

ABOUT OUR FAMILY'S UNUSUAL JOURNEY

BY ELISE ELROD

About Baptist roots...

Our journey to no more religion began as a couple, each of us from very religious families. After a successful engineering career, I was president of a local parachurch group and traveled to Gdansk and Warsaw, Poland. We had both been very busy in religion all our lives. Then, we began attending Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY. We were 'A' students. I concentrated on homiletics and church growth, serving on the seminary payroll as an academic counselor to incoming students. My spouse, a lifelong musician, studied church music.

During seminary, we drove five hours roundtrip to serve a church as music director and pastor. Because we sold the engineering firm, we were able to buy a home across the street from the seminary and lease an apartment on a small lake only two miles from our church. Friday evening through Sunday evening, we spent near the church. Monday thru Friday mid-day, we spent at the seminary.

After graduation, we moved back to Middle Tennessee to serve another church, again as pastor and music director. We were on our way. We had money, a beautiful home on a major lake this time and church placement only thirty miles from our hometown.

Up until then, our story is characteristic of many second career clergy couples. Our dream of working in religion looked promising but there was a fly in the ointment. Our Southern Baptist roots challenged me while I struggled with a medical condition with which I was later diagnosed. Doctors say the condition affects less than four-thousandths of one percent of the population.

I was ordained during a service in a church of my childhood. Signatures of a long list of church

leaders run over onto the back of the certificate of ordination. Like many who must hide something, I was deeply invested in that which simply could not support my circumstances; and I had done so without confiding in anyone.

Perhaps, this is why I advocated for those divorced and women to be able to serve in every capacity. I urged the mentally disabled to take part and they did so, sometimes over the objections of the so-called "able." I asked a group where I heard the 'N' word often to work toward inclusion of more than one ethnic minority. I was seen as to the left; at least as the religious might think of being to the left.

Yet, I had never really understood the authentic issues of social isolation involved. I could back off when I met opposition; not fully understanding what delay meant to those being denied. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King said, *"...when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of 'nobodiness'—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait."*

About family...

I was born in 1951 in rural Tennessee where my family was living in a house that was once used as a turkey roost. Dad was a six foot, four inch farmer with a crew cut, later turned ironworker, then a very successful businessperson; now retired. Mom passed away a couple of years before I retired. She was a tiny woman and an extraordinary artist. My parents taught me a work ethic I will always cherish.

In 1966, I met the most astonishing person. We were fourteen and fifteen years of age. In 1970, thirty days after graduating high school, we married. My spouse worked in banking while I earned a degree in engineering. We worked together to build a successful family and an engineering firm that earned us taxable income annually of several hundred thousand dollars.



Now, we have three wonderful grown children and seven grandchildren.

About Joni...

The image I carry of Joni (formally Elizabeth Joan Outland) is one I have seen hundreds of times in each of the religious settings we served. There she stands face to face, attending to the life of a senior; all the while a child tugs at Joni's skirt. She is an extraordinary listener. Even now, our kids and grandkids arrive on the weekends for pot roast, carrots, potatoes, green beans and Joni's famous yeast rolls. They enter in thunderous excitement—straight to the kitchen where they literally take turns telling MawMaw (that's Joni) all about their jobs, their grades and their troubles. Now that I think about it, I do the same thing every day.

Joni is a people person. Her favorite people seem to be on the edges of life, either at the beginning or near the end. Children's choir materials have been stored under her bed for over thirty years. She graduated from the School of Church Music at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. She sings, plays piano and keyboard. Her senior's choir once sang, "Are You Humbly Grateful or Grumbly Hateful?" Joni is humbly grateful for her life and yours, and mine.

She was comptroller for our engineering firm. She is now HR Manager for a major zoo.

About our marriage...

Joni and I are legally married, and will soon celebrate our forty-fifth year. How did such a thing happen? It was not until in my forties when I finally spoke to Joni about the struggle. One weekday, we arrived home from our jobs at a church. Joni was minister of music. I was pastor. I told her that I was troubled and depressed. She said she knew something was wrong. I explained to her my thoughts and discomfort and my memories from age six.

Neither of us was familiar with the APA diagnosis "Gender Identity Disorder" (APA now labels Gender Identity Dysphonia). So, after twenty-eight years of marriage, we began seeing doctors, hoping to make, what we thought was gender confusion, go away.

Back then, we met every week with a psychologist. To this we soon added a psychiatrist. Eventually, we added an endocrinologist. After a year and half and over 100 weekly meetings to doctors' offices, Joni, the doctors and I were in agreement concerning the correct course of action. We resigned our church positions and continued the medical journey known as transition.

The initial consequences were most disturbing. Both sides of our birth families abandoned us. We lost the house on the lake. Medical intervention, prescriptions and surgeries eventually cost over \$100,000.00, the vast majority not insured.

Naïvely, we searched for a church to attend. The first church we attended set limitations on when and in what we could participate. At the second church, I was marched from the church out into the rain by a group of deacons. Our departure from religion was inevitable.

Even so, for a couple of years, I wandered from church to church, leaving each either by invitation or afraid of being discovered. The whole mess, including harassment on the job, made the newspaper. As I continued transition, our married family held tight to us, though our extended families were all but gone.

