

Spiritual Autobiography

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I was born in Holland, Michigan, I am the youngest of three, and my parents were married until I was about 5 years old. Each of my siblings are separated by 2.5 years, so I grew up with my brother, but didn't become close to my sister until my mid-twenties. To my mind, my parents divorce was uneventful. When I was twelve, however, my mother moved my brother and me to her hometown: Iola, Kansas. My mother wanted to move to take over as the editor and publisher of the family newspaper. This is the most significant event of my childhood.

Iola is a small rural Kansas town, with a population of roughly 5,000, and the vast majority are rural white folk. Going through middle school and high school in Iola gave me a deeper sense of community and family. Although my sense of racial and economic identity didn't develop until college. Throughout middle school, I grew more involved in the local Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), where I formed my first sense of community and social justice. Much of my identity was wrapped up in serving in and through the church. That small church gave me strong relationships through the youth group and through mission trips to Mexico. During high school my dad got interested in Buddhist meditation and that widened my sense of spiritual growth, and it was during high school, I developed my life-long love of running; it is still the physical practice I use for self-care. When I am running and exercising, I am at my most healthy.

I went to St. Olaf College in Minnesota where I majored in religion. When I was not studying I was working as the assistant director of an after-school program for "at-risk" youth. I also was the director of a college mentoring program for "at risk" Latino/a youth in town. Though I eventually found a solid group of friends, I did feel that St. Olaf was an insular and privileged environment, where many of the students came from wealthy suburbs of the Twin Cities. I did not grow up poor, but in Iola, there was not as much social space for stratification between the "rich" and the "poor." Academically, I felt under-prepared for St. Olaf, and remember having to work harder than other students to make good grades. Eventually, school became easier and I found deep meaning in writing, studying, and the classroom.

The most significant period of my college years involved my sister. She was born with a cavernous angioma—a raspberry-sized cluster of blood vessels positioned above her brain stem. One day after she graduated from college the cluster of blood vessels started to expand in her brain producing stroke-like effects, threatening her life. She underwent two surgeries at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Mn. the year before I came to St. Olaf. The side-effects were massive: she had to re-learn the majority of her motor-skills and lived with my dad and step-mom in Michigan for a year after her surgery, before she eventually moved back to pursue a masters and PhD in english at the University of Kansas. On trips back home to Kansas from college I would often stay with her. She has since married, has two kids, and is a professor of creative writing in Kansas. She still has some slight paralysis in her face and her balance is not as strong as it used to be. She is the picture of perseverance and strength and she is one reason why family is so important to me.

After college I moved to San Antonio, Texas to work for a year as a community organizer with the Industrial Areas Foundation through the Young Adult Volunteer (YAV) program of the PC(USA). IAF organizers come from a culture of agitation and power-building. It forced me to mature and clarify my priorities politically and vocationally. I fell in love with

organizing: the emphasis on personal growth, the intentionality behind the relationships, its clear-eyed analysis on political power and the violence of everyday economic, racial and judicial oppression. I began to discern my true vocational passion for social justice and theological ethics. I found, however, that I had a deeper passion to help Christians understand their own theological reasons for this work. If I hadn't organized in Texas, I would not have applied to seminary at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

I moved to New York City with my brother, who just finished the Peace Corps in El Salvador. He attended NYU for two years as I completed my MDiv at Union and began my ordination process. We grew very close during this time. During my MDiv I started working for and eventually became the executive director of Religions for Peace USA (RFPUSA). During this time I met my now partner, Lauren, and applied and entered the PhD program in social ethics at Union. Between my MDiv and PhD program I moved to Nashville to direct RFPUSA and be the point-person for an anti-Islamophobia initiative. My work in Tennessee gave me relationships with Muslims who struggle against religious and racial bias motivated by a perverted Christian theology. My relationship with Lauren is central to my overall health: she is caring and consistent partner through the ups and downs, the long-distant relationship, the demands of a PhD program, and even now as we are in the fourth year of marriage. In 2020, we welcome our son, Julian Emerson.

Over the years I have discerned that my vocational ministry is a call to the intersection of the church, the academy, and community organizing. My sense of self is deeply embedded in stories in each of these overlapping — yet distinct — circles. Each move over the years has presented its opportunities and challenges for growth, and I have slowly learned what matters most to me, and how to maintain a balance of mental and physical health. My family has become increasingly important. Real social, personal, and relational growth takes time and continued investment. Organizing in Texas taught me that our broader culture encourages social isolation. Social and political problems feel more daunting when faced alone: organizing is about building relationships grounded in shared values of what people hold most dear, and building political power to protect and fight for those values. My scholarly work focuses on communities organizing for what they hold most, what they hold sacred, but this is not merely an intellectual endeavor. It is at the very heart of my Christian faith and my political and personal values.