

ADVENTURES OF A YOUNG ACTRESS
WHO HAD NO IDEA SHE WAS A “UU”

We live a life and then we try to make sense of it. I wish that we could make sense of it all and THEN live some life or the other. Doesn't seem to work that way.

I always wanted to act—from the time I saw my first play at age six. I loved watching it and somehow I knew that I could “do it”—I just knew. And I was right, I could. I had a lot to learn but I learned it. However, I had a great deal of difficulty learning how to live a life—I just stumbled along and wished that I could be on stage at all times. It seemed safer there—except for the bilious reviewers.

The most important thing about theatre for me, however, had to do with the community of people that inhabited that sub-culture world. I felt at home in every theatre I worked in over the years—and that was quite a goodly number. In fact—I found it very hard to relate to folks of this planet who were NOT in theatre. And then to my amazement at age 60---having mostly retired from the full time work of theatre—I found a NEW community. I found Unitarian Universalists. And I felt at home here almost immediately. Just recently I've been asking myself “WHY?” What's the connection between these 2 worlds? What is it that they share that draws me to them?

And so— the following stories that I've drawn from previous memoirish writings give me a place to examine what happened at age 60. And I'm going to take you along with me, if nothing else you'll get a glimpse into world you may know very little about. And actually I think it's quite

important that we each look at how we became UUs and how it has impacted our lives.

My first role was as Gretel in the operetta Hansel and Gretel. The boy playing Hansel was shorter than me and hated me. I tolerated him. We were in the second grade in a Catholic grade school during the time that nuns were still in medieval drag. Our Sister was mentally ill only we didn't know that—we just thought that she was kind of –well—scary.

As I recall we only did sections of the operetta—but who knows now--we were only 7 or 8 years old. Anyway we were required to rehearse all recess times and during lunch hour. I only remember myself and the very unhappy little boy being trapped by the piano---no other students. And then one day Sister decided that we would perform what we had rehearsed for the rest of the class. So she locked the door at the end of a school day and I sang and sang and sang. Parents were banging on the door trying to get us out—to no avail. Finally Mother Superior unlocked the schoolroom door and released a couple of dozen sobbing children. We never saw Sister again—a new nun appeared almost immediately and the piano disappeared.

Sister had a story---I don't know when I first heard the tale--- probably some few years later when I was still at the same school. She was the youngest daughter of a large and wealthy Catholic family—all girls. Her father wanted a son and promised his youngest daughter to god if a son could be delivered. He was and Sister became a sister. She wanted to be a professional musician—no such luck. But she spotted me and KNEW. And she was right, nobody was going to make me a nun. Nobody was going to stop me---not even my manic/depressive mother. I mean, I'd already had my worst audience—24 sobbing kids.

I only hope that Sister was able to make music wherever they sent her.

And so at age 7 I was already beginning to realize that dogmatic religions might not be for me but that theatre was magic as far as I was concerned. A whole lot of us are recovering Catholics and we find the freedom from dogmatism and patriarchal grandstanding to be an amazing relief once we find UU LAND. We join all of the other free thinkers with glee. But you see, once leaving the Catholic orbit, I took a 40 year detour and became a stage actor. So—is there any connection here? The theatre world is made up of free thinkers—sometimes quite radical. And it’s a “Welcoming Community” with gold stars. I would say the makeup is probably close to 50% Gay and Lesbian. And although the theatre world HAD been very patriarchal in its leadership—a bunch of we ladies changed that—big time.

But how did the theatre world come into existence for me?—well, via my high school drama teacher—who is still a friend of mine. He was only 24 years old when I was in High School and he informed me that I had the ability to become a professional theatre person if I had the will to overcome all of the obstacles. And I sure had a lot of dumb luck on my side once I realized he MEANT it—ie—that I was good enough to give it a go if I had the strength to keep going. So “give it a go” I did. For 40 years I supported myself as a theatre artist—fully supported myself. It wasn’t easy—but yes, it was worth it. Telling stories made me feel alive---still does. We need stories—our own and other folks—stories from way back there in the past and way out there in foreign places and way down deep inside ourselves. The connection to UU’s? Well—here I am telling you my story to encourage you to examine YOUR story. UU’s do that for each other.

