May 2015

www.summercushman.com/magazine

I wrote this document in the fall of 2009. But as I sit here, reading it in the spring of 2015, I am amazed at how true the text remains.

If I were to write it today, it would, of course, be different. I'm different. My focus of study and spiritual practice are different. I express ideas differently now.

But there are many things in this text that I continue to think, believe, and communicate. Reading through it again, I have been reminded of where many of my thoughts come from. I am reminded of my own story.

I see the path I took as a theological thinker. I see the exploration of embodiment that led me to a deeper study of yoga, which led me to Vedic thought and scripture.

I am publishing this credo, which I wrote in my Constructive Theology class, as a way to mark and celebrate the 5th anniversary of my graduation from seminary.

Working toward my Masters of Divinity degree changed my life. It's an experience that I hold dear and remember as one of the hardest, but best things I've ever done.

Thank you so much for taking the time to read this work. It is my hope that it supports your own thinking and practice. And that it might just encourage you to articulate your own beliefs in written form.

-Summer Cushman
May, 2015

Credo:

A Statement of Belief

Following the example of Parker Palmer in his book, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring,* I have written this credo with the help of poetry, artwork and creative quotations. I used these tools as lenses through which to look and springboards from which to jump as I explored and attempted to articulate what it is I believe. I have divided this credo into four sections: 1) Who am I as the thinker? 2) How do I set out to do the thinking? And, 3 & 4) What do I think? Several things were difficult about this process, not least of which, was trying to fully articulate my points in such a short amount of space. Even so, I enjoyed the task of reading, thinking and writing theologically. Attempting to articulate beliefs is one of the best forms of learning what one actually believes.

-Summer Cushman

August, 2009

Part 1: Who

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

(Genesis 32:24-31)

I return to these eight verses of Jacob by the river habitually. They tell me a story of search and transformation and provide me with a wrestling companion. I, like Jacob, have called out for blessing, cried in vain for the name of God, and have been injured.

My religious journey has been odd. I have only three memories of congregational experience from childhood: being poorly welcomed when my young, single mother brought my sister and I to a local Christian church as she considered whether or not our family should be church goers; the exterior of an Episcopal church we visited once with my mother's boyfriend shortly after we all moved in together; and the red carpet and gold statues of the Dharma Center my grandmother once took me to for meditation practice when I was a sophomore in high school. Once in awhile my immediate family would pray, but it was usually connected to a holiday and always addressed to the 'higher power out there.' Through my grandmother I was exposed to New Age, Buddhist and Pagan/Wiccan traditions.

As a young adult I decided I wanted to explore religion for myself and called several churches late on a Friday evening hoping to listen to answering machines. One pastor answered the phone and I told him that I hadn't expected anyone to answer. When he told me they were holding a Good Friday service, I asked him what was good about it. In other words, I had absolutely no understanding of Christianity. And it was in this naiveté that I ended up in a fundamentalist Christian church. The people of Greenwood Christian happily wrapped my husband and me into their fold. We joined a Bible study for young married couples, became active attenders of all church activities and were eventually fully immersed in the cold, January waters of the Puget Sound. We were born again—much to the horror of our friends and family. We journeyed with this church for two years; we learned the Bible for the first time, tried on 'godly' family and gender roles and sincerely searched for God's will in our lives. We moved to a new city for college armed with a bit more knowledge of Christianity and attended several churches—including a three-month tenure with Pentecostals. Somewhat by accident, we found our way to the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers, and have been sporadically traveling through their various branches ever since.

The above narrative offers a quick and dirty version of my denominational history, but how does it explain who I am today? Or why I do theology the way I do? The fact that I was raised without institutional religion, but rather met it in the form of a fundamentalist, non-denominational church as a 22-year old, newly married woman informs every aspect of how I understand Christianity and the church today. I came to Christianity nine years ago and I have spent the last seven years healing from the experience of fundamentalism. I have spent far more

years questioning religion and/or recovering from the way I learned it than I have actually spent practicing it. My theology then, is one of skepticism. Nine years ago I walked in the front door of Greenwood Christian Church ready to believe what the people there told me about God. I am no longer ready to simply believe. Following a notion of George Fox, founder of Quakerism, I must come to my belief experimentally.

