

We moved to Cullowhee the day before Halloween eleven years ago. The boys were 7 and 9 years old and I was wondering where the heck they could trick or treat the next day considering we lived on a hill with only 3 other houses. I struck up a conversation with the man who sold us our house who happened to be still cleaning some things out and he told me some of the local churches do a trunk or treat on Halloween. He then proceeded to ask me what church I attend. I explained I had been raised Catholic, had left the Catholic church and joined a UU fellowship 4 years earlier and that since there was no UU church nearby I wasn't quite sure what church I would be joining here. He thought for a minute and then he said, "If you were Catholic and then became a Unitarian Universalist then you should check out St. David's Episcopal. My friend got married there and it seems like a middle ground between Catholicism and Unitarian Universalism." I was intrigued and visited St. David's that very first Sunday we lived here in Cullowhee, November 5, 2006.

The first Sunday I attended St. David's, I almost did not make it through the service because it seemed too similar to a Catholic Mass and felt too close for comfort. I started to get very nervous contemplating the best moment to sneak out of the church. I waited too long to make my escape and then it was time for the Homily. Well, now, I couldn't leave while everyone was sitting and quietly listening. I would have to wait and make my escape when everyone stood. So, I stayed and I listened to Michael. I wish I could remember what he talked about those 11 years ago, but I know it spoke to me. I know I was amazed at a priest who talked about his daily life, admitted struggles, appeared human. This was not the "up on a pedestal" priests of my youth. I could relate to what Michael was saying – it was down to earth and about my own life. So, I stayed right through to coffee hour where Joanne got a hold of me and then I didn't have a chance – I was coming back for another week. And, as Joanne had instructed, bringing my children. For many years, I was not quite comfortable with the formality of our service and its similarity to the church of my youth, but I kept coming back to hear Michael preach and to gather with people who in my opinion were trying to embody what Jesus really asks us to do. I had not found that in organized religion in many years.

My most significant memories of Michael are personal ones no other church member would know about. Michael has a way of quietly seeing a need and offering help. Without big fanfare or drawing attention to himself, he has quietly pointed me in a few directions that have had profoundly positive effects on my life. My assumption is that he has been doing this with many others over the years. Some of you know that I am a recovering alcoholic. I don't know what precipitated my revealing this status to Michael, but I am sure it was during some quiet moment when I needed to be honest with someone who I knew would not judge me. Several years ago, Michael asked me if I had ever heard of Fr. Richard Rohr, I had not. Knowing I was part of a 12 step program, he then shared a book Fr. Rohr had written called *Breathing Under Water: The Spirituality of Twelve Step Programs*. This began my love affair with Fr. Richard Rohr. I have read most of his books and even got to hear him speak in Charlotte. When I arrived back at my hotel Andy was waiting and asked me about the conference. My response was to burst into tears. After years of questioning organized religion and allowing myself to drift away from the close relationship I had with Jesus in my youth, my afternoon with Richard Rohr changed me in a way I can't really describe, but I was home again. The loud noises of the Christian right were not going to keep me away from Christ anymore. The Jesus I knew in my heart was somehow found in me that day and it was Michael who set me on that path.

For many years, I had tried to quiet my mind through meditation, but I always failed and gave up assuming true meditation was only for monks sitting in caves or quiet monasteries. It was Michael, who introduced me to meditation in a way I had never experienced. I began to attend his mindfulness gatherings and learned to let my thoughts roll by and refocus on my breath – even if that meant having to re-focus on my breath every few seconds. I was not failing, this was all a part of learning to be present – a skill I desperately needed to learn. Through his mindfulness groups, Michael introduced me to another spiritual leader who has become one of my personal guides, Thich Naht Hahn. My dabbling into Buddhist practices has broadened my spirituality and brought me back to peace in the present moment. I love having an Episcopal priest who embraces and shares the wisdom of other religions and spiritual paths. Michael is not

threatened by wisdom outside Christianity and this has enriched my personal spiritual path immensely. Four years ago when my chemotherapy treatments were causing horrible, debilitating headaches, a package arrived in the mail and it contained a CD set of Mindfulness practices for people experiencing chronic physical pain – it had been sent by Michael. My daily meditation practice centers me, helps me stay present and on some days – literally saves me. Michael quietly and gently offered a space to learn meditation and I will be forever grateful.

My relationship with organized religion is tenuous, at best. But, I keep coming back to Saint David's to hear Michael preach and to be embraced by this welcoming and loving community. From that very first day, Michael's sermon made me feel like this was a place where I did not have to be perfect or impress God or anyone else. I just had to be myself, love others, and go out into the world and help where I could. Thank you, Michael for nudging me in directions I didn't know I needed to go and for the gifts of spirituality that have enriched my life beyond any words can express.