

*My Pandemic Year*

*Betty Bright*

I am grateful to be here this morning with all of you, either in this beautiful chapel or virtually. As I thought back to 2020, it was breath, or, evidence of life, that was often on my mind, and from there, I was carried back to memories of childhood. Growing up just west of Portland, Oregon, my parents took my sister and me to the Oregon Coast each summer, where my dad would take me and my sister clamming. I can see the three of us walking the beach, my sister and me carrying buckets and shovels and wearing our sweat shirts and pedal pushers (yes, that was a thing), with my dad walking ahead carrying his own larger shovel and pail.

We'd walk, scanning the sand ahead for the clams' evidence of life, also called a "show," that would appear just inside the tidal edge. The sign appears as a depression or hole, left where the clam has withdrawn its neck and started to dig, quickly burrowing down with its foot. The Pacific Razor Clam is named for the long, convex shape of its shell, designed to enhance its vertical acceleration, which makes it tricky to catch. When I'd spot a show, I'd drop to my knees and dig like heck, first with a shovel, and then toss the shovel aside and propel my entire arm down into the hole. Sometimes I'd catch one, but more often, the clam's powerful foot would prevail, as it propelled itself into the depths. This process would repeat until the rising sun burned off the fog, and we three would return, usually carrying my father's captured clams, and anticipating their salty fried goodness at that evening's dinner.

It's a good memory, one that I hold to, in part because my life changed not long after, when I turned twelve. My parents divorced, the family split, and continued to fracture over the next many years, sending all of us into a time that was uncertain, uncomfortable, even a little scary. I learned much in the following years, including compassion, as I watched my mother struggle with work and health challenges.

There were more difficult periods ahead in my late teens and early twenties, other challenges that awaited me, until I generated my own transitional period after college, by moving to Minnesota on a Greyhound bus.

My mother was raised Episcopalian and earned a two-year degree at St. Helen's Hall, which was an Episcopal women's college in Portland. With my mother, my sister and I attended St. Bartholomew's in Beaverton until high school, but I don't remember conversations about God or religion; we attended church because that's what we did. Even so, the quietude and reflection that I experienced in church resonated with me. At Trinity, I wear a St. Christopher's medal that my favorite Aunt Mae gave me at my confirmation, which now shares space with Oregon sea glass.

Those two pendants sum up my earliest imprints: a yearning after spirit, and Oregon's wild coastline. Once in Minnesota, my former husband and I, and later our daughter Vera, attended Unitarian Universalist churches, which I appreciated for their open door to all spiritual paths, as well as a focus on social justice.

Ultimately, I sought what I described as a more focused spiritual practice, and found my way back to the Episcopal church and to Trinity, but I'm careful to describe myself as an unconventional Christian. I've always been a seeker, someone who finds inspiration in Buddhist and Native American writings, as well as in the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

The years flow past, with much joy, and other mountains to climb. Fast forward to 2020, and I'm now single, with my daughter a nurse in Colorado. That year began for me probably as it did for many of you. I was busy, blessed with friends, my daughter's visits, and several writing projects, as well as my ministry for the year, to serve as Trinity's Junior Warden. All was well, and then, COVID happened.

Given my history, when the pandemic arrived, requiring restrained circumstances and a life of heightened awareness, it was not a stretch for me; it was familiar ground. Trinity's adult forum responded by exploring liminal space, that in-between-ness that can activate anxiety about the unknown, but also can lead to excavating long-buried truths. I now had a name for those challenging periods in my childhood, as well as a deeper appreciation for their having inspired me to move to Minnesota.

At the same time, and for the first time since I joined Trinity six years ago, I took a break from adult forum. Instead of focusing on the realities of a solo liminal space, my way through was to stay busy and count my blessings, grateful that I was anchored and held by the Trinity community.

And then, the ground shifted yet again. On Memorial Day, the life of George Floyd was callously taken, his breath extinguished, one life out of thousands of lives taken from people of color throughout the history of this country, but this time, we saw it; we couldn't not see it, it happened here, and was on constant replay—and, whether or not it touched each of us individually, it has clearly, undeniably, changed everything.

It certainly changed me. Like many of us, I attended Trinity's zoom open meeting, and listened as fellow Trinitarians shared their grief and stories of loved ones who have endured prejudice. I felt shame, and, in choosing to remain at home during COVID because of my own compromised immune system, I felt enormous frustration to do, *something*. I turned to our Episcopal Church's national website, and began to read.

On that site I found a story that begins in the early 2000s. Katrina Browne began researching her heritage, as many of us have done. She'd heard stories for years about her beloved East Coast ancestor James DeWolf, who had been a U.S. Senator and was reportedly the second richest man in America, with buildings named after him in Bristol, Rhode Island. In her research, Browne discovered to her horror that the DeWolf fathers, sons and grandsons had built their enormous wealth on human trafficking—the slave trade—from 1769 to 1820. How could this be, she said to herself. How could I not have known? This was the North. Didn't slavery only happen in the South?

That remorse launched Browne, an Episcopalian, on a life quest. Over the coming years she and nine family members retraced a triangular trade route that played a key role early America's Northern commerce. The triangle went from slave forts on Africa's West coast of Ghana, to the ruins of Browne's family plantation in Cuba, and then back to U.S. coastal ports, including Bristol's in the north. Browne made a documentary of their journey, and then she and others created Sacred Ground, a ten-session curriculum grounded in the Christian faith, that invites participants to travel through history in order to peel away the layers that have brought us to today.