Two years ago I began the Masters of Divinity program at Earlham School of Religion. As I reflect back on my first year, I realize that I was angry and that in some unconscious way, I came to seminary in order to finally rid myself of the religious project. I argued with almost everything I read and my writing was often filled with the most negative aspect of Christianity I could find. But before it is assumed that I am hopelessly bitter regarding anything to do with religion, let me move toward a recent and significant shift in my life. My theology is one of skepticism, yes, but I'm not talking about a nihilistic skepticism. I'm talking about a skepticism that is afraid of anyone or anything that is too sure of answers. I don't know whether or not Absolute Truth exists, but I'm pretty confident that if it does, I can't know it from my limited perspective. I do believe—and this is important—that I should and will spend a great deal of my life energy looking for truth even though I know I will never succeed in finding it.

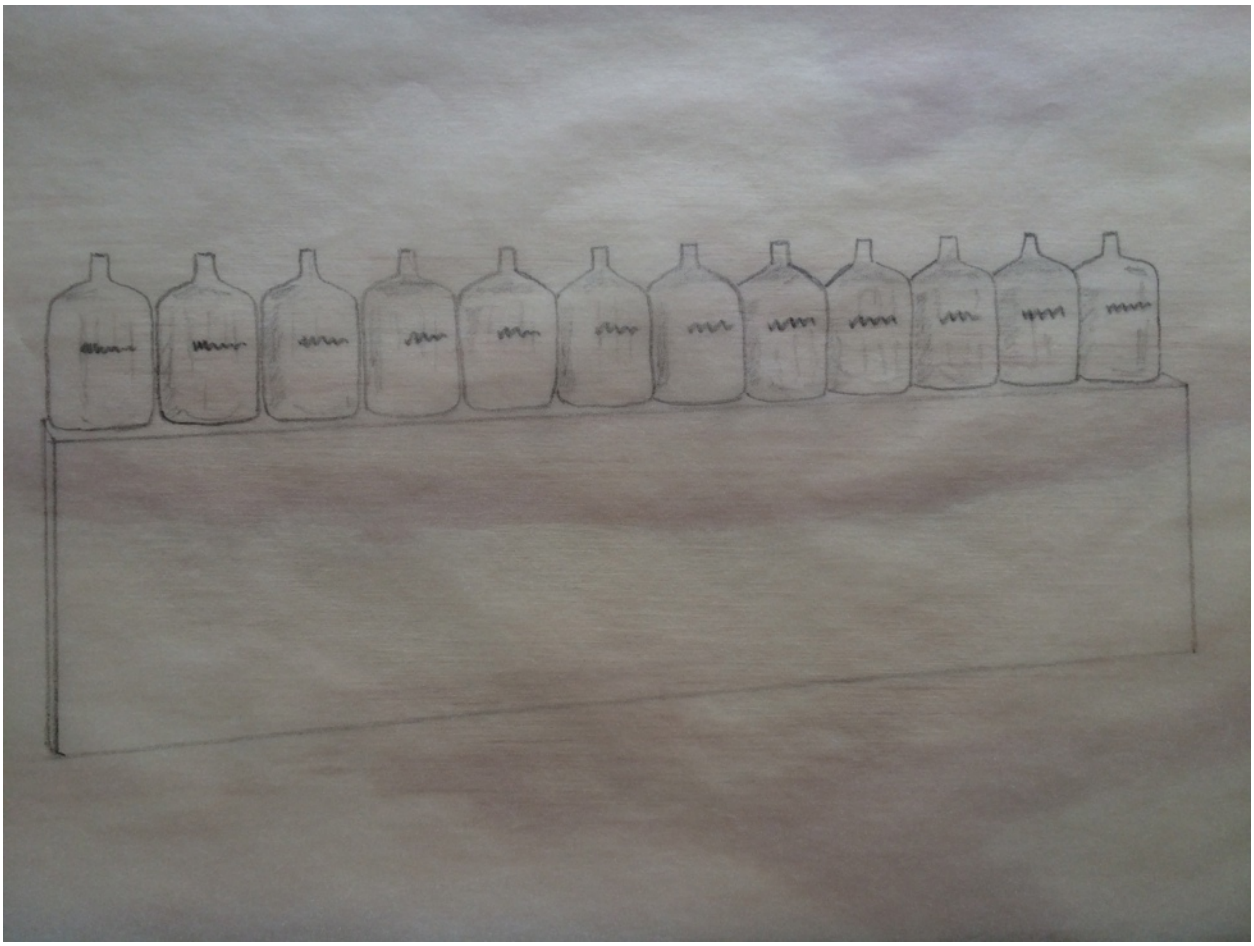
In the story of Genesis 32, Jacob walked away from the river of Jabbok triumphant, but limping. He had wrestled with a mysterious being and learned something of mystery and of himself. And just as we all do, he interpreted his experience. Jacob determined that the mysterious being was none other than God and that he had survived a face-to-face encounter. It is important to remember, however, that Jacob was never given the name he had asked for in the story. Jacob is never told the name or identity of his wrestling companion. I point out this detail not to belittle the story in anyway, but rather to keep the unknowable aspect of it at the forefront. Jacob wrestled with a question and was given insight, but he was not given an answer. As conscience human beings we have big questions regarding the meaning of our lives and we expend a great deal of energy wrestling with possible answers, but I don't think we will ever find The Answer. I believe our fate is wrapped up with Jacob's. I'm confident that we will come close to answers from time to time and that we will feel as though we've been brushed by divinity. But I don't believe we will be given the names we yearn for.

