

I Am a Child of God:
An Odd & Wondrous Calling¹

*I am a Child of God
Blessed and loved, I will not fear
You all are children too
Come in peace – you're welcome here!*

Every Wednesday night at my home congregation, the United Church of Christ of Vermillion, South Dakota (UCCV), our elementary-age students sing these words as they gather to learn and grow together. Ever since I first heard them more than six years ago, they have been my credo. When Jesus received his call to public ministry, God did not tell him what he needed to *do*. God told him who he *was*: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”² At its root, a vocation is not a call to action. Rather, it is a call to *be* Somebody – or, I might say, to *remember* the Somebody we already are. It is a claiming of our own Belovedness, our own deep identity as Children of God, created in Her image and likeness.³ So when I talk about my call to the ministry, I absolutely feel called to ordained ministry in the United Church of Christ, to preaching and teaching, to the arts and to community leadership. At the most fundamental level, though, I am called to *be myself*, to remember and then become the person that God knows me to be... and then to co-create with others the kind of communities where we can all belong in the truth of Who We Are: Children of God, blessed and loved, no longer strangers, no longer alone.

¹ Thanks for the title go to Lillian Daniel & Martin B Copenhaver, *This Odd & Wondrous Calling: The Public & Private Lives of Two Ministers* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2009).

² Luke 3:32.

³ Genesis 1:27.

1. What I Believe

God the Parent

In the Sufi prayer practice of *zikr* (Arabic: "remembrance") we chant the ninety-nine names of God in Islam. *La ilaha ilallah*: there is no God but God. Or as our Jewish siblings put it, *Adonai Eloheinu*, *Adonai Echad*: the HOLY ONE is our God, our God is One.⁴ And yet the One has many faces. My Sufi teacher Sheikh Yassir Chadley once put it to me this way: "Every leaf on every tree is doing *zikr*, giving praise to its Creator. *We* are the ones who need to remember." So we come up with ninety-nine (and nine hundred ninety-nine) names to help us recall the Beloved: our rock and our salvation,⁵ our loving parent,⁶ the maker of heaven and earth,⁷ the All-Merciful, the All-Powerful, the All-Compassionate, *Adonai Elohim*, the *Shekinah*⁸ who is present in our midst, the small still voice that speaks to us at our very core.⁹

Yet if I feel qualified to say anything at all about God, it is this: She is the One who loves us into being. The very first thing the HOLY ONE does in the Book of Genesis is to birth the Universe: light and darkness, planets and stars, water and earth and fire and air, plants and fish and birds and beasts and even human beings! And yet the Maker of Heaven and Earth is, in Himself,¹⁰ what our Lakota relatives call *Wakantanka*: the Great Mystery, the Singing Silence between the notes in the music of Creation that gives the notes their meaning. At the same time as I believe in God as "an empty realm, a mysterious order of reality, a no-thing-ness that is

⁴ Deuteronomy 6:4.

⁵ Psalm 62:2.

⁶ Matthew 6:9.

⁷ Psalm 121:2.

⁸ The Hebrew word for the feminine aspect of the Divine. The literal sense of the word is "dwelling."

⁹ 1 Kings 19:12.

¹⁰ You will notice that I interchange pronouns for God throughout this paper. Rather than simply neutering my God-language, I prefer, as in my example of Sufi *zikr*, to play with the multiplicity of God's self-expressions.

simultaneously the source of *all* things,"¹¹ I also believe in Her profound relationality. Gene Thin Elk, a *Sicangu*¹² medicine man, taught me that the Lakota word for "mystery" is related to the Lakota word for "umbilical cord" – Wakantanka may be mysterious, but we are still somehow connected to Them. As I say, He does not only call us into being, She *loves* us into being. Brazilian theologian Ivone Gebara writes, "As I see it, relatedness is the primary and the ultimate ground of all that exists... Both the world we see around us and humanity within it are expressions of the relatedness that characterizes all things... [W]e can thus affirm that God is relatedness."¹³ In Him all things live and move and have their being¹⁴ - and as the First Epistle of John affirms, that very being is relationship, is Love.¹⁵

God the Child

There is a chant from the Ecumenical Monastic Community of Taizè that runs: "Come and fill our hearts with your peace, you alone O God are holy." At one of the morning prayer practices I led for two years at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, a Unitarian Universalist colleague asked if we could change the line to "you *and all your world* are holy." Honestly, I like it better that way. If God is indeed a loving Creator, and relationship is necessary to love, then what is She in love with? Her Creation, of course. The Book of Genesis makes the bold claim that not only is God the Creator, but also that God's Creation is *tov*, that is, *good* - *tov meod* in fact, *very good*. And as the Hebrew prayer I mentioned earlier affirms, Creation was not a single discrete act that occurred once and for all with the Big Bang. The God of my experience

¹¹ Brian Swimme, *The Universe Is a Green Dragon: A Cosmic Creation Story* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Company, 1984): 36 (emphasis original).

