

## EXPLAINING CHURCH

*This piece is part of a series of documents called "Dropped Stitches"—an attempt to recover some of the missing pieces in my relationship to my brother, Philip, as we entered our senior years. Although our inherited background was held in common, our responses to those influences differed. And almost all of our lives were led separately, he on the West Coast, and I in the Midwest or in New England. In my 80s, I initiated a series of conversations, to which he responded, using his computer. Only my side of this particular conversation is included here.*

The meaning of church has changed throughout my life. In our Northwood childhood, it was simply home to me. Daddy was in the pulpit, Mother in the pew with us. It was the climax of the week, not only for us, but for the village, it seemed. The church bell would toll Sunday morning early, calling the congregation to the corner where the church stood. Across the street stood the vestry building, where Sunday school took place after church. I only remember Christmas Sunday when we children performed a special pageant, after which we were given those coveted boxes of ribbon candy.

Worship services always began the same, singing "Holy, Holy, Holy." Teenage Donald Macomber made the organ accompaniment possible by diving into the narrow crevice behind the console to pump the bellows during the singing of each hymn.

It was a New England picture postcard life, a sleepy little stretch of Route 202 punctuated by church, post office, and a cluster of white clapboard houses with shutters.

Kansas City was a shock in more ways than one. Tabernacle Baptist, presided over by Pastor Jaudon, became our church home for the brief year we lived there. I only remember that Sunday school classes were assigned by age, rather than grade, placing me with children in a lower grade. Our class met in the boiler room, adding to the feeling of dislocation and dreariness.

Wheaton changed everything for our family. Serving a college community meant that College Church included the presence of professionally trained voices in the choir, and sermons that acknowledged the more nuanced intellectual background of the congregants. My Sunday school department was run by nationally known innovators in the field of Christian education.

The midwestern flavor of informality and warmth added a dimension missing in my New England experience. It affected our parents, as well, and was reflected in the way Dad approached one of his most satisfying pastorates—the Glen Ellyn Church nearby.

It was the Glen Ellyn Church, more than any other, that became "my church." I attended during the spiritually formative teen years of 12-17. Those were also the World War II years, which gave a close-knit character to the church experience for teenagers.

One by one, the young men of that community left for the armed services,

returning in uniform from time to time on leave. That was a war when the uniforms evoked strong pride; we were too young to know war's horrors. No television brought the images into our living rooms. I knit squares for afghans, recycled newspapers and tin cans, made a Social Studies scrapbook of headlines detailing the progress of the war. We hung a flag with blue stars in our sanctuary, praying that none would turn to gold.

So, brother, you began dating openly when you started college. I got one opportunity to observe you one Sunday evening. You had brought Pat, a college freshman, to the service, and had elected the more romantic option of walking the two miles back home to campus rather than riding with our family in a car. We were coming along College Avenue close to the Wheaton border, when our headlights flashed full on you as you were shepherding Pat along the snowy banked highway. She was wearing high heels, skittering along propelled by your strong arm to protect her. Pat was brunette and beautiful. Later, she once told me she had some "wild days" in her freshman year; she remembered you. It did not surprise me that you were drawn to women with a certain dash.

After a year and a half at the church, you too enlisted in the Navy. as always, you were in church for a final "commissioning" before the congregation sent you off to war. Glen Ellyn would continue to be my home for four more years.

The end of the Glen Ellyn church experience was the end of an era for me. From that point on, my father was no longer my pastor. Through my college years, I was immersed in the spiritually saturated Wheaton world. Daily chapels became my church.

I have one memory of a weekend visit with you during that time when you were stationed at Great Lakes. I pondered what I should do about attending church on Sunday. I was feeling your resistance to what the church represented, and wanted to influence you in a spiritual direction. I mistakenly assumed that church was a helpful means to that end. It felt awkward to me, however, and not a direct sisterly expression of love. There had begun a subtle distance growing between us, and I interpreted this to relate to where I stood as a Christian. I could not pull apart my own feelings and those I absorbed from my parents, especially my mother.

With your daughter Janie between us in the front seat of your convertible, we toiled down the highway toward a church in Waukegan and back again. As we drove home, I ventured to start a conversation. I do not recall its substance now, but it surely had to do with your relationship to God and church (which I conflated in my mind). I was crying. Janie, her sympathetic eyes wide, asked, "Why is Eunice crying?" which made me even more weepy. As soon as we were in the apartment, she announced to her mom, "Eunice was crying." Her mom quickly dismissed the comment and shuffled Janie off with some distraction.

There it stood—the unnamable unspoken feeling like an alien presence in the room. I was passing judgment on you implicitly. I could not accept what was. My own experience of God was real, but it was cloaked in an artificial strait jacket that prevented me from being present to who you were—your wife, your child, your life.

I am so sorry. And I also forgive myself those moments. But I am also sad, as I see the distances we needed for a long time.

