

Today, I'd like to reflect on what this community has meant for my own faith. As Westerners we see faith through a lens of our individualism; I've come to see it as communal, with personal & private dimensions. In John's gospel, the first disciples are called in pairs—Philip & Nathaniel, Peter & Andrew; from the beginning there's a company of followers. Even Jesus is paired with John/Baptist in the opening chapter. This communal aspect presents us with a dilemma when the dominant institutions and forms of the faith we practice have been hijacked by forces antithetical to faithfulness. It messes with us. It's like a heckler inside our head. We need experiences, people, and faith communities who quiet the heckler. I think a sociologist would call it a plausibility structure—the experiences, people, faith communities who help make a spiritual path plausible for you. Blue Ocean has been that for me. But let me back up and give some context.

Approaching retirement has uncorked memories from early in my career. My dreams have been scenes from the 70's, 80's, 90's before most of you knew me (or were born.) My earliest faith connection as a young adult occurred in Detroit as I transitioned to Ann Arbor, 1970. I can name people from that period who made a big impression: Haskel Stone, Dick Bieber, Brian Martin, Deb Poier, Barb Martin, Miss Ethel. These people, and something called the NW Fellowship and Messiah Church were part of my plausibility structure. Many decades later, only positive memories, like the time I went out with a guy named Matt in 1971 to share faith in the EMU dorms. The person we were talking to said, "Religion's not for me, it's a crutch." Matt's reply has stuck with me all these years. He said, "I hear you, but for me it's a hospital bed." I liked how he owned his need, long before Brene Brown's research on vulnerability.

Or in married student housing at UM it was Joseph and Lilly Arthungal and a quirky little house church. I was a college freshman and Joseph was a grad student in his 30's from Kerala, India. He took me out door-to-door to invite people to his Bible Study, and he liked to hold hands, which took some getting used to. So positive memories before Joseph moved to Ohio.

Including early memories of bemused wonder. Like the very first home Bible Study Nancy and I went to in 1971 at Joseph and Lilly's apartment. They were from a Pentecostal sect called the "Ceylon Pentecostal Mission" which had puritanical side to it. But none of the show biz glitz of American Pentecostalism. Imagine an Eastern/contemplative/Pentecostal vibe. Joseph observed the Sabbath as a day of prayer in his traditional Indian garb, like a Hindu Sadhu. As we come into their apartment for the first time, we're met by three couples. Remember, we're just out of high school, and we don't know any married couples, but this is married student housing. So there' Joseph and Lilly, and a couple from the Philippines, along with an American couple fresh from the 1950's, the Lamps. Nancy and I were by far the youngest, hippies, not socialized to any Christian scene like this. I had long hair and yes, beads. Nancy had short hair and wore Osh Kosh overalls, and we brought our infant to the meeting. Being a second-wave feminist, when the child needed to be nursed, Nancy took care of business right there in the Bible Study, impervious to the unspoken norms of the group, or simply unwilling to abide by them.

You have to understand: culturally conservative Christian practices were under the radar back then, didn't show up in movies or SNL skits—so I barely knew such ways of being Christian existed. The singing begins. Oh, there's singing at a Bible Study! Joseph and Lilly offer a song in Malayam, which has strangely stayed with me all these years. Then the group bust out with "I'm living in Hallelujah Land, I'm living where everything is grand!" Nancy and I give each other the "We're-not-in-Kansas-anymore" look.

Then the Bibles come out. The text for the evening of our first-ever Bible study? 1 Cor. 10 where Paul advises head coverings for women "because of the angels." This topic occupied the group for about 45 minutes. (40 years later, I read a commentary by a Pentecostal scholar who, after a lengthy discussion of this verse concluded, "Perhaps in humility we should simply admit we have no way of knowing Paul meant when he wrote that.") Back home from our first ever Bible Study, Nancy said, "I had no idea what they were talking about, but I could feel the love." So our earliest experiences of faith community—quirky but positive.