¹² The Lakota band centered around the Rosebud Indian Reservation in SD.

¹³ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1999): 103.

¹⁴ Acts 17:28.

¹⁵ 1 John 4:8.

is no watchmaker, who winds up the Universe and then steps disinterestedly back; He is intimately involved in the ever-unfolding process of Creation.

God's love is revealed most clearly in Creation, in the simple, astounding fact that there is something rather than nothing! How many times have you watched the sun set over the prairie and known, with your soul if not with your brain, that here is the still-burning afterglow of the fireball that birthed the Universe? How many times have you stood before an ancient redwood or a newly-budding sapling and heard, with your soul if not with your ears, the words of the HOLY ONE to Moses in the Burning Bush: "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground"?¹⁶ How many times have you delighted in shared food, in shared drink, in shared song, in shared loving touch, and experienced in spirit and in truth the Psalmist's invitation to "taste and see that the HOLY ONE is good"?¹⁷ Or to frame it from the other side: how many times have you seen devastating photographs of the Alberta Tar Sands, of clear-cut rainforests, of refugee boats floating across the Mediterranean, and felt Creation groaning for the redemption that Paul speaks of in his Letter to the Romans?¹⁸ Mine is at root a creation spirituality, that is to say, *panentheism*: "God is in everything and everything is in God."¹⁹ For in the words of cosmologist Brian Swimme, "we are enveloped by a universe that is a single energetic event, a whole, unified, multiform, and glorious outpouring of being."²⁰

God the Spirit

St. Augustine of Hippo argues that there are three components to any loving relationship: the Lover (the one who loves), the Beloved (the recipient of love), and Love itself (the dynamic

¹⁶ Ex 3:5.

¹⁷ Ps 34:8.

¹⁸ Rom 8:19-23.

¹⁹ Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality* (Sante Fe, NM: Bear & Company, 1983): 90.

²⁰ Swimme, *The Universe Is a Green Dragon*: 40.

Spirit that links the two in relationship).²¹ The Loving Creativity that ignited the Big Bang is at work today every bit as much as it was 14 billion years ago – and *we* get to participate, in all our glorious human smallness and diversity, in the work of Creation. For as the Book of Genesis puts it, we are “created in [God’s] image.”²² And what does it mean to be created in the image of a Creator if not that we are recipients of the Spirit of Love and Creativity itself?

Now, I am convinced that all of Creation bears the imprint of its Maker’s face, from the simplest single-cell organism to the grandest galaxy. But humans would appear to have the unique ability among the created things of which we are aware, in degree if not in kind, to ourselves *create*, to imagine a thing and then call it into being. Perhaps we cannot summon an entire cosmos *ex nihilo* (“out of nothing”) as can the HOLY ONE. But if God is in all and all is in God, then we too carry that Divine Spark. We are what J.R.R. Tolkien calls *sub-creators* who “make still by the law in which we’re made,”²³ co-creators with the Divine. As Swimme puts it, “The universe has unfolded to this point. It has poured into you the creative powers necessary for its further development.”²⁴ Love we are and to Love we shall ultimately return; and while we live, we have been blessed with the opportunity to participate, as beloved Children, in what Father Richard Rohr calls the Divine Dance of the Spirit.

When I say that humans are beloved sub-creators, I am not simply talking about what are often referred to as the “creative arts” here, although certainly those are included: music, art, literature, poetry, sculpture, dance. Indeed, for many of us (for me, certainly!) they are the places where we experience the Holy Spirit most obviously and immediately. But they are far from the

²¹ Augustine of Hippo, “On the Trinity,” trans. Arthur West Haddan, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 3., ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1887), XI.2, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1301.htm>.

²² Genesis 1:27.

²³ J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 54.

²⁴ Swimme, *The Universe Is a Green Dragon*,

only possible expressions of Divine Creativity. The carpenter who calls forth a table from uncarved wood is no less a creator than the composer who calls forth a symphony from sound and silence, the mother bearing a child in her womb no lesser artist than the novelist bearing a story in her head. Being human is a constant process of invention and re-invention, of interacting with God's Creation and thereby transforming the world and ourselves. And relationship is the ultimate creative act, the place where the lines between Lover and Beloved become blurred and Love Itself can become incarnate.

For as New Thought theologian Neale Donald Walsch reminds us, we have been blessed with the ability to engage in the most profound act of creativity possible: the creation of our very selves.²⁵ We are “children of the Most High, all of us,”²⁶ and as such we have the incredible freedom to choose who we want to be. We are invited not only to *be* the Children of God, but to *experience ourselves* as that, to actively choose our True Selves and participate with God in our becoming. Therein lies our greatest gift... and simultaneously our greatest temptation.

