

Pastor Bud Makes the Headlines

Ex-priest shares faith in living

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ORMOND BEACH -- Helen is a cardinal -- a bright red bird that comes to the feeder on the deck outside the glass door of his study.

She said she would come back to him as a bird.

A mockingbird, he suggested.

No. A cardinal, she told him.

And there she is looking in on him, as he looks out on her.

At 63, still lean and ruggedly good-looking, Bud Murphy is a world away from where he thought he'd be when, as a very young man, he felt called to live the celibate life of a Roman Catholic priest.

He couldn't have imagined then, before he met Helen, that his spiritual journey would take him here -- to the Unitarian Universalist Society in Ormond Beach -- where he now serves as pastor.

But imagining Murphy as a 28-year-old priest who unknowingly made a young nun weak in the knees is not difficult.

That's what Helen told him later -- that her knees went weak when she looked at him. And she promised herself never to look him in the eyes again.

It was only after a great deal of individual soul searching and reflection that they both came to the realization that, despite the vows they'd made, they were meant to be together.

And for 33 years they were. Until -- after two children and a life filled with love and family rhythms, and various careers -- Helen died of breast cancer in 2002.

Now, "every day I see the cardinal," he says.
Bud Murphy is a believer.

Maybe not the same kind of believer he was when he was a boy, growing up along the St. Claire River in Michigan, and felt what he describes as an "immanent call." But a believer nonetheless.

"It wasn't hearing a voice in the stillness of the night," he says, but rather just knowing, within himself, what he was meant to be. And in the monastic environment of Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit's inner city, he looked both within and without as he contemplated his future life as a priest during a time of great change.

"Events were taking place in the church," says Murphy, who was ordained in 1967. The focus was on social action, helping the downtrodden and making the world better.

"We were blessed with the pontificate of Pope John the 23rd who turned the church on its ear," he says. And like other young priests, "I probably expected celibacy wouldn't last," Murphy admits.

But he knew what he was getting into when he entered the seminary, he says, and accepted the possibility that he would have to remain celibate all of his life.

"It was an obstacle," he says, but "it was a sacrifice I hoped I could make." The church's rationale for this requirement was that the priesthood was a "call to sanctity" that could not be fulfilled by those who also felt deep and lasting bonds to other human beings. But what it fails to acknowledge, he says, is that priests are human beings, too.

A concert violinist before becoming a nun, Helen belonged to a convent in a neighboring parish. And like the young priest -- who was labeled a "distraction" to the sisters -- she was having second thoughts about the life she chose.

On track to become the mistress of novices, her order sent her to Marquette University in Milwaukee to get a master's degree in theology.

Murphy visited her there. And the priest and nun realized they were meant to be together.

At one point, he says, "I entertained the idea of being married and still remaining in the priesthood." It soon became clear, however, they were not going to be the Catholic Church's first married clerical couple.

They were married by a Presbyterian minister in 1970, then had a "re-celebration" of their marriage vows by a Catholic monsignor when they moved back to Detroit, where Bud was working on a master's degree in pastoral counseling. He switched to a lay program at the University of Detroit, and he and Helen, who was certified in social work, practiced together as marriage and human potential counselors.

The Murphys eventually moved to Arizona, and then to Florida, where Bud and Helen worked at the Federal Aviation Administration's management training facility in Palm Coast.

Helen was one of three FAA instructors who, in 1993, blew the whistle on controversial mind control practices used by the consultant running the agency's training program, spurring a Department of Transportation probe. She later wrote a self-published novel based on her experiences there.

Meanwhile, the couple's spiritual journey brought them to the Unitarian Universalist Society, which is open to all beliefs.

"I'm a reverential agnostic," he says. "I don't know. And what I don't know I revere . . . Everything is a profound mystery."

The kind of personal prayers he offers up are of "pure adoration," he says, and of gratitude to the unknown -- to "the God force . . . the life force."

Helen's life force, however, was slipping away.

They and their grown children, Jon and Molly, had to face the painful realization that she was not going to survive her battle with cancer.

But before she died, she made it clear to Bud that she wanted him to get on with his life.

And he has.

Though he's worked at many jobs over the years, and was even a model for a brief time, Murphy has always been a clergyman at heart. So he embraced the opportunity when, in 2003, he was asked to become the Unitarian Universalist Society's new minister.

Once known as Father Murphy, he became Pastor Bud, though his job can't really be described as shepherding a flock. More like "cat herder," he quips, because Unitarians tend to roam freely over the theological landscape. "We gather to support each other in our search for truth and meaning," he says, and to work toward such jointly held values as liberty, justice and peace.

Many Unitarians come from other religions, notes Natalie Dix, a charter member of the congregation. So Murphy fit right in. One of his strongest attributes, she says, is "his ability to get people to think."

Donna Jordan, another member of the congregation, praises his community involvement and passion for social action. "And when he's on a roll, there is no one more entertaining and engaging."

Murphy also has begun dating a special woman, and is confident Helen would approve.

After all, he notes, pointing to the bright red bird outside his study door, she remains a part of him.

His favorite quote of Helen's is: "Belief is the only magician."

She once wrote: "If you want to work a miracle in your life, and don't yet believe in yourself, find someone who does and believe in them."

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