In our faith community, we have the practice of sharing our spiritual autobiograph once when we come into the church. Since many of us haven't shared our spiritual autobiography in many yers, we are now going though our membership and updatingthem. Here is mine.

Spiritual Autobiography

April 21, 2013

In many ways my life has been defined by a psychological and spiritual tension between my giftedness and my suffering in the face of it. I had a loving, supportive family of origin, received a good education and did well in college, easily got into medical school, spent seven years practicing in an extraordinarily beautiful town on the North Shore of Lake Superior, worked in an inner-city clinic, founded Joseph's House, published three books, and reared children whom we're proud of and still have wonderful relationships with.

I'm intelligent and sensitive, a good writer, a good listener; I've learned many skills and done good work with my life; I've been part of a wonderful community and an extraordinary marriage to Marja with whom I share almost all values. Were anyone to *ask* for these gifts they'd be appropriately convicted of greed.

In the face of all of this, I was intermittently depressed for thirty years. For much of that time, I believed my depression to be my fault, a character defect that I should have been able to overcome. But even though the depression is well treated now, I'm still dissatisfied with (and sometimes ashamed of) myself, sorry for myself, uncertain of my worth, lonely and so on. I've constantly felt I needed to do more and to be more.

This tension between outer blessing and inner suffering has been arguably the most powerful spiritual force in my life.

I've written my spiritual autobiography at least three times since I came to the Church of the Saviour thirty years ago. Despite updating each time, the previous versions have all consisted of the same spiritual complaint: my lack of relationship with God. It'll be different this time.

I was born in 1945 and grew up as a preacher's kid in the politically and socially liberal United Church of Christ where the social gospel was strong but the inner journey not so much. I was always a good student, valedictorian of my high school, National Merit Scholarship, Phi Beta Kappa at Yale and so on. But at Yale I was obsessively studying eight hours a day in addition to my classes and a part-time job. I was very depressed, although I wouldn't recognize my feelings as "depression" for almost 30 years. After 2½ years of misery in college, I finally took a year's sabbatical to Germany where I worked and traveled. The depression disappeared and I had a wonderful year. I came back to Yale with a much healthier attitude.

While at Yale, I took two excellent philosophy courses and came home to ask my father why I should believe all these myths in the Bible. He acknowledged that except for the Resurrection, belief in biblical mythology wasn't necessary for the Christian. But how could even the Resurrection have happened? He couldn't really tell me, so I left the church. I was to learn later on that he had many of the same questions himself that he'd shared with almost no one.

Despite my agnosticism, over the next 20 years, I kept allowing myself to be evangelized by eager Christians. Although I couldn't possibly assent to the "beliefs," I knew there was something in Christianity that I wanted. Part of it was a theology that made sense of my internal morality, which couldn't be justified by my humanistic, Enlightenment faith. If the world were really just energy and atoms, why should I act morally? Why should I sacrifice myself for another? Why would I give money to the poor … or even care about them. I was envious of those Christians whose moral beliefs were consistent with their worldview.

Marja had grown up in a charismatic church in Finland. We had met in high school when she was the foreign exchange student. Marja says it was love at first sight. Me, it took a little longer. By the end of the school year we'd begun dating, and we kept up a passionate correspondence. The following year I spent the summer in Marja's home town working construction. By the end of the summer, what *I* thought was that I didn't love her; the truth was that I wasn't emotionally ready for a serious relationship. I broke up with her. It would be five years before we got together again while we were both working in a civil rights project near Tuskegee, Alabama. After a year living together, we were married on Midsummer's in 1969.

By this time—partly under my influence, she says—Marja had become a skeptic, too, and we enjoyed some years in a common "faith." I went to medical school at the University of Minnesota, not really sure why. But then I spent my third year of medical school in an unusual program that allowed me to work under the guidance of rural physician in Grand Marais on the

north shore of Lake Superior. It was wonderful, but that year was also the last time I enjoyed the practice of medicine.

During that year, I went with a group to traverse Mt McKinley. Most mountain climbing trips you come down the same way you go up, which means that you can leave supplies for the return trip in caches, so you don't have to carry so much up, and you know exactly what the way down looks like. Traversing is to go up one side and down the other. We figured it would take us about two weeks to go up and about a week to go down the other side. We figured correctly about the trip up. But it took us three weeks to get down. So what was supposed to be a three-week trip turned out to be five. To make matters worse for the families back home, we had no radio contact once we were over the top of the mountain. By the fourth week Marja had good reason to be worried; by the fifth week it was looking more and more likely that I wouldn't be coming back at all. We had a lot of conservative Christian friends in our little town who gave Marja a great deal of support. By the time I finally got home, I discovered I was sleeping with this charismatic Christian who found speaking in tongues quite natural and meaningful.

That was a little freaky.

