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To the Centre of the Labyrinth, and Beyond

Karis Burkowski¹

“Seriously? You’re kidding, right? Why would we want to eat the body of our friend and drink his blood? That’s cannibalism! Surely, when He said, ‘Do this in remembrance of me,’ He meant that we should do this symbolically, as a reminder.”

That was the precise moment when I first began to question my faith. I was thirteen, in confirmation class, and we were learning about transubstantiation and consubstantiation. Until that moment I was a good, churchgoing Evangelical Lutheran girl, a “true believer.” After that class, I started paying more rational, critical attention to *everything* we were learning from our blue and grey catechism book. Looking back, I can see that I must have become quite a pain in the ass for Pastor Lange. Eventually he asked me to bring my questions to him *after* class so as not to “disrupt the flow.” Even then I understood that he did not want my questions causing doubts in the minds of the rest of the class.

Sometimes he could provide answers that made sense to me, but often I was told I simply had to “take it on faith.” On my three kilometre walk home from Mount Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church to Columbia Street in Waterloo, Ontario, I would ponder this. Sometimes I would stop and sit by the creek at the corner of Westmount Road and University Avenue (which was still fairly natural and pretty back in the early 1960s) and read my notes again, trying to deal with the cognitive dissonance that was troubling me.

I was duly confirmed with the rest of the class, but that was mainly because it would have been unthinkable to go against the wishes of my parents or face ostracism from my classmates and friends. It was the 1960s, the brave new world of hippies and the Beatles, the exiled Dalai Lama, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and the Hare Krishna movement. So many ideas and concepts to explore! I read everything I could find about different religious traditions and tried to experience them.

While I still attended church, I tried on other religions like trying on clothes. Buddhism came closest, but nothing really fit. All of them, even Buddhism, had glass ceilings for women and treated us differently from men. This did not sit well with a young feminist. It was like being in a maze – all blind alleys and dead ends. I found myself becoming increasingly disenchanted with all religious traditions.

Then, in the late 1980s, I discovered Joseph Campbell. I learned about comparative mythologies, spiritual metaphor, the power of myth, the Hero’s Journey, following my bliss, and lots more. Unfortunately, my “Saint Joseph” died in 1987, so I never did get to meet him, but he had a profound effect nonetheless.

A maze is not a labyrinth. A maze is a perplexing series of choices, often leading to dead ends and requiring backtracking. A labyrinth, on the other hand, is a single pathway, leading inexorably (although it may not always feel that way) from the entrance to the goal. Joseph Campbell showed me that I was not in a maze, but in a labyrinth.

¹ A member of Interfaith Grand River since 2001, Karis Burkowski enjoys an active retirement, volunteering with local Humanist organizations and marketing her co-authored book *Why Men Made God*.

At about that time, I became a Neopagan, having discovered that the earth-based traditions worked best for me. I loved celebrating the lunar and solar cycles, the seasons of the year, and the stages of a human life. These were concepts that matched observable reality. Although I stayed with that tradition for more than twenty years, I kept on reading and exploring. The difference was that now I was studying religions from an anthropological perspective.

Viewed in this way, it was completely understandable that wondrous creatures like talking snakes and flying horses would appear when required to advance the agendas of the writers of the stories. And all the paraphernalia such as bonnets, scarves, beanies, veils, wigs, shawls, jewellery, unusual hats, ways of treating hair, and even special underwear made sense as tribal insignia to separate those inside the groups from those outside. The more bizarre these accoutrements were, the more they intrigued me. I continued to learn about and experience the various religious celebrations whenever I could. Fires that could never go out, books that had their own bedrooms *and beds*, awkward prayer positions and, yes, even those Eucharist rituals that had once appalled me were now fascinating customs to observe.

I went to India and joined worshippers of Durga in her temple, experienced the exquisite Lotus Temple of the Baha'is, attended or observed prayers at Sunni and Shia masjids (mosques), and enjoyed Sufi musical presentations. I missed out on seeing the Kali temple in the mountains, but later learned that this may have been a blessing, given that tourists still occasionally end up as sacrifices. (Look up the origin of the word *thug*.)

In 2001, I joined Interfaith Grand River (IGR), getting to know clerics from all the religious traditions in the Grand River watershed, and discussing with them the nuances of their beliefs. It was, and continues to be, a fascinating experience. I had read the Qur'an and the Bible, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *I Ching* and the Eightfold Path, but most of them knew virtually nothing about Neopaganism, so it was great fun challenging their preconceptions. We really did not eat babies or dance naked around fires! Many of the IGR members knew about Native Spirituality, but were genuinely surprised to learn that earth-based spirituality still existed and was actively practised outside of that tradition.

