

FaithLifeStories: Fran Ford

Fran Ford is a longtime parishioner at OMC and an active volunteer in outreach to the homeless.

I wish I could claim my faith journey was a long winding road but it was more like a mountain switchback. I was born in the hay day of the fifties when family and religion ruled. My mother was a devoted Catholic mother whose only night out was Sodality. I remember many times walking past her room at bedtime and seeing her on her knees in prayer.

She saw that we got to confession every Saturday and we never went to a movie until we checked the Catholic movie guide. And even though she saw that we got to confession, she also managed to teach us that religion was not about the rule but about the unconditional love of God.

But the fifties lead to the sixties, a time of questioning everything and throwing away the best of our upbringing. I had gone to Catholic grade school and high school but went to Penn State for college. This was a school my mother referred to as "that place" because she blamed it for my rebellion against the faith. But that was not the case; I think it was the times, with the war tearing the government apart and causing us to question what we thought we knew as truth.

I believed religion was all lies but it was important I married a Catholic to please my mother. By the time I got married, I had walked away from my religion. So I married a Catholic who was as lapsed as I was. My husband went to Catholic school through college and he blamed college for his loss of faith. He said that from his religion class it was obvious that the church was just another political organization with people plotting against each other to get to the top.

We had two daughters and I had them both baptized and sent them to CCD because I wanted them to have a moral compass and something to believe in if things got tough. But that was the extent of their exposure to the religion. I tried to reinforce the religion in the home but with no spousal support, the kids tolerated me but I was more an object of their ridicule. And overall, we were content in our faithless lifestyle.

Then I had a massive stroke. My first conscious thought was, if God is your father he would never do anything to hurt you without a reason. So find the reason. This was such a gift because it set me off in a direction, a search to find a purpose rather than wallow in self-pity. I found my purpose in aiding the homeless.

But I had a second stroke, which really changed my life. I lost my ability to talk and became very physically compromised. This caused me to go back to the lessons my mother had taught me. Most important were belief in the unconditional love of God and that everything happens for a purpose. It is not necessary for us to know the purpose but it is necessary to be faithful to God and not question his plan for us.

I think God talked TO me when I had my stroke, assuring me that he would never hurt me without a reason. During the years when I didn't practice, it's not that I thought the faith was a lie; I thought religion was a lie. Somewhere I had forgotten the lesson of a personal God and rediscovered that with my stroke. My husband saw my conversion as further proof of my brain damage.

But then my husband died and my faith became that much more important to me. I would not say I clung to my faith but I did feel God walking with me to aid me as I walked through this tough time.

Both of my daughters married non-practicing Catholics and were married outside the Church by a Lutheran minister who has been a friend of the family ever since. But I would say they are Christmas Catholics. Neither of them has children. One is a teacher in the Philadelphia public schools and this is her life mission. My other daughter is a middle school guidance counselor dealing daily with typical middle school problems. I know they pray to get through their day

There have been two major shifts in my faith formation that I think are worth mentioning. One of them was when someone asked me if I ever asked God why this was happening (my strokes and loss of some physical functions). I thought, "Did I ask God why I had two beautiful intelligent children? Or why I was born to a loving mother who taught me about unconditional love by loving regardless of how obstinate or obnoxious I was? So what right did I have to question when His decisions for me are a little uncomfortable. He has never failed me."

The other time was when someone asked, "How can you have faith when you have lost it all?" And my thought was that I have lost plenty but I still have more than most people. And the irony is it took the losses for me to take stock and realize how incredible lucky my life has been. And part of the luck was that I settled in OMC parish where my faith can be nourished by all the opportunity it provides.