Our daughter Laurel was almost two, and I was worried that a couple with such disparate beliefs that were important to each of them was asking for trouble. So I redoubled my efforts to become a Christian. It took a while.

After graduation and internship, we came back to Grand Marais.

I won't go into the sordid details of my attempts to shoehorn myself into Christian "belief." At one point I read CS Lewis who wrote that if you get to the place where you know that you you could never deny Christianity, you might was well call yourself a Christian … at least for a while. So, as a last ditch effort, I joined Marja's theologically conservative and socially reactionary Evangelical Free Church to see if I could find faith. It didn't work. Actually, you might call it a disaster. Because I was a doctor in a church that didn't have much prestige in the community, after six months as a "Christian" I was put on the board of elders.

The following summer, I had the lead in a wonderful comedy in our local playhouse, in which I was called to say "God damn this" and "God damn that" throughout the play. Church members

came to watch “their” doctor. They were not pleased. Soon, the elder board asked me to apologize publicly to the church for taking God’s name in vain, which I, of course, couldn’t do. I left the elder board.

After seven years in Grand Marais, I had to leave. I thought it was burn-out; in fact, it was the unrecognized depression. We took a year off in Finland, where Marja worked to support us, and I took care of the kids: Laurel was 11, Karin 8, and Kai turned 4. During that year, I wrote my first book, *Healing the Wounds* about the contradictions in medicine that had wiped me out. The year in Finland was absolutely the finest year of my life. I actually wanted to stay permanently; Marja wisely knew we should return. But I was terrified of going back to work as a country doctor.

While in a small group in our little Minnesota town, we had read Elizabeth O’Connor’s *Call to Commitment,*
so just before leaving for Finland, we came down for a couple of Wellspring orientations. Here was a church in which the inner spiritual journey was fundamental to outward mission and vice-versa. It also helped that the church members didn’t seem to obsess over doctrine.

While we were in Finland, I’d written regularly to Mur Carrington, my spiritual director from Church of the Saviour. She told Janelle about our situation, who invited us immediate to join her. We arrived during an oppressive summer heat and humidity we could hardly imagine. (We still don’t get why anyone would choose to build a city here.) The rest of the story you mostly know. I worked at Community of Hope for ten years, joined Potter’s House and the Christ House mission group that planned and supervised the building of Christ House. Our family lived there on the third floor, just above the men for five years. In 1990, we founded Joseph’s House where we lived for three years until I cracked up again and we spent another year in Finland. On returning, I left medicine permanently. I’d tried for seventeen years to squeeze myself into a profession that made me miserable. We moved out of Joseph’s House although and I continued working in various positions at Joseph’s House until 2007.

After returning from Finland the second time, I finally recognized my mental suffering s depression, got on appropriate medicine after a while, and have been almost completely free of the depression for almost 20 years.

When we first moved here in 1983, I came seeking an experience of God. I sensed the spirit within the Church of the Saviour. I had heard about liberation theology and its promise of a

deeper faith if one moved into solidarity with the poor. But it never worked for me. I found the outward journey exciting and the Potter's House community wonderful. I was deeply impressed by the faith of the people, but I still couldn't get my mind around those beliefs—like the physical resurrection—that didn't make any sense. Who was this God? People had frequently suggested just "believing in him" for a while, acting as if. But what did that even mean? How does one *decide* to believe? It doesn't even make sense. I had no recognizable experience of God. I felt constantly at the edge of the community, wanting to get in but not quite able to do so. It didn't help much, actually, when other faithful Christians told me that they recognized in me a deep faith in God. What are you talking about? I thought. I've had neither an experience of God nor faith as I understood it. And I damn well wasn't going to pretend to believe in something I couldn't believe in.

So for the last 30 years, I've danced around whether to consider myself a Christian. How could I be a Christian if I had no relationship with God or belief in the physical resurrection? Those seemed to be the central issues in my spiritual journey

What I've realized over the past year, however, is that I'd been barking up the wrong tree for about 50 years. I just didn't get it. How one could not "get" his own spiritual journey may sound a little weird, but it's true. What I've just outlined was actually a culturally and intellectually determined big detour, a huge waste of time and energy.

So let me start again with a different but equally true story.

Growing up, I don't remember my family talking much about justice, and, as far as I can remember, I didn't think about it until much later, when I realized that working for justice was just something expected, something you just did without thinking much about it. Up until I started elementary school, we lived in a poor white area of St Louis where my mom was a nurse and my dad ran an integrated settlement house nearby right on the border between the poor black ghetto and the poor white sections of town. In the summer, my dad directed an integrated summer camp in neighboring Illinois; my mom was the camp nurse and we kids tagged along. This was in the late 1940s when segregation was still legal and widely practiced, but I wasn't aware that my experiences of integration were anything unusual.

