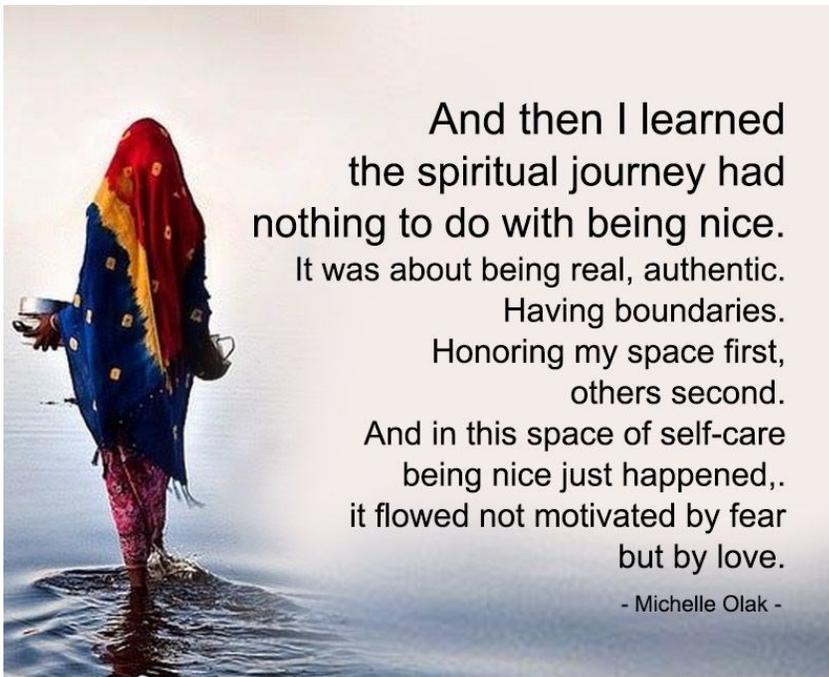


THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY



And then I learned
the spiritual journey had
nothing to do with being nice.

It was about being real, authentic.

Having boundaries.

Honoring my space first,
others second.

And in this space of self-care
being nice just happened,..
it flowed not motivated by fear
but by love.

- Michelle Olak -

I love this quote because it captures the essence of what my life has been about. Some seem to think that a spiritual journey means going to a far off place to find nirvana and that has likely been their experience. Others will say you need to hook up with a highly qualified guru or master if you really want to take a deep dive while you're on your spiritual journey. And, that's probably what they did.

You see, it's predicated on what you're looking for. If you take comfort in being led, you will seek out a leader. If you're

adventuresome and have a hankering for "something different" — something that is exciting and spiritually enriching, you might find yourself in the wilds of Africa riding on the back of an elephant and seeing that as a spiritual journey. It's different for everybody and it's up to you to determine what's right for you.

For me, the spiritual journey has always been an inside job. However, the paths that I've taken in life have been catalysts for growth since each led to opportunities to learn something new. I've learned not to beat myself up when things don't work out the way I think it should for one reason or the other. Instead, I bless the mess and keep it moving while trusting that it's just another experience that is leading me to my best and highest good.

I've bounced around a lot in my life trying to find my way. For the first forty years, or so, I had no clue about what I wanted to do and went from one thing to the next looking for some answers. It wasn't until I enrolled in school in my early forties did I realize that I was passionate about learning new things, writing, spirituality, and creativity in general. Up until that time, most of my schooling was informal and difficult because I spent a lot of time in the school of hard knocks. As a result, I began to see that most of the harm being done was because I had not learned how to love myself and I had to do everything, and then some, as indicated in the above quote in order to heal.

Inner Evolution • A Quiet Revolution

For many years, I was emotionally broken and I went to every workshop, retreat, church, or guru that seemed to hold the magic elixir to get me out of my distress. I read the latest and the greatest self-help books and became very knowledgeable about various healing modalities.

What I came to appreciate about all of that soul searching is that nobody could fix me. No one had the magic answer. No one could perform a miracle. I learned that if it was to be, it was up to me. No book, no teacher, no preacher, no class could do for me what I needed to do for myself.

Once I got that understanding, things started to change. I began taking responsibility for the choices I was making. When something didn't go well, I knew that it wasn't about blaming someone or some thing. When I felt that tendency arise, I knew I had to go inside. The more I learned to look within and reflect on the part I might have played in any given situation, the more easily I was able to see that the answers dwelled inside of me.

This was powerful because, ultimately, it was transformative. My life began to change for the better and my relationships improved. Now, I can't imagine being any other way.

As mentioned previously, I found my groove in school at what many consider a late start in life. The system is set up for us to get our education while we're young, right out of high school. It's a great idea but not everyone can do that. Not everyone can appreciate how their lives can be shaped in a very beneficial way by doing so. And, of course, there are those who know it but can't do it because of one thing or the other. I

was one who knew it but due to lack of support, a big dose of low self esteem, and a shame-based mentality around money and not knowing how to navigate the financial end of it, kept me from pursuing a college degree at an early age.

