

VALUING DIFFERENT RELIGIONS:

Facing a Personal Bias

By Susan O'Halloran

At a recent spiritual retreat our facilitator asked us to reflect on where *we* were intolerant. We bristled. I think it would be safe to say that most of us thought of ourselves as open-minded and progressive. We were a group of professionals from across the country who had met for nine years. We were involved in prison reform, anti-racism work, homes for battered women, schools for children of different physical abilities to name a few. But after some honest reflection most of us had to admit that we *did* have some intolerance towards different religious and political beliefs. We had to admit that we could be just as guilty of creating “us vs. them” as anyone else

We discussed that, yes, it was important to take a stand and oppose beliefs we find loathsome and even dangerous. It's important to use democratic channels of voting, community organizing and the like to create our vision of a happy and just society. But that is different than making negative assumptions about people whose political or religious beliefs smack of anything with which we disagree.

As a professional storyteller I am involved in the *More Alike Than Not Project* where story artists from different backgrounds – Christian, Jewish and Muslim and, soon, we hope others – tell entertaining and thought-provoking stories about what their religions mean to them. I find myself thinking a lot these days about religious tolerance and a lesson I learned (after the fact) from being raised with my grandparents.

When I was in the seventh grade, 1963, the Catholic Church called an Ecumenical Council in Rome. All the cardinals from around the world gathered to make the Church “more modern!” That's how the nuns said it, “Our church is going to be *more modern!*” as if we had just won the giant stuffed Panda at a carnival ball toss.

However, in my house, the Ecumenical Council signaled an earthquake, the formation of an impassable chasm between those who were part of this new Church, my generation, and those who were left behind, my Grandparents. My Grandparents lived upstairs in a bedroom and sitting room. Downstairs, we all shared the kitchen, dining room and living room. My Grandmother with her great crest of unruly white hair and my Grandfather still lean as the photograph of him when he was twenty were always, I mean always, partaking in the religion that they loved.

Every day they moved about our house with rosaries in hand. My Grandfather clasped brown wooden beads; my Grandmother fingered her way to comfort with crystal beads, my favorites. When I was little, in the mornings, those sparkled and sprayed rainbows onto our turquoise kitchen tiles. I thought her rosary was made of diamonds. Mornings, afternoons, evenings, my grandparents shuffled past me mumbling their Hail Mary's and Our Father's and flicking their thumbs to the next bead on their strings.

My Grandmother and Grandfather were in their eighties when the Ecumenical Council was called to update our Church. To my Grandparents, the Catholic Church was the one true Church precisely because it had *not* changed in hundreds of years. But as the year of the Vatican Council progressed, each Sunday brought a new announcement of yet another alteration to modernize our Church.

After Mass, during the car ride home, my Grandparents held their tongues but once upstairs we'd hear them wail about the newest change: “Now the altar's being

turned around? Who wants the priest looking right at you?” or “The Mass is going to be in English? English? Why would we want to understand the prayers?”

There was no real private place in our small house. Any conversation could be heard anywhere, but by holding their complaints and bewilderment till they reached their upstairs space, my Grandparents were affording us “young people” some measure of respect in case, somehow, we found these earth-shattering adjustments to our liking.

But one Sunday we arrived home after mass and my Grandparents couldn't make it the few steps to their second floor staircase. Their hands shook as they lowered themselves down onto the plastic covered white couch in our living room. They sat there in silence, their spines slumped into their Sunday best clothing. I waited for the weekly explosion, “What are those cardinals doing over in Rome? How can they change what Jesus made? It isn't our religion anymore!”

But this day – nothing. I watched them stare into their laps, then shake their heads from side to side. When my Grandmother finally lifted her head, her soft white skin hung an extra inch from her jawbone as if her despair had drained her face of any elasticity.

Her voice was barely a whisper. “What happened to our Holy Ghost? How could they take our Holy Ghost?”

Father Hayes, our pastor, had announced from the pulpit that Sunday that the name of the “Holy Ghost” – the third leg of the Trinity, the three in one manifestation of God – was going to be changed to the less spooky sounding name “the Holy Spirit.”