Our next two faith community experiences lasted much longer—with mixed results as the Jesus movement of the early 70s morphs from a grass roots, very pluriform, counter-culture phenomenon, to something that gets absorbed into surrounding structures—one Catholic, the other evangelical. These communities had a contemporary feel compared to Joseph and Lilly, but that can be misleading. When you're part of a newly forming spiritual movement with a lot of cultural energy swirling about, you don't know it at first. You know even less where its headed. You don't understand the forces shaping it. As I mentioned last time, the first of these phases lasted 17 years, followed by another that lasted 25 years—both had rough endings. Whether it's a marriage, a workplace or a faith community, rough endings can cast a retrospective shadow over all that precedes it--the opposite of "All's well that ends well." Even very positive aspects of the experience are tainted in memory. A difficult sorting is required. A rough ending may bring to disillusionment, which is not all bad—when our illusions are disillusioned, it helps us embrace reality, which is the realm of the divine. But a rough ending may also detour into a settled bitterness that hardens like concrete. And that leaves us stuck. It's not the way you want to enter the next phase of your life if you can help it.

So it's been such a blessing to me—these last eight years as one of the pastors of Blue Ocean. I may be repeating myself, but I want to: all previous pastoral teams I was part of were dominated by men. And men surrounded by a religious patriarchy that always turns masculinity toxic; riddled with rivalry, and in this case with a "purpose-driven visionary culture" that breeds flat-out grandiosity. Even the softest patriarchy distorts masculinity for men, it does. Serving with Emily especially as a co-pastor and with a pastoral team where for 7 years I was the only one with he-him pronouns, was my decompression chamber from decades of unhealthy masculine energy. In my last 8 years of work relationships and in my congregational experience I've known a level of freedom from all that pressure I didn't know I was under until I wasn't.

Take the grandiosity. Decades of being at conferences or meetings or strategy sessions where someone is spouting big dreams of wide influence, everything at this inflated intensity and scale. It's like the room is filled with amphetamines in aerosol form. There is a time and place for thinking big. I happen to think our church is part of a meaningful new development on the faith landscape. But why does everything have to be scaled up then amped up? Whatever happened to "Lord my heart is not ambitious. I don't concern myself with things too marvelous for me." Scale and amperage are not the only measures of value, of meaning, of beauty. At Blue Ocean, I was no longer part of a pastoral team or a surrounding structure that was acclimated to all that grandiosity. Emily had seen it before, but also saw through it. It turns out there is plenty of value, plenty of meaning, plenty of beauty without all that ... and a lot more reality. I've come to see grandiosity as a sad form of gerrymandered, artificial hope.

Which brings me to another gift my faith has received from you these past 8 years: the gift of a preserved and nurtured hope. This church has preserved a lifelong hope that was on the brink of being snuffed out: that a community of faith, as we say, *built around shared stories and rituals that inspires us to pursue justice and live out our values ...* is not a religious pipe dream, but it's something that exists, something that can be realized, at least approximated.

This matters a lot because such a hope has been a focus of my adult life. I had two simultaneously important influences that lit up my hope for communities of faith early on. On the one hand, as an undergraduate living in an apartment with my spouse and 2 kids, I'm having this early honeymoon experience of a faith community before it's run off the rails—the Jesus movement before the political right created the religious right, starting in the mid-70's.

At same time, I get a work study job with the community mental health center in Ypsilanti. CMH was still in its optimistic heyday. The Mental Health Reform act was the last Bill signed by President Kennedy—to reform the problem of taking people with mental health issues, throwing them into a state psychiatric hospital, drugging them up and warehousing them. The idea was to return thousands to their home communities, where community mental health centers were springing up with a two-fold purpose: to care for the newly discharged patients in the community, but also to try to make the communities themselves places where mental health is better supported. A social workers dream. People were trying all sort of innovative things. When I started there, age 19, they threw me into the deep water. After short orientation, I had caseload, including people in dire circumstances. I had supervision of course, but I was right there on the front lines. By age 20, I was staffing the suicide prevention hotline one or two nights a week from my apartment, where calls would get patched in.

My faith community and my community mental health community felt like very separate worlds, but with an obvious common purpose: to create a place of supportive connections at a time in history when the social fabric was fraying badly. In the early 70s (this has changed a lot since then) there was a lot of suspicion and distance between mental health professionals and religious communities. Freud, the father of psychiatry, had a conflicted relationship to religion and cast it in a negative frame. Religion returned the favor and was even more suspicious of psychiatry. Treatment options were severely limited

compared to today. This was well before the social research studies that demonstrated how for most people, being part of a church or synagogue or other religious community was a demonstrable benefit to their mental health.