Although I realize many people won't agree with me, I find my interpretation of Genesis 32:24-31 hopeful. While it is imperative we remember the fact that Jacob didn't receive an answer to his question, it's equally essential we keep sight of the fact that the question was asked at all. Holding the asking and the unanswering in tension, I see a character who tenaciously searched after mystery. Looking into the depths of the unknowable realms can be painful, but Jacob persisted even after injury. He was able to understand his experience in a way that allowed him to move forward. From his insight Jacob formed opinions out of which grew action. Jacob limped hopefully into the sunrise and into the next phase of his life.

From my current vantage point, I am able to recognize that the anger I felt during my first year of seminary was part of a dark night experience. One in which the 'God of Answers' I had originally been introduced to was finally subsiding and opening up space for new spiritual exploration. I had long ago given up the answering god and the title Christian in my stated belief, but I continued to focus on them in lived frustration. It sounds simplistic, but once I internally realized I could live a life a faith without submitting to the Christian tradition, a new spiritual realm opened up for me. One in which I can focus on the positive rather than the negative. I, like Jacob, can walk away from the heat of a wrestling match. I might be limping, but I can walk toward sunrise.

I begin the project of writing this credo as a person who believes in mystery. Like Jacob, I can name and interpret my experiences even though I don't have the answers to all the questions I've asked. I know that I exist and that I am capable of love. And even though I sometimes suffer injury because of it, these two facts are miraculous enough to convince me that continued participation in the religious world is a worthwhile endeavor.

Part 2: How



My drawing of Kiki Smith's Untitled 1987-90
12 Silvered Glass Jars etched with the words:
semen, mucus, vomit, oil, tears, blood, milk, saliva, diarrhea, urine, sweat, pus

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.
(Genesis 3:19)

Sometimes I wonder how many hours of human life and thought have been devoted to trying to figure out how and why human beings exist. I'm sure there's a big enough number for this calculation somewhere, but my limited knowledge of math doesn't allow me to imagine it. But even so, the equation seems impossible to figure out, how would we even measure such a thing? With this impossibility in mind, how much more impossible does it feel to try and figure out how birds or electrons or the cosmos or I came into being? Let alone trying to figure out *why* it all exists! While my curiosity for all of these impossible questions has by no means abated, I've turned my focus in a slightly different direction: What can I do with the life that I have miraculously been given? All my theological work stems from this question. I am incapable of solving the mystery of life, and therefore, I am free from trying. I am free to bask in the wonder of it all. I am free to be confused. I will probably never know how or why the human race came into being, but what I do know is that we did. The fact that I am here, yet have no concrete idea of how or why shrouds everything in mystery. And it is this mystery that gives life sacredness. Out of this feeling of mysterious sacredness comes the drive to make my life matter and to strive toward a world in which every being has the opportunity to make their lives matter as well.

