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Faith Matters & Music Matters



Columnist - Rev. Christine Leslie

During May, a church in Atlanta my parents helped to start, and that my family belonged to when I was a little girl, will celebrate its 50th anniversary. This congregation nurtured my family in many ways, not the least being my father's call to ordained ministry, and perhaps in nascent ways, my own call to ordained ministry. My mother has made this congregation her church home again after being away for many years. She has taken a real delight in being among those still alive in the "founders" group who are helping to plan all of the festivities. Since I will not be able to be present, I am sending a letter for the 50th Anniversary Memory Book about the impact being in the church's children's choir had on my life.

It was while learning two hymns, "This Is My Father's World" and "Savior, Teach Me Day By Day" that I had my first, conscious association about the words coming out of my mouth being the same as those written on the page. I was about 6 years old when this amazing realization took place, and I can remember thinking to myself, "So this is what reading is." To this day, when I sing or hear these hymns, I am 5-years old again with a hymn book perched on my chest reading for the first time in my life.

The other significant impact singing in the children's choir had on me had to do with what the hymns were teaching me. I can trace the roots of my faith in the loving, "knowable" Sacred One to the teachings contained in the lyrics of those hymns and many others I later learned. These earliest spiritual experiences are the foundation upon which my faith in The Holy One has been based. It is also why music, and sacred music in particular, matter so much to me. It was the love of The Holy One for me in the music of the church, and not its ideologies, that shaped me as a child. Music came to mean so much to me I decided to earn my undergraduate degree in voice from the University of Cincinnati's Conservatory of Music. While working on my Masters in Opera there, I realized being an operatic diva was not the calling on my life.

I then began to explore what was and decided to go to seminary. While in seminary I began to knit together the spiritual concepts of my childhood with those I was studying in my courses on theology, ethics, the Bible, and religion and society. I was an accomplished guitarist and singer when I started seminary. Throughout seminary I also sang openly and honestly as an out lesbian. By the time I graduated and was ordained, I had finally begun to understand why music mattered to my faith so much. Then I began to forget.

Between the spring of 1981 and the summer of 1993, the beautiful voice of the faith-filled, out lesbian in me grew fainter and fainter, and then finally fell silent. During those 12 years the silencing of my singing voice mirrored what was going on in my lesbian soul. Then, in the summer of 1993, I attended the national gatherings of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ in St. Louis, and sang, for the first time, in a sacred music chorale for friends and members of the GLBT community in front of thousands of people.

What beautiful music we made! What a presence we were, and what a difference was made in my life as a result of singing in that choir! Once again The Holy One made Herself "known" to me in the ways I had experienced in my childhood. She was alive and vibrant, and called to me through the music to come out and add my rich, gorgeous soprano voice to that heavenly choir that manifest itself in St. Louis that summer. Like my choir experience when 6 years old, things haven't been the same since!

As a result of singing in that sacred music chorale in St. Louis, I left my closeted life behind forever, and I have helped to start two sacred music chorales for friends and members of the GLBT community. One is on Long Island. The other is here in VT and is called The Samadhi Singers ("samadhi" is sanskrit for "oneness with The Holy"). The Samadhi Singers are already hard at work preparing for their next concert in the fall.

In fact, anyone who would like to join The Samadhi Singers need only have some ability to read music and a heartfelt desire to sing with other folks for whom faith and sacred music matter. We ask for regular participation in our Sunday evening rehearsals that are from 7-9 PM at Christ Church, Presbyterian in Burlington. When folks sign up the only thing we ask is

whether you sing alto, soprano, tenor, or bass. We don't even ask you why faith and music matter in your life. This is between each member of the choir and their understanding of The Holy One.

The Samadhi Singers offer a safe and supportive way to strengthen your faith and deepen your regard for sacred music, so that which ultimately matters the most, your experience of The Holy One's love for you, is also strengthened and deepened. You just never know...singing in such a choir might even give you something to write home about, too!

Rev. Christine Leslie is the founder and director of Triangle Ministries, A Center for Lesbian & Gay Spiritual Development near Burlington, VT. She is available for individual and couple counseling, commitment services, grief counseling, workshops, and retreats. She specializes in the integration of sexual-identity formation and spiritual development. Contact her at 802-860-7106 or e mail her at revcsl@aol.com. You can visit the Triangle Ministries web page at <http://members.aol.com/revcsl>

Queer Studies

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production or through a combination of media.

Despite the offerings at these schools, no real queer curriculum seems to exist at any college within Vermont or the country. While programs in Gender Studies continue to abound throughout the country, they do not encompass the realm of Queer Studies. Strides are being taken, though, to create more courses that deal with sexuality but, according to Vermilya, "To do Queer Studies now, you'd have to be very determined and make changes in a very archaic organization...." The task is not unachievable; however, a sound "queer curriculum is truly interdisciplinary. It cuts across disciplines and it cuts across genders," believes Ragona.

While the area of Queer Studies continues to grow within Vermont colleges, students are now faced with the ultimate challenge. The door to further study has been opened, but only through a collective voice can a real program be implemented. For, just as Vermilya states, "It's following in the footsteps of Black Studies and Women's Studies.... Queer Studies would be so exciting! Students have to rock the boat, though, if they want it."