



Shaker Church, West Saanich Road, Brentwood Bay, Vancouver Island, BC.

"My Journey of Faith"

Mavis Underwood, Saanich Nation

As a child growing up I was surrounded by organized religion. Grandparents on my Mother's side were devout Catholics and our First Nations community was home to a community Catholic church built by Catholic missionaries. I remember visits from missionaries and the Monsigneur to our home. When eavesdropping I was confused by the efforts to convert my Father because I thought he already was a good soul and it was even more confusing when I heard them asking my Dad to marry my Mom. Our family already had about 6 children so it scared me to think that my parents weren't married and were living in sin. My Mom told me that they just wanted my Dad to marry into the Catholic faith

My Grandparents on my Father's side were actively involved in developing the Shaker faith unique to Salish people in the lower mainland and into Washington State. Shakers still travel back and forth between B. C. and Washington State to attend Shaker rallies. The religion has helped many of our people cope with tremendous grief and loss and addictions. If I was to explain the Shaker faith to an outsider I would describe it as powerful, fundamental faith that shares the power of faith and hope to help people. Shakers pray to the Lord Saviour Jesus to help them and sometimes there are healing miracles where people have found relief from pain, worry, illness, or psychological problems.

My Grandfather, Bert Underwood was a powerful Shaker healer. My Great Uncle, Sandy Jones was also a healer. Both men were also builders, building fishing boats and houses and of course the Shaker Church on West Saanich Road in Brentwood. One of my great joys as a young child was watching the Shakers at the Christmas Rally. Many children came because Santa was there. We would sit or lay down on wooden benches waiting for Santa and our Christmas presents and goody bags. What I remember most is that my Grandpa and Sandy Jones were getting on in years. Sometimes they could hardly walk because of arthritis pain in their backs and legs. But when the Shaker bells began to ring they flew around the room. They were fast and light on their feet. I was particularly fascinated by Sandy Jones size 6 feet in shiny black shoes. The Shakers would be damp with sweat and when they would finish they would collapse usually laughing into their seats.

Religion is a lot for a child mind to think about. I was so heavily influenced by Christian doctrine that I would make my brother kneel on the ground with me and we would put our foreheads to the ground and cup our hands around our eyes to see what we could see. I remember telling him that all that life captured in his hands was a miracle of life created by God just for us. I remember my brother Doug indulging my little sermon without much comment, other than "oh yeah". I also persuaded him to sneak back to the church because in the sermon the priest said this is the house of the Lord and he lives here in the altar. We snuck back to look under the altar to see if Christ, the Lord, or Jesus was home. We also sniffed the wine and tried to see if we could create the miracle of changing the wine into the blood of Christ. For some reason it just did not happen. We finally left because as it started to get dark the statues starting looking at us and they seemed to be getting bigger. We did remember to put our hands in the holy water and to say sorry and goodnight as we hurried out.

We played holy communion at home when our parents were gone. My Mom was a prolific baker of bread and cinnamon buns. With so many children she had to be. We would take her fresh baked bread and would make hosts. My older brothers who were aspiring altar boys would bless the bread and would make us kneel in front of them and would give us bread and tell us to pray. When they would get bored with holy communion they would whack us on the head for being sinners.

My Mom was our saviour. She tried so hard to keep us going to church. In the beginning the family was small and easy to manage. We would observe all of the religious teachings. We ate fish on Fridays. That was no big deal, when the fish were running sometimes we ate fish everyday. The girls wore head-coverings to attend mass. As our family grew it became harder to keep nice kerchiefs, sometimes Mom resorted to covering our heads with nice clean diapers. It still is embarrassing to think about how we looked but Mom was happy that we went to church.

The scariest part of being a Catholic was my holy communion. We became brides of Christ and I really thought there was something a little weird about that. I liked my white dress though, unfortunately my new white shoes floated away in the saltwater. That was one of the first subjects for my first confession. I lied about the shoes. After getting into the routine of confessing I sometimes made up sins since I did not want to disappoint the priest. I said I swore, lied to my Mom, stole from my brothers or sisters. I once thought about breaking one of the 10 commandments just to show that I paid attention to them but realized that was quite a big whopper. At any rate it was between me and God. The priest maybe believed me and made me do penance, but God knew I was just trying hard to please.

My journey of faith is ongoing. I have family and friends that are prayerful people. They keep hope alive. I do have faith in the goodness of this world. The ability of people to reach out the hand of kindness or lend a word of encouragement or caring. I do not have much faith in organized religion. I listen to the stories of those who have overcome great adversity and that gives me faith and hope. I liked going to church when there was singing and laughter and diapers on our heads but I do not go anymore.

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