

Room of Mirrors
By Alberita Johnson
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...I was in a poetry group and we were tasked with writing a poem about ourselves. After a few drafts but this is what I came up with.

A Poem: Room of Mirrors

Peering down the hall I knew she was there.
I watched her walk down her hallway filled with doors
She carefully chose this time and opened a door,
The room is dark and filled with mirrors.
She is in a fright.
Who is there? She wonders and closes the door.
One, two, three steps more
Her eyes adjust with help of a sliver of light
She sees beautiful reflections and dances in delight
Spinning, leaping, and falling to the floor.
Rolling and rolling she reaches the wall of mirrors.
Who are you she mumbles, while staring at the wall,
Why, we are you, the wall replies
Can't be, she wonders aloud
The wall replies again, oh yes, we are you.
Turning away, she sees her past reflecting back at her,
She thanks her ancestors and acknowledges her growth
She rips off her clothes and removes her trappings
Her light explodes and she is reborn.

Alberita Johnson-2011

This poem is a reflection of me, and today, I would like to share with you a few reflections of my life's journey that I believe led me to this welcoming space here called All Faiths Unitarian Congregation.

For me there is nothing like beginning a new journey, we have time to prepare, make decisions, and imagine what it is going to be like.

But sometimes we are not prepared, in fact we may not have made any decision whatsoever to depart.

We may simply be investigating a new place, a new thing, something different. It is these investigative journeys that I am drawn to the unplanned, the unsolicited, I suppose it is my curious nature.

In the beginning of a new journey I am often uncertain and become anxious, and sometimes apprehensive, but not on this particular one.

I was single and living in NYC, making a good living in the eighties, king cocaine and queen crack was rampaging the city, and most times it was as if no one cared about it.

Unlike the outcry we are experiencing now regarding opioids, fentanyl and the like.

Reaganomics was ineffective and backfired and the city suffered.

It was unsafe, and yet the city partied hard and so did I, remember going to a nightclub Paradise Garage, in the Village of NY nearby NYU, who can forget the Village People, and John Travolter-Staying Alive.

By the late eighties, things slowly began to change and I was also.

I was on a new journey that began as a challenge. At the time my best friend and I worked together, vacationed together and basically shared our lives.

She also had her fill with the difficulties of life in the city and she turned to the church. She would regularly share with me the happenings at her church.

Having grown up in the church I was not impressed. But I quietly listened to her sharing and could tell she was happy. At times she would quote bible verses and I would join her.

One day while I completed a bible quote she was sharing with me, she challenged me with a simple question, "if you know all these things concerning God and the Bible, how come you don't come to church."

I had recently experienced a bad break up and was depressed. I recall thinking about her question one evening when I was feeling particularly down and I prayed, "God if you are real then please take this feeling away from me."

And I cannot remember the length of time that passed between my prayer and it being answered but when I felt better. I attributed that to an answered prayer, and the next time she invited me to church I went along.

You see, what she did not know is how much church I attended growing up. I did not tell her how attuned my family was to the civil rights movements of the sixties, and that Martin, Malcolm, Angela Davis and Nikki Giovanni were regular topics of conversation at home.

I did not tell her that my family rarely missed a Sunday at church. That I could remember being in church as early as five years of age.

I did not tell her that we were a Pentecostal/apostolic and by the time I was 8 years old we converted to Baptist and that I was a third generation usher at 12 years old and how I was drawn to religion and prayed every night or could not I could not sleep well if I did not.

I did not tell her that while growing up we had been taught to listen intently to the sermon's on Sundays that could last up to an hour.

I did not tell her that every Sunday in the Pentecostal church we, meaning everyone, at Sunday School had to recite a scripture by hard.

I did not tell her of the religious instruction received at Sunday School especially prior to baptism. And that going in the waters of baptism had changed me deeply.

As a matter of fact I did not realize how much religious instruction I remembered and how much I had memorized, or that I actually liked going to church. All this I kept inside. Until I joined the church she was attending.

It was a small congregation about this size, and I had an experience that I had never had before during a church service. One evening during midweek service.

I became overwhelmed during service and wept and blew my nose most of the service.

I tried to remain quiet but for some reason I was extremely moved and emotional.

After service the minister called out to me not privately but from the chancel. I stood and acknowledged him, and he asked a question that surprised me.

He asked if I had been "Called." For some reason the fight, flight or freeze reflex kicked in and I froze, I just stood there, for what seemed like an eternity.

More tears began to roll down my face and I nodded my head not quite sure what I just agreed to.

Soon after, he and his wife took me under their wings, taught me, and mentored me in what they knew and it was he and his wife that Ordained me as a Minister at their church.

I was a minister at a small Missionary Baptist Church called Merrick Park, in Jamaica Queens, NY, in 1988. Where I shared messages on the pulpit, on the radio and sang in the choir.

I had Answered the Call of Love and said yes! And was Standing on the Side of Love.

