

St Thomas Stories

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My name is Katherine Mary Duffy Sim, but you can call me Kate. You may wonder why I'm standing up here with these paintings. Well, that's my St. Thomas Story.

When I was asked to participate in St. Thomas Stories, I was honored and grateful. Then I became confused, then terrified. I'm not afraid of public speaking; I was an English teacher for 32 years, and I've given dozens of professional presentations. It's not that I lack a feel for language. I'm a writer – and I'm Irish. We're never at a loss for words! But I felt as though someone had pushed the “mute” button in my brain, and there was nothing in my head but resounding silence.

I discussed my anxiety with my beloved husband, Charlie, my sounding board and moral compass. As usual, he downplayed my drama and cut to the chase. You see, I thought that I was going to have to tell the story of my entire faith journey. That story would cover over 50 years, two Protestant denominations, a brief fling with Wicca and Hinduism, two branches of Judaism, Buddhism, and now, Roman Catholicism. (My dear Auntie Helen, may she rest in peace, used to predict that someday I would become Baha'i.) Last November, John Shaughnessy wrote an article about me that appeared in the Criterion, and he told my story so truthfully and eloquently, that for a fleeting moment I thought I might just stand up here and read John's article --and switch out all the pronouns, replacing the “she's” with “I's.”

But Charlie reminded me that the real story isn't about my faith journey. It's about my relationship with Mary. And I can't talk about Mary without bringing up the subject of mothers.

The first thing I'll say is that, while she was right about many things, my dear Auntie Helen was wrong about my becoming Baha'i someday. I know that because I know I've come home. How do I know I've come home? Because this is where my mother lives, and my whole life I was searching for my Mother.

My biological mother and I had a somewhat tenuous relationship. Born to a lapsed Catholic and a confused Protestant, I grew up in an alcoholic home where things could get scary. Sometimes I got hurt. The abuse was always presented to me as punishment that I deserved for being inherently bad and even mentally ill. My mother raised me in the Disciples of Christ Church; I was president of my youth group, sang in the choir, served as a Deaconess, taught Sunday school, and performed other acts of lay ministry, but I went into the church building and left the church building feeling that I was never good enough for Jesus, because of this badness/madness that my mother convinced me had stained my heart.

My father died when I was 20, and I saw, during the three years that he diminished due to cancer, that the Catholicism he had once abandoned in his pursuit of an “intellectual life,” became his vehicle of grace as he grew closer to death and more self-contained. I felt as though he had something beautiful up his sleeve that he never fully disclosed nor shared with me before he died. He did give me a lovely oak and bronze crucifix for my room, but there were times when I would take it down from the wall because I was ashamed for Jesus to see me, as bad as I was. I had the busy-ness and the artifacts of Christianity, but none of the grace.

Four years after my father died I married a Methodist and joined the Methodist church. I sang in the choir, served as a Deaconess, taught Sunday school, and performed other acts of lay ministry. I also became the mother of a beautiful, perfect, little girl. As I watched this precious child, this innocent soul grow and develop, I realized that I had been raised with a lie. No child deserves to be hurt. No child deserves shame. It’s a mother’s job to protect her children. If someone had done to my daughter what was done to me, I would have had them arrested.

The only surviving family member from the time of my childhood abuse was my mother. When I confronted her with the cruelty and hypocrisy within the family, and how it had affected me, she became vicious and attacked me verbally. Of course I was bad, of course I deserved it, of course I was crazy. And how dare someone as wicked as I was perform acts of service in the Church? How dare I even have the gall to walk through the door of a church, as dirty as I was? She sent out letters to members of the family telling them that I had suffered a complete mental break and was not competent to be a wife or mother.

We didn't speak for three years, even though we only lived five minutes apart. I couldn't see her or hear her voice without becoming physically ill. I went to the spiritual leaders of the Methodist Church with my dilemma. They were embarrassed. They took the "come around to the back door and we'll give you some literature in a brown paper wrapper" approach to adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

I was devastated, doubly betrayed. I had been abandoned by my family and by my church. But not by God. I might not be welcomed by the followers of Jesus, but I'd always known a God who spoke to me through nature, who was beautiful and eternal. But how and where to worship? I had always been interested in Judaism and had many Jewish friends, as well as Jewish ancestry. At age 37 I attended a Friday evening service at Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation. It was as though the sun came out and God said, "Where have you been?"

