

EASTER BASKETS

Growing up Unitarian in the 1960's was just - weird. We didn't know any other Unitarian kids, just the ones who went to our church, none of whom were friends or lived close by. In the very white, heavily Italian and Irish Catholic town of Eastchester where I grew up, the only other religion was Jewish, and there were only a smattering of those. Somehow there was a sense that my church was not a real church.

Oh how I longed to be like those other little girls who got to wear the poufy white dresses for their first communions, and whispered memorized words to prayers... how I knew this, I'm not sure, since I didn't visit anyone else's church. But I saw glimpses of the beautiful dresses, in a clothing store or driving by a real church on someone else's special morning.

But Easter. Along with Christmas, we got to share that holiday. Though we didn't pray or talk about Christ, the Unitarian Church in White Plains obliged by hosting the egg hunt, and most especially, encouraging the dressing up of children and adults alike. This was indescribably thrilling to me. My very sophisticated lime green polyester spring coat - with a FAKE FUR COLLAR no less. That year, age 8, a newspaper reporter showed up at church,

and my picture was snapped. The next day, it was in the paper with the caption, "Prettiest girl on Easter Sunday." Dear heavens, I was never the prettiest anything, and how desperately I needed to believe that caption.

I loved dying eggs. Still do. The Easter baskets of my childhood, bursting with a beautiful hollow girl bunny, and sticky jelly beans, was a glory to wake up to. And, the egg hunt.

These were rituals. Easter bound me to my peers. I could not explain to them what it meant to be Unitarian, but we could laugh about biting the chocolate bunnies' heads off together.

As a mom, Easter brought with it the delirious pleasure of indulging the compulsion to out-cute the rest of the world with matching Easter outfits. Why was this so urgently important? Each year, there were themed Easter baskets: science supplies one year, musical instruments the next, art supplies, books and reading, vintage toys, gardening. We hosted Easter dinner with lamb and coconut bunny cake. And of course, an Easter egg hunt, indoors or out, until the kids were way too old and beyond. Never a mention of anyone having risen from the grave.

This year, the first without my mom, I am thinking about the origin of my obsession with Easter. Holidays in the house came from her. Though both my parents were ethnically Jewish, for some reason I shrank from the idea of my Jewish roots. Was this because, intentionally or not, my parents did? Mom made pot roast, and for the first few years after her mom died, she lit a candle on the anniversary of my grandma's death. But that was it. My dad - whose aunt was the writer Anzia Yezerska, who documented life in impoverished Jewish neighborhoods in the lower east side - had no say in the matter. He was not close to any of his eight siblings, and no one practiced Judaism anyway.

There was a lot of confusion that I never faced down. I knew that my mom had been raised in the Ethical Culture tradition. I now also know that this was a non-denominational faith which attracted many Jews at a time when anti-Semitism might have been rampant. Was I, as the wonderful director of RE at Emma's Hebrew school said, a "Jewntarian?" For whatever reason, I did not like this idea. I definitely didn't feel compelled to explore it. I was bitter that during the Hebrew School celebration dinner the one year Emma attended (long story), not one person spoke to me or invited us to sit with them. I was angry when my brother, now a conservative Jew by marriage, didn't attend our father's funeral at the White

Plains UU Church, because, he said, his religion forbade him to enter another house of worship. He in turn was upset that we had carried out my father's wish to be cremated. Irrationally, I took all of this personally. To me, this did not seem like a forgiving or welcoming faith. I know that this is not true, nor is it fair. I felt as if I was looking for reasons or excuses to push it away. Perhaps like my parents did. I now wish I had grown up with an understanding of Judaism and at least token observation of Passover and Hanukah.

My mother somehow craved these Christian rituals and traditions. I wish I could ask her why. She hadn't grown up with them. It was important that we shared them as a family, unthinkable that we would not. Was she also trying to find her place, connect to a different world than that of her own childhood? I can only guess.

So then, it was equally important for me to share them with my children. These traditional rituals have their place among other family ones, far less traditional: a yearly New Years burning of the last year's calendar. A sage blessing of a new home, blessed again at the beginning of the Pandemic. Nightly candles at the dinner table with a reading.

And what weaves them together? My UU roots, no matter how tangled: the place where I can ask these questions, explore the answers, wonder about my Jewish roots aloud, and wear my Easter bonnet, no matter how silly.

