

Our Stories - - Elizabeth (Betsy) Dalton

Deep background... I am originally a Jersey girl, born in urban Elizabeth, and eventually moving to suburban Caldwell – the middle child of 3, with older sister Joan and younger brother David. My mother, Louise, and my father, Robert, were both high school teachers. They were married during WWII, as my dad was stationed at Fort Dix, close to home. Following the war, my parents continued full-time work teaching high school, influencing perhaps why I ended up becoming a special education teacher, after graduating in Psychology at URI, and going on for my certification a few years later. It was at URI that I met Robert Fleming Dalton, a smart and talented Irish-American fellow who I immediately fell in love with and later married in 1978. We both found our way into education as a career – he as an English professor and myself in the special education classroom, then college counselor, and finally assistant professor of special education at Rhode Island College. What I loved most in the field was working with student teachers, helping them to learn and apply the skills they needed to work effectively with ALL of the students in their classes, especially those students who had differing needs and/or various disabilities. Working in special education taught me both to seek and to value the gifts that each person brings to the table. We are all so very different from one and other, and yet, in so many ways, the same.

As I reflect, I know that I also learned so much from my maternal grandparents, who I spent much time with growing up. My maternal grandmother, Mary Imre, was born in Hungary and immigrated to the US at age 8 in the early days of the 20th century. She went to school for a few years but spoke little English and was ridiculed terribly for being an immigrant - so at age 10 she quit school and went to work as a seamstress in the sweatshops of New York City. At age 16, she met Charlie Flagge, son of German immigrants, and married soon thereafter. A year later, my mother was born. My grandparents lived around the corner from my parents, so I spent every day growing up in NJ with Grandma Flagge, watching her cook and sew, and often exploring the far corners of her attic. There was a special room in the attic that had been my parent's bedroom during the war, and I would spend hours there, reading books and playing with my dolls (all of whom had hand-made clothes, crafted by my Grandmother). I deeply loved my grandmother.

Spiritually, I grew up in a Presbyterian home. My father's family were long-time Presbyterians. We attended the First Presbyterian Church of Caldwell, NJ – an enormous stone church dating back to the late 1700s and founded by Reverend James Caldwell, “the fighting parson” of the Revolutionary War. I went to Sunday school each week, sang in the church choir, and memorized all of the books of the Bible. I even went to Presbyterian music camp! But when I eventually moved to RI to attend college, I left my church behind and entered a more eclectic life. The Vietnam War was raging in 1970, my freshman year, and I found myself called to protest and engage in the anti-war actions at school. Many students were being drafted, and Bob (my love) barely escaped the draft. It was a time of great exploration – truly an exciting time to be a

college student. I believe that these times of great sacrifice, turbulence, and self-reflection framed my liberal views about life.

After knowing each other for 7 years, Bob and I married and eventually had two sons – John and Martin. We lived in Providence, Bob’s home town. One day, my friend Betsy O’Rourke asked if I might like to come and sing in the choir at the First Unitarian Church in Providence, the church she had grown up in – and I said yes. After one service, listening to the Reverend Tom Alburn, I knew that this was a church that I wanted to be part of. I joined the choir and loved it, and attended there until our family moved to Hope Valley. It was too hard to travel to Providence for church, with young kids at home and working full-time as a teacher, so for many years we were disconnected from any form of organized religion. Then, my life changed abruptly – my husband, Bob, had a massive brain hemorrhage and died in 2001. You really never are ready for anything like this.... but life does go on.

I kept working, brought up the boys, took care of my mother, and finished my PhD in Education in 2009. I was fortunate then to get a post-doctoral fellowship in Boston for a year. Immersing myself in new areas of education helped me to find my confidence and purpose as an educator. I loved that fellowship year, and so when I came back to my same job and same life here in Hope Valley, something was definitely missing... I felt empty. I knew I needed to make new connections. One Sunday in January, I found my way to UUCSC. I listened to the service by Betty Kornitzer and to the choir led by Michael Galib. At the end of the service, I approached Michael, introduced myself and said I’d like to join the choir. Since then, I have grown closer and closer to this congregation and to Unitarian Universalism. I am in the 7 Principles class now, and find that there are always deeper ideas that I want to pursue. UUCSC is a big, beautiful, loving and diverse family, and I am so happy to be part of this family. You bring comfort and joy and friendship into my life. Thank you.

Betsy Dalton
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