And then---at age 30 baby David appeared. I'd wanted a child for some time but I guess Davy had a few other things to take care of before incarnating into his small self. So after six months of being home with this little guy it was time to get back to work. Lincoln Center in New York offered me an acting job and so off we went. Trying to figure out how to work and get David taken care of was a nightmare. However, my wonderful dressing room mate at the theatre was a terrific woman who adored children. She let me have a crib in our dressing room at night while we were performing. She was married to the producer so no one complained, in fact the whole theatre kind of helped take care of my son. He had what was called a Crawlagator. Babies could lay on it on their stomachs and propel themselves with their arms. Kind of a Kinder skate board. He'd zip all over the back stage area, before the performance, visiting the other dressing rooms.

Daytime was another story--- kids make way too much noise at rehearsals and the only childcare that I could find that I could afford was uptown from our apt. David and I rode a bus to and from with him in a backpack carry. A couple of weeks into this and we got a BIG snow. I went skidding while scurrying for a bus. I'd never seen so many New Yorkers rush to rescue a downed mother and kid in a snow drift.

One gentleman was irate that I wasn't taking a cab—but the money for that didn't exist. He handed me two twenty dollar bills. One was to get me to and from the babysitters—the other was a tip for the elevator man in our building. And of course the native New Yorker was right. The lovely man who operated the elevator had a cousin in our building and she ran an affordable child care center in her apt. She took David and lavished love on him.

Davy and I made it through a whole lot of stuff like that. His Dad and I divorced, but we made it. There was always somebody there to help us out of snow drifts. You just have to take the hand that's held out to help you. And that takes a kind of courage.

And now, as I thought back on THAT episode in my life--- I wondered what did it have to do with my UU philosophizing? And the connection is children--teaching children our principles of ethical living, helping them realize the importance of social justice for all beings, showing them how to live in accordance with the inter-dependent web of life, and taking their hands to help them share in the giving of non patronizing compassion. And in my case—also sharing with my son my own ad hoc Zen Paganism. At this time I can only wish I had known about Unitarian Universalism when I was raising my son as a single parent---the support of a Children's RE group would have been oh, so very wonderful. However, the theatre world supports all of the UU Principles—unstated—but always there. So my son David picked up his good and honest core by osmosis.

During my 30's and early 40's I spent almost 10 years with the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco. They did indeed have a very successful conservatory school attached to the theatre. I was working as an actress on both the very large main stage and very small experimental stage. And also working some with the students as a teacher and director. Then during a very physical performance in the small theatre my right knee began to give me some grief. In fact my whole leg didn't feel so hot. And to my

horror things got worse and worse over the next few days. Finally, I got up one morning and could only kind of crawl to the car to get to the doctor. I wound up in the hospital so fast I couldn't quite get my breath. The doc was convinced that I had a blood clot.

Don't know why but I had this large private room with trees outside the window. The space and trees saved my sanity. Blood thinning started immediately and I frantically tried to pull my life together. The theatre was informed and started the process of putting in my understudies and marshalling scads of folks to come visit me. Not sure I wanted that—but come they did. The nurses were astounded—not just by the numbers but by the way that they were DRESSED! Then I got hold of David's father to come pick him up after school and he was in town in a flash and kept David for the week that I was being thinned. I managed to get this all done by phone before the pain killers knocked me into happy land.

It was a very weird week—in and out of consciousness. Even held a rehearsal in my room for a student production that I was directing. The nurses brought in coffee for the cast of the play and stayed to listen to the read through. They'd never been through anything like this before—but then neither had I. I got weaker as the week progressed. Some thing occurred that I'm not sure really occurred—but I think it did. Woke groggily one afternoon to see a clown fast asleep in the chair by the window. Probably one of the students from the school—but I never really knew. He, or she, was gone when next I awoke and the nurses didn't remember seeing any "clown". Still, I felt blessed.

I hated the bed pans and would cheat and stagger to the bathroom when no one was looking. And then I passed out during one of my urinary escapades and was carted back to bed. I remember the nurse saying: “Look at that! Call the doctor”! I shrunk inside, fearing what I had done to myself. But I hadn’t done it—at least not in the bathroom. Bruising had appeared all over my right leg. They surmised that I didn’t have a blood clot but had bruising from a fall. However I could remember no fall. My bet was that I’d done it in performance and my mind shut out the pain. The doctor said I could not have sustained those injuries without knowing it. But then—HE’D never been an actor.