By this point, I'm sure my readers have picked up on my love affair with mystery, so let me move toward a more concrete framework. I begin from a place of unknowing, yes, but I also experience the concrete reality that is me. I am a white, middle-class, educated, female from the United States of America. I am spending my adult life in the 21st century—which like most times, is filled with complicated people who love and celebrate, but also suffer and hate. This litany of details wouldn't be complete without the important fact that I am embodied; I experience life no other way.

I introduced this section with Kiki Smith's untitled sculpture, made of glass jars etched with the names of 12 bodily fluids, because it will not allow me to ignore my embodiment. In some ways the sculpture is repulsive and makes me want to turn away in nausea. Yet my eyes remain transfixed —because it is visually stunning, but also because it speaks of me. If the fluids named on these containers are nauseating, then aren't I also nauseating? Are not all 12 of these fluids part of the human body—part of me? Sometime ago I came across the question of whether I have a body or am a body. As I look at these jars and consider my own sweat, mucus, and saliva, this interesting

philosophical question takes on materiality. Am I my saliva? Or my leg? Or my brain? How much of my body can I deny before I cease to exist? When people say, "my body failed me" what does it mean? Who am I if I'm not my body? Can my body fail *me*? All right, all right, enough with the questions. My point is I'm not a dualist. My thinking doesn't involve separating things into various camps. I have no memory of anything before birth and so far I haven't met anyone who can actually tell me what happens after death, hence, my embodied experience is all I've got. I am my body. My body is me.

Having inherited Western Christianity, a tradition deeply influenced by Greek philosophy, I inherited a tradition that often divides the human person into spirit and matter and places higher value on the mind than the body. It's a tradition that has often taught that the material body is the place of sin. The more I study theology from an embodied perspective, however, the more incorrect I find this line of thinking. My body carries memories from every moment of my existence. The more I pay attention to my body, the more I realize the stories and knowledge it holds. I have been discussing unknowable mystery, but—and here's the rub—mystery would mean nothing if it didn't contain at least something that can be grabbed. The more I look at and try to understand the reality of existence, the more I realize the importance of little moments of knowing—of handles. I know I've found a handle of knowing when I get the feeling of truth in my guts. The more I learn to listen to my body, the more I concretely understand the usefulness of physical emotion.

In the *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, Susan Ross writes:

> Feminist theologies have emphasized that human experience and knowledge are rooted in the body. They have stressed 'embodied thinking' that is rooted in concrete circumstances and oriented toward practical results. They have promoted an 'embodied morality' that takes emotion seriously. [1]

I'm not surprised that feminist theologians are the ones bringing embodied theologies to the forefront. I raised the point earlier that the body—the flesh in St. Paul's terminology—is often thought to be the location of sin in the Christian tradition. Women, walking around in their menstruating, birthing, and lactating bodies have been viewed as more connected to the material, bodied world and therefore have been viewed as more sinful. I once had the experience of walking down some church stairs toward an adult Bible school class and being told that sin was my fault. A

man looked me in the face and told me that women are the cause of all sin in the world. This blatant sexism is built on a dualism that separates body and soul, placing the spiritual higher than the material. Men are as unable to escape their embodiment as women, yet they have been able to escape some of the supposed sinfulness of it by locating more sin in the female body.

Human bodies, both male and female, are filled with the lived experience of being. We can choose to look at the words etched on Kiki Smith's glass jars and walk away in disgust. We can choose to place more value on certain bodies because of skin tone and sex. We can choose to fight the fragility inherent in our bodies by proving our strength through violence. But I hope at the end of my life, these choices will not have been mine. Human beings, no matter how we try and separate ourselves, are forever linked through the fact of death. We are made of dust and to dust we shall return.