Thirty years later—when I had married and Don and I moved to Boston, we were persons without church ties. Elsewhere I have written about our Chicago peregrinations in several churches of various denominations and our despairing conclusion that we needed to take a vacation from church for a time. Our only connection was with an informal Mennonite gathering Sunday evenings in Cambridge, but that was not a permanent tie. We were adrift.

Instead, we found ourselves in another subculture—especially in Dorchester where we first lived, which is predominantly Roman Catholic. But the entire city was saturated with Catholic influence. Not all of it was inherently attractive, especially our encounters with a more raucous feisty brand of Irish Catholicism permeating our part of the city.

Somehow I managed to sidestep the land mines of Roman Catholic hierarchy and discovered quiet corners of liberated Catholic monks and nuns who began introducing me to the way of contemplation, a more mystical path. I hasten to say that I was not the best disciple for this mode, but I did find it refreshing and creative. It meant learning to listen to that inner voice of the *God Within*. They gave me a positive introduction to God the Beloved who seeks nothing less than union with us humans.

I began reading works by the Carmelites, a Roman Catholic order established in the sixteenth century by two remarkable persons—St. Theresa, a feisty Spanish lady whose instructions on the spiritual life read like a very harried person's diary jottings, and St. John of the Cross, the Spanish mystic who wrote almost erotic poetry of his yearning for God, as well as the better known opus on the "Dark Night of the Soul,"— a helpful accompaniment for anyone embarking on a spiritual journey.

Something about John's passionate poetry, an extrapolation of love poetry of The Song of Songs of Solomon spoke to me during some of the "dark nights" I experienced a couple of decades ago:

*Why, since You wounded  
This heart, don't You heal it?  
And why, since You stole it from me,  
Do You leave it so,  
And fail to carry off what You have stolen?*

*Extinguish these miseries,  
Since no one else can stamp them out;  
And may my eyes behold You,  
Because You are their light,  
And I would open them to You alone.*

*O spring like crystal!  
If only, on Your silvered -over face,  
You would suddenly form  
The eyes I have desired,  
Which I bear sketched deep within my heart.*

My forays into Catholic mysticism were closely linked with my stumbling into the Episcopalians. Don and I were directed to a little church on the back side of Beacon Hill—a mission of the monks of the Society of St. John the Evangelist in Cambridge. We stepped into the dimly lit sanctuary our first Sunday there, and were drawn by the atmosphere of reverence and devotion, which we attributed to the influence of the monks who presided over the liturgy. It was a cultural shift of some proportions, and Don had to admit that at one point, observing the extreme formality and decorum, that he thought he had stepped onto the set of a British comedy.

How shall I explain the way this mode of worship fit for me, actually for both of us? I had spent years in Protestant churches where the buzz of conversation is the prelude to worship, where the sermon—usually lengthy and impassioned, is the climax of the hour, and where the announcements are interjected in the middle, totally breaking the continuity of reverent attention. Here was a new way of viewing the function of the church gathered to worship. The climax toward which everything pointed was not the sermon, but the Eucharist celebration. The sermon, often called a homily, was short, always based on the text for the day. And we always read four passages—one from the Old Testament, a Psalm (usually sung), the Epistles, and the Gospels. The texts are part of a "lectionary" used by all Episcopalians and Anglicans around the world, and now have been adopted by some Protestant denominations as well. The hymns tend to be those of high musical quality, and we sing all the verses. Gone are the "gospel songs" of my childhood. though a few ethnically sensitive selections remain, primarily "spirituals" in recognition of African Americans among us.

Prayers are not spontaneous; being written, they tend to have richer content, more terse and provocative, encouraging me to pay attention to their subtleties. We sang the creed every week too, lest anyone accuse an Episcopalian of no longer believing anything (Episcopalians are famous for not believing everything they chant in church).

Mother came to church with me one Sunday just to see what heresy I was espousing. But she was hopelessly prejudiced against formal prayers, and the

starkness of a liturgy that seemed less genuine to her than the informal ways to which she had become accustomed. Walking up to the altar to take communion from a common cup, asking "Is it wine?" totally undid her.

So the Episcopal church is right for me, but not every Episcopal church, for there is considerable variety among congregations. The particular brand to which I was introduced is called Anglo Catholic, because it retains forms closer to Roman Catholicism. And again, I have steered clear of the more austere Anglo Catholic churches, some of which retain traditional opposition toward the ordination of women. The monastery in Cambridge where we worship is more flexible. Most notably, they openly support gays in the congregation and as clergy. After all, several of the monks are gay. And they encourage the ordination of women.

I despaired of ever finding a home in a church I could tolerate, so I have been deeply thankful for the monastery where both Don and I feel at home and nourished in head, heart, and soul. We don't want "fellowship," or to serve on committees, or to teach others, or to make decisions about money. It is a selfish choice, and one I recommend to anyone else who needs an experience of genuine worship.

For worship is what occurs there every week. Dependably. Beautifully. Simply. Meaningfully. Quietly. With decorum, good music, thoughtful brief sermons.