The Great Sin: Forgetfulness

The words commonly translated as *sin* in the Bible (Greek *hamartia*, Hebrew *hata*) literally mean “missing the mark.” Sin is not an inborn state of depravity – how could God's good Creation be inherently flawed? That said, I do believe that Creation is a work-in-progress. We are *tov meod* (very good), but not yet *tamim* (perfect, or rather “complete, whole”); like a tomato on the vine, we have not yet come to full ripeness. That does not change that we are in God, and that God is in us, and that we have been given the awe-inspiring gift of co-creation

²⁵ Neale Donald Walsch, *Conversations with God: An Uncommon Dialogue, Book 1* (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1995), 26-27.

²⁶ Psalm 82:6.

with God through the Spirit. But it does mean that we make mistakes, miss the mark, “fall short of the glory of God.”²⁷ And the single greatest mistake we can make is to forget Who We Are.

Rabbi Michael Lerner, one of the San Francisco Bay Area’s foremost spiritual activists, taught me that the *mitzvot* of the Hebrew Bible are phrased, not in the imperative, but rather in the future indicative: not *thou shalt not* but rather *you will not*. They are not commandments so much as descriptions of what it looks like when we live actively in communion with the HOLY ONE. When we are in right relationship with God—when we remember that we are Their beloved Children, all of us—we will not kill, will not steal, will not oppress. We will create ourselves in the image of our Creator: loving, compassionate, merciful. When we aren’t in communion with God, however—when we forget—when we create from a place of fear, of ego (the “false self” as Richard Rohr likes to call it), of disconnection from the Source of All That Is... that’s when things get messy.

We can abuse our God-given creativity just as surely as we can use it to incarnate God’s love in the world. If Hell exists, it consists in precisely this: the exercise of our god-like powers in a way that denies the truth of our relatedness. For example, as a person of German heritage, I am very proud of my ancestors: from composers like Beethoven to scientists like Einstein, from mystics like Hildegard of Bingen to witnesses for justice like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we have given the world some amazing examples of Love and Creativity. And yet the very same culture that gave us such giants also gave us the Holocaust. That great catastrophe of human history required the exercise, on the grand scale, of our capacity to create, to transform – and it required collective amnesia on the grand scale too. Could there be any more spectacular misuse of God’s gifts than such mechanization and systematization of cruelty and hatred?

²⁷ Rom 3:23.

We don't have to look to the scale of genocide to caution us against the dangers of forgetfulness though. For instance, I have only too often bought my own stories of smallness and not-enoughness about myself, believing that if only I can be this, if only I can achieve that, *then* I will finally be acceptable in the eyes of others and of God. Too often I am blind to the truth of Grace: that I can never earn God's love, that I am blessed and loved simply virtue of being alive. Too often I create my reality from that place of fearfulness, projecting my insecurities onto others. It is my belief that self-hate and systemic oppression spring from the same basic source, our forgetfulness of what it really means to be human. If we knew that we are loved, that we are Love, we would not feel the need to do violence to others or ourselves. And so we need something—someone—to remind us, to bring us back into right relationship.

Jesus: The Great Reminder

St. Irenaeus famously wrote that “God became a human being in order that human beings might become God.”²⁸ For me, that radical, surprising, infuriating Jewish carpenter and prophet Jesus of Nazareth gives us the blueprint for a life lived fully in the Spirit, a vision of Love in the Flesh.²⁹ And as the Prologue to the Gospel of John further tells us, Jesus did what he did, became who he became, in order that all of us might have “power to become Children of God,”³⁰ not just in ontological fact but in lived experience. Jesus models what it looks like to live in the full consciousness of our identity as the Beloved of God – and in so doing reminds us Who We Are and enables us to become our full selves “in Christ” too.

So what does it look like to live in the Spirit as Jesus did? He tells us himself: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent

²⁸ Quoted in Fox, *Original Blessing*: 179.

²⁹ John 1:14.

³⁰ John 1:12.

me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."³¹ In the midst of an institutional religious culture that weaponized belonging and access to the Divine to create stark hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion, in the midst of a socio-political culture that co-opted human flourishing for Empire and exploitation, Jesus used his God-given creativity "to pluck up and to pull down" that which denies our Divine Childhood and "to build and to plant" that which affirms it.³² His was a ministry of healing and inclusion, of creating communities where the truth of God's love can be experienced in our very midst, of casting out the demons that keep us locked in our smallness. "For freedom Christ has set us free," Paul writes. "Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery"³³ – slavery to our doubts and our fears, slavery to our "false selves" and the false, oppressive systems we have called into being.