When I was in high school, we lived in an all-white, affluent suburb of Buffalo, NY, where my dad was pastor of a fairly large church. A black family moved into town, and my father quickly visited and invited them to attend our church. Before they had a chance to attend, however,

they had been chased out of town by burning crosses on their lawn.

A little while later, an African American student from my dad's seminary near St Louis wanted to study for a semester at the University of Buffalo, and our family invited him live with us. I remember wondering why this bothered people in the congregation. That they were worried that this quiet, gentle seminary student would sexually assault my little sister seemed simply bizarre.

I don't know how my mother and father talked about such things or how they made these decisions. In fact—although I had a terrible memory long before my Alzheimer's—I don't remember even having conversations specifically about justice at all. I know that my dad wasn't considered an activist; he wasn't intentionally making waves; there were no movements to fire him. As far as I understood, acting against injustice—in this case racial injustice—was just something you did.

So when I decided to be a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War, my dad wasn't fazed. When I decided to resist the draft and make myself vulnerable to two years of jail time, my dad was more concerned, but he didn't try to talk me out of it. He just wanted to make sure I knew what I was doing. While he had all the usual concerns a father might have, he nevertheless told me about his own strident editorials in his college paper against US entry into WWII. He also told me why he had abandoned his conscientious objector position during the war.

With this background, when it was time to choose a place to practice medicine, it was important to both Marja and me to go to what was then called "an underserved area." I didn't see any point in going to a place that already had enough doctors or where other doctors were clamoring to go. We returned to the same town I'd been a student in. Barbara, my older partner's wife was from the poor Native American tribe living on one end of the county; poor whites lived on the other. We were the only doctors in a county the size of Rhode Island, but, again, it was just assumed that we would find a way to offer medical care to everyone, regardless of their ability to pay.

What I only tumbled to recently, was that in growing up, I was gifted not only with this concern for racial injustice and poverty but also with a wonderful, deep faith in a moral universe. Until very recently, I took this faith for granted, not even considering it unusual and certainly not recognizing it as "faith." It included the certain knowledge of many specific assumptions. For

example:

- I've always known that the best life that one can have is one in which love and justice are the primary values.
- I've always known that money and material goods have very little to do with happiness.

- I've always known that if I stay true to my values, life will be basically good to me. That's not a naïve belief that nothing bad would happen to me. It was that, regardless of what happened as a result of staying faithful, I would not regret those decisions. A life of faithfulness would be by definition a good life.
- I have always known that other people are doing the best that they can. If I really understood their circumstances and history, I would not judge them. People are essentially good. While many people find this faith naïve, I have always been grateful for the relationships it's brought me and never regretted it.
- I've always known that there really is no "Other"; all people are part of my family and I can treat them as such
- I've always known that doing harm to others brings unhappiness.
- I've always known that true servanthood is the best way to live.
- And so on.

These are not propositions I "believe." They are realities that I have known in my bones all my life. This is not a faith I "came to" or crafted, or even recognized as faith. I deserve no "credit" for it. It was and continues to be pure gift.

During many phases in my misdirected quest for an experience of God, I have frequently been envious of people who were given a faith in God as a birthright, Fred for instance. I was oblivious to the profound faith I'd been given. I've been blind to the narrowness with which I've understood faith; I never recognized my birthright for what it was.

Just to state the obvious, in practice I've rarely been able to live up to my faith. But even in the depths of my 30 years of depression, I've never doubted it. What was to doubt?

So when we came here 30 years ago, it was not out of a sense of "should" or an abstract conception of "justice." Providing medical care for poor people would just be a richer way of life. My conscious passion for the general concept of justice came later, primarily out of my intimate contact with my patients. It was from them that I learned that face-to-face relationships with the oppressed brought a deeper understanding of what was missing from the life of privilege that I'd

been given.

When I began to understand the history of American poverty and what our society did to aggravate it, I just couldn't believe it. In fact, at first I naïvely believed that it would only be necessary was to educate people about the realities and they would naturally demand change. I began speaking and writing in the early 1980s. It was then that I began to be more of an activist.

I need also to say a word about my passion for environmental sanity. Its origins were also just unconscious givens. Being outdoors has always been important to me. Like my dad, as a kid I trapped muskrats for their pelts, going out early on cold mornings, breaking the ice on the stream and reaching deep into the underwater tunnels to check the traps. Every summer our family took an entire month to go camping at a Provincial Park on a lake near Ottawa. I prized my time alone with my father in a tiny boat on the lake.

Marja and I have backpacked our entire lives together and they've been times of exceptional closeness between us.