They gave me a test that would either tell me I was OK or kill me. I was OK, and man, did they get me out of that hospital FAST. I’d torn my knee and wound up in a cast for six weeks--still performing—even driving. Friends helped, neighbors helped—little David helped ---and really everyone at the theatre pitched in to help us. We made it. I didn’t think we would—I thought I was going down for the count. But good heavens—I hadn’t even met my wonderful 2nd husband yet and we’ve been together now for 30 years.

Don’t ever think that there’s no more goodness that will come into your life. That next Sunrise alone is the most glorious gift in the world.

And this time the connection for me between the theatre world and the UU world in the past story is the community of caring people. Theatre folks always care for each other and UU’s do the same. For instance when Florrie and Tom Brassier came back to Kitsap after the weeks in Seattle where Florrie had had her bone marrow transplant ----20 people from her Fellowship had cleaned their house and fixed up their yard. And when I was going through cancer treatment all kinds of wonderful UU friends showed up

with food and prayer beads to help me out. It's such a good feeling to have that sense of a community of loving and giving folks. And just like in theatre—you can be arguing away over some idea or the other and the next minute join hands to help somebody get through a rough time.

And now on to my last theatre story. I stopped acting in my mid forties and became an Artistic Director of a theatre in Seattle. So I was both giving the theatre its aesthetic compass and also being its primary stage director. Lot of work—lot of headaches—lot of fun. Even helped a playwright get a Pulitzer Prize. His play was actually a connected series of short plays produced over 2 performances. It was titled THE KENTUCKY CYCLE. It took some doing to raise the money to do THAT. But I just knew that it would fly what with the terrific director attached to the script. But oh boy, was the Board of Directors nervous—if it belly flopped we'd be in deep do-do financially.

Simultaneously with this going on my husband and I were trying to sell our house in Seattle and move to our little log cabin in Kitsap County—where we would add on a second part of the dwelling.

So there I was a couple of days before the first performance of THE KENTUCKY CYCLE and our Seattle house had been sold and we had to move out. We rented a truck and hired a couple of interns from the theatre and did the move ourselves on the theatre's day off. The most "fun" was getting my big ole beat up piano onto the truck. But we tootled over toward Kitsap in good spirits. Then of course, just a few miles from our new home, the truck broke down. We were rescued by Dell—who became a friend for life. He fixes cars—had a tow truck and took OUR truck to his car hospital. He just

happened to be driving by. We put the Interns on the Ferry back to Seattle and spent the night in Indianola sans furniture except for a couch bed.

The next day I drove to Seattle and checked up on how THE KENTUCKY CYCLE was coming along. Things seemed to be OK. And by gosh the first preview went swimmingly—I stood in the back and watched with pride. When the audience leapt to it's feet in appreciation I collapsed off of mine and lay on the floor at the back of the theatre whispering “thank you---thank you”! The house manager kind of dragged me out of the way so that the audience could exit without leaping over me.

It was past midnight when I drove and ferried to Kitsap—I was exhausted but happy. And then I remembered: NO FURNITRE! And I started to laugh—huge big belly laughs. Life just refuses to be tidy. You might produce an award winning play but your furniture will take a hike on ya. Or, you'll have a house full of furniture and the play that you are working on will bomb big time. So I just kept on laughing at it all. Wish that I could always do that. Wish we could all do that—the world would be a much saner place.

Now—here I am in my 70's---looking back on the production of THE KENTUCKY CYCLE and wondering why it was so VERY important to me—why was theatre in general soooooo very important to me? Just ego gratification plus a love of story telling? There had to be more---- and working in Adult RE with the Rev. Elizabeth Stevens (we would co-facilitate classes) taught me what that “more” was all about. I began to realize that for me Art was

SACRED. It was my soul's life work—assigned to me. Art as a creative process is part of my spiritual path and I finally recognized that as a UU. And now, I add to performance-- UU Lay Ministry Sermons. Mostly around what I call SACRED IMAGINATION: The Importance of Myth and Storytelling in our lives. So I'm a theatre artist and a UU and they fit together very well indeed. Took me a long time to figure that out---but so what---it ain't over till it's over.

I finish with a quote from THE RE-ENCHANTMENT OF EVERYDAY LIFE by Thomas Moore: “The artist's work not only is beautiful but has considerable healing power and is essential to the soul of the community”. I want to be part of the soul of the community wherever I happen to be living.