

# Dawn Coglisier

*Born in New Jersey, Dawn Coglisier grew up in a dysfunctional family and experienced a nomadic childhood, constantly moving from one place to another. In spite of difficult early years, as an adult Dawn was determined and focused. She graduated from Thomas Jefferson School of Nursing in Philadelphia and then worked as a nurse while continuing her education toward advanced practice. Along with her husband and their three children, she then relocated from the East Coast to Arizona, where they lived for several years on a reservation in the Navajo Nation. While there, Dawn again worked as a nurse and continued studying. After obtaining her master's degree in nursing, she passed the board exams and became a family nurse practitioner. Her nomadic lifestyle would come to an end with her family's final move to Oregon, where they now reside on their micro farm with plenty of farm animals. Dawn pursued additional education in the field of addiction medicine and now works in a rural community mental health center as an addiction specialist. Her work focuses on LGBTQIA+ individuals, and she provides care to what is often the community's most vulnerable population. When she is not working, she enjoys being outdoors in the beauty of the Pacific Northwest, where she can be found hiking, kayaking the rivers, gardening on her farm, or just relaxing in a hammock watching her farm animals.*

# Believe It or Not!

One of my favorite coffee mugs has the word “Believe” spelled across it in bright orange letters. Each morning when I get to work, I drink out of this inspirational mug. It’s a great mug. It’s pretty big, so it holds a lot. It has a strong, sturdy handle that fits my hand just right.

More than being the perfect container for my morning brew, the mug is a reminder of a topic dear to my heart. I’m someone who talks a lot about faith and the power of belief. I enjoy learning about the faith of others. People observing my actions (not to mention my mug) might assume that I have always had a strong connection to faith. They would be mistaken. In fact, my journey toward defining what I believe has been long and often rocky. It has been crowded with experiences that I am still gathering.

The journey began in my youth, which was filled with chaos and family dysfunction. I spent most of my early childhood in New Jersey in the custody of my paternal grandparents. They identified as Southern Baptist, with a loose connection to the church. They prayed before meals and when life circumstances dictated a need for prayer. But other than a cross on the wall and some Bibles from “back home,” there were not many other signs of religious belief. Things were different when we went on trips “back home,” which meant to Tennessee. Everyone in the family there was heavily into Southern Baptist culture. My Aunt Surry was the choir director and pianist in her small country church. She carried a small Bible with her everywhere she went. Her dresses came to below her knees, and she kept her long silver hair pulled back in a neat bun. She was a kind woman, and I always felt at peace around her. When we were in Tennessee, there were church events to attend on an almost daily basis.

During the periods I lived with my mother, I was exposed to various denominations, including Methodist, Catholic, and Lutheran.

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The memories that are clearest are of when I was about 11. During that time, we attended a little Methodist church in a small town in Georgia. I remember that church fondly, not because of any doctrine I was taught, but because of the community among its members. There, I was able to form bonds with other kids my age.

While I valued those relationships, my experience in this house of worship was tainted by the dysfunction in our home. Those Sunday mornings always involved a rush to get to church on time. The hurrying would increase the ever-present tension in the house. Family members screamed at one another. My mother would often be crying. If I started yelling about what was going on, she was likely to smack me across the head. If my stepfather was around and I stepped out of line, as I often did, he would knock me to the ground. He rarely came along to church, and I was happy to leave him behind.

When we arrived at church, we were also expected to leave behind the reality of our lives. We had to smile and act as if everything was perfect. We were not permitted to say or do anything that let anyone know about the ugliness that preceded our arrival. As a result of this hypocrisy, I became furious. During quiet prayer times, I wanted to scream out loud about the lie my family was presenting. I wanted to yell out, “Does God know what is going on in our house?” Moments like these made me begin to wonder about the existence of God.



During the brief periods in my teens when I lived with my father and stepmother, I began thinking about atheism and agnosticism. As far as I know, my father was an atheist. My life experience was already making me question the existence of God. It didn’t make sense to me that a supreme being would allow such suffering, especially for a child. My father’s wife was from a Catholic family, and she took us to church and even sent me to religion classes. I don’t remember a thing from those classes, except that I didn’t like them. There was an overtone of rigidity

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that frustrated me to no end. The teachers were nuns, and I did not understand these women and how they lived. Later in life, I would end up working for a Catholic organization and became friends with many nuns. I learned to honor their journeys and the work they do. However, as a teen, being forced into Catholicism by a stepmother who I thought didn't care for me pushed me into a real rebellion phase.

Because of my rocky relationship with my parents, I spent a good amount of time living on the streets. I stayed in runaway shelters, slept in bus stations, camped in the woods, and did a lot of couch surfing. Even though sleeping in the woods left me exposed to the elements, those were the times I felt the strongest spiritual connection. Something about being alone with the forces of nature made me feel grounded, whole, and connected to a power greater than myself.

During one of these times in the woods, I met a girl about my age on a sandy beach deep in the pines. We hit it off and talked for hours. She invited me to her house, which she shared with her mom and grandmother. I was so impressed with their house. It wasn't fancy, but it was cool, natural, and earthy. They used branches for curtain rods, and beautiful rocks here and there for decoration.

The women informed me that they identified as witches. Here was an entire new layer to my growing confusion about faith and belief. They practiced their faith with a small group of other women that they referred to as their "grove." Their sessions together were held in a small, circular area in the woods behind their home. They referred to these gatherings as rituals. I attended several of them and observed nothing but love and kindness. I watched this daughter, mother, and grandmother conduct services that connected people and the earth. These women prayed in their own way to many deities, both male and female, although their primary focus was the Goddess. Their sanctuary was beautifully adorned with trees and wildflowers that changed with the seasons. I was intrigued by the emphasis on nature and the guideline of ensuring no harm to

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others. Still, as had happened with my exposure to other religions, I was bothered by the formality—by the rules and regulations that were invented by people. I was impressed by much of what these women taught me, although I do not follow their tradition. And I know that lacking a sense of family, I was drawn to these women's family bond.



By the time I entered adulthood, I had little use for formal religion of any type. I felt bitter towards anyone who attempted to sell me on the “one true path.” So I was surprised when a very close friend, who was also disillusioned by organized religion, invited me to what she promised was a “different” type of church—a Unitarian Universalist (UU) church. Intrigued, I went to the UU church with my husband. I was confused from the moment we pulled into the driveway. This house of worship seemed to be inclusive of many faiths—how could all this be under one roof?

The sign outside the church showed a chalice with a flame in it surrounded by symbols of various religions. These symbols included a Christian cross, a Star of David, a Yin Yang, an OM, and a Buddhist symbol. Similar signs of diversity were posted around the sanctuary. The church itself was a round structure built into the side of the hill. The building wasn't fancy, but it had a sense of warmth and inclusion. Greeters at the door smiled and shook my hand. The rows of seats inside the church curved towards each other, allowing people to look into one another's faces. But what I remember most was the people. There was such diversity! Some were in jeans and tie dye; others were in formal Sunday best. And there were children everywhere. I was struck by the way everyone seemed to accept everyone else. The children were not being ordered to be quiet; they were being embraced for being who they were.

As I read the order of service handed to me at the door, I noticed that this day's event was a “Coming of Age” service, which celebrated the teens in the church that were transitioning

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to adulthood. On the back of the pamphlet was a list of principles that guide the Unitarian Universalist Church. There were none of the rules and regulations or “you must believe this” statements that had so bothered me about other religious groups. Instead, the list included things like respecting the inherent worth and dignity of others. It went on to mention things such as the importance of social justice, peace, liberty, acceptance, and a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

I was amazed as I read the list. I finally felt at home! No one was trying to convince me that there was one true path. There was respect and encouragement for people to open their minds and their hearts to the journey, both their own and that of others. There were Christians, Jews, Pagans, atheists, and more under one roof, all exploring this world of faith and belief. During the service, the teens stood up and talked about what it meant to them to be members of this community. I cried when a young African American woman, adopted by two Caucasians who were from Catholic and Jewish backgrounds, talked about coming out as gay and how the fellowship had held her with grace and acceptance.

For the first time in my life, in a place of spirituality, I was actually able to say, “YES! This is what I believe!” I had finally found a spiritual home, and I have been a Unitarian since that day. My husband and I have raised our three children as Unitarians and have never had a day of regret.

Being a Unitarian has allowed me the opportunity to explore with an open mind and an open heart, and to enjoy the journey. I no longer seek something that might or might not be. I accept that there are many paths and that there are powers greater than me. I can enjoy the exploration of others’ paths and respect their truths while forming and honoring my own. This has been such a healing experience for me. As a Unitarian, I have had the opportunity not only to form a personal faith, but also to expand the facets of what faith should mean in my life. The Unitarian church is filled with beautiful families that might not be accepted in certain faiths.

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There are families consisting of same-sex couples, interracial families, interfaith groups, and more. These people are a true representation of our world, rather than the fairytale ideal I was forced to pretend to accept as a child.

Now that I am happily rooted in my spiritual home, I have been able to welcome some tremendous adventures. For example, my family lived for two years on a Navajo reservation. We moved there because I was in graduate school studying to become an advanced practice nurse practitioner. Strengthened by our UU experience, my husband and children and I were able to enter into the life of the “rez” with open minds and hearts. Because of (I believe) our openness, we were honored by being allowed to take part in many traditional ceremonies based on the Navajo culture. I was able to befriend medicine men and women who took their time to educate me on their faith and share their practices with me.

My adult life has been filled with such encounters, some of them brief, but all of them meaningful. Each has added to the beautiful tapestry that is the blanket of faith I wrap around myself to this day. I have walked on mountaintops and talked with Tibetan Lamas. I have attended drum circles in celebration of Orisha. I have learned healing rituals from hoodoo practitioners, and I have held hands in prayer circles with Christian outreach workers ministering to the homeless. I have danced in the forest with Druids and celebrated the feast of the seven fishes with Catholics. I have attended weddings in ornate cathedrals, and, sitting on a dirt floor, I have celebrated the traditional Navajo wedding of a Navajo groom and his New York wife. I have prayed on my knees in front of an altar bedecked with three large Buddhas. I have held prayer sitting on a rock by a river under the moon. Each experience and each prayer has had one thing in common—gratitude for the life I have been given and the experiences that have filled it.

Looking back at my life’s journey, I am so grateful that I have had experiences with people of diverse beliefs from all over this beautiful world. I have walked away richer from each

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conversation. I still giggle when someone asks me if I will pray with them because they assume I am of their religion. And I will pray with them. My prayer will most likely be to a different source, but the intent is the same. Every day, I pray for tolerance and understanding for myself, my family, and all those we encounter. As I learned that first day I walked into the Unitarian Universalist church, I pray that everyone will come to understand the importance of individual journeys and to respect the inherent worth of every person.

I am finally able to say that, yes, I am spiritually at peace. I have found comfort in the thought that for me, having belief does not mean that I identify a God. I am no longer bound by the need to fit into the mold of a particular religion. I am most at peace when I am living, and teaching my children to live, in harmony with