My Grandfather took out a white handkerchief and wiped his eyes. “No more Holy Ghost?” He stared at the Infant of Prague statue on the coffee table in front of him. His voice lifted in a question as if the small plaster child could confirm or disprove that such a thing could happen.

Somehow for my grandparents the insult of this latest Church transformation became linked to the fact that our phone numbers were changed that month. In our south side Chicago neighborhood, we all had the same telephone prefix, “Walbrook 5” or as we said it, “WA 5.” But then one day the annual thick yellow and white phone books were plunked down on our doorsteps and Walbrook and all the other word prefixes were gone. We were now “925” – the exact same keys – but the verbal change was the last straw for my Grandparents. They still carried their rosaries but now often, I noticed, their fingers were still. Instead of prayers, they lamented, “What have they done with our Holy Ghost? What have they done with our phone number? Why did they change our phone number? Why did they take away the Holy Ghost?”

To my brother and I, two teenagers, my Grandparents were cause for out and out ridicule or at least a roll of the eyes. “Here they go again,” we would signal each other.

Recently I attended the funeral mass of my former father-in-law. My father-in-law, who had been in his thirties when the Church's upheaval began, had not let the Vatican Council throw him. He had simply gone out and found himself a parish that didn't accept the Vatican's 1963 changes. Stepping into my father-in-law's New Jersey Church was like walking into a time warp, everything exactly as my Church had been in my 1950s grammar school days. The walls of this Church were lined with paintings of martyred saints, blood bursting from the long swords thrust into their ribs. My ex-mother-in-law and the other churchwomen covered their heads with lace doilies. The altar boys (and only boys) held the golden tray under people's chins as they received communion. No holding the host with your own fingers or sipping wine from a chalice. During the

entire funeral mass, the priest turned his back to us and spoke all the words in Latin. I knew every response like people who grew up hearing their parents speaking another language in the house. Then, one day, you hear a lullaby in your parents' native tongue and all the words of the song come flooding back to you.

Being at that mass was like slipping into an old pair of leather shoes that bubbles out in just the right place to make way for your crooked big toe. Listening to the priest speaking in Latin, all at once, I understood how being only observer left you free to talk to God on your own. For one whole hour nothing was asked of me. The congregation didn't speak, didn't sing. The priest interceded to God on my behalf. I could hear my Irish grandmother saying, "And aren't his prayers more powerful anyway?" I was able to slide into a holy space, an inner life, a place almost impossible to access during normal days of making a living, answering email, cleaning house and tracking my expenses on Quicken.

When the Ecumenical Council was held in 1963, I had been following the Latin Mass and other "less modern" Catholic rituals for approximately twelve years. My Grandparents had been slipping into this zone of peace and certainty for eighty some years when the cold slap of the Council smacked their faces and took away not only the predictable sign posts but the very road just as they neared the end of their journey.

Before their deaths, in their nineties, both my Grandparents had lost their eyesight. Nonetheless they did what chores they could, feeling their way around our house, one hand still clutching their rosaries and the other hand feeling for the changing surfaces and angles of the walls. It was a kind of day-time haunting – aged bodies floating over our beige wall-to-wall carpeting with the scuffing of bedroom slippers, *zith, zith, zith*, the bass line to their continuous moans, imploring no one in particular, "What to believe? What to believe in now?"

How do we embrace change and, yet, keep watchful, remembering that not all change provides the answers for which we hoped? Just because someone wants their rituals or beliefs to stay the same (i.e. they're "conservative") doesn't mean they're foolhardy or obstructionist. We can disagree with each other. We can have our own preferences. But as important as being clear on who *we* are is being able to listen to someone else's heart. What attaches someone to a particular ritual or belief? Can we acknowledge our common human longings for change and meaning, comfort and security?

It's challenging for those of us who are so involved in breaking down "Us vs. Them" to look at where we create "the Other." On reflection, I see that I had created an "Other" right in my own home, right within my own religion. Think of the biases I can concoct when someone is even more different from me than a family member! What I am learning now, and this new storytelling project, *More Alike Than Not*, has helped me see, is that when we open to seeming opposites, we can discover missing parts of ourselves that, in some instances, we just might want to reclaim.

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