

Manifesting the Miraculously Messy

A Spiritual Autobiography by Kimberly Baldwin

Reincarnation is the rebirth of the soul in a new body after death. There are a myriad of variations on this theory, one being that we pick our parents. Some scholars teach the theory that our parents are an earthly veneration of God and our relationship with them influences all our other relationships, including how we experience the Great Creator.

Assuming this is plausible, what was I thinking? My mother, a teenager before Roe v. Wade, had me when she was just 15 years old. Adopted shortly thereafter, I cannot recall a time when I was not acutely aware of “being adopted” which for me was synonymous with “abandoned.”

My adopted parental deities ate Life Savers for breakfast, smoked Lucky Strikes by the carton, and drank Dark Eyes vodka from a brown paper bag hidden under the front seat of the car. Their moods fluctuated wildly depending on the hour and degree of intoxication. One minute they could be overtly affectionate and in the blink of an eye, belligerent and violent. Never knowing from one minute to the next what would transpire, my first encounter with divinity was twisted, toxic, and conditional.

Father, an intellectual atheist, spared me religiosity. Mother, on the other hand, suffered from what I like to call PPT or post-Pentecostal trauma. When the “spirits” moved her, she damned God and called upon a Jesus H. Christ who crapped holy.

As dysfunctional as these individuals were, they possessed a few redeeming qualities. One ideology in particular, instilled in me at an early age, was that there are less fortunate people in the world than I. Therefore, by default, I am fortunate and should always be grateful. Gratitude is a noble quality; however, when rooted in fear, it contributes to victimization.

Best friends

The Thomas sisters were my best friends growing up. They lived in the bi-level next door and rode a bus to parochial school while I walked the four city blocks to public. The sisters taught me about a subterranean level where the Devil, a half-man-half-goat lived. The Devil could travel from his underground lair up through the plumbing and into the toilet to drag me back to hell with him where I would burn for all eternity. They also taught me the difference between

Mary the Holy Mother of Jesus who rode on the dashboard of their station wagon, and Mary Magdalene the whore.

They taught me all of the words to the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*. It began with Judas singing: "Listen Jesus, I don't like what I see. All I ask is that you listen to me. And remember, I've been your right hand man all along. You have set them all on fire. They think they've found the new messiah. And they'll hurt you when they find they're wrong."

Walter, my paternal grandfather, married a Catholic woman named — yep, you guessed it — Mary. When Walter died, Mary took me to a mass for the dead. It was twilight when we entered the darkened church. Mary stopped me in the vestibule and showed me how to sprinkle holy water from an ashtray mounted to the wall across my chest and head in the sign of a cross. Only when properly anointed could I enter the sanctuary. The first thing I saw hanging from the ceiling was a scarecrow. Once the initial shock wore off, I realized the scarecrow was actually a life-size statue of an emaciated man in a diaper.

Mary grabbed my elbow and dragged me swiftly down a row of pews. Shushing, she told me to kneel and modeled how to fold my hands reverently. Men wearing long white robes chanted in Latin while swinging smoldering silver decanters back and forth as they walked up and down the aisles. Mary placed an envelope full of money in a pewter serving tray on her way up to the altar of votive candles where she lit one for Grandpa's soul. It was stuck in purgatory, where souls that were unfit for heaven went and would stay until proper atonement was made by those who loved them. During the service I wondered what apostasy Grandpa committed that would cause the essence of who he was to be suspended in a place of misery and how great our acts of attrition would need to be to cover his debts.

The woman I thought was my paternal grandmother, Petranella, loved me. The image of her bent over the kitchen table kneading dough with gnarled fingers will remain embedded in my heart and mind forever. Her hair was the color of vanilla. She always wore it pinned up in a bun, covered by a faded babushka. She smelled like sugar cookies, wore thick support hosiery, and clunky shoes. When we were alone she had me recite Sh'ma, which at the time I thought was a magical incantation.

"Now cover your eyes," she would say in broken English. "Repeat after me, my darling. Sh'ma

Yisrael ADONAI Eloheinu ADONAI echad.” Sadly, I was about nine years old the last time I saw her. Shortly thereafter, I would become a ward of the state when deemed incorrigible by the Department of Child and Family Services after my parents divorced and their fitness to raise a child was contested. Years later, my mother’s explanation was that she could either voluntarily sign the petition to terminate her parental rights or go to court and a judge would do it for her. My angst turned to indignation and by the age of 12, I was a self-proclaimed antiestablishmentarian, openly opposing authority.