My husband, daughter, and I converted to Judaism and lived full Jewish lives. My daughter became a *bat mitzvah*. It was a wonderful period in my life. I learned liturgical Hebrew, I learned the Jewish roots of Christianity, I sang in the choir and directed a religious school program. I met wonderful people who became lifelong friends. The Jewish community took me in with loving, open arms. I am forever indebted. Unfortunately, for many reasons, my first marriage didn't last. A few years after my divorce, I met my Charlie. We were married in a synagogue, and I got another beautiful daughter in the bargain. Husband, wife, and two daughters: we were a Jewish family.

Except, of course, for my mother. With the help of Rabbi Eric Bram, who went to God last year, may his memory be for blessing, I was able to find room in my heart to establish an uneasy truce with my mother. One Easter she asked for my forgiveness. We began to speak again and reached a point of what I can only call reserved affection.

In October 2009 my mother fell in her apartment and lay on the floor for five hours before being able to crawl to the phone and call for help. She was hospitalized, then placed in a stinking hell hole that called itself a "rehabilitation center." At the time of her accident I was in Tucson with my husband's family as they gathered around his dying mother, and when I came back to Indianapolis I became very ill

(remember H1N1?) and was in bed for over two weeks. I was not able to be as involved in my mother's care as I wanted to be. I did as much as I could, making daily calls from 1700 miles away, then calling from my sick bed as I was able. When I became mobile, I had many conversations with the facility director (a high school friend of mine from church youth group); I pounded on the social worker's door; I went nose to nose with nurses. Still my mother sometimes went without meals, her symptoms of congestive heart failure were ignored, and she lay in her own filth.

Then she contracted C-Dif. Because of poor communication in the rehab facility, she was tested, diagnosed, and treated too late -- her condition became fatal. She wasted away to 88 pounds, and was in constant pain. A few days after her diagnosis, I got the call to come and say goodbye. When I arrived, she drifted in and out of consciousness, wanting her hair brushed, wanting to know what day it was. I sat next to her bed, saturated with grief, but more than that – guilt. I was supposed to take care of her, and yet she ended up in this horrible place, in this horrible condition. Could I, would I have done more, had there not been that earlier enmity between us?

I was still recovering from the virus, I was emotionally and physically exhausted, irretrievably behind at work. I was empty. I couldn't think. None of the Jewish prayers for healing came to my mind. After 15 years, I forgot all my Hebrew. I began swaying next to my mother's bed and out of my mouth came the words, "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed if the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death, Amen."

My mother lasted through the night. The next afternoon I sat by her bed with my daughter Sharon, who had always been very close to my mother, and who was quite distraught by the idea of her death. We said our goodbyes, told my mother she could go on, but medicated and incoherent, she was restless, resistant, crying out fearfully, still in pain. Shari and I sat leaning into each other with our heads touching, and I said, "You know, if I look at her and see Granny, I can survive this. But when I look at her and see my Mommy..."

That's when I put my head on my mother's shoulder and started to sob. Her breathing slowed, she ceased to struggle, and she became peaceful. A few minutes later she was gone.

It was a gift of grace for both of us. She got to be my Mommy one last time.

After my mother's death, my life came to a screeching halt. I was still weakened by stress and by the virus. I was overworked, emotionally bereft, and in the next year Charlie and I endured a total of five deaths in our combined families. I couldn't sit through the services in the synagogue any more. Kaddish, the Mourner's Prayer I had once found so beautiful, was now just a mouthful of sounds that had nothing to do with how I felt about my mother. I bought a rosary. I began to pray the rosary. I read Christian and Catholic philosophy. I went to mass. And I bathed in the grace of Mary. I knew that at my mother's death, a transition had been made, a hand-off if you will, from one mother to the next.

