

A Serendipitous Visit Home

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I have had no intentions to revisit my literal and spiritual home in the rust belt area of Ohio. I thought those childhood memories were long since archived to the past. So I was beyond surprised to learn how impactful an unplanned trip back would become.

It was a phone call that came out of the blue. “Hey Jack, this is Bob in Salem, Ohio.” This now 90 year old former parishioner caught me totally off guard. I hadn’t seen or talked with him or his wife Louise in over 40 years. “Jack, Louise died last night and I am hoping you can come. She always wanted you to one day officiate at her funeral.”

I must have instinctively said yes because I can still hear his voice, “If you can fly into the Akron/Canton Airport I’ll come and pick you up. Just let me know your arrival time.” Clearly I knew, with a forty some mile drive from Akron, Ohio to Salem, Ohio, I didn’t want to be the passenger in a car driven by a 90 year old grieving widower. “You don’t need to do that Bob. I’ll rent a car so if my flight is delayed you won’t have to wait.” He agreed and expressed how happy he was that I would be ‘doing’ Louise’s funeral.

Some years ago, I told myself and a few close friends that I was stepping away from performing any more official clergy functions—no more weddings, funerals, sermons or church services of any kind. I have done hundreds and hundreds of each since being ordained (“recorded” as Quakers call it), some 50 years before. I have been stationed around the world several times, traveling thousands of miles as an Air Force Chaplain and that many miles and more away from a theology birthed from God-fearing, church-loving, fundamentalist parents and grandparents.

But for some reason unknown to me at the time I said “Yes” to Bob’s call.

Several days later I was driving my rental car from the Akron/Canton Airport—headed off for Salem, Ohio. On a whim, I decided to stop in Alliance, my hometown, about half way between Akron and Salem, and to my old home-place, a house built with my dad’s own hands before I was born. It was the only house I had lived in before going off to college. I gingerly knocked on the back door and in a few minutes, which seemed much longer, an elderly gentleman answered and graciously invited me in. He proudly told me that many years earlier, he had bought that home from my dad for \$42,000. The trappings of a myriad of memories danced in my mind, along with the gold foam-lined drapes still hanging in the small living room.

At the funeral, a host of former parishioners showed up. Most faces were familiar but my memory bank could no longer easily retrieve many of their names.

I have embraced the 'suprise' of why that "Yes" to Bob's wife's funeral rolled off my tongue. I now better understand and claim those parts of myself I so long ago compartmentalized, stowed far away. Through that serendipity I re-learned: I am now what I have been becoming.

While gratefully still many miles from that original home and family beliefs, I now am able to journey a more integrated life, more authentically and joyfully walking in the trajectory of my true north.