The beginning of Psalm 68, as translated by Nan C. Merrill in Psalms for Praying reads:

> Impregnate us with Love, O Comforter!
> Let our fears be transformed;
> let all that keeps us separated and confused flee!
> As smoke is blown away, so let our fears rise up before You;
> as wax melts before fire,
> let our fears be melted by Love!
> Then will we be released from bondage;
> we will exult before the Beloved;
> we will be jubilant with joy![2]

This embodied vision of relatedness points toward the way in which I do theology. Merrill captures a psalmist yearning for false separations to die away as wax melts before fire. As I reflect back on my ministerial life thus far and look toward the goals of my future, I too am yearning for a world in which fear will be melted by love. As an embodied being I understand the world through my eyes, heart, hands and feet. As I do theological and ministerial work, I hope to remain always focused upon openness and relatedness. For I believe this is the way religion will work toward justice in the here and now—the only time we have.

Part 3: What (God/Creation/Faith)

My drawing of Eva Hesse's Untitled (Rope Piece), 1970
(Which I was lucky enough to make while standing in front of the original.)

"The Kingdom is within and without you,"
says the Gospel according to Thomas.
"So is Hell," Zen would add.
—Frederick Franck,
Zen Seeing, Zen Drawing: Meditation in Action

I am not a scientist. But Parker Palmer struck me with a sudden scientific fascination when I read the following words in his book *The Active Life*: "The universe today contains the same number of atoms it had at the beginning."[3] Intrigued, I pulled Bill Bryson's *A Short History of Nearly Everything* off my shelf and turned to the chapter called 'The Mighty Atom.' Several comments from physicists caught my attention:

- "All thing are made up of atoms." –Richard Feynman [4]
- When asked how one could envision an atom, Werner Heisenberg replied, "Don't try." [5]
- "Atoms cannot be perceived by the senses...they are things of thought." -Ernst Mach [6]

Bill Bryson writes:

> Every atom you possess has almost certainly passed through several stars and been part of millions of organisms on its way to becoming you. We are each so atomically numerous and so vigorously recycled at death that a significant number of our atoms —up to a billion for each of us, it has been suggested— probably once belonged to Shakespeare ... So we are all reincarnations—though short-lived ones. When we die our atoms will disassemble and move off to find new uses elsewhere—as part of a leaf or other human being or drop of dew. Atoms, however, go on practically forever. [7]

This litany of quotes about atoms might seem odd in a work of theology. So before I deal with the quotes directly please allow me to explain. I do not believe in God—not a personal, active, caring one anyway. However, I'm not presumptuous enough to claim that just because I don't believe in a God, that a God does not or cannot exist. Let us not forget that people didn't used to believe in germs. Being a religious person who doesn't believe in God is often tricky and for the past few years I have struggled with how to think about and use language regarding divinity. When I came across Palmer's remark about atoms, I happened to be living on 1,200 acres of almost completely natural land. Suffice it to say I was in the mood to be enamored by something that linked me concretely to the trees and water surrounding me. I was also breaking free from the dark night experience I discussed above and open to new religious possibilities.

I realize that discussing the fact that all things are made up of atoms is nothing new. When thought of in theological terms, however, the idea sent my mind whirling. If Parker Palmer has

done his research and is correct in claiming that the same number of atoms exists today as at the beginning and Bill Bryson is correct regarding the way atoms are recycled at death, then my mind has been reawakened to the possibility of divinity. What if "God" is the imaginable though impossible amalgamation of every single atom. Every single one. This thought brings me squarely into conversation with pantheism—a concept that roughly means "God is all and all is God."[8] But what does this definition mean? By using the word God, does it automatically refer to a God with attributes similar to human beings? Maybe, maybe not. I suppose it depends on who is wrestling with the question. The word God is a loaded term, one that brings about both adoration and contempt. I have been unable to believe in, let alone adore, a personal God ever since I began truly paying attention to the suffering and evil that surrounds me. A loving, all-powerful God is simply not logical as I examine reality. A reality that I find represented well in Eva Hesse's untitled sculpture of twisted rope.