In Minnesota we lived 3 miles up from town with a wonderful view of Lake Superior, on the border of a wilderness area of over 3500 square miles. We sometimes had to put out bread slathered with hot sauce on our garbage cans to keep the bears from returning. We could hear the wolves howling. We had to drive carefully to avoid hitting deer and slow down to let moose cross the road. The Milky Way and sometimes the Northern Lights blazed in our darkened sky.

I spent many hours cross-country skiing in Minnesota and during our family's winters in Finland. My deepest felt spiritual experiences were marveling amidst incredibly beautiful, bare white birches against deep blue skies, feeling strong in the minus 15º weather. Even at age 35, I lived for those times in the woods.

Our natural world is part of my bones.

When Marja was young, everyone had skis; it was just part of life. There was always snow

from November through March. Now during large parts of the winter the ground is bare. By our third winter trip in 1993, there had been four or five winters with hardly any snow and Kai was the only boy in his class who had skis. A couple of years later, the Finnish army had to begin *te aching*
new recruits how to ski.

In northern Minnesota, there are now long winter periods without snow on the ground.

So global warming and the other ecological tragedies are not abstract issues for me. Our grandchildren will not be able to follow our tracks into Glacier National Park to see glaciers because they will be gone.

I feel the impact of global climate change and other destruction of natural habitat very personally. When I teach, I have to struggle not to devolve into not-very-helpful doom and gloom. When I think of my grandchildren and the parts of the wilderness that have been important to me that won't be there for them, I find it hard sometimes not to tear up.

I know full well that, in this community, I am not alone in any of this. In fact, it's been in this community that I've learned the connections between the devastation of the natural world and the national sins of poverty and racism on the one hand and the structures of capitalism and American politics on the other. It's painful for me to recognize my country as the source of so much evil.

I am not so much angry as sorrowful. Jesus' words express my feelings profoundly.

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.

- It's best to love one another.
- Sacrifice for another is the best way to live.
- Relationship with the poor is necessary to a full life.
- Lose your life and you will find it, and so on.

For so many years, I confused those expressions of Jesus as just “teachings of Jesus,” but they are actually much, much more. Jesus, we say, is the expression of God in human form. Therefore, any expression of Jesus is also an expression of God. So faith in Jesus’ teaching *is* faith in the ineffable, the infinite, the unspeakable.

So I belong to this community not because we express our in faith God in the same way, but because we understand that the infinite nature of God is inexpressible. You may not feel comfortable with how I express my faith. Lots of people whom I consider to be friends and profoundly Christian have thought I shouldn’t really call myself a “believer.” I could never say they were wrong because the small part of God that I can talk about isn’t enough to include me within the faith that they know. And, of course, lots of my agnostic friends consider me too religious to be in their group, either. So be it. We’re all deeply flawed, deeply limited … and very complete.

Much of this community has always understood my belonging to Christ’s body well before I did. And I *knew* I belonged here even when I didn’t *think* I did. So I’ve stayed, knowing I could never leave, mostly because you understand my belonging here.

I’m not going to say much at all about my Alzheimer’s. I said a lot about my experience with it in my February sermon which is on both the Eighth Day website and my own. And there’s more on my blog than anyone wants to know.

Alzheimer’s taught me much about my faith. I’m not *afraid* of the future, mostly *curious*. I live much more in the present now. I accept myself much more and am not striving to be anyone else. I’ve found a call that brings me great joy. This has been a wonderful seven months. I can’t believe it’s going to stay that way forever, but if the people who write me are any indication, the wonder of this could last for some time. It will probably be much more difficult for those close to me, especially for many of you here, to watch me decline intellectually and ultimately in many other ways, as well. But I hope you will temper your sorrow by how I experience this disease. For me it might not be so bad as we think. I trust that some of you will be able to stay with me anyway. I suspect that the worst part for the person who has Alzheimer’s is the sense of abandonment as people fall away from embarrassment, from disgust, from pain, from helplessness. But I’m coming to trust that this community will not fall away and I will not feel abandoned or isolated.

I'm sure that for some of you, it *will* be too much; it probably would be too much for me if our positions were reversed. So please don't respond to me out of a sense that you *should* or a sense of guilt. … Well, a little bit of guilt might be a good start to get you over your fears or whatever. But don't come if it's not good for you. We're a community and we have different gifts, each of which strengthens the community, which will then be better able to respond to me.

There's so much left unsaid, perhaps most importantly Marja's role in this spiritual journey. One thing I must say, however, is that as I face this future with Alzheimer's, I can't even imagine a person better to travel this road with. I'm not surprised that when I've told several of you that she is the best possible, each one of you also just assumes that to be true.

So contrary to what I've always thought, much of what I've experienced in life comes out of this unshakeable, inexpressible faith:

- my relationship with Marja and our kids,
- my work at the clinics,
- our family's life at Christ House and at Joseph's House,
- my writings,
- my trips to Iraq and
- now my call to respond to this disease publicly

I'm very grateful.