The ordeal became more and more isolating. I lost hope of ever having family or friends or even a job again. Though Joni gave me no reason to fear, I worried she too would eventually follow the exodus of others and so would our children. One night, I just ran away. Joni called Metro, Nashville police. I was found unconscious in an emergency room; in Hendersonville, TN.



The police report read, *an anonymous caller reported that there was a car at Mallard Point partially submerged... Upon arrival ... this officer observed the vehicle in the water... There was a white female reclined in the driver's seat with her seat belt on... The officer observed three empty pill bottles lying on their side on the front dash in front of the driver's side... The female was breathing but not very conscious. Officer Litton tried to get her seat belt off when he realized that she took a clothes hanger and tied the connectors together... after several minutes he was able to free the seat belt. EMS & Fire then took her from the vehicle and transported her to Hendersonville Hospital. The medications were Diazepam, Hydrocodine and Endocet. It is unknown how many she took. She was identified as Ms. Elrod.*

About the paradigm shift...

Oddly, a small church would help me begin to hope. Glendalers they call each other. I spoke of them so often that Joni joined me there after years of not attending any church. They made her treasurer. She also led a children's choir.

In one church I was told that I was a danger to their children. At Glendale, I was asked when I would take my turn keeping the nursery. At one church I was told that families were staying away on Wednesday evening because they could not eat meals with me. Dozens of Glendalers invited me to supper. At one church I was asked to stay away from Sunday school—but I could attend worship services. At Glendale, I was asked to teach Sunday school and preach in worship services. At one church, a frightened pastor had to work hard from the pulpit to admonish his congregation to be tolerant of others, meaning me. At Glendale, they asked me to serve communion. At one church, the deacons told me I could not use the restrooms. A



Glendaler came to me in the women's room and placed her arms around me while I cried.

About the ministry...

An introduction back into religion came while at Glendale after meeting Rev. Dr. Peggy Way, PhD, a professor at Eden Theological Seminary in Saint Louis. This was a pivotal experience for me. There came an invitation to speak at Eden Seminary in Saint Louis.

I spoke in chapel that morning. Over lunch, we had a round table discussion in the cafeteria. That afternoon, I taught a class on cultural studies and in the evening conducted a community event.

The Dean of Students for Eden, Dr. Holly Nelson wrote, *"You will come away with the awareness that Elise is first of all a person you would like to have as a friend, secondly a person full of humor and wisdom, and only lastly a person with an unusual story to share."* I had never been able to articulate it but her perceived order of my emphasis confirms my priorities.

The interim time, until a search committee and I found each other, was spent speaking publicly. The healing journey has taken me to the most extraordinary speaking opportunities of my life including many prestigious universities (often invited back) and to the pulpit of Ebenezer Baptist, the home church of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King.



For several years, I worked as a volunteer with the Campus for Human Development in downtown; Nashville, TN. CHD provides services for persons who are living homeless. My duties included registering guests who seek services from the Room in the Inn program and conducting orientation sessions concerning program participation. I also participated in Odyssey, a CHD program to move persons from the streets into temporary on-campus housing and learning until they obtain the necessary skills, employment

and savings to no longer live homeless. Occasionally, I facilitated an on-campus class of thirty to forty women at CHD.

After applying to over four hundred churches, I was able to serve again in a religious setting. I served as pastor of a small UCC church in New England; then another moderate sized UCC church in Florida. I am now retired and still teaching in Florida; serving a group known as WAY2B..

About just being...

Joni and I adopted what we call a whole life policy. Our whole lives are not an embarrassment but to be celebrated. As a couple, Joni and I have experienced an escape from religion, migrating ideology, business, wealth, poverty, popularity and the loneliness of being ostracized. The experience has progressively deepened our understanding of the value of a genuine, vulnerable life.



It is our hope, whatever opportunity comes our way, it is neither because of our unusual history nor in spite of it. No journey, no matter how unique, is a central focus of life. All journeys contribute to life. Ours fills us with compassion for others, especially those chased to the margins of life.

My voice has changed and strengthened. An African American woman wrote to me after we met at a National Speakers Association conference, *“The power of your voice lies in your ability to have been what activist often refer to as the spook who sat by the door. You have seen and heard things from both sides of the table... You have heard up close what men really think of women, what conservatives think of liberals, etc. Now life has reversed. What real power you*

possess. Please do not be limited by what you did, and what you think you can do. You actually have the power to do more than you can imagine. The time is more right than you can know.”



She helped me understand I have an obligation to learn from what I once only suffered, to add to the concepts behind my words, an expression of experience that makes me a credible voice; not about gender but about individually growing in the way of contentment.

Joni and I believe there is a way of being that every human being is meant to be. That is, there is a manner of being, in which humans best relate. This way allows, even celebrates, the full diversity of culture and thought.

We have nothing to prove. We can be set down anywhere. We can be comfortable in our own skin. We can just be. This way of being is the tie that binds us, the origin of one's visceral response. It is the path beneath our feet. We need only watch our step to travel the route together.