After heartfelt conversations with my mentor of 30 years, Wanda Strange, I decided to join the Church of my spiritual mother in order to make sense of the death of my biological mother. I entered RCIA in 2010. It was a hard thing for Charlie to lose a Jewish wife. He felt abandoned (a feeling I understand well), and tension grew in our marriage. He couldn't understand Judaism no longer met my needs, and I couldn't adequately explain why I had to become Catholic. I just knew that there was no other way to have the relationship I wanted with the Blessed Mother. Would I be forced to choose between my marriage and Mary? If so, the choice would have to be Mary.

While things began to clarify in my faith life, my professional life was disintegrating. I think it might be safe to say that teaching had always been my true religion. It gave me joy, purpose, and, the sense of connecting to something bigger and more important than myself. But in my exhausted and grieving condition, I felt teaching become a tedious burden. I had to drag myself to campus to face my students. In between classes I would close my office door, turn out the lights, put a yoga mat on the floor, and sleep fitfully in between migraines. All the joy had left me. I knew it wasn't fair to me to go on and it certainly wasn't fair to my students. I took a leave of absence without pay beginning January 2011.

Now what do I do? One evening, during that January of 2011, I was sitting in my living room feeling lost and afraid. I knew I couldn't go back to teaching, and would have to permanently resign my position, thus terminating my source of income. I had compromised my marriage by preparing to join the Church. What had I done? Suddenly my mind's eye flashed on the remembered image from a much beloved photograph, a picture of me, at age 3, sitting in my grandmother's lap. It's not unusual for my gramma to come to me when I am feeling lost and afraid. I sat there savoring the image of that photograph, but as I held it in my mind, it changed. Instead of my gramma holding me, it was the Blessed Mother.

My first thought was, "I'd like to paint that!" I don't know where that came from. I hadn't painted in years. I'd never studied painting. I just hung around and watched my own mother, a gifted artist, when she got out her canvas and brushes.

The second thought that came to me was, Kate, Our Lady has been holding you your entire life. There has not been a moment when she has not cherished and guided you. You are only able and ready to see it now.

The next day I got out my brushes and canvas and paints, and I dedicated myself to painting images of the Blessed Mother. In the past year I have created a series of 15 paintings of Mary in different natural settings. The series is titled "I See Her Everywhere" – because I do. In every beautiful flower, every slender tree, every snowflake, the moon reflecting on the water...she is always with me.

Each of these paintings is accompanied by a poem. I have one more painting to complete, and my long-range plan is to expand the text and create a book of Marian devotions. I have a website, www.mymothersgrace.com, where people can see my paintings and up until recently purchase cards and prints with the images. I am in the process of changing the website so that Catholic organizations can obtain the images for free to use as fundraisers. It just doesn't feel right to put a prices on the Blessed Mother.

My family has made peace with my conversion and my vocation. When I went through conversion at the Easter Vigil here at St. Thomas last year, my Jewish husband was the first one to greet me with a kiss and tell me, "Congratulations," and he fully supports every step of my new journey because he sees how good it is for me.

And that comes back to Charlie's suggestions about my opening comments. This is about my relationship with Mary. And about mothers. I love the porcelain statues of Mary you see in discrete niches. I love the beautiful carvings you see in the naves of churches. I love the paintings of the demure Virgin and the placid young mother holding a fat, haloed baby.

But to me, Mary is more than that. She is a mother for the millennium. She is strong enough to pick us up when we fall. She is courageous enough to stand between us and danger. She is patient enough to wait for us to run about exploring until we realize that she is our home, and we return to her.

And she holds us to task. There was a time, last summer, when I had what I believe was a direct message from the Blessed Mother, and it went something like this: "Kate, there's someone I want you to meet. This is my Son. It's time you two became acquainted."

To Jesus Through Mary. Through the mysteries of the rosary, I came to know Christ. That is the end of my St. Thomas Story. The Jesus of my youth, the one I associated with shame and inadequacy, became known to me as the son of my Blessed Mother. As she loves me, He loves me. And as she serves Him, I serve Him.

Thank you for listening. I'll be happy to answer any questions you have about the paintings. I'll leave you with an Irish proverb. **Tá Dia láidir agus tá máthair mhaith**

"God is strong – and He has a good mother."