

A Whole Constellation of Tipping Points

David R. Weiss – March 22, 2023

Further reflections on “giving up on church for my children.” Remember, I titled my blog, “Full Frontal Faith: Erring on the Edge of Honest.” Whether doing public theology or self-reflection, my goal is to write with as much insight and honesty as I can. Still, these are reflections on MY journey, not yours. I’m not asking anyone else to make the same choice I have. Over the years I’ve learned my writing is often insightful to others. But insight does not necessarily mean imitation, and I trust you to discern where any insight leads you.

Here we go ...

The Big Dipper. Seven stars. Actually, eight! (That first twinkle in from the end of the handle is, in fact, two stars—Mizar and Alcor—that only the sharpest eyes can distinguish.) The two stars we rely on most are the “pointers”—the pair that line up to point to the North Star. But you wouldn’t recognize them without the other stars that form the Big Dipper. A whole constellation helps you find the North Star.

So it was for me. I began my last post, “Perhaps every decision has multiple forces, tiny and large, stretched out behind it.” These then are some of the multiple forces behind my decision to step back from the Christian church as the context for my work. Let’s say my North Star is my goal of pursuing my climate writing outside the church for the sake of my children. That’s *the direction* I want to go. But a whole constellation of tipping points helped direct me to that North Star. Today I want to identify seven (eight) of these tipping points: the stars in my own “Big Dipper” of sorts.

1. My restless sense of vocation. Since adolescence—for *fifty years now*—I’ve wrestled with my place in the church ... and the church has returned the favor. I’ve had a deep and persistent sense of vocation ...but never a deep and persistent sense of “fit.” Anywhere. Driven by a life-long hunger to understand and respond to this vocational longing (which has felt somehow linked to “God” or the Sacred), the simple truth is that none of my education, teaching, or church involvement ever fully met that hunger. (With one exception: my work alongside and on behalf of LGBTQ folks, on my own and through the Reconciling in Christ program. *That was vocational in its fullest sense.*) This is NOT to blame my education, teaching, or churches. In every setting I’ve had moments that were rewarding. But the restlessness has never subsided.

Thus, my connection to the Christian church has *never* been as “secure” as it may have appeared from the outside. Ultimately, the persistent “insecurity” of my place in the church became a tipping point to a call beyond the church.

2. Heterodoxy. That’s a nicer word than heresy or heretic, but it means something similar: to hold beliefs at odds with those accepted as the norm. I’ve been coloring outside (sometimes *far outside*) the lines of standard/orthodox Christian beliefs for a *long* time. I might explore this more fully in a future post, but in my last post, when I referred to “playing mental games of dodgeball and whack-a-mole” during church, here’s some of what I meant. I don’t view the Bible as divinely inspired. At all. I don’t believe in the Trinity (except as an imperfect metaphor for naming God as Being-in-Community). I don’t regard Jesus as God, or even the Son of God (not in any singular way). I don’t believe in a bodily resurrection of Jesus (or anyone else). I don’t think Jesus’ death has *anything* to do with forgiveness of sin (in fact, the very notion

grieves and angers me). I don't believe Jesus performed any "miracles" that violated any of the laws of physics or biology. I could go on. You get the idea.

To be fair, I *do* regard Jesus as a mystic-prophet-teacher whose words and life are worthy of study, reverence, and emulation, *but who never desired our worship*. We—me and Jesus—remain on very good terms.

As a theologian, I could write several pages of nuance for each of those statements (and maybe I will). It's true, there are *plenty* of Christians who quibble with many of these ideas. (And plenty more feminist, womanist, liberationist, black, queer, and ecological theological, as well as historical Jesus scholars, who quibble with exceptional and exciting insight!) Yet it's equally true that, even in most liberal-progressive churches, it regularly requires a fair bit of theological contortionism (aka "dodgeball and whack-a-mole") to engage with the weight of a tradition that remains reluctant to choose real change. Still, were it not for my kids, I might well have chosen to persist in seeking to foment change myself. However, in their absence, my own heterodoxy became one more tipping point in a constellation of stars directing me ... beyond.

3. Unitarian Universalism on my radar. In March 2003 I gave a talk about themes in LGBTQ theology to a UU church in Davenport, Iowa. That invitation came thanks to a Luther College student who took my class on "LGBT Voices in Theology" the prior spring. It was my first time speaking to and worshipping with Unitarians, and it left a deep impression. I told Margaret afterwards that it was probably the most "at ease" I'd ever been in worship. That I felt like these were "my people." And yet, my family, my heritage, and all my theological was Christian. So that's where I stayed, even as I occasionally referred to myself as a "UU doing covert work" in the Lutheran tradition. For (almost exactly) twenty years, the UU tradition has been on my radar, a faint but constant blink on the screen.

