

## **Gail Schilling - Spiritual Autobiography for St. Paul's Church July 14-15, 2018**

Good morning.

When I was about 5 and my cousin Eddie, who went to Catholic school was 6, he asked me, "Do you believe in God?"

"Who's God?"

"He's a great big man in the sky with a beard and he knows everything you've ever done wrong!"

Whoa! Who IS this God?" I wasn't at all sure

Yet even our psalmist, writing 2500 hundred years ago, asks "Who is the King of Glory?" Who is God – to us today? To me? And so I've been invited to share my story, selected shorts from my EfM spiritual autobiography. Because early on in EfM, [Education for Ministry], I learned that ministry begins in relationship. These little stories highlight how I have come to know God as protector, as provider, as Presence in others.

### **Beginnings**

Though my grandfather had been the custodian at Merrimack St. Baptist Church in Manchester we attended church as a family only on Easter and maybe Christmas. From about 3<sup>rd</sup> grade on, I went to Sunday school where I liked music, stories, and stickers. By age 12, we little Baptists were expected to be baptized by full immersion. This whole process alarmed me, especially since I thought our pastor with his perpetual six-o'clock shadow looked like a gangster. His hip waders in the baptismal tank detracted from the solemnity of the occasion.

By high school, I joined Baptist Youth Fellowship, sang in the choir, and travelled to the NY World's Fair for World Day of Prayer. Now, this was the era of Vatican II and ecumenism, so my youth group visited a Catholic church, a synagogue, and another protestant church. My closest girlfriends were Jewish, Greek Orthodox and Congregationalist. In short, I was exposed to a lot of faith traditions, yet spent most of my time in solitude at home, because out in the country, I had no neighbors. I began morning devotional reading; at night, I prayed on my knees on the floor of my unheated bedroom – didn't everybody?

Once I arrived at UNH, assigned to a different dorm than my high school crowd, I became withdrawn. I also began to question a lot of my religious training, attended church less, and abandoned the morning devotions. Lack of friends and the abysmally gray weather slid me into my first serious bout of depression, something I would have to manage for the rest of my life. At the end of my sophomore year, I quit UNH and moved to Cambridge, MA, where my very close Quaker friend was living. I found a brainless job. Then during a race riot in Harvard Square I experienced my first conscious, spiritual connection with God.

## God as Protector

April, 1970. My boyfriend and I knew our relationship was on the skids. We agreed to talk after his evening class at Harvard; I sat through the class to be ready when he was. Suddenly, a man burst through the door. "There's a riot in the Square. The bank is burning. The kiosk is on fire. The subways aren't running. Stay here until we can get you out!" Soon we were escorted through the Yard and out the gate – which he clanged locked behind us. We were on our own. I lived west of Harvard Sq. – impassable; Boyfriend lived in Brighton- a very long walk, so we headed toward Central Sq. and possible transportation. Along the way, fires burned unattended. Sirens wailed. Broken glass covered the sidewalks. I watched a man smash a shop window, lift out a portable TV and saunter down the street. Worse yet, my boyfriend kept running away from me.

By the time we reached the Post Office in Central Sq., a mob lined it, shouting, threatening. We spied the yellow banner of an MBTA bus. Rescue! But the bus disgorged paratroopers who pulled down face shields, raised batons and marched toward the mob. I sprinted through the gauntlet with 30 seconds to spare. I could not grab my boyfriend's shirt. He pulled out of my grasp. In the confusion, I bolted down a side street I would not walk in daytime, never mind at night during a riot. I panted. And panted, "...valley of death...fear no evil...thou art with me" *What was that?*

As my breathing slowed, the words floated into my consciousness, just a few at a time. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm I had learned as a child in Baptist Sunday School, probably from a flannel board. A profound feeling of relief, then peace suffused me in that ugly darkness. I knew I was not alone, that God was with me, that everything was OK. This marked my first conscious experience of grace: God as my Protector.

Now my newfound spirit needed nourishment. I visited Quaker and meetings and Mormon services, but my hungry spirit wanted more. I found it in the Folk Mass at Harvard. Ah. This is Nurturing. Relevant. Real.

The Jesuit priest in hand-embroidered stole, presided over at a card table altar covered with a hand-embroidered cloth. Homemade bread and wine were served on handmade pottery. And the music! Upbeat guitars, piano and recorder. Very contemporary because it had been written by the St. Louis Jesuits, the street musician, and the Taizé community. Finally! A vibrant faith community that provided fellowship – and my future husband. Now life would be perfect! Right?