Sacred Ground opened a door to eight of us from Trinity, who met over zoom in ten sessions from June to December, reading books and articles, and watching films and videos. Again, and again in the sessions, those present would say, I didn't know, or, how could I not have known that. Well, *I* was saying that, and I'm a historian, for Pete's sake. I had a vague sense of Jim Crow restrictions, but that was it. I had had a busy life, but in over sixty years had learned little about the innumerable barriers built into education, commerce, and America's so-called "melting pot."

For just one example, I'd never thought deeply about the ongoing effects of red-lining, which is when home loans to eligible buyers are denied, often because of race. In a related practice, I was shocked at the widespread use of racial covenants written into land deeds. The first Minneapolis covenant appeared in 1910, and stipulates that, the "premises shall not at any time be conveyed, mortgaged or leased to any person or persons of Chinese, Japanese, Moorish, Turkish, Negro, Mongolian or African blood or descent." Recently, volunteers at the University of Minnesota have reviewed all of the deeds in Hennepin County. On their website I found a swath of properties just a few blocks from my Deephaven home that carry such language—those covenants date from 1941.

Yes, the Sacred Ground path was powerful. *And* it included two additional aspects that could make it transformative.

First, the curriculum is designed so that those of us who are white, can do our own work with others who are white, on a journey that is fact-based and heart-felt.

Secondly, each path is personal. Much as Browne's family research opened her eyes to a hidden history, Sacred Ground walkers are invited to look to their founding ancestors with an eye to place their families' stories into a larger historical context.

For example, an immigrant lens opens a seeker to a deeper understanding of family members who arrived, vulnerable, seeking refuge, and facing oppression as America's newest 'Other'. Reflecting on those stories from *that* perspective invites compassion toward those who are enduring it today.

Or, from a different perspective, as in Katrina Browne's family and my own maternal heritage, our ancestors may have enacted oppressions. My lineage reaches to Davy Crockett, who achieved mythic status as the "King of the Wild Frontier." (My lineage actually ties to his brother, but growing up we were told he was a direct ancestor). To my parents' generation, Crockett personified the nineteenth century's heroic westward expansion, and the Oregon Trail. It was only when I was in high school, that I began to see that history in terms of the Indigenous nations that were overrun, displaced, and then decimated by settler colonialism. My Crockett lineage has been a source of pain ever since.

At Trinity we often talk about both/and, as a means of respecting different points of view. Sacred Ground helped me to see more clearly my history, both within the circumstances of that long-ago time, and also, recognizing history's ongoing tragic effects. Here's what I mean. My research suggests that the Crockett line originated from the Scots-Irish in what is now the United Kingdom. In the early seventeenth century, the Border Scots were recruited by the British to seize Ireland's lands, basically colonizing the Indigenous Northern Irish people.

In the eighteenth century, nearly a quarter-million Scots-Irish migrated to America. These immigrants were cash-poor. Many were forced to indenture themselves to repay their debts, and many of them faced prejudice. Some became soldier-settlers, much as their ancestors had back in Ireland. Allied with the military, these soldier-settlers drove America's self-described "Manifest Destiny," which justified the taking of Indigenous lands, the breaking of treaties, and the forced relocation of Indigenous nations—whose effects continue to be felt today in Native American communities: the past always connects to the present.

For me, so much of this has been about shifting perspective. For example, if I was walking my Sacred Ground path as a Native American, whose Indigenous heritage was nearly exterminated, my perception of

the myths of Davy Crockett would rightly reflect that tremendous loss and injustice. Those would have been the stories passed down in my family, which would continue to form part of my identity and sense of place in America, today.

My research is not about blaming my ancestors, far from it. In fact, I see this as my ministry, recognizing a more authentic history which is helping me to speak my truth about a complicated family lineage. No more secrets or myth making, just compassion and a lament for those caught within a history of continuing injustice that I believe needs to be understood, acknowledged, and addressed, in order for this country to ultimately heal.

As our Sacred Ground journey continued, we Trinitarians began to recognize the invisible system that benefits some, at the expense of many others. Author Isabel Wilkerson describes it as exposing, beam by beam, a structure of privilege that we don't see, because, well, we aren't meant to see it. Even as we each have built our own lives, worked hard, and endured struggles, we were still helped along, through subtle layers of access and protection, that remain invisible to us. It's no wonder that naming it provokes surprise or defensiveness, and yet, it is so clear once those voices are heard by one's mind, heart, and spirit.

This is what I learned in my pandemic year. That liminal space experienced solo is tough, but that God is in that space as well, ever offering an invitation to move into growth. I also learned that if the unknown is crossed together, in beloved community and prayerful discernment, liminal space can open the heart, enlarge the soul, and, yes, expand the breath.

I return to thoughts of my childhood, as I cherish that time, walking the beach in the dense fog of an Oregon morning. There is my sister, walking ahead, alongside my dad, who is so very tall, and we're all carrying our shovels and pails. The air is thick and the ocean is quiet, as it is in the morning, and it's a perfect time, a precious time, yes, a time before change and loss, but still a time I return to and treasure. As the three of us peer intently ahead, seeking evidence of life, the future awaits within us, a future we can continue to shape as long as we have breath. Soon the sun will burn off the fog, and our way back will be more clearly lit.

I cherish our Episcopal faith because it invites us to listen and think deeply, to be vulnerable, and to not be afraid of what we don't know or understand. Because in this moment and moving forward in beloved community, we are there for one another, and never alone.

*Amen*