Through my cousin, Katie, and her husband, Byron, I've had opportunity to visit their UU fellowship here in the Twin Cities several times. In fact, I've twice offered presentations there myself. Last fall, as I found my need for fuller transparency in my own faith life rising, I turned to them (and Margaret) for rich conversation. And just this past January, when I learned that Katie would be speaking on a Sunday morning, reflecting on her church's journey in light of UU principles, I zoomed in to "support her." But I was just as much checking the waters for myself. Whether you call it convenient or providential, it proved transformative. Something shifted for me that morning. Even though I wasn't sure what to make of the shift.

Some tipping points can only be identified in hindsight. This one I *felt as it tipped*; disorienting, exciting, fearful, but undeniably tipped. That faint constant blink started to blaze.

4. Imaginary letters to my (very real) grandchildren. For twenty years I taught college religion. Even when I was cobbling teaching jobs together with side gigs, I *was* a teacher. If anyone asked any of my kids (biological, step-, in-law, or of the heart) what I did, they could easily answer, "He's a college religion instructor." Then in 2017 I left teaching for good. I was unemployed ... self-employed ... under-employed—who knew exactly what I was? Not me.

Eventually, after two semester-long seminars dealing with vocation, I embraced a new identity: *public theologian*. (My writing on LGBTQ issues had already been public theology, but at the time I still saw myself as a college instructor.) Now, my blog and an occasional adult ed forum at a local church *was* my "fulltime job." But I fretted over how my children—or grandchildren—

would understand what I was doing with my life now. As a result, in the second of those seminars, as my final project, I described my convictions and my work in a series of imaginary letters to my nine grandchildren.

These letters, written in the fall of 2018, became a tipping point because they marked the first time I tried to articulate the value and substance of my work to my grandchildren outside the church, from my place inside the church. The first time I imaginatively stepped into the painful space between our worlds of meaning—and fashioned my first words in that in between space

5. My climate alarm. It is so much more than climate, but rising temperatures and increasing weather extremes is how it most often enters the news. Really, it's *overshoot*: living innocently, ignorantly, recklessly, wantonly beyond Earth's capacity to renew itself. The fossil fuel emissions driving climate change are just one facet of overshoot. Destruction of wild habitat, pollution of land and water and air, abuse of domestic animals and extinction of wild animals. The list runs on in myriad directions—none of them good. We are not merely changing the climate, *we are crashing the multiple systems that sustain our lives. We are actively rushing toward ecocide on a planetary scale. We run the very real risk of placing ourselves—homo sapiens—on the endangered species list.* (We may already have. ☹)

When I turned my focus as a theologian toward climate around 2015, I had *no idea* the depth of our crisis. By now I am persuaded there is no way we will sidestep ecological or societal catastrophe. Is it still “theoretically” possible to drop emissions fast enough to keep temperature rise to 1.5C? Maybe. But is it realistically, economically, politically, socially, culturally, or religiously feasible to do this? No, no, no, no, no, and no. Doesn't mean we oughtn't fight like hell. Because every fraction of a degree that we hold back *will mean less suffering*. But this crisis has so many moving parts, only one of which is carbon. The fabric of our lives is unraveling on all sides (and it's because of us).

Listen carefully. In my mind, we—you, me, my children and grandchildren, and all those you love—are doomed to catastrophe. *This is not the same as being doomed, period.* Because there is human life pre-catastrophe, there *will be* human life mid-catastrophe, and there is *likely to be* human life on the far side of catastrophe. And my vocation, as near as I can tell, is to imagine, create, and present guidance that can assist us in preserving not simply our lives but our *humanity* as we move toward, into, and (hopefully) beyond catastrophe.

If you're convinced the future is bright and full of promise, I'm probably not the person you want to invite to a party. But if you brood with anxiety over a future that seems FAR more perilous than you dreamed of, then I just might be your best friend. My climate alarm is a BIG tipping point. It drives the urgency that shapes nearly every choice I make these days.

6. The Revolution of Love. In December 2020 a friend on the West Coast invited me to check out an online gathering of The Revolution of Love, a ministry she was connected to. I joined a service by Zoom, with great trepidation; I am decidedly *not* a joiner. BUT—I found this group undeniably compelling. An interfaith-multipath movement founded by Rev. Felicia in 2012, ROL's one defining core belief is in the transformative power of nonviolence in making justice and peace. For its first eight years ROL held in-person gatherings and community-solidarity actions in the L.A. area; with the pandemic it shifted to an online ministry in mid-2020.

Margaret and I only experienced the online expression of ROL, but for twenty months we rarely missed an online gathering. Our “services,” as they were called, never worshipped anyone or anything. They focused on understanding the dynamics that empowered us to be (or prevented us from becoming) change agents in the world. Our core commitments were to oppose violence and hatred in its many forms, to be actively anti-racist and pro-abolition (of police and prisons), to be vigorous in our solidarity with marginalized communities, and to committed to doing our own inner healing in order to deepen our capacity to be present to and for others. We were “just” a rag-tag group of several dozen folks scattered across the U.S.—atheist, agnostic, Jewish, Christian, and more—bringing both wounds and gifts into a community determined to reshape the world, beginning with ourselves.