I have loved this sculpture for several years and in 2006 was able to see it beyond the pages of a book. Standing before the golden, tangled knots I was overwhelmed by complexity, chaos and an odd beauty—the very same things that fill the world in which I live. Odd beauty connotes a certain ugliness. Complexity speaks of a complicated web of difficult and interrelated issues. Chaos can range from complete disorder to simple unpredictability. All of these descriptions leave space for things to go wrong—they leave open the potential for evil. Eva Hesse's twisted rope gives visual shape to the oddly beautiful, chaotic, complex, often evil world in which I live. Her sculpture gives me something to wrap my brain around as I ponder the meaning and mystery of existence. I look at her tangled, knotted ropes and wonder about one of Martin Heidegger's more famous questions: Why is there something rather than nothing?

According to my elementary education, the atom is the smallest unit or building block of our existence. The 'something rather than nothing' is made up of atoms. So back to my question: What if "God" is the impossible combination of every single atom. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy claims that one view of pantheism is "that everything that exists constitutes a "unity" and this all-inclusive unity is in some sense divine."[9] With this thought in mind, I begin to understand the term God, or maybe better, divinity, to mean an absolute unity of everything that is. I understand this unity as an impersonal, sacred reality, not a personal being. Using definitions of

pantheism to help explain my theology, however, raises the question of whether or not I am saying that the tree outside my window is God. I am not. I am saying that the tree outside my window is one small piece of the mysterious unity of all that is. The tree outside my window possibly contains some of the same atoms that once made up my great-great-great grandmother. In other words, the tree and I are similar and connected. The tree might not emotionally care for me in the same way that I care for it, but the tree does provide me with care simply by producing oxygen for me to breath. All of creation—the something rather than nothing—is connected in ways that we can't see from our limited perspective. As fear spreads regarding the stability of our food supply with the disappearance of bees, we are noticing the connectedness we too often and easily ignore. With this connectedness in mind, "God" becomes a term that represents the unified total of existence—albeit a unified total that can't actually unify. Just like Hesse's ropes, the unified total is actually a unified fragmentation. As confusing as this mysteriously paradoxical thought is, I have no other way of understanding the something rather than nothing. What I do know is that the miracle of 'something' is a miracle worthy of inspiring awe, wonder, and worry over morality.

Issues of creation care and social justice are easily understood as important from a view of utter, sacred unity. The commandment to love my neighbor as myself becomes somewhat literal when I think in terms of recycled atoms. My theology of justice doesn't come from the hope of eternal reward as I'm pretty sure that "I" won't survive death. The atoms that I am made of will survive my death, sure, but they will never again form the exact combination that is me. I care about justice because I'm alive. Existence is fragile and strange. It is worthy of protecting. The atoms that make up living beings— bears and trees and people—probably don't care about justice. These same atoms, after all, make up the keyboard I'm typing on and it certainly doesn't care about justice. But for some miraculous reason, the combination of atoms that constitute who I am allow me to feel and inflict pain, feel and offer love, mourn and celebrate. I care about justice because I can! I care about justice and believe it to be the moral duty of all other human beings to care about it as well, because issues of justice affect every single one of us.

My understanding of suffering and justice are directly related to my understanding of faith, prayer and worship. I gave up the Christian God because of the reality of evil. I don't know why evil is a part of our 'something rather than nothing,' but I know that it is. I also know that I participate

in it. Everyone does. As Frederick Franck so nicely put it, "'The Kingdom is within and without you,' says the Gospel according to Thomas. 'So is Hell,' Zen would add." [10] While I am capable of great compassion, I would be lying if I denied the fact that I am also capable of great evil. This is why I need community. We all do. This is why I practice Quakerism and study the Christian tradition. I may be an agnostic person interested in pantheistic ideas, but I have a deep-seated desire for the concept of right living. How do I foster more of the Kingdom (or commonwealth) than Hell in my life and actions? I do it by gathering with other people to sit in silence and listen. We notice and listen to the world—to the mysterious divine unity that we are a part of. I do it by praying, for in prayer, the pray-er is changed. I believe in the mysterious power of whispered words even if no one but me can hear them. I believe in paying attention to the Communion of Saints—the people who once were part of our sacred 'something rather than nothing.' The memory of their existence affects my reality and they—if only through their recycled atoms—are now a part of me. I pray to them. Even without belief in a personal God, I have faith and pray and worship because I care about alleviating the suffering that surrounds me. I care about it because I believe that every living part of the mysterious divine unity deserves the chance to understand and enjoy the utter mystery and miracle that they are.

