

To the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Poughkeepsie

(Jolanda Jansen)

Good morning

Some of you will remember me from when I first came here in 1990, timid, shy, with my 4-year old in tow, recently divorced, shell-shocked from leaving the shelter of the Unification Church and having to learn to survive in the United States of America.

I sought you out. I knew the theology and philosophy of Unitarianism was a good fit, but by coming here I would meet my first UU community.

You were everything I had hoped for. At my first service I discovered that the President of the Fellowship was a woman, Carolyn Rounds Boris, the service was given by a lay member, Tom Hackett, and at the end of the service there was an opportunity for dialogue. I had arrived in heaven.

However, I was not ready for heaven. I was terrified of people. Standing to sing the hymns evoked such feelings of sadness, I would cry. I was in therapy to address for the first time in my life the death of my mother who had died when I was three years old.

I reached out and created a trio of mothers at the Fellowship. Women who were the age my mother would have been if she had lived. Wilma Jaffe, Mildred Arpino, and Barbara Tiger. I did committees and projects with them, visited their homes, allowed myself to heal.

One summer, during the lay-led Sunday services, I developed enough courage to share my experience of having been a member of the Unification Church, the Moonies, my arranged marriage to Soyol's father, and my process of leaving the organization after 10 years. The Fellowship was my safe place to learn to trust people.

Walter Engel was present, he remembers it all. He remembers Leo Freeman attending Fellowship, our getting to know each other and deciding to get married. Leo who was sent here by his manager at IBM because he was lonely and wanted to meet women, and his boss thought that the women at UU were the best kind.

But I was still involved in an inner journey. A complicated journey of getting to know my father. The one person whom I had loved most intensely the longest, who fought all his life to control his emotions, except he couldn't, and then he would explode and scream and hit me, or throw things, and make no sense. The grown man who was 6' 2" tall, but sounded like an animal in extreme pain. Who was unbearably hurt when I joined the Unification Church, felt rejected and unloved, and was not able to perceive how much his wife and his four children all loved him, loved him deeply.

I travelled to New Zealand to visit him every 5 years or so. I brought gifts, I tried to share what I was learning in therapy, I listened to my mom into the wee hours of the morning as she wept her loneliness into my arms, and I learned to accept that the kind of connection with him that I was looking for might not be possible in this lifetime, for any of us.

Two of my nephews were diagnosed with dyspraxia which is a kind of developmental coordination disorder. It often comes with language problems, and sometimes a degree of difficulty with perception and thought. For the first time the family became aware of neurological disorders. Everyone started looking at Dad and wondering if he had a neurological disorder. In the US I met someone with severe Asperger's Syndrome, I started wondering if Dad had that. We were all trying to diagnose him to make sense of our experience of trying and failing to form a relationship with him.

For my Dad's 80th birthday I made a photo book. I tried to highlight his strengths and abilities, and how we had benefited from or inherited them from him. I have put two copies in the back of the room for you to look at after the service. The morning that I presented it to him, he looked the whole thing through and then said "There were dark times too, that are not in here." He started talking about the day that World War Two ended and he was arrested and placed in a house in the village, a secret prison, part of a process to prevent the Dutch population from taking justice into their own hands and murdering their fellow countrymen who had collaborated with the Germans during the occupation.

My stepmother and I held our breath, Dad had never volunteered to talk about this before. Intermittently over the next three years I questioned him and he shared bits and pieces of what had happened. I discovered that his Dad and his Mom had been imprisoned, that his older sister had her hair cut in the public square. That his parent's house had been taken from them. That he had not talked about it because to be a collaborator was so shameful that it could cost him his job. That as part of his punishment he was denied the right to vote for 10 years, and that the lingering ostracization was a major reason for immigrating to New Zealand.

Besides beginning to understand what effect suppressing these memories and hiding this information had on my father, I was filled with a terrible taste in my mouth, "What if my relatives had actively contributed to the identification, deportation and death of the Jews during World War II?" I went from feeling horror at the fact of the holocaust to nausea at the idea that my own family had directly contributed to it.

My father's information was limited to the memories of his own experience at age 17, his age when the war ended. He did not remember how long his parents had been in jail, he did not know why his father had become a member of the Nationalist Socialist Party, and in fact he hated his father. My Dad blamed my grandfather for the rest of his life. Blamed him for ruining my Dad's life. My Dad never learned to talk with him. He had no interest in politics, and refused to vote for the rest of his life.

I started my own research. First online at a special Dutch website set up for people my age trying to understand people like my Dad. We are called "Children of Wrong Parents." Kinderen van Foute Ouders. Some have written stories on this web site. Some have written books. Many have waited for their parents to die before publishing. Many have offended siblings who did not want this information to come out.

I read a very detailed account of the first five years, 1933 – 1938, of the Dutch Nationalist Socialist Party which gave me a more nuanced perspective on the conditions in the Netherlands during the Great Depression, the unemployment, the fear of communism, and the spiritual enthusiasm of the members who were going to restore the Netherlands to its former glory.

I discovered that the National Archive in the Hague has all the files of the investigations, the charges, the convictions and the punishments of those arrested at the end of the war. After my father's death on March 18, 2011 I decided that I wanted to read these files.

It took me a while to work up the courage to act on this decision. Finally in July of last year, more than a year after his death I filed my official request, and by the end of August I was told they had found files for both my father and my grandfather. These files can only be viewed in person by immediate relatives. I arranged to travel to the Netherlands in October and my cousin Annerieke, who shares the same grandfather, agreed to come with me to the Archive. We read the files together.

There was no evidence of betrayal of Jews or betrayal of the Dutch people who hid them or betrayal of Dutch people who were in hiding.

My worst fears were not realized. Instead I am left with a deep sadness. The lack of compassion, the shame, the lack of insight because the whole country decided not to talk about what happened.

I would have liked to get to know my grandfather, I think I might have liked him.

I wish my father could have found someone to trust, just one person with whom he could have shared, who could have helped him process his experiences.

Since I have returned I seem to have found some peace, I am no longer afraid of what I will find.

Instead I have found the energy to create a photo book of my Stepmother's life.

I'm hoping that it will provide some healing, and maybe contribute towards a culture of compassion within my immediate family, my siblings, their spouses and their children.