ROL became a tipping point by showing me a spiritual/heartfelt community centered not on supernatural beliefs but on this worldly transformation. (ROL went on hiatus last August so Rev. Felicia could focus on a book project. The impact of ROL on our lives was such that, since then, Margaret and I have hosted a monthly online gathering for a handful of ROLers to sustain our fellowship and be mutually supportive to one another. Decidedly *not* a joiner, I joined.)

7. Therapy. For the past five years I’ve been working with a therapist off and on. For the past two years quite regularly. We’ve discussed a whole range of issues and experiences, and I’ve been fortunate to work with a therapist I’ve found compassionate, insightful, and challenging.

Mostly I’ve been processing trauma and depression (both have roots running back to my teen years, with fresh additions of both in adulthood) and exploring how the dynamics of my mostly happy childhood conspired to undermine some of my best hopes for adulthood. Oops. It’s a long, complicated tale. Ever so briefly: the course of my life has been shaped and misshaped by a dysfunctional dance between my academic-intellectual excellence and my unwittingly pattern of linking ... knotting ... *chaining* my self-esteem to the external approval that came easily and abundantly.

Not unlike Pavlov’s mouth-watering dogs, from the time I started school, my public performance was paired so consistently with positive reinforcement that the very (subconscious-unconscious) infrastructure of my sense of wellbeing became merged in a most unwell way with outward feedback. Too damned gifted to disappoint others very often, I eventually found myself imprisoned, as it were, in an invisible cell of “needing to please others” such that I was unable to effectively pursue the inner callings speaking *to me*.

I’m still working to disentangle myself from this pattern. But I *am* working on it. And as I have begun to understand and, bit by bit, undo this dynamic, therapy has become one of the pointer stars in this constellation of tipping points.

8. My mom’s death. As many of you know, my mom died last August after a long slow descent into dementia. Most of my grieving occurred during the final three or four years of her life, as her memories, habits, interactions, and character were all besieged by the disease without mercy. Her death brought fresh waves of sadness, but also a finality to her journey and an end to her diminishment.

Each of us grieves differently. And there are moments when I’m ambushed by sadness often sparked by a scent, a sight, a sound, a photograph. But mostly I grieve by way of gratitude and resolve. No one in my life—*no one*—accompanied me more steadfastly and for more years, across

the terrain of my vocational wandering. From letters to late night conversations my mom cheered me on toward a wholeness I often fumbled away myself.

My final promise to her, as much a promise to myself, with the finality of life itself pressing in, was that I would not tarry any longer in becoming me. If I had any reservations about living into the insights I'd gained through therapy, the end of Mom's life ended those reservations as well. Her death forms the other pointer star in the constellation.

The whole constellation. I could identify other tipping points, but these are the ones visible to the naked eye. My decision to "give up on church for my children" has roots running as far back as my adolescent inklings of vocation, as ground-shaking as my mom's death, and as recent as my spontaneous decision to attend my cousin's talk at her UU fellowship in January. When I step back and view them together, I can almost watch them arranging themselves into a Big Dipper, with the final pair of "pointer stars" giving me a clear sense of direction ... toward that North Star.

About that North Star. Choosing to step outside the Christian tradition is not a decision made lightly or easily. Although there are glimmers of relief (no more liturgical-theological dodgeball or whack-a-mole), there are also real and significant losses. Some friendships will carry forward in other forms; many will not. There will be new theological notions to resonate with; but also, some older familiar ones that I'll miss. But this is NOT about cost accounting. This is about love.

John Philip Newell writes in *Christ of the Celts* that Celtic spirituality, from the very beginning, had no use for the idea of the cross as a payment for human sin. From theological argument to mystical experience to rituals, sacred and mundane, Celtic Christians affirmed God's boundless love reaching out to and through creation. So, to view the cross as payment for sin was not merely nonsensical, it was a betrayal of the God they knew. Yet the cross remains everywhere in Celtic art and spiritual imagery. Newell argues that this is because they understood the cross, in Julian of Norwich's words, as a great "showing" of the heart of God. No payment tendered to a judging God, the cross underscores Jesus' faithfulness to God's love for humanity—a healing, wholing, community-birthing love. It cost him everything. But his faithfulness held.

Newell: "And so the cross, in addition to being a revelation of the nature of God, is a revelation of our true nature, made in the image of God. It reveals that we come closest to our true self when we pour ourselves out in love for one another, when we give the whole of our being." (*Christ of the Celts*, 84-85) In this sense, my decision to leave the church, for the sake of my children and grandchildren—to go in search of new words than can speak to their hearts—is *not at all* the renunciation of my Christian faith. *It is the fullness of it.*

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