

March 9, 2025 – Credo Service – **Marth Woodward**

There once was a young man who sought the wisdom of an old seer who lived far off in the mountains. As the young man travelled farther through village after village, people pointed “that way”, and on he went. Eventually he came to a humble hut and found the aged wise man. “Oh, master, can you tell me what is the secret of life?” The old man said “Wet birds don’t fly at midnight”. “Wet birds don’t fly at midnight?”, the young man asked. The seer said “They *don’t?*”

I’ve traveled a lot and seen celebrations, rituals, and idols that seem reasonable and often lovely. They form the social glue of communities and meet the emotional needs of people in different environments. In our own world, we learn through imagery and metaphors of language the hierarchies and taboos of our culture.

Getting older has a positive side: we have more understanding; we’ve learned through loss and mistakes what really matters. Hopefully we have outgrown fears, set aside prejudices and learned to trust the wisdom and care of others. We’ve learned to value the basics: **empathy, loyalty, and courage.**

I believe that children are often very religious. Many times young students have asked me “ My parents want me to believe something, but it doesn't make any sense to me...what am I supposed to do?” My own mother gave me a red letter Bible, which has the sayings attributed to Jesus in red, and she said “ Just bother with this.” In Presbyterian Sunday school, I heard shades of interpretation, learned how to understand Scots, and just couldn't get the connection with a personal God and Jesus. We were exposed to many faiths, so the classic story of a Presbyterian sailor didn't quite apply.....(castaway story) but the concept of faith, and the adjurations to avoid even simple “ sins” were incomprehensible.

It was reading Roland Bainton's biography of Martin Luther that opened a door for me. I saw that Luther developed many of his beliefs because he needed them. By the time it was time to join the church and say the creed, I, who was the kid asked to do the prayers in church or the sermon on youth Sunday, realized I didn't believe any of it.

I didn't have a cuddly family, but I had wonderful teachers and mentors and was very lucky in this. My connection to the world was in books, pets , nature and music. I really tried to understand why Christianity was relevant. College classes in Old Testament and ancient history put the Bible stories in perspective among legends of the ancient world and as the product of a code of power of male priests.

A lot of philosophy seemed a game to me, but I did find answers I needed in reading Baruch Spinoza and Emmanuel Kant, and much later in Emerson...what can we know and what is the basis of ethics. Of course the really cool stuff was what we, children of the sixties, shared in the dorms: Mme. Blavatsky, Jung, Tagore, the Tarot, and the Cabala.

A big part of studying music of the European traditions is the history of the church, for that was where any written evidence is found and because in church usage was how

music grew from Hebrew chant into polyphony and the vast tree of Western music. A book that nailed the coffin shut on Christianity for me was Eric Werner's *The Sacred Bridge*, a history of the growth of music through the first millennium BC.

In fiction, many Jewish writers have struggled with the individual and God. Chaim Potok's *Book of Lights*, based on his experiences in the Korean war, allows for the possibility that there is no God. This gave me courage to take this as a given.

In the wider world of grad school at Stanford, I learned about Loren Eiseley, an anthropologist who wrote beautifully about our connection with nature. I would encourage anyone to read *The Immense Journey*.

One of my amazing mentors was Richard Evans Schultes, the biologist who studied the relationship between people and their plants. His movies of taking snuff with Amazonian shamans made me realize the psychological mechanism of the rituals was identical to communion in the church...the phenomenon of seeking communication with the Divine was something universally human.

So, in these writers who have shared the conundrums of human intellect, there are the questions: *how do we know what is real? how do we follow our obligations to others and still be independent in thought? What determines what is ethical behavior?*

I don't know what I can say I will believe in the future. The process of untying the knots of religious tradition has been lifelong. It's not an individual quest but underlies our communication and expectations of ourselves and others. I know that now we cannot fathom the universe or even our own existence as someday ceasing. I personally believe that as humans we have a species awareness, a sense of community and need across cultures. Perhaps that is what we conceive of as God. I do believe in trying to live for empathy, loyalty and courage. I believe there is something transcending our understanding about Love. I am thankful for the help of many generous teachers and for the language of music and our connection with Mother Earth.

The **Words for reflection** are from Baruch Spinoza, a 17th century Jewish Dutch philosopher, who was thrown out of his congregation for questioning established doctrines. To this I'll add a quote from Loren Eiseley's *The Night Country*.