For what is Incarnation if not an affirmation that God—whom we have so often been conditioned to see as distant, domineering, even violent—is with us in our embodied human triumphs and human tragedies? What are Crucifixion and Resurrection, if not an affirmation shouted in the face of a fearful world that our small selves are not our True Selves? That Love is the underlying structure of reality? That not even the Empire publicly torturing an innocent man to death can stop new possibilities from being birthed? That nothing in all Creation can compromise our identity as the Beloved Children of God, not even death itself?³⁴ The Jesus Story is a myth in the truest sense, a scaffold for meaning and living that empowers us to tell our own stories in light of the Great Story of Life, Death, and Resurrection, a spiritual mnemonic device that helps us *remember*, and in so doing *recover*, Ourselves.

³¹ Luke 4:18-19.

³² Jeremiah 1:10.

³³ Galatians 5:1.

³⁴ Romans 8:38.

II. A Still-Speaking God, a Still-Speaking Church

The Church: A School for Remembering

“If anyone is in Christ,” Paul writes, “there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”³⁵ In the wake of Jesus’ death and Resurrection, the Church becomes the Body of the Christ in the world, called to carry on his work of building community and reconnecting people to themselves in our own time just as he did in his. As Christ “in his flesh... has broken down the dividing wall,”³⁶ so are we as the Body of Christ called to do the same: to heal the sick, to preach good news to the poor, to liberate the captives, to eat with the sinners, to comfort the mourners, to welcome the lonely, to tear down every illusory wall that separates us from one another, from God, and from ourselves.

This cannot be a purely individual effort – for it was by acting out the illusion of separateness that we got ourselves into most of our human predicaments in the first place. The Divine Spark is within each of us, and it is also *among* us, in our relationships to one another.³⁷ Truly the Church is there where two or more are gathered together,³⁸ for being the Church means *being-together*, living into the communion that is our birthright. The Kingdom of God³⁹ is a communal and an ecological project, and as such one that calls for many gifts, that in fact requires each one of us to come fully alive in our gifts.⁴⁰ The Church is where we learn how to do that, an experiential school of faith where we help each other recover and live into our highest Selves. If we are not saved together, we are not saved at all.

³⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:17.

³⁶ Ephesians 2:14.

³⁷ Luke 17:21. See also the Great Commandment, Mark 2:28-34.

³⁸ Matthew 18:20.

³⁹ I understand the Kingdom not only as a future state of union with God, but also that state of awareness, accessible here and now, where we are both connected to All That Is as well as consciously tapped into that connection.

⁴⁰ cf. 1 Corinthians 12.

Now, let me be clear: I believe that the Kingdom is far bigger than any one church, bigger even than Christianity. Jesus himself points at this, constantly inviting those who were viewed as “unsaved” or “un-savable” to dine with him at God’s banquet⁴¹ and saying that “not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven.”⁴² And certainly in my personal experience, I have met atheists, Muslims, Sikhs, Pagans, etc. who are much more faithful Christians (in the sense of *followers in the way of Christ*) than many of us who claim the label! No, I find it impossible to believe that the Love of All Loves could leave *anybody* out, that the infinitely creative Maker of All That Is could only come up with one path to reach Her. Thus the Body of Christ is “the fullness of him who fills all in all”⁴³ – a cosmic reality, not to be confined to any one provisional human community or any one religious vocabulary.

As a living, breathing, cosmic project, the Church is also ever-evolving; the forms of church with which we are most familiar aren’t necessarily coterminous with the Church-with-a-capital-C, nor the only (or even most desirable!) forms for spiritual community in our time. “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places,”⁴⁴ Jesus tells us; in the Body of Christ, there are as many members as there are communities, each of them uniquely gifted to en flesh God’s love in the world in their own particular way. The Body is thus grander, more encompassing, more *creative* than any one tradition could ever be, even one as deep and as wide as ours.

God Is Still Speaking: The United Church of Christ

And yet the fact remains that, in our daily living, we *need* community, however provisional; we experience the reality of our cosmic connectedness in the mundanity of shared life. Just as Jesus incarnated the Word of God in the fully human form of a wild-eyed,

⁴¹ Luke 14:15-24.

⁴² Matthew 7:21.

⁴³ Ephesians 1:27.

⁴⁴ John 14:2.

temperamental Jewish storyteller and healer in the very specific, terribly messy context of first-century Palestine, so are we invited to co-incarnate the Word of God in our own specific, messy lives and communities... which brings me to the United Church of Christ. I didn't find my way to the UCC because I did a bunch of research and reasoned that it was the "best" of all the possible denominations I could join; I found my way to the UCC because the local congregation in Vermillion, SD was the imperfect, transformative community I needed in the place I happened to be at the time. My journey with the wider church has converted me to the UCC writ large, warts and all, and I have come to see us not merely as the denomination to which my home congregation happens to belong but also as a body of which I am proud to be a member.