I was encouraged to enroll at a small non-profit, private Christian college which I did. And remained at Merrick Park for several years. It was there that I met and married my first partner and became a wife and stepmom to two adorable little boys.

Unfortunately a few years after our marriage Sister Norton passed away, the Pastor's wife and he followed a year later.

But my "call," to ministry lives on.

We moved on and joined Highland Church, a mega non-denominational congregation under the leadership of Rev. Subash Cherian, he moved to America around the same time I was called.

It was quite a leap from a small congregation of about 100 members to a large congregation of approximately 2500 members.

The Pastor was from India and practiced apologetics. He had a photographic memory when it came to scriptures and the spiritual. He was often on TV as he was outstanding.

At Highland church there were many east Indian members as well as many other races and ethnicities.

It was there I found my footing in the depths of diversity, we often sang in different languages, ate foods of the world, and classes were offered in multiple languages.

I experienced different cultures as we practiced Christian spirituality in different ways.

Highland Church was considered liberal for the Baptists and many former Baptists found a home there.

My partner and I led two ministries there, Marriage Enrichment/Premarital and Turning Point, a Teen Challenge substance and alcohol abuse program to combat the crack epidemic that continued to plague large cities like New York even in the nineties.

I continued taking classes when I could, however at that time I was working full time, married and raising two children. I took classes to become a religious educator, completed the required courses and became a RE. We had hundreds of children weekly.

Some of my most joyous times were spent with the children, and engaged couples because they were gleeful like children.

I spent many years at Highland Church a Christian Megachurch in Jamaica, Queens, NY.

In the late 20th century, it was time for a new journey, as my partner and I relocated to S. W. Florida.

It is the year 2000 and I am aware of one of the biggest journeys of my life. I am retiring and moving from NYC to Fort Myers Florida.

We had reached a wall and it was time to move on, I got lost in memories while packing and driving back and forth. It was uncanny.

Our home was finally complete and we went to see the new house, and two months later 9/11 happened.

I became torn as I knew I would be leaving friends, family and the familiar when all I wanted was to be home, I did not want **just then** to move to a city I really did not know at a time when we, the country, me, needed the comfort and security of the familiar.

Uncertainty was at large and I had questions, how will it be, will I find a church home, will I make new friends. As I pondered these questions it was as if I was all my memories, experiences, knowledge and wisdom engaged in powerful reflections of memories and I found myself ready for my new life.

We settled down here in Fort Myers Feb. 2002, and life was good. We were both retired, my mother was living with us in NY so she came along, my boys were adults and decided not to move to Florida.

We moved to Gateway, just down south off Daniels Pkwy.

And began to look for a church home soon after.

We visited many congregations, unfortunately my partner became increasingly ill, with various ailments. And I found that I missed the familiar more when he was ill.

I missed our boys terribly and different races, ethnicities, cultural foods, music and dance, and black spirituality as practiced in the black church.

Soon, my husband found Mount Hermon Church and we eventually became members and the loneliness was lifted somewhat.

But I am sure you are aware that just because you are the same race and religion doesn't mean all is well, I was the big city girl from NY in a small city in Fort Myers, in a very small black community.

I found myself lonely in a crowd. Even though I moved forward and became active in the black community.

I became the President of the NCBW and Co-founded Hinds Feet Mentoring Organization here in Fort Myers, started working PT at the Women's Resources Center which also was the home of Dress for Success International and eventually became the Southeast Corridor representative for Dress for Success International.

I volunteered at United Way as a Women's Support Group Leader down on MLK Jr. And it was there that the Executive Director informed me that I was coaching.

She encouraged me to look into it. Which I did, and then took classes and became a Professional Coach specializing in Holistic Coaching for the entire being. I mostly worked with women and teenage girls. My Coaching business expanded quickly.

So I began to look for locations to host groups other than the United Way, because the hours were not that conducive to the community needs.

I had been introduced to Abul Haq Muhammad of QLC and decided to find out if I could lease space at the center for my groups. I did and we began meeting there.

But nothing soothed me like a good book. They filled my imagination with places and encounters I could only dream of and I spent countless hours at the library.

I remember coming across a book about a labyrinth, borrowed it and decided I wanted to walk a labyrinth.

It was during that time that to my surprise I found myself pregnant and two weeks later I had a miscarriage. And 1 month later my eldest sister passed away 9 months after that my 2nd oldest sister passed away. My mother and I were distraught with grief.

Then First Strike the country was at war and just like that my oldest stepson was deployed to Iraq. My husband's health was fading and he was not sharing his feelings. Things were not so good for us.

But, I was on a mission for peace within, and the labyrinth was calling to me. I needed an escape... Little did I know there was a UU Congregation not far from my home that had a labyrinth.

Instead I found one at a nature center in Estero. I contacted them and left my email address.

Shortly thereafter I received an email from the center sharing visiting hours and volunteer opportunities.

And at the end under the signature there was a link to what was called, Circle Connections, so I clicked it.