Part 4: What (Symbols/Christ/Church)

A Ritual to Read to Each Other

If you don't know the kind of person I am
and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood
storming out to play through the broken dyke.

And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail,
but if one wanders the circus won't find the park,
I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,
a remote important region in all who talk;
though we could fool each other, we should consider—
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep,
the signals we give—yes or no, or maybe—
should be clear; the darkness around us is deep.

—William Stafford

I was introduced to this poem on the first day of my seminary career. I have carried it closely with me ever since. I find it an appropriate lens through which to view the final section of my credo. For the darkness around us is indeed deep and the signals we give (and symbols we use) should indeed be clear.

I am a lover of the Bible, of church, of Easter, of liturgy and ritual. After reading the first three sections of this document, my readers might be confused by this statement. I have already disclosed the fact that I am not a Christian, but it must be understood that I live in a Christian world. Even without being raised in a Christian home, my personhood and ways of knowing have been and continue to be deeply influenced by the Christianity that infiltrates almost every part of the culture I live in. Christianity isn't something I can escape, especially if I want to be part of the religious world. While there are certain aspects of Christian history that I detest (take the crusades, inquisition, and much of missionary colonization for instance) and specific theologies that I find dangerous (such as salvation coming through an act of violence) there is much in Christianity that I appreciate (concepts of grace and transformation for example). I participate in Christianity. I follow its liturgical calendar, celebrate its holidays and study its scripture. I am a member of the Religious Society of Friends, which officially links me to the Christian tradition. As has been evidenced in my writing thus far, I employ the use of Christian symbols to explain my personal belief system.

So what is my relationship to Christianity's primary symbol—the person of Jesus Christ? I know that Jesus of Nazareth died. I don't know anyone who would disagree with this fact. There is, however, much disagreement as to what happened next. Christians believe that he rose from the dead, appeared to his disciples, and ascended to the father in heaven—offering salvation to his people in the process. Many people think of this as simply a far-fetched story, and there are countless others who because of differing religious views, believe it to be heresy. So while the death of Jesus is most certainly a fact (for death comes to all of us), his resurrection is a much harder detail to confirm. However, while the resurrection may or may not be a historical fact, the existence of the story is very real. The resurrection of Jesus *did* happen, at least in the religious narrative of Christianity. And within this narrative, belief in Jesus' death and resurrection brings one salvation.

The problem with this concept of salvation is its effect on humanity's relationship to suffering.

The Christian narrative identifies the death of a man believed to be innocent—Jesus of Nazareth—as the redemptive act that offered salvation to all of humanity. It is believed that by Jesus' innocent suffering, the guilty are set free, they are saved. Therefore, the suffering experienced by Jesus is celebrated. Implicit in the Christian narrative, then, is the notion that suffering can be good for humanity, that it can be something worthy of celebration. As the Book of Hebrews puts it, "But we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone."[11] Or again, "It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings."[12] It's clear that in the Christian narrative suffering is not only a prerequisite for avoiding death, but also a "fitting" means by which to be brought to glory. That is, to be saved seems to necessitate suffering. In the words of theologian Rita Nakashima Brock: "To make claims that any person's tragic, painful death is divinely willed or necessary for others to be saved mutes our ability to be angry about unnecessary suffering."[13] If we live with the assumption that we are saved, that evil has already been defeated, and that salvation can be offered to all of humanity by offering them belief in Jesus' death and resurrection, how are we to fight the hidden and explicit injustice and suffering that exists in our world? We can't; but the bigger problem is that we often don't even think we need to.

