



Delving into Deeper Connection

Rev. ellie hutchison

i received two “Cs” in Seminary, one of which was for a class on the art of worship with Rev. Dr. Cláudio Carvalhaes. The last thing Dr. Carvalhaes shared with me was, “while I know you understand the academic side of ritual, I wonder how much you are grasping the practice and meaning of ritual in the spiritual end, and... welcome to the journey.” That was in 2011. Since then, i’ve thought about the value and importance of ritual every day of my life if not multiple times a day, so much so that it has informed my own ministry work alongside womxn currently incarcerated in a prison in Arizona.

The Saturday after the most recent election here in the United States, the womxn inside the prison and i found ourselves delving deep into conversation around the results. They asked me how the “outside world” was handling the news. If i’m honest i shared that there were many in my own biological family that were elated and so many others in my chosen family who jumped into the deep end of fear and panic. While i don’t have permission from them to share exactly what we discussed, i can share that the conversation turned towards ritual and how we engage in it to try to understand our connection to the Divine and to one another when we know that there are so many who are suffering.

For those who may not be familiar with the carceral system, those who are held captive inside prisons, jails, detention centers, and so on deal with shifting levels of fascism every single day of their lives. And with this amount of violence, at some point one must turn to a practice in which to make sense of the world, to feel connected to the good, to the Holy, and to one another, for how else can we survive? One of the practices that we engage in inside the prison is the sharing of stories with the intention to cultivate a practice of deep listening and to plant the seeds of curiosity that

lead to a deep commitment to empathy and collective healing.

Now i know there are some, perhaps even my former professor, who might push back on the idea of storytelling as ritual, but i'd like us to stop and think about all that seems to be missing in this world. For many it might be the changing climate, for others it might be the loss of stability and reasoning, for all of us it's the impact of war. And for many in this ever changing world of American Christianity, it's the loss of how we practice religion, whether it concerns who is or isn't in the congregation, the "type of clergy" leading the church, the music played or even what physical space we are gathering in. And in those spaces, when was the last time you or we engaged in deep listening to learn more about why things are changing and how we are being impacted by the change? What could the power of storytelling do for you—to have someone listen to you to learn more about who you are and then for you to do the same in return? What can be healed through deep listening and learning?

As the Minister for Community and Congregational Engagement, i invite each of our houses of worship to begin to ask themselves the following questions: how different could our churches look internally and externally if we engaged in the practice of deep listening through storytelling? What if we cultivated a curiosity without expectations that leads towards empathy and collective healing—not so our churches "survive" but so WE can thrive? For isn't this what our Bible is? A collection of shared stories that invite us to connect to the Divine and to one another... to dream what is possible? We are given examples throughout our Sacred text that teach us the power of story. What a gift it is to have those stories guide us so we aren't figuring out how to do this thing called life alone. And so Beloveds, i invite you into the ritual practice of storytelling and to pay attention to what develops from being in community with one another and then to be open to the next steps of collective healing because we all deserve it. Again, if i were to be honest, we all need it more than ever right now. Tú eres mi otro yo, "you are the other me."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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