

Hello,

I'm Kelli DeGraw, and I've been a member of this congregation, as an adult, since March 2016 (and St. Pete resident most of my life).

When asked to talk about my UU Journey, I was reminded of a croning ritual for a friend about 8 years ago. The Pagan leader asked me, "So, who are you and how do you fit here?". My response was, "I'm really not sure."

And I still feel that way.

My grandfather was a **nuclear physicist** during the Atomic discovery, and my grandmother was a **women's rights activist** with the American Association of University Women, in Arlington VA. Their Presbyterian Church was not meeting their needs or for their two daughters. A friend mentioned Unitarian Universalism; and they went. It **fit** them with conversations of life, belief systems and many theologies. **Their** connection with UU would become a stepping stone for **my** journey.

I was born in Texas, and as the song goes, "in late December back in '63". During my first few years, I'm not remembering any religion; I am remembering tension, leading to a divorce. The domestic violence my mother endured then was not **ever** going to be in my life.

I was blessed with great caregivers. My mom struggled as a single parent but her friend Vivian stepped up and I lived with her at times. She had three kids and all attended St. Jude's. They took me with them and I even attended a few catechism classes. **OH** the midnight masses at Christmas, **Gorgeous!** I remember the beauty, uniformity, my Sunday dresses and lace veil on my head. Vivian explained the procession of people walking to the Priest, what they received, what it represented, **and** why I couldn't go.

This family taught me basic chores as they were rotated among the four of us kids. To an only child, teamwork lessons are priceless.

Around age 10, I made a new friend who was Jewish. I followed her to Temple Beth El one Saturday. I listened as the children learned their prayers, sounding beautiful, but **I** was not allowed in the classroom. St. Jude's allowed me in, but I couldn't walk to the priest. The exclusion was confusing.

I spent school breaks with my grandparents in Arlington. They were STILL very active with the UUs. I attended RE every Sunday during my visits, where I was recognized and welcomed.

My grandparents' values molded me, even at the dining table; with our napkin in the lap and one hand holding it still. No elbows on the table and Silent Grace, which I truly love and still practice.

I attended Girl Scouts and thrived on all the activities. Even through some bullying, Girl Scouts was a good fit, reaffirming my UU roots.

Pinellas County Schools didn't desegregate until 1971, my third-grade year. For the first time, we had kids of all colors in our class, we were **Just Kids**. I still communicate with a few of those ladies today (Thank you Facebook). At UU Arlington's RE, hands of all colors were the theme, as Virginia was truly diverse. Our UUSP Pledge theme **last year** (All In!) brought that memory full circle.

In the mid 70's, Mom found UU St. Pete. *Here, our RE leader helped with **teen conversations - a place to talk with adults to trust for those tough questions***. I enjoyed RE: the teachings and diversity. Having learned how to make a Challah in RE, I made one when a Jewish friend lost his mother. **It surprised** him that a **child** did this for him and his family. We met again years later through work; and the fondness was still intact.

Mom remarried, right here at UUSP. We stopped coming here after that and was introduced to the Pagan and holistic communities. Mom found she was somewhat of a healer and I found intuitions that I never knew I had.

In my high school years, the bowling team and music (concert & marching bands) sustained me. I played the flute. When I was 16, a death in the family led me to drop out of school, get my GED and started college by 18.

I also hit the adult bowling leagues, I found this was my therapy, as I could throw things without hurting anyone.

At 24, I met "a guy", who gave me my wonderful daughter Rebecca. **I found myself** alone at 25, with a 6-month-old, **so** my mom became my daughter's caregiver so I could work more. Even with great friends at work, and at the bowling alley, I needed something else. I tried UU Clearwater, but it wasn't me.

My daughter's father came back into **MY** life, sober, and we had our son. I went back to college. **There**, I read Siddhartha, by Hermann Hesse. I couldn't stop **thinking about** it. The questions, the people, the walks, and the lessons leading to knowledge gained; it stayed with me.

I finished my AS degree and got a job with St. Anthony's Hospital. As the healthcare industry changed, so did my job, for the worse. My three-year-old son was assessed for Asperger's, and the kids' dad left two years later. I had to give up the expense of bowling (*my therapy*) to raise my kids and keep our home.

**It was worth it.** Both of my children were involved with music and graduated high school. My daughter has given me two beautiful grandchildren, and live two houses away from me. My son, (lives with me) has worked since graduation and is finding his sense of self as a gay man. **These four are my light!**

I **finally** got back to my bowling, meeting new people, but not all values blended. It was time for me to continue my spiritual walk.

The first Sunday in January 2016 I walked through those doors right there, attended the UU101 classes, signed the book, and found a place with our Communications Committee.

Looking back, I witnessed domestic violence, survived bullying and assault, even had a few suicidal moments. But **I made it!** Maybe it was my time with amazing adults, maybe it was the exposure to various lifestyles, people and religions. Maybe it was **Siddhartha's story**, helping me to continue to walk on.

Back to that Pagan leader, that I told, "I really don't know". I also told her, and this holds true today, "I believe in a higher power, but don't put a name to it, but I've seen it/felt it. I believe in the health of this planet and in guardian angels."

I get visited by a monarch butterfly every time I'm outside.

I'm still searching.

I've participated in celebrations of life, marched in parades, and tried to help those who need it. I don't have a particular philosophy, but I am philosophical – defined as "showing a calm attitude toward disappointments or difficulties" - and I'm here!

I feel that this congregation, this church, is HOME and I will continue to grow my spirit as you let me be "ME" in this space.

Thank you for listening!