle soul. That feeling led me to consider and absorb much of what he had to say. Among many things, he taught that it is wise to look for our spiritual connections within the imagery in which we have grown up. In a curious way, he reassured me that I should not be looking for foreign religions to fill that God sized hole. So, I just continued living in this new world. Trying to understand how to be a responsible adult. And, I tucked that nugget away.

I moved to the Adirondack Mountains in 1975 and lived there most of the next five years. I lived in a rustic cabin on the shores of a small mountain lake that was part of a larger chain of lakes. In the summer, I marveled at the beauty of the flowers, the freshness of the water, the purity of the air. In the fall, I felt the eternal changing of the seasons and the slow drifting into sleep of the land and its life. My soul rejoiced in the changing colors and the cool clean chilling autumnal air. In winter, I skied mile after mile in the deep snow and rejoiced in the stunning beauty of the white earth and the blue sky and the dark mountains. With spring, I sought out the first shoots of color, the early blossoms and the swelling buds.

Most of the time I did not live alone but shared the place with one of my brothers or with friends and other family. There were days in the autumn when we stepped outside to trees covered with frost and red and golden leaves. To a sky that was a blue of transfiguration. The joy which swelled in us could only be expressed by applause and shouts of "author, author." Gradually I came to see this world I was living in as divine, as a creation. I started calling myself a pagan. I had no thought that this might someday lead me back to Christianity. But it did, it re-opened me to the non-physical, the spiritual, the divine.

Within a few years of these events I had met Linda. We had celebrated our marriage, we had celebrated the birth of our daughter, Jessica, and had moved to Lawrence, Kansas, where I was born and where my family comes from. We were not going to church but enjoying our baby, my brothers, our friends, and the excitement of graduate school for Linda and law school for me. We did not even talk about going to church.

Then, one Sunday morning, we woke up, looked at each other and both said. "We should go to church today." And so, we did. Neither of us ever knew why that Sunday was the day, but it was.

That was 32 years ago. Those 32 years have been an exciting time of growth in faith and understanding and change. I expect the future to continue to be just as exciting.