The reason I call the UCC home can be summed up in two words: *autonomy* and *covenant*. Each member of the local congregation has the freedom of conscience to listen to the prompting of the Divine that lives and breathes in them – and, at the same time, they covenant with the entire congregation to live and practice together and to be responsible to one another and to God. Likewise the denomination: “the autonomy of the Local Church is inherent and modifiable only by its own action,”⁴⁵ and yet “within the United Church of Christ, the various expressions of the church relate to each other in a covenantal manner. Each expression of the Church has responsibilities and rights in relation to the others, to the end that the whole church will seek God’s will and be faithful to God’s mission.”⁴⁶ This last clause is important: we set up this dynamic tension between autonomy and covenant in order to more fully live in communion with our God, the reason and end of all this self-knowledge and community-building in the first

⁴⁵ United Church of Christ, “The Constitution of the United Church of Christ” (Cleveland OH, amended July 2017): V.18, accessed 29 December 2017: <http://uccfiles.com/pdf/Constitution.pdf>.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, III.6.

place. The very structure of the UCC reflects the Great Commandment to be in right relationship with God, with our neighbors, and with ourselves.

This generative (if pesky!) dialectic between autonomy and covenant, liberty and relationship, the individual and the communal, is a necessary product of our history. In order to bring the Evangelical & Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches together in 1957—especially when they were both already ecumenical projects themselves—there had to be a way to honor the diversity of belief and practice among our churches while recognizing our fundamental unity. Our answer? Congregational polity, which had held that tension for generations going back to our Dissenting forefathers and -mothers. Decision-making power lies in the democratic practice of the local congregation, and yet in our covenantal relationships with one another and with God, we are held responsible to something larger than ourselves. Thus we can say that “the United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole Head, Jesus Christ,” and yet also affirm “the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God.”⁴⁷

This is why I feel so at home in the UCC. We are the inheritors of a long, rich tradition—several long, rich traditions in fact!—and we take those traditions seriously, from the Bible to the insights of the Protestant Reformers to the heritages of our original constitutive denominations and beyond. And then, having taken them seriously, we are invited to make them our own, to creatively appropriate the belief and practice of our ancestors and re-incarnate the Word in new contexts. If the Church is to be a site of a New Creation’s unfolding, then our particular church provides, right here in its foundational document, a framework for conscious, connected co-creativity with God—for uniqueness and creative audacity—for community that pushes the

⁴⁷ Ibid., Preamble.2.

boundaries of what Church has been and can be. I think of Mira Vista UCC (MVUCC), the congregation I've served for three years now in El Cerrito, CA. In many ways we are an “ordinary,” aging congregation – not always thought of as innovators in contemporary Protestantism. And yet our people are in the process of using the money from the sale of their building to start a coffee shop *cum* pay as you can restaurant *cum* community arts space. The UCC is far from the only denomination that encourages that kind of missional creativity, but we are (or should be!) uniquely open to it. As we are so rightly fond of saying, *God is still speaking* – and They still have a lot to say, so who are we to limit the possibilities?

Thus we have a denomination where the Biblical Witness Fellowship can coexist with City of Refuge, a queer, radically progressive, Black Pentecostal UCC in Oakland CA. *That is so cool!* I may have very strong theological and political opinions that are not shared by my colleagues, or even my own congregants—about racism, for instance, or economic inequality, or sacred sexuality, or Biblical interpretation—but I believe that is a *good* thing. It is for me the key to what it means to be a united and uniting church: we neither preach nor practice uniformity, but rather union, recognizing the golden thread of the Divine that runs through all our site-specific embodiments of spiritual community. It's not what we believe that unites us; it's the way we “do church,” our stumbling but ongoing attempt to live into Jesus' prayer that we might all be one.⁴⁸

The Sacraments: “Do This and Remember”

Talking of unity and diversity, there have been fewer more divisive issues in the history of Christianity, ironically enough, than the sacraments. In the UCC, at least we only have Baptism and Communion to fight over! It's no surprise to me that a faith that looks to the human Jesus and to the earthy Hebrew tradition would sacralize the simplest of natural elements: bread, wine,

⁴⁸ John 17:21.

water. In my religious theater work, my writing partner Aaron Eaves and I frequently talk about “drawing the magic circle.” Through the use of prayer and ritual, song and sacred storytelling, we take the “profane” and make it sacred – or rather, recognize anew the sacredness that was always there. The sacraments are the means by which the Church “draws the magic circle.” We don’t just *talk* about union with Christ and with one another: we share a meal, so that we can *feel* the bread and wine, the Body and Blood of Creation, becoming a part of us. We don’t just *talk* about new birth, whether the birth of a child or somebody’s being “born anew” into community; we let them feel that age-old symbol of life and transformation, water, running over their skin, washing away the old and making room for the new.

