

## One Member's Journey

This member's journey is the story of a life saved. It does not contain the excitement of a capsized raft pulled from the churning waters of class 5 rapids, or the dramatic intervention of a team of trauma surgeons springing to action in a chaotic urban emergency room. Rather, it is the tale of an average guy, from an everyday family, who was afflicted with many of the common ailments that can plague a middle class gay man, born in the 1950s, to a traditional Christian Middle-American family.

I think a lot of you gathered here this morning might be familiar with the symptoms, whether through your own personal experience or that of someone you've known or loved. Two loving parents, a wonderful kid sister, doting grandparent, a mostly public school education, a good college, a fairly decent career, spectacular friends – and – devastating depression, endless despair, paralyzing self-hatred, condemnation and hopelessness. Add to that an early HIV diagnosis, the first in his circle of friends and the only one still alive 5 years later.

Scarred by coming out, eventually estranged from family, stung by homophobia – especially his own. Numbed by grief, staggered by rejection, unable to envision anything but unfairness, inequality and injustice. Embittered, self-consumed, propelled down a rapid endless descent; no need to die and go to hell – eternal damnation could never match the anguish and angst of awaking each morning to face the new day.

Please meet the man who stands before you today, just fifteen years ago. That was me – on a good day. And I made good money, drove a late model convertible, lived in San Francisco in an apartment with a great view of the Golden Gate Bridge, the Marin Headlands, and the enchanting downtown skylines of San Francisco and the East Bay. I had it all – quite literally.

Then a miracle happened. It didn't come in a flash of light or a boom of thunder. It was gradual but pervasive; sort of like getting a big shot of Novacaine at the dentist and then having to wait 20 or so minutes for it to settle into the flesh of your gums and the synapses of deeply-embedded nerves.

And I resisted it, vigorously and passionately – I tried to hold it at bay, with all of my strength and determination and incredulity; but to no avail. I had crossed the threshold of the First Unitarian Church of Oakland and I had met and experienced the first principle of the Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations – the inherent worth and dignity of *every* individual – even me.

I really liked how it sounded and I thought it was really cool, as long as I remained an exception to it. But the men, women and children of that congregation would not have it – they practiced, believed and *lived* that principle. When I was asked to teach religious education to the middle school kids, I was convinced that it was a some kind of trap or a test. I began to draft a disclosure letter to the parents: 'a self-avowed gay man with AIDS will be spending Sunday mornings in the church basement with your young adolescent children.' The ministers looked shocked, then just laughed and laughed, thinking I was joking. I taught for two years and grew to know and love – and be loved – by some of the most remarkable young people I ever met.

Then I was invited to consider taking my years of experience with illness and death to become a lay pastoral care provider. I started visiting people who had just been

diagnosed with a terminal illness and I sat with many of them as they died or recovered or suffered immeasurable pain. Then mourned or grieved or celebrated them with their loved ones.

In the meantime, my beautiful partner Darin and I had decided to have a ceremony of holy union and Reverend Janne Eller-Isaacs counseled us and helped me to muster the courage to invite my parents to attend and even participate in our ceremony. I remember the minister asking us if we were prepared to have our relationships with our families transformed by this experience. We dismissed her warning only to actually have those transformations occur, in the most radical and wonderful manner. The night of our ceremony Janne spent three hours with my mother, and after several years of us not even speaking to each other, my mother and I reconciled and she and Darin and I became powerfully close in the years before her death.

These are just a very few of the reasons why I know that Unitarian Universalism is a life-saving faith and offers a life-transforming value system that heals the ill and redeems even the most broken, desperate and despairing of our world. It has saved my life as it can yours and that of any others who are blessed enough to cross its threshold. It is a living tradition with centuries of roots and eons of promise. Let us live it together.