As I've already discussed, my theology stems from an embodied, relational state focused on justice. Hence, the traditional Christian understanding of salvation doesn't work for me. But is there another way for the concept of salvation to be useful? In the most basic of terms, salvation refers to an act of saving, of preserving from disaster or harm. What kind of disaster or harm does humanity need to be saved from? How about poverty, violence, hunger, oppression, loneliness and fear? These are the issues that plague us. In order for the idea of salvation to really matter in our everyday, very human, decisions and actions, we must pull it down from the skies of transcendent reality and place it squarely in the material world. We must take *full* responsibility for it. Only then will salvation be possible for ourselves and our world. Every time people, in the spirit of love, generosity, and kindness, actively stand against violence and oppression, humanity is brought one

step closer to understanding the meaning of salvation for our lives. Assuming that salvation and the defeat of evil have already been accomplished, the Christian narrative excuses people from the very real work that needs to be done. It allows for the acceptance of—rather than the salvation from—suffering. If we are to be saved, we have to work out our salvation together, right here in the physical world.

Discussing Julia Esquivel's poem entitled "They Have Threatened Us With Resurrection," Parker Palmer writes:

> For Esquivel, there is no resurrection of isolated individuals. She is simply not concerned about private resurrections, yours or mine or her own. Each of us is resurrected only as we enter into the network of relationships called community, a network that embraces not only living persons but people who have died, and nonhuman creatures as well. Resurrection has personal significance—if we understand the person as a communal being—but it is above all a corporate, social, and political event, an event in which justice and truth and love come to fruition.[14]

To which I say, Amen! In the privileged West, the culture to which I belong, nothing feels more significant than individual personhood. While I fall victim to this mode of thinking too often, I cannot fully suppress the understanding that I am but a small speck in the mysterious unity that is all things. A small speck that uses the tools of religion to understand my history and place. I am part of Christianity because for better or worse, the story of Christianity has informed who I am. I continue to hold membership in a religious body because I believe we can better work for corporate salvation—where "justice and truth and love come to fruition"—as a corporate body. But only if we work to re-imagine the ways in which we have traditionally understood and acted out our religious stories. Religion and its symbols do not exist for individuals or individual salvation. As William Penn wrote, "True religion does not draw [people] out of the world but enables them to live better in it and excites their endeavors to mend it."[15] Religion is a meaningless concept that becomes meaningful only through the lives of religious people. How religious stories are understood and religious belief acted out is the way religion begins to matter. Religion, no matter how uncomfortable this might make many—must remain constantly in flux. If religion is to be an agent of transformation in our lives and world, religion itself must remain open to being transformed.

I love Easter because of the potential I find for justice in its story. The story of Good Friday tells of the evil present in our world. Innocent people are tortured and killed everyday. Those of us lucky enough to escape this kind of suffering must be brave enough to look it in the face because otherwise we will never be brave enough to stand against it. Easter Sunday tells the story of rising out of the evil that plagues us. We must have faith that evil doesn't get the last word if we are to have the courage to stand against it. The stories found in religious scriptures, holidays, and liturgies were written by people just like you and me—people trying to do their best to deal with the oddly beautiful, complex, chaotic, often evil world in which they lived. We can use their stories as we attempt to do the same. As William Stafford wrote:

> For it is important that awake people be awake,
> or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep,
> the signals we give—yes or no, or maybe—
> should be clear; the darkness around us is deep.

Together, we must work to stay awake to the sacred mystery that is our existence. We must work to make religion something of value, something that is constantly transforming through the transformed lives of religious people who continue to work toward the transformation of our society.

[1] Russell, Letty M. Dictionary of Feminist Theologies. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 1996. p. 32

[2] Merrill, Nancy C. Psalms for Praying. Continuum: New York, 2005. p. 129

[3] Palmer, Parker. The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring. Harper & Row: San Francisco, 1990. p. 149

[4] Bryson, Bill. A Short History of Nearly Everything. Broadway Books: New York, 2003. p. 133

[5] Ibid, 145

[6] Ibid, 137

[7] Ibid, 134

[8] McKim, Donald K. Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 1996. p. 199

[9] http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pantheism/

[10] Franck, Frederick. Zen Seeing, Zen Drawing: Meditation in Action. Bantam Books: New York, 1993.

[11] Hebrews 2:9

[12] Hebrews 2:10

[13] Brock, Rita Nakashima. Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power. New York: Crossroad, 1988. p. 94

[14] Palmer, p. 152

[15] This quote is on the back of one of my favorite t-shirts. It says "Quaker" on the front!