As I say, the great human sin is forgetfulness. I believe in the sacraments therefore not only as invitations into the *mystery* of communion but also as *memorials* in a quite literal sense. It is as Jesus says: “do this in remembrance of me,”⁴⁹ remembrance of not only of Who I Am but Who You Are too. The sacraments recall to us the fact that, for Jesus and those first disciples who shared the Last Supper, the future was every bit as uncertain as the future is for us today – and the potential for Resurrection just as real. By reconnecting us to the sacredness at the core of all things, they interrupt those systems of domination and despair that would turn our lives into a mechanistic process in which we are the objects of our stories rather than their subjects. They reconnect us to the truth that there is no plot development so dire that the Divine cannot enter in, a grammar with which we tell that Story in which there are no periods, only commas.

⁴⁹ Luke 22:19.

3. My Faith Journey & Call to Ministry

When Abraham set out on the pilgrimage of trust that got this wild tradition of ours rolling, God told him, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”⁵⁰ The teacher and storyteller at the synagogue I attend in Berkeley, Maggid Jhos Singer, translates that first command as it is actually written in the Hebrew: *lekh lekha*, “Go, go to yourself.”⁵¹ My journey as a Member in Discernment in the UCC, and in a larger sense as a person of faith, has been precisely that: a pilgrimage to the Promised Land of myself. And it has led me to the truth that ministry is not merely a career for me, something I want to do or would be good at; it is the deep expression of Who I Am and Who I Want to Be.

I never set out in life with the goal of becoming a minister. Born in Deadwood, South Dakota, I was raised noncommittal Catholic and spent most of my adolescence and early adulthood as an agnostic-bordering-on-atheist. At various times in my young life I wanted to be a high school social studies teacher, a writer, a rock ‘n roll singer, an elected official, a college professor, and a peace activist. The first time the idea of ministry crossed my mind was when I met the pastor of my home congregation, the Rev. Steve Miller. He showed me that you could be a person of faith and still be thoughtful, that you could ask the Big Questions and find meaning in the common search, even when you don’t have the answers. Perhaps most importantly, though, he showed me the difference that one life can make in the life of a community.

So it was that when I volunteered to lead a prayer service in the manner of Taizé at the University of South Dakota (USD) in September 2012, Steve attended the service and half-jokingly told me afterward: “You can forget the PhD in Political Science, Tom, we’re sending

⁵⁰ Genesis 12:1.

⁵¹ ELI Talks, “Go, Go to Yourself: Personal Story as Spiritual Practice,” video, 19:10, 8 December 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RthJg85O8vw>.

you to PSR!” – that is, the Pacific School of Religion, the seminary he attended in Berkeley, CA. The more I thought about it, though, the more it made sense. Suddenly it became possible for me to do *all* the things I had always wanted to do! In addition to recently finding UCC Vermillion, I was also working as a volunteer leader for Taizé Pine Ridge, a gathering for prayer and interracial healing on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation – all while trying to figure out what to do with my life after graduating from USD. For many reasons, ministry seemed a natural fit.

My experience in Spring 2013, co-leading Taizé Pine Ridge with my Native friends at the same time as I was doing the soul-work of processing my parents’ divorce when I was eleven and coming to terms with my little brother being transgender, sealed the deal. Singing along with five hundred other young people, Native and non-Native alike, words that in Lakota mean “I do not understand your ways, O God, but You know the way for me” under a rising moon on the Badlands of South Dakota, I could feel my past being transformed even as I saw the first halting steps toward reconciliation being taken all around me. I call this my “Resurrection Experience,” the first time I realized, experientially as well as intellectually, that pain and heartbreak—personal or social—are *not* the end of the story. It convinced me that the creation of communities of meaning and belonging, communities where healing can *actually* happen, was what I was supposed to do with my life.

Thus, in July 2014, after serving for a year as Assistant Minister for Worship & Education at UCCV, I packed my bags for Berkeley to pursue my Master of Divinity at PSR.⁵² In doing so, I left behind not only my home state but also my marriage, which had fallen apart as my newly-discovered calling clashed with my ex-wife picking up the pieces when both of her parents died unexpectedly within six months of one another. (Fortunately, Teniesha and I are still good

⁵² As of writing, I am in my final semester, set to graduate in May 2018.

friends.) On my own in Berkeley, I rediscovered myself as an artist, an identity I had suppressed for years to focus on what I thought were “more important” things like activism, teaching, and community-building, but which is now absolutely central to my sense of myself as a minister and as a human being. In addition to being a full-time student and serving part-time at Mira Vista UCC, first as Minister-in-Training and more recently as Associate Minister for Worship Arts, I wrote theological poetry, composed worship songs, and produced and performed spiritual theater. I also became highly involved in creating community among residential students at PSR, leading morning prayer services in the manner of Taizé, coordinating community meals, and exploring possibilities in intentional living with my fellow students.