## God as Provider

But 16 years later, I was a single Mom in Wyoming with 4 children, ages 2, 4, 5 and 8. My husband's start-up business had failed, and he had found a job in LA near his parents, also failing. I stood firm: "I won't move the children. Wyoming is home." He continued to send child support while he worked, then the money dried up. He remarried. I was on my own. After waiting 7 to 12 years for my children, I would not put them in daycare to work at the newspaper for \$7/hour, so I prayed like crazy and found creative ways to survive, like freelancing for several newspapers, singing funerals, giving guitar lessons, decorating cakes, even taking in laundry for a mountain man.

But the constant scramble to find money, care for 4 children (cloth diapers), chop firewood, raise a huge garden then can the harvest, shovel snow, rise at 5 to pray in the quiet stretched me to my snapping point. A horrible thought: end it. This electric shock of despair terrified me. Gagged me. I appealed to Sister Alice Ann. "I'm going to church and even daily Mass. I do morning devotions. I pray novenas. How can I think like this for even 5 seconds? I thought I was getting stronger..."

"Ah," she said softly. "But you *are* growing stronger. The Evil One knows he's losing you. You are being tested." I believed her.

About the same time, I went to daily Mass and at communion Fr. Tony said, "Body of Christ. Come to lunch." In the rectory which had become a farmhouse, complete with wood smoke, he served homemade chicken soup and gave me an envelope. I resisted. "No. You need it. It's for you," he said. It contained \$325. My mortgage was \$329.

Lack taught me faith – and humility. I learned to accept WIC vouchers, Christmas and Thanksgiving baskets. I even learned to accept Food Stamps – but I drove 12 miles out of town to redeem them.

Over the next 10 years, I learned that God is my Provider. I trusted that I would be taken care of if I did my part.

How about the time

- "Someone who loves you" anonymously sent me \$500 in the mail
- Friends gave me a gallon of dried beans; a rancher gave me frozen beef; the social worker at the Prison Farm gave me tomatoes; I grew onions and garlic. Gallons of chili -- free!
- A friend paid my mortgage for 9 months. Nine!

- Food came, but not manna and quail. Rather, Wyoming Game and Fish gave me confiscated meat. Ok, so I didn't know how to skin and butcher an antelope with my Swiss Army knife – but I learned.
- I found gently used clothes for the kids and me on my porch. One time, I interviewed the Wyo. Secretary of State wearing Toni's blouse, Cathy's leather jacket, Betty's suede skirt and Elaine's high-heeled boots.

My faith in God deepened as I discerned His continuous protection and providence all around me. In 1999, I began to publish these insights as devotionals in *Daily Guideposts*. I still do.

### **God as Presence in Others**

Now, I might have happily lived out my life in my Wyoming community. After all, it had everything I loved. I hadn't reckoned with "the mysterious will of God" that Paul describes in Ephesians.

By 2001, both of my parents landed in the hospital at once. Not fair to my only sibling, so I stuffed my possessions into Wyoming storage and moved to NH to comfort my folks. Dad died in 2002, but Mom – partial blind, partially deaf with a ticky heart -- lived another 12 years.

I soon discovered that along with my friends and furniture, I had left my personal and professional identities behind. In NH, I was invisible. I had no kids at home. No one knew me at the grocery store. Sure, I taught a few courses and in so doing, I met students who were much more dislocated than I was: refugees. . One student wrote feelingly, "These are the people in my family who were killed, my father, my brother, my cousin..." *Dear God, How do I tell him he needs a colon here?*

Instead, I said, "I'm so sorry this happened to you. How do you keep smiling?"

"I believe in God. Things will be better." I taught them English; they taught me real faith

I helped a few tell their stories. Once such story, *God Threw Me Back: A Child Survives Civil War in Sudan* was published just last month. Perhaps, I *was* where I belonged, after all.

But I still needed a faith community. As sexual abuse stories flooded the media, I became ashamed of my Catholic church. And when my older daughter came out, I knew I had to part from the Catholic Church's condemnation of gays. Even after 30 years of being Catholic

SO I scanned the newspaper listing of church services. One ad read, "A Place to Belong. Whoever you are. Just as you are." Soon I had a nametag – an identity! – then, a place in the choir, a rotation for hospitality, a role as writing mentor. Relationships...yes, ministry begins in relationship.

Who, then, is God, the King of Glory? Not a man in the sky with a beard. No. For me, God is Protector, Provider and here at St. Paul's, a Presence. And that Presence is reflected in the faces of my fellow parishioners. You see, God reveals Himself/Herself in you. Yes, in all of you. And I am blessed.

Thank you for being part of my faith journey and My Story.

**Amen.**

**--Gail Schilling**