As a member of the IGR steering committee, I helped organize several different lecture series presentations in which teachers from Encounter World Religions taught about various religions and then took the class to a worship service to meet practitioners, share a meal with them, and ask questions. I wish there was a way to get funding so that IGR could offer this program on an ongoing basis at little or no cost to the participants. It is so important for the different "tribes" in a community to have a basic understanding of one another!

On four different occasions over the years, I attended the Encounter World Religions intensive, week-long experience in Toronto, where we could engage with Native Elders, Zen Buddhists, Wiccans, Zoroastrians, and Rastafari, along with other traditions not easily accessed in Kitchener-Waterloo. Meals were included and it was not unusual to spend 12-hour days listening to lectures, visiting sites, and discussing ideas late into the evening with classmates.

The more I thought about and talked about Neopaganism, the more I fine-tuned my language and my self-identification. I shifted to Pantheism, the belief that all of Nature should be considered sacred, but even that did not quite fit. The time seemed right for some deep introspection.

And so, in 2007, I got myself a backpack and some hiking boots and walked the 850-kilometre El Camino de Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage across the top of Spain, in the footsteps of pilgrims from as far back as the ninth century. I slept in some of the same stone barns that they had slept in, and visited cathedrals that must have awed them over the centuries. The pilgrimage footpath traverses three mountain ranges and a desert, wild forests and lush vineyard regions, abandoned villages and cosmopolitan cities. I walked for six weeks, away from everyone and everything I knew, away from all my routines and with only the supplies I carried on my back. I experienced all forms of weather and plenty of hardships. Day after day of “walk, eat, sleep, repeat,” living completely in the moment. Many hours with no one to talk to except my shadow (or perhaps I should say Shadow, with a capital S). It was a metaphor for Life’s journey, and a revelation about the very real power of pilgrimage.

When you begin the pilgrimage, with your shiny new gear and your preconceptions of how it will be, you bring with you the Ego Self you have built up, honed, and polished over all the years of your life to that point. Your Ego Self has been formed by your upbringing, your family, your cultural traditions, your school years, your early experiences in the work world and the world of relationships, and so on. This includes the media-driven focus on striving for status in the pack by acquiring more stuff and more acknowledgements. This Ego Self has taken shape more or less without your conscious control.

When you go on a pilgrimage, little by little, day by day, the ego version of yourself gets chipped away. If the pilgrimage is long enough and challenging enough, you end up stripped down to your basic humanity, just one more pilgrim on the journey. You lighten your pack and do the best you can, and try to help others do the same. By the time you reach your destination, the Camino is your village and the other Peregrinos are your tribe. It’s no wonder that the early pilgrims felt “washed clean,” as if their sins had been pardoned and they could begin anew.

My Camino left me feeling open, vulnerable, aware, and free to rebuild myself, this time consciously. I felt as if I had reached the centre of the labyrinth.

Joseph Campbell expressed this feeling beautifully when he said,

We have not even to risk the adventure alone for the heroes of all time
have gone before us.

The labyrinth is thoroughly known ... we have only to follow the thread
of the hero path.

And where we had thought to find an abomination we shall find a God.

And where we had thought to slay another we shall slay ourselves.

Where we had thought to travel outwards we shall come to the
center of our own existence.

And where we had thought to be alone we shall be with all the world.²

Was that the end of the journey? No indeed! From the centre of the labyrinth I have as far to go as I have already come.

I now self-identify as a Secular Humanist. I have co-authored a book called *Why Men Made God* and I currently serve as the Vice President of the Society of Ontario Freethinkers.

² Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Bollingen Foundation, 1949).

Co-authoring can be fraught, and I now realize I need to speak my own truth without the pressure to compromise with more extreme views, so I am making notes for a new book.

The voices that guide me now are the voices of scientists and astrophysicists, people like Carl Sagan and Neil de Grasse Tyson, Brian Cox and Brian Greene. I understand that we are all part of one tribe, the tribe of Earthlings. We have all evolved from the building blocks of life that are spread throughout the Universe. We are interconnected with everything on the planet. Every molecule that is in us was previously in something else, and those molecules will be recycled when we die. Every breath we take contains air molecules once breathed by dinosaurs. Most importantly, I understand that every person I meet is a unique result of all that has happened over millions of years. Each one of us is a miracle, and we are fortunate to be here together, sharing the experience of life on this amazing planet.

The voices of secularists, agnostics, humanists, and atheists can be deeply spiritual, without the agenda of trying to convert you to a specific religious tradition. Instead, the agenda is to make you think. To make you question and discuss and debate and internalize and evolve. We can learn something from everyone we meet on the journey. The trick is not just to hear but to listen.

Do I believe in any form of invisible, supernatural being? No. Do I still consider myself a spiritual person? Certainly. Can the secular be sacred? Absolutely!