If that sounds like a lot, that’s because it was – too much, in fact. For even as my creative work reconnected me with a vital part of my *Imago Dei* self, it also brought me face-to-face with my own limitations. In August 2017, after six weeks of insomnia, I voluntarily spent a week at a psychiatric hospital for exhaustion. After a lifetime of basing my self-worth in what I could *do*, what I could *produce*, I had forgotten how to simply *be*. I was not being a good steward of the Creation I am – and I burned out.

I do not understand your ways, O God, but You know the way for me. And it *does* seem appropriate to me, synchronistic even, that my recovery has coincided with the final stages of my discernment. These last months have seen me slowing down and taking stock. They’ve seen me working hard to re-learn how to take care of myself – which has meant a lot of spiritual practice, therapeutic support, and focusing on what’s most important to me. They’ve also seen me reconnecting to my ecological self, and to the natural world of which I am such an intimate part (hiking is my foremost spiritual practice, alongside singing). And you know what? I have never felt happier and more integrated in my life. I feel as though I have been given a once-in-a-

lifetime opportunity to reflect deeply on who I feel called to become in the fullness of Who I Am, broken as well as blessed, wounded as well as gifted.

Henry Nouwen writes, “our brokenness reveals something about who we are. Our sufferings and pains are not simply bothersome disruptions of our lives; rather, they touch in our uniqueness and our most intimate individuality.”⁵³ Pain is no less a part of being created in the Image of God than is joy. I was born in the Black Hills of South Dakota, a child of colonialism, and I carry that complexity in my very body, forged as it is from the bones of what the Lakota call the Heart of All That Is. As a child I experienced terrible loneliness and struggled with social anxiety. I carried psychic pain and a deep sense of “not-belonging” out of my parents’ divorce and subsequently overinvested myself in romantic relationships like my own unsuccessful marriage, imagining that a partner could “take the pain away.” After a lifetime of chronic overperformance I found myself at the edge of a nervous breakdown last summer. I am more aware of my imperfections than anybody. But I have found that when I have honored my pain and my imperfections as integral parts of who I am, when I have been able to trust that my fears and my history do not define me, then they are transformed. Somehow, my wounds are weaknesses no longer but a source of strength and blessing,⁵⁴ enabling to me feel empathy for others and motivating me to build the kind of communities where people feel like they belong, where there is always hope, where God loves us no matter what. Or to put it another way, no Easter without Good Friday – isn’t that what Resurrection is all about?

In my journey to myself, I have come to realize the truth of the oft-quoted statement that “the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger

⁵³ Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993), 71.

⁵⁴ 2 Corinthians 12:19.

meet.”⁵⁵ I’m thinking of a moment when Aaron and I performed one of our worship dramas at Peace UCC in Santa Cruz CA in July 2016. After the service, we got the two best reviews we have ever received. A seven-year-old girl came up to us and squealed, “That was the best church I’ve ever been to!!” Then a sixty-five-year-old woman walked up in tears and said, “I’ve had a relationship with God the Father and God the Spirit before, but never with Jesus – until today.” Or I’m thinking of going to visit sick parishioners at Mira Vista, to make music or read poetry with them, and having them tell me later how much it meant to them. Or I’m thinking of how, in these past months, I have been able to use my recovery to normalize the struggles of multiple friends and parishioners and help them access the resources they need.

I share these anecdotes not to make myself sound any better than I actually am, but to illustrate a point whose truth it has taken me my whole life thus far to realize: my greatest act of service to my community is living into my true self, brokenness and all. When we are fully ourselves, imperfect yes but striving to get a little better each day, we give others permission to do the same; and when others are fully themselves, they give *us* permission in return. It’s what Jesus was trying to teach us all along, I think: we can only be our True Selves *together*.