Unlike some people, I never had a doubt about being smart enough. However, I was naïve enough to think that whatever needed to happen for me to learn, it would happen naturally while taking classes. That may be true in some cases but my experience has shown me that regardless of how smart you think you are, anything worth doing will take some effort and doesn't fall into your lap naturally.

Up until my early forties, the only college I had was in various junior colleges. It seems I'd go thru life taking a class here and there in whatever interested me and no real direction. I just knew that I loved learning and engaging with others so school was more, or less, a hobby.

When I enrolled part time in a 4-year college to pursue a bachelors degree, I still wasn't sure about where I wanted to go. I just knew that being in school gave me a sense of structure and joy even when the classes were difficult.

Among the first few classes I took at Notre Dame college in South Euclid, OH was a class on Women's Studies. I loved that class. Our first assignment was to write a one or two page essay on the woman I wanted to be.

At the time, I worked a 9 to 5 job that was pure hell. I'd been back in Cleveland for a while after living in California for 18 years and was still trying to get my footing. I was raw after having my heart broken numerous times while in LA and I was looking for a way to save my life. School was it.

So, we had this assignment to write about ourselves and, as I often did, I waited until the day before it was due to get down to business. I figured, it's just one or two pages, and I knew enough about myself that it would be a breeze.

My intention was to leave work and go straight home and start working on my paper. Instead of going straight home, I went through the drive-thru at Popeye's Chicken to get a bite to eat. There were a lot of people in front of me but I decided to stick it out and work on my paper while waiting. It was a beautiful fall day, probably in the 60s and sunny, and I didn't need the heat or air conditioning on in the car so I was comfortable.

Oddly enough, nothing would come to me. I couldn't figure out how to shape what needed to be said. I had a clue about what I wanted to say but knew that it would take more than one or two pages. So, I took a risk and wrote a poem instead. We were asked to write a reflection and I didn't know if a poem would be acceptable.

I wrote that poem from my heart of hearts. I'd written a few short poems prior to that for my eyes only and the idea of sharing with others was a bit daunting. By the time I got through the line at Popeye's, it was done, and when I read it the next day I got a standing ovation.

Some of you are familiar with it and may even have copies. It seems I've shared it with hundreds of people since it was written. It apparently touches the heart strings and I think people find it inspiring. I did write it to inspire but the main person I was trying to inspire was myself because God knows I needed it. That was a difficult time in my life and I was determined to see brighter days. I call it my Popeye's Chicken poem entitled, *I'll Lead With My Passion*.

I'll Lead with My Passion

*Like a butterfly, I will spread my wings as I
unload all the hurtful things
That have held me back for years and years
And have filled my life with strife and tears*

*I'll lead with my passion and not with my pain
With nothing to lose and so much to gain*

*Like a child who discovers a brand new toy, I'll
bask in the light of love and joy
No more searching and praying for someone to
care
I have found love inside and have plenty to
spare*

*I'll lead with my passion and not with my need
With strength and compassion I'll plant some
new seeds*

*So what if you don't like the way that I act, you'll
find I'm no longer subjected to that
I'll be my own woman and live as I choose
And, as I just said, I have nothing to lose*

*I'll lead with my passion and not with my fear
With wisdom and courage my pathway is clear*

*Like an eagle who soars past clouds and high
cliffs, when problems beset me I'll see them as
gifts
And as they're presented I'll know in my heart
They're camouflaged blessings just waiting to
start*

*I'll lead with my passion and not with my doubt
With faith that's unfailing and no second
thoughts*

*Like many great souls who have helped me to
see, I'll do all I can to set others free
And help them to find all the beauty inside
That makes life worth living and allows us to
thrive*

*I'll lead with my passion and not with my shame
With grace, strength, and mercy – not looking to
blame*

*I know that the woman that I want to be
Lives inside my soul and will be set free!*

That poem literally became my marching orders. Whenever life got me down, I would reflect on it. Over the years it has been revised several times and now it's titled *I Lead With My Passion* and some words have been changed accordingly.

I believe that our journeys in life are spiritual in nature. All of us have taken circuitous routes to get to where we thought we needed to go. Some of those choices were not the best but we lived and learned. What I've come to understand and appreciate is that all roads lead to God. If you are able to be compassionate towards yourself when you feel you have made a wrong turn, you will stand a better chance of gleaning the lesson from the experience so that you can grow and go in a better direction.

Too often, many of us are taught as a child to be nice which has its benefits but that's not enough.

I had to learn that it wasn't about being nice, it was about being real, being authentic, setting boundaries, and learning to love myself. Once I got that straight, I was motivated by love instead of fear and now *Love is my religion*.

My spiritual journey continues... Last night I was ordained as an interfaith / interspiritual minister. My commencement ceremony is Saturday, June 12th, and **you are invited to attend** the online service, free and open to the public. Click here to register: <https://www.1spirit.org/classof2021>



*Peace & Blessings,
Rev. Shirley*



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