I found it interesting and decided to investigate their calendar, and found a class called, "Cakes for the Queen of Heaven," of course that caught my eye.

My questioning mind became engaged...What is that all about? It sounds like it has something to do with the bible, church, spirituality and who is the Queen of Heaven?

I registered for the class, and surprise surprise, it was at the UU Church not far from my home, and they had a labyrinth!

It was a win-win, until I arrived and found out it was a class about the Goddess and I discovered I was on a journey of the unexpected, a journey that I had been cautioned to avoid for many years. Which was to be afraid of anything that the bible told me to fear.

And that included female deities, idols, and the like. But that did not deter me, I continued taking the class anyway, and loved it.

It was in that class that I met my Carole, little did I know that we would fall in love.

Also during this time I studied Judaism, with a dear friend of mine Steven Aaron, and his wife Barbara. Steven was Jewish and his wife Catholic, and he would go with her to Mass and she with him to Temple.

Eventually they merged spiritually and became Messianic Jews. I fully supported them and they soon found a Messianic Congregation, my husband and I began to visit and eventually joined.

The Rabbi and the Rebbetsin took me under their wings and taught me. Eventually I became a Shabbat teacher for children and youth and the Women's ministries leader.

Okay now after the class at UUCFM I started to visit the labyrinth on their property and the nature center in Estero and walked their labyrinth also.

I started going to drum circles and volunteering at Happehatchee and returned to an old flame and began writing poetry again.

Basically I was beginning to open to a different way of being. And my mourning for the loss of my baby and sisters began to diminish somewhat.

I eventually became the Executive Director of Happehatchee, the nature center in Estero that had the labyrinth, and met wonderful people there most of whom were UU's.

And on a very personal note: my partner and I split as our journey together was no longer in sync. It was a very difficult time for us.

We separated, and for the first time in over 25 years I was living alone, without a partner and within two years he had a stroke and passed away.

I became a widow. Filled with self-blame, I had the if onlys...

That was years ago, and during that time, I finally stopped ***just*** attending UU Congregations, I ***joined*** one.

And in doing so, I let go of what I had been taught to fear, I became aware and accepting of other spiritual beliefs, and how those beliefs impact those who practice them.

And the impact on their overall culture, I got past the absence of people of color Unitarian Universalism. I stopped being spiritually judgmental and instead made a conscious decision to see and hear of other ways to experience the Great Mystery many call God.

I wrapped myself in the cloak of UUA Principles and Sources and yielded in the Love and Peace they represented.

I was reborn, naked...not ashamed of my newly found freedom and became... a WA. I also began working at UUCFM as a production manager and I occasionally shared my poems and a few messages from the pulpit.

During an appraisal review, I recall being asked what my church can do for me. I answered that I am interested in the UUA CER/CLM Program.

A 3-5 year program. And just like that I applied, was accepted and with the blessings of BOD and Congregation

I entered the program as part of the UUA CER/SR CLM pilot program.

Just in time for COVID, I was in a church without a minister, in a program that needed a lot of guidance, and what did my church do?

They hired myself and another CLM to be the spiritual anchors or lay ministers with very little authority other than Sunday morning services. It was difficult for the congregation to separate and understand position.

After an unfortunate incident at UUCFM while COVID was on the decline and Caorle and I were planning our commitment ceremony we realized that we needed a change. And soon after our ceremony we left Florida for Washington state and stayed away 4.5 months and rested. It was a sabbatical for me and our honeymoon.

We returned 2 weeks before hurricane Ian hit and we were flooded. We are moving back into our own home this week.

It took me almost a year to let go of my commitment to UUCFM but I finally released myself at the end of my coursework and experiential components of the CLM curriculum and suddenly I did not have a church or UU Community which is a major component of the curriculum.

Prior to leaving for Washington, my partner and I were participants in Coming to the Table, a national organization promoting healing and reconciliation of the racial divide prevalent in America.

Our own Joyce Ramay was also a participant. I reached out to Joyce Ramay, with a short letter, quote, "I am in the CLM program and will be visiting AF more often.

I would like to know how I can be of service. Joyce responded and we met, had coffee and muffins, and I applied for the CYP Director position here, I was soon offered the position and accepted.

Life was good. I knew in my heart that I had found a spiritual home, and a place that grounds me.

In closing it took me three and a half years to complete the CLM Program curriculum, and I am currently in the process of submitting documents, receiving evaluations, and preparing a short talk (sermonette) to go before the Commissioning Council, and become your fully Commissioned Lay Minister!

So, today on my first day, and first sermon as your CLM, I, a woman of African descent whose tribal ancestors practiced ritual's. Today I ritually... symbolically representing the removal of anything that may hinder me from serving you in the best way possible even when it is difficult for us all.

Finally...I invite you to join me and hold onto what is best, release what is not and love in the fullest.

May our love expand and our children be blessed forever!

Amen and Ashe