

From Despair to Gratitude

By Lana Castle

Had anyone told me seven years ago that I'd not only join a church but resonate with one powerfully, I'd have been extremely skeptical. I'd led a mostly secular life and avoided religious types for decades. I was so church-averse I found it nearly impossible to sit through a wedding, a funeral or a family reunion sing-along with an old Methodist hymnal. Organ music in particular disturbed me. Hymns brought guilty tears and racking despair. More than once, I'd slipped out of a pew and waited out a service in a restroom, never fully able to comprehend my pain. But in recent years, Unity has become my life's blood.

Although my parents had insisted that my sisters and I attend Sunday school and join them for the adult services that followed, I felt terribly out of place. I experienced our large family church as cold and uninviting, and the congregation as judgmental and superficial. To me, the music from the massive floor-to-ceiling pipe organ seemed better suited for a horror movie than for a sanctuary. For years, my nightmares revolved around wandering lost in the church basement, accompanied by that organ's wails.

My Grandmother Lehman's little wooden church in Guthrie, Oklahoma, was somewhat friendlier but still left me feeling out of place. I didn't know the other children and was too shy to make any friends. But, when visiting Grandmother, church attendance was mandatory. Mother's family had its fair share of ministers, and the other relatives on her side are quite devout. On visits after I left home for college and adulthood, my Great Aunt Jeannette always asked what church I'd been attending. My answer of "none" never failed to baffle her.

I found many aspects of religion contradictory, confusing or downright horrifying. By the age of five, I'd concluded I was damned to hell. I had not only lied on occasion but had often wished my father dead. His demands and abusive language terrified me, and I could not forgive the dreadful ways he treated us. *With sins as great as mine, I could never receive God's gift of redemption.* I was surely doomed. When at night I said the famed child's prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep," I altered the ending and begged the God who never answered to please end my life.

My few attempts to read the Bible, of which I knew little more than the stories my family read each Christmas, ended miserably. I'd start and restart with Genesis and get bogged down in all the begatting. A time or two, I tried my fundamentalist sister's recommendation of starting with Revelations but was unable to relate.

I couldn't buy into literal interpretations, especially when recounts from the Bible's different authors seemed to conflict.

What I'd learned about Jesus had made sense: Love your neighbor, be peaceful and forgiving, even turn the other cheek. But his message of love was confusingly contrary to hymns about "onward Christian soldiers marching as to war." If Christians were so loving, why would they be at war?

In my late teens, I worked several summers at a Camp Fire Girls camp. One year, a fellow counselor introduced me to the Quaker faith. I found their philosophy of nonviolence, their commitment to social service and their concept of equality refreshing. The belief that a divine light shines forth from every individual intrigued me as well. Following a divorce from my first husband in my 20s, I attended several Quaker meetings (by then known as the Society of Friends). I felt more at home in that small community of pleasant, intelligent people, though calming my mind enough to sit through their hour-long silent services was challenging. I enjoyed the camaraderie of their 'eating meetings' — the potlucks that followed their service once a month. I quit going, however, when a divorced man I'd befriended there began pursuing me relentlessly with the idea of marrying me.

A couple of decades passed during which I attended no church at all. My current husband, Ralph, grew up Catholic and had even been a member of a Catholic teaching order for nine years. That felt *incredibly* strange when we first began dating! He'd left the brotherhood disillusioned with the Catholic faith and was a committed agnostic by the time we met. Although he's still not interested in attending church, he's very supportive of my involvement.

I first heard about Unity from a dynamic young woman named Glenda Pittard. We'd crossed paths when I was in my late 40s. Glenda exuded a magnetic aura of enthusiasm, energy and light. I'd never met such a genuinely happy, positive, loving person. I wanted what she had! She invited me to attend a picnic at her east Austin Unity church. I declined, but the notion stuck with me. It took several years for me to follow through.

When I met Glenda, I was deeply entrenched in the mental health community, active in the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance and certified to teach suicide prevention. I'd sought Glenda's promotional assistance for a book I'd written: a layman's guide to bipolar disorder, including medical information,

written from an ordinary patient's perspective. The other bipolar books back then were either technical texts written by psychiatrists or memoirs written from celebrities affected by the disorder.

My book was surprisingly successful. Readers easily identified with me, so word-of-mouth traveled fast. I'd struggled with bipolar disorder and near-constant suicidal thinking for decades. During one depressive episode in my 30s, my stepson concluded, "You don't really want to live at all, do you?" It broke my heart to have to truthfully answer No. Whatever light I'd had inside as a child had burned down to a smoldering ember.

I'd struggled with a smorgasbord of physical ailments after nearly dying as an infant and had been a walking pharmacy ever since. All through my 40s and far into my 50s, my identity revolved around illness and being the 'bipolar posterchild' of Texas.

Several others in my family struggled with mental illness too. After my dear eldest sister Barbara's suicide, I'd become obsessed with informing others about bipolar disorder and trying to help those 'walking the tightrope' between depression and mania better manage their lives.