That is why I am called to congregational ministry in the United Church of Christ. If the primary human vocation is to become ourselves, then my vocation is to become myself in the *service* (the Latin meaning of *ministry*) of a community. Bearing that in mind, any ministry I undertake will necessarily be a ministry of creativity. I believe I can say without hyperbole that I am an exceptional musician, writer, preacher, and worship leader. These are big gifts I have to offer any congregation – and there is nothing that brings me greater joy than knowing that my gifts have been of service to others. But I don’t mean a “ministry of creativity” in an “artistic”

⁵⁵ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 118-119.

sense only. Whether preaching or teaching, singing prayers at a bedside or singing songs of protest in the streets, in many ways I see the pastoral role as that of *storyteller*: empowering others to see their own stories through the eyes of faith and to find the hope to create new possibilities. I have been told that this is my gift not only as a public figure but as a counselor and spiritual companion as well: being able to listen to people's stories about themselves and their world and help them tell new ones. Moreover, I believe my creative passion for emerging spiritual community will serve the Church well in the twenty-first century as we move forward into a "post-Christian" world, one in which the forms and structures that served our ancestors are having to be rethought and reclaimed, in which our long-accustomed ways of "doing church" aren't feeding people the way they once did, in which identification with a particular tradition's story is increasingly less important than living into the Great Story itself.

At my Member-in-Discernment interview in 2016, when the Committee on Ministry heard my passion for emerging community and the arts, they asked me, "Do you believe you need to be ordained for this work?" It was a good question, one I've sat with for two years. Now I can answer with full confidence: *yes I do*. Because both of those passions are contained under, and brought to fullness in, my calling to pastoral ministry. Ordination is the necessary third leg of the vocational trinity, the affirmation of the call *by others*, because my responsibility as a minister is not only to God, nor only to myself. I am called to serve not just "others" in the abstract but rather to serve a *particular community*, affirmed and authorized by *them* to do this work. Likewise, mine is a call to a *particular tradition*: the United Church of Christ, where we actively work to balance covenant and autonomy, where we remain connected to our tradition without idolizing it, where trust in the still-speaking God is part and parcel of our identity.

So, let's get particular. I envision myself as the pastor of a mid-size, multigenerational congregation – big enough to be dynamic, but not so big that we can't know each other by name. One of the great gifts of Church is that we bring together people from all stages of life to support and care for one another in joy and in struggle, from baptisms to weddings to funerals and beyond. And I feel called to work with all age groups, to nurture true “families of faith” through worship, education, the arts, community-building, and justice work. My experience up to this point has prepared me for precisely this kind of “generalized” ministry: I received the Harry S. Truman Scholarship for my passion for peace education and directed an interfaith social justice nonprofit. I coordinated a campus ministry at the University of South Dakota, co-led youth groups at UCC Vermillion, and served as program director for a multi-generational camp two summers in a row. I have sat at bedsides with the dying and I have co-officiated at weddings. I have led creative worship and preached for an aging community as they dreamed a new beginning for themselves, and I have sat in on the budget meetings where such dreams meet reality. I have served as an Associate Minister for Worship Arts and have gotten to hear my songs sung and see my plays performed in churches throughout Northern California. I lived in multiracial intentional community in Pine Ridge, and I spent my seminary years in Berkeley exploring innovative ministries with my colleagues.

I freely admit that I have plenty to learn – for instance, I am on a constant journey of working with my intersecting White, cis-male, and middle-class privileges. Likewise, administration will never be my strong suit. *And* I am confident in my ability to do this work and do it well, to help diverse communities live into the best of what Church can be, creating new forms of justice-seeking, stranger-welcoming community that go beyond the walls (physical and otherwise) that have heretofore bounded our imaginations.

Moreover, and even more concretely, I see myself serving a congregation in the Midwest, maybe even back in South Dakota. I am open to living and serving in other places, of course, to going where God calls me next. But my loyalties ultimately lie with the people and the land who will always be Home; and I know that wherever my journey takes me, my heart will always long to come back. As Rev. Dr. Melinda McLain, the head pastor at Mira Vista, told me recently, “There are a lot of bearded young progressives in Northern California, Tom. We’d love to keep you – *and*, you will be able to make such a huge difference in a community back home or somewhere like it.” The Hero’s Journey does not end when she finishes her adventure, when she has triumphed over her obstacles and acquired her new powers; it ends when she returns to the village to share what she has learned, to share Who She Has Become.

In a little college town in South Dakota, I found UCC Vermillion, a congregation that affirmed this small-town kid’s inherent worth and value as a Child of God and believed in me even when I couldn’t believe in myself. That showed me what just, compassionate, inclusive community looks like. That modeled cross-religious and cross-cultural hospitality and stood as a beacon of progressive, soul-nurturing spirituality in our community. I had never known anything like that before. And I know that I am ultimately called to return to my corner of the world and give back what I have been given, to believe in others the way so many have believed in me, to co-create *that* kind of community. So that the next time a Tom Emanuel comes along, looking for a place to belong—whatever his race, sexual orientation, gender, class, country of origin, or religious background—s/he can find what I found at UCCV and continue to find in our wider Church. And *that* is why I am called to ordained ministry in the United Church of Christ.

Thank you for reading, and may the God of many faces and many names, the God whose Beloved Children we are, bless you now and in all your days to come. *Amen.*