I talked with my community mental health boss, Dr. Sheila Baler about this, saying, people can get a lot of support in their church communities, sharing my experience. So I'm advocating for the community mental health center to pay attention to faith communities, especially churches there in Ypsilanti, to see them as potential allies. She said, "Why don't you make a proposal?" Which I did. So I went around to a bunch of pretty conservative churches in Ypsilanti (remember I have friends who sing, I'm living in Halleluiah land, so I can speak the language) to tell the pastors about community mental health resources and how to access them, and maybe these two different groups could cooperate a little more. And I was warmly received by these pretty culturally conservative pastors, often from the South. This is pre religious right, before political radicalization of conservative Christians. Looking back, I think it was a saving grace that my earliest experience of a faith community came when I was surrounded by social workers and workers in community mental health who I loved and respected. It helped me realize that if a faith community isn't a benefit for a person's mental health, well somethings wrong.

This hope for the good a faith community can do, has kept me going, even after encountering different forms of "religiously mediated harm" that challenged or destabilized my hope—and were a challenge to my own mental health. But you can easily imagine a scenario in which that lifelong hope might have been snuffed out.

Picture me, nearly 63 in January of 2015 and the impact in my life, if that hope had been snuffed out. *What I've hoped for is a pipe dream. I tried but it ended badly.* That would have been a bummer on so many levels. But there you were: blue ocean. And by a kind of miracle, I'm thrust out from under the patriarchal religious systems that cannot function in a healthy way, and I'm paired with Emily Swan who has been seasoned in ways I have never been seasoned. I'm part of a pastoral team of talented people with a refreshing for me, way of being in the world. (I'm also newly married to an Episcopal priest who understands the challenges female clergy face—like men assuming expertise in certain areas of church life because they are men, or men saying things to a female clergy they would never say to a male clergy. So I'm getting an education!) And, of course, in January 2015 I didn't know who would show up but the dearest people showed up, they show up at our organizational meetings and it's obvious they have this hope too and they want to make it work and they volunteer, hoping against some of their own bad experiences, many worse than mine, and together we cause it to happen.

Abraham Heschel (scholar, civil rights activist) describes Judaism as a community of many different viewpoints, but a shared concern. And I could feel it at Blue Ocean, this shared concern for a faith community that is a boon to well-being, fostering values and a vision of God that bears good fruit ... and if a thing doesn't bear good fruit, that's *enough evidence* to leave it behind.

Then we're hit with global pandemic, which is hard on people and churches. But we make it through the worst of it, with this added dimension of our translocal members. And I have the best 8 years of my long career as a pastor. *All's well that ends well* and *third time's the charm*.

Just to put this in a "professional clergy colleague context," part of my world not so visible to you. I have known so many clergy over the years who love their congregations, but also are vaguely disappointed in them. Not as many as you might think, but enough to notice. They started out in a ministry with higher hopes than had been even approximately realized. I cannot relate to their disappointment. And I'm not making some ranking of Blue Ocean on a scale of churches. I'm bearing witness to my own experience only. And I hope you understand I'm not putting Blue Ocean on some pedestal. Length of days disabuses one of the tendencies to put people or groups on pedestals. But I'm allowed my favorites, like anyone else. This church is a treasure, to me. I'm retiring with the best possible feeling one can hope for, which is to have a lifelong hope intact. To everyone who has made this church possible: thank you for your part in that.

Close with our text for today. When I first read the writings of the prophet Isaiah, it would have been during my community mental health days. Occasionally I was the only one staffing the Ypsilanti mental health center from 5–8pm and it would be slow, and I'd read my Bible. And around that time I read the prophet Isaiah for the first time, and this part moved me, traditionally regarded as a reference to Israel, and/or to Israel's Messiah:

"Here is my servant whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom my soul delights
I have placed my Spirit on him;
he will render fair judgements for the nations.
² He will not cry out or shout;
he will not raise his voice in the streets.
³ A crushed reed he will not break,
a smoldering wick he will not snuff out;
he will faithfully render fair judgements.
⁴ He will not grow dim or be crushed
before establishing justice on the earth;
the coastlands will wait in anticipation for his decrees."

It's pretty great when an ancient text reaches out from the deep past and inspires you at age 20. It's even better when that *same text* still reaches out from the deep past and inspires you at age 70, with more meaning this time. The pleasure has been mine.