When I came to Unity, I had finally recovered from the trauma of Barbara's death. However, I was grieving and depressed from watching my beloved mother deteriorate over the nine long years that followed a devastating stroke. She was a couple of months away from passing. I was angry with God. *What had she done to deserve such suffering?* Many questions about Mother's impending death were troubling me. *Would loving hands lift her into the Heaven she so strongly believed in? Would she reconnect with my father, who had died of cancer 15 years before? Was there even a Heaven out there? Would Mother find eternal life?*

I was certain hell existed; after all, I'd experienced it many times. *But would the hell I'd wind up in after death be one of fire and brimstone? Would it be even worse than the hell I'd already known?* I was swimming in a soup of negativity and pain.

Coming through the archway in front of Unity Church of the Hills my first day was the first step on my journey of spiritual transformation. I remember well the friendly face of the parking lot attendant — a loving man I'd later come to know as John Boyden — waving me onto the grounds. When other smiling people welcomed me and ushered me through the open doors, I cautiously entered a foyer bustling with enthusiastic, laughing, hugging congregants. I thought, *Uh-oh.*

What sort of cult have I walked into? and Are all these people for real? Or is their 'happiness' just a front? It was so foreign to my experience. Yet at the same time, their love felt — well, genuine.

Remembering my friend Glenda, I proceeded warily into the sanctuary — a wonderful, spacious room with huge picture windows revealing the live oaks that surround the church and bathed by a near-blinding beam of light emanating from a skylight. I slipped into a back row and took a seat on the softly padded pew. A large unadorned wooden cross hung subtly on the back wall of the platform — an open platform with no alter or pulpit. Soon, a man stepped up, tapped a large glass bowl and traced its edge with a stick that caused the bowl to emit a low hum. Okay, that was different, a bit woo-woo for me but still not threatening.

The sanctuary quieted and a young man and woman stepped forward. With *extraordinary* voices, they began singing a beautiful song that spoke of hearing “the brush of angels’ wings” and seeing “glory on each face.” Tears began streaming down my face and I started to shake. Then the congregation rose and began singing the same song and greeting one another. Embarrassed by my tears and shaking, my first urge was to bolt. But I stayed and soaked up the loving acceptance and hugs I received in place of the pity and condescendence I’d expected.

Soon, a phenomenal band began playing a pulsing Latin rhythm. *At a church! Unbelievable!* Not long after, I learned that the pianist was Robert Skiles of Beto and the Fairlanes — my favorite salsa band for many years. People jumped to their feet to join in a song whose words were projected onto a large screen below the cross. They were clapping, dancing, waving their arms above their heads. Their enthusiasm was infectious. It felt as if I were in the midst of a tent revival.

After we sat down, a few announcements were made and someone led us in a few short affirmations. I was quite familiar with affirmations. I’d experienced their power and even written some myself, starting with the first I ever managed to believe: “I am *not* a piece of sh--.” Affirmations are helpful only to the extent that you believe them, and I could accept that I *was* a human being, even if not a very good one. I was determined to not repeat anything I couldn’t fully accept. I analyzed each affirmation offered and surprisingly found none I could object to, so I chimed in.

When the offering bag was passed, I was as usual, concerned about my paltry donation. I’ve always held my money close and spent it carefully because our budget had always been tight. I’ve been told I have a talent for “pinching a penny

until it screams,” and my husband is likewise quite frugal (much to our children’s disappointment). I had no idea how he would react to my tithing *10 percent* of the little I brought in. I noticed people placing their hands over the bags, silently blessing their contents before passing the bags down the aisle. When we said the offering blessing, I wondered how much I’d be pressured to give more. *Would I be bilked into giving away everything we owned?* But no such pressure came, and with great astonishment, I’ve discovered as I’ve given more, I’ve received so much more than I could have imagined.

I don’t recall a great deal else about that first service, but I do remember shouts of “Amen” and “Yes!” I felt strangely caught up rather than repulsed, as I might have been in the past. There was no talk of a judging God waiting to condemn me for my sins — just an unconditionally loving Spirit that valued everyone — *including me!*

The service ended with people standing, holding hands, swaying and then raising arms in unison at the end. The song we sang was “Let There Be Peace on Earth” — one that had always deeply touched my heart. I raised my arms along with them, not even wanting to let go. I’d finally found my spiritual home.

Unity has helped change my life from one I resented and often wanted to escape to one of absolute hope, joy and love. I feel so incredibly blessed to have found a source of spiritual nourishment that I lacked for far too long. Although I’ve been unable to attend that many classes, I’ve ‘osmosed’ Unity’s positive messages and now travel through my days with its uplifting music in my head. I’ve come to absolutely love those people who seemed too happy to be real when I first met them, and those who’ve followed over the years. At 62, my life has finally begun in earnest. You might say I’m now afflicted with Spirititis. I’m rekindling the fire inside and starting to allow my light to shine in the world. I am so, so eternally grateful for Unity.