Houses of refuge

When I was unable or unwilling to adhere to a particular way of doing or being in the plethora of foster and group homes, so-called “houses of refuge,” I was banished to a place called White’s, a century-old Quaker institution run by The Society of Friends. Located in rural Indiana, the campus was isolated from modern civilization. Through an organized set of doctrines, I was subjected to daily systematic brainwashing with ideals and principles intended to keep me on the straight and narrow. Loudspeakers blasted contemporary Christian music across the compound. Speech was suppressed and attendance mandatory at daily chapel services where Reverend Teague belted out old-time hymns about rocks and quicksand.

One Christmas, I was corralled into watching a swirling vortex of stereotypical entropy called *The Cross and the Switchblade*, a movie starring lily-white, squeaky-clean Pat Boone as preacher David Wilkerson. Eric Estrada, the guy who played Ponch in the popular ‘80s TV series *Chips*, portrayed notorious gang leader Nicki Cruz.

As part of the indoctrination process, I was given a Bible to read. In opposition, I chose instead the biography of Golda Meir, a woman, a Jew, and the prime minister of Israel who, like the Biblical Jews, changed her name several times.

White’s High School athletic teams traveled. Away games and an overnight camping trip at the end of the season appealed to me. A natural athlete I was not. However, desperate to change my circumstances, I became willing to do whatever it took to make a team. I had stamina and the ability to endure extreme circumstances, so I became compliant for a season, made the track team, and during our overnight trip, I ran away. Eventually I was apprehended by local authorities, returned to Whites and placed under constant surveillance. All incoming and

outgoing mail was closely inspected, I had zero access to a telephone and was never allowed to go anywhere alone for the remainder of my stay.

AA to Unity

About the same time, my parents reunited and subsequently remarried. Returned to their care, I spent the remainder of my teens worshipping the gods of debauchery, addiction, and excess, otherwise known as sex, drugs, and rock and roll. At 19, I sought asylum in AA meetings, enveloped by chain-smoking, caffeine-guzzling veterans who commiserated about “war stories” with me. Honestly, I tried to practice the 12 steps but had trouble with misogyny. God, as I understood *him*, *his* care, asking *him*. The temperate company I kept became my Higher Power and a source of strength. Their support kept me coming back to the meetings, but unfortunately, could not keep me sober.

One day, while hanging around in the historic district downtown, I happened upon Unity, a sacred space where everyone was welcome regardless of gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. The space was a plain white wooden structure, about a hundred years old with a steeple. The windows stretched from the floor to the ceiling, allowing sunlight to dance across the natural hardwood floors and deep mahogany pews. Meditation was a part of the service, as was song filled with empowering lyrics: *“Let there be peace on Earth and let it begin with me”* and *“I love myself the way I am, there is nothing I need to change.”*

Unity was my gateway to Eastern thought, Ayurveda, and authors like Louise Hay, Deepak Chopra, and Wayne Dyer. No matter how much I pumped up my self-esteem with positive thoughts, affirmations, and actions, the image I saw in the mirror was reversed. The dysfunctional system in which I’d grown up suffused the sacrosanct life in which I found myself. Interpersonal relationships were contradictions, discrepancies that left my inner child perplexed.

Forfeiting my freedom

Following in my foremothers’ footsteps, I gave my power away in a perfect blend of hedonism and sacrifice worthy of martyrdom status. Forfeiting my personal freedom for habitual devotion to another, stoically suffering in silence, displaying what experts call an insecure attachment pattern. I feared abandonment, the unknown, and those who claimed to love me. The pattern feels like love, but it is really fear. Since fear and love are incompatible, I lost the ability to love completely, focusing all my attention on mere survival.

Humans are vastly complicated beings. As much as I would like to offer one, there's no simple explanation for staying in an abusive relationship. What I do know is that a dictatorship takes a psychological toll on its subjects. In situations like mine, where there is extreme domestic violence and subordination, my dependency upon those people immediately around me altered my perception of the world so I could fit into theirs. I lost my mind. But sometimes you have to lose your mind to come to your senses.

Utterly defeated, I called out to a God I did not believe in. Traditionally, the Supreme Being's mercy had to contend with stiff-necked, passive-aggressive types who, like me, did not believe they needed it. What did the Almighty do? Choose what was foolish in the world to disgrace the wise. What was weak to humble the strong. And my personal favorite, dispatch a streetwise, wine-drinking vagrant, precarious socialist, who, with his motley crew of disciples, challenged those who imagined themselves outside this mercy circle, either because they thought themselves justified in their righteousness, or were just completely lost.

What did I get? The 13th Amendment. An amendment is essentially a correction. It comes in many varieties up to and including the process of altering something. The 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution drastically altered my life. The amendment maintains a legal exception for continued slavery as punishment for crime.

Predicated upon slavery, prison is an inhumane system that at best expects minimal potential from and for those under its care. Experiencing this revelation firsthand, I made up my mind early on to make my time serve me while I served it. Devouring every single book I could get my hands on, from quantum physics to queer theory. Earning a few college degrees along the way, I began advocating for social justice and prison reform, proposing interventions that managed to communicate higher expectations than just not to recidivate. Because the same factors that place a person at risk for exposure to trauma, also contribute to an unstable social environment and incarceration.

For me personally, repeated exposure to interpersonal trauma had consistent and predictable consequences that affected multiple areas of functionality, altering every aspect of my life. Conditions that were detrimental to my health and development, such as poverty, sexism, inadequate education, and community violence, all of which compound the other social evil of

domestic violence. Misdiagnosed, untreated, labelled, I was discarded into a penal system that perpetuated the cycle. Forced into isolation, although not recommended, had the power to reproduce repressed memories through associative mechanisms in the store of my mind. Things I learned to forget were excavated. It was from these experiences I chose to look death squarely in the face and break the shackles of slavery to fear.

To paraphrase Marianne Williamson: It was not darkness (the fear that I was inadequate) that most frightened me. What most frightened me was my light (that I was powerful beyond measure). Like Lilith — personified as an evil banshee who endured misogyny to become a hell-bent feminist she-devil shrieking from the tops of tall buildings her battle cry of empowerment: “The death of ego is the end of all fear!” — I was going to speak my Truth and would not quiet my voice to appease those who were uncomfortable with my power. I’d come full circle back to my Jewish roots and Kabbalah, an ancient esoteric practice based on mystical insight, theosophy, and thaumaturgy.

Kabbalists believe in reincarnation. The soul’s returning to the physical world to correct a different aspect of itself. Tikune is the balance between our actions and their consequences — because cause and effect must be served for the karmic scales to balance. They may take a long time to balance out, but they eventually will. Justice might not be immediate or obvious, but it will prevail. I have to admit, I often wonder what Lady Justice would do with that sword of hers if what I did was placed on one end of her scale and what was done to me on the other?

So I meditate. Meditation is believed to aid one’s ability to recognize the miraculous in all things, not just things that seem miraculous or unexplainable. Through meditation, I employ *kavanah*, the primary spiritual force behind all Hebrew words and the vehicle for drawing in the appropriate spiritual energy to manifest a miracle.

After a knee injury I began the practice of Yoga. Yoga is also a unique blend of practical application and theoretical knowledge. It is a philosophy within a religious framework, although believing in religious dogma is not required. Yoga has religion embedded into it, but it is not religion. Yoga, like Kabbalah, is linked to the Universal Spirit, either a personal deity or an abstract principle of truth and perfection, considered in us as well as outside of us.

Yoga, above all else, taught me how to slow down. I was not created to slavishly speed from one appointment, season, joy, or heartache to the next. Lord knows I have traveled faster than

equipped to travel and taken on responsibilities that were not mine to take. Yesterday's troubles, today's problems, and tomorrow's circumstances are all part of the pilgrimage.

Creation continues

Someday, when we reach the finish line and our exhaustion and perplexity are over, we will rejoice. But right here and now, our lives have meaning and purpose. Live on purpose. Create cultures that choose integrity, faith, and compassion. Give rise to civilization. Expand your language. Speak in ways that are not offensive, no matter your belief frame. Create conditions where the freedom to respond openly is allowed. Create spaces where everyone realizes their innate potential and authentic selves because all sentient beings possess an eternal light. That light removes shadows and reveals truths. In any situation, right here in this moment, or at any time in the future, the unknown may cast a shadow on what is before us, but we will not shrink before what has yet to be illuminated. Manifest your own messy miracles and rock on.

About the author...

Kimberly Baldwin is a graduate of Oakland City University, earning an Associate of Arts degree in Human Services and a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Management Consulting, summa cum laude, with an accompanying certificate from the University's Honors College. She also studied at the University of the South School of Theology, where she earned a Certificate in Education for Ministry, and at Indiana University-Perdue University for her participation in the groundbreaking Inside-Out Prison Exchange Criminal Justice Program. After graduation, while employed by the non-profit organization Indiana Canine Assistants Network (ICAN), where she trained and placed service dogs with children and adults living with physical and mental disabilities, she was instrumental in creating curriculum for a re-entry program recognized as being one of the best-performing programs in the Indiana Department of Corrections in reducing recidivism rates; a Hospice program; a non-profit called One Net-One Life (providing mosquito nets to Africa); and the Garden Project (growing and harvesting produce for a local food bank). An opportunity presented itself to work with Dr. Kelsey Kauffman and other gifted scholars to create a grassroots, non-conventional college program. Appearing on National Public Radio (NPR) as published scholars of American history, Baldwin and her colleagues presented their work to historians' conclaves making interventions in the history of 19th century women's prisons, which won the Indiana Historical Society's Best Research Project award in 2016. They are writing a book on their findings to be published by The New Press in 2020.