

An August Reflection

Good morning! My name is George and I am a recovering Southern Baptist.

When Michael asked me to speak today I accepted the invitation because to do otherwise would have been an act of ingratitude on my part. Each Sunday Michael offers a thoughtful, well-considered homily which never fails to challenge, to inspire, and to encourage. After laboring to produce this morning's presentation I now have a new and even fuller appreciation for what he does each week. I was also concerned that I might look into the mirror of my soul and find no reflection.

It is a challenge to offer a view into one's life, especially when that life is remarkable only for its absence of drama or suspense. An abbreviated version, the Hollywood pitch, of that ordinary life which led Joan and me to St. David's might read as follows:

A wife expresses at various times over the years an interest in participating in the life of a church. The husband is initially less enthusiastic with that plan but eventually agrees to get on board. The couple arrives at an Episcopal church for Sunday services, finds the experience uplifting, and returns on subsequent Sundays. .

That basic story actually tells everything about the path that led Joan and me to this community. But please indulge me as I attempt to add a little flesh to the bare bones of that outline.

All of us have experienced watershed events, moments that seem to divide our lives into some sense of a "before" and an "after". Our initial decision to visit St. David's was one such moment for Joan and me. Our first Sunday at St. David's occurred on Oct. 11, 2015. That date is easy to remember because attending worship services was at that time such an uncharacteristic behavior for us. Other than to witness the occasional wedding or to pay our respects at a memorial service, neither of us had frequented a church of any kind for many years.

Joan had mentioned her interest in St. David's on several occasions over the years of our marriage but I always held back. I think that it would be true to say that she has always felt a greater affinity with Christianity than has been my inclination. Although I was raised as a Christian, my family practiced in such a way that, at some time in my early life, religion began to feel coercive and claustrophobic. My early exposure to fundamentalism left me with a perception that religious faith could only be expressed as a rigid and unyielding certainty. Because my parents' faith proved to be such a poor fit I eagerly looked forward to attending college, not only for the educational opportunity it represented but also as a chance to say goodbye to the Baptist Church. By then I thought that I had seen enough of religion to last a lifetime.

Severing ties with the Baptist church felt by turns liberating and disorienting. At some intuitive level I still recognized the need for the guidance of spiritual beliefs, but I had no idea how such beliefs could be developed and not resemble the constraining practices that I had just abandoned. I was still laboring under the assumption that faith can only equal an absolute certainty. My search for a religious grounding led to a brief flirtation with Catholicism during the time I was in college and later while working with the Peace Corps in Paraguay but it ultimately concluded as a failed experiment. Although I never become a member of the Catholic Church there was much about its long tradition, its rituals, and its place in the history of western art that I found appealing.

Time and life march forward regardless of how well or how poorly we are prepared to meet its challenges, and the concept of faith continued to be a difficult hurdle for me to clear. But part of my good fortune in life has been to stumble onto authors who, serving as guides, seemed able to cast some light into the darker corners of my skepticism. One of the most helpful of these wiser heads has been the British religious historian Karen Armstrong. In an interview that I heard 10 or more years ago, I heard Armstrong make the statement that faith is not the same as certainty, a stark contradiction to what I had been taught to believe. As she explained it, faith needs doubt, for it is in the gap between the two that faith finds room to grow. I had never encountered an explanation like this before, or if I had, I was not yet prepared to appreciate its significance. Hearing Karen Armstrong speak about faith, in retrospect, signaled a change in my outlook and helped resolve my sense of religious estrangement.

New habits are hard to establish and old ones are resistant to change. During our marriage Joan and I had developed a comfortable Sunday morning routine of enjoying a long walk in the woods in the company of our dogs. Comfort is hard to abandon, and undertaking a new venture always carries with it the risk of failure or disappointment. But last October Joan and I finally gathered our courage, decided to act and to take a risk, and so we appeared at the doors of St. David's one Sunday morning.

Never having attended services here we thought it would be wise to arrive a little early so that we could slip in unnoticed and find seating. We were successful on the seating project, less so on going unnoticed. As we waited for services to begin Michael spotted us, sat down to introduce himself and extended a warm and sincere welcome. Joan and I both took comfort in the morning's service, even if we were unfamiliar with the liturgy and unaccustomed with some of the more aerobic aspects of Episcopal worship. The warmth with which we were received that day by Michael and by the members of the St. David's congregation is a large factor in explaining why Joan and I chose to become involved with the life of this extraordinary community.

St. David's has become an expansive spiritual home for us, one that allows for freedom of thought and one that encourages its members to probe and question. We feel that we have benefited enormously by our relationship with this congregation. It has been here that Joan and I were introduced to the practice of mindfulness, a means of learning to live more fully in the present moment. We have been able to cultivate and nurture new friendships and to renew and strengthen longstanding relationships. This church has

given us much, not least of which is the privilege of being able to accompany each of you along the path of a shared spiritual journey.

Because this is St. David's where poetry is so often a part of Sunday services I would like to end with a brief reading. Ben Bridgers was known as a friend to many of us here today, a man of great compassion whose recent death we continue to mourn. Perhaps less well known is the fact that he was, in addition to being an attorney, a poet. In his volume of poems entitled "Doors" Ben offers a series of prayers. Here is one of them:

O God

It is the end of a busy day.

I have squeezed every drop of every moment of this day
from before dawn to the moon's peak
and there is nothing left to do but lie on this bed
breathe deeply before I sleep
count my blessings
and be grateful
that today I have left no appointed task undone
nor frittered my time nor shirked my duty.

It has been a good day
As every day should be
And this body can now rest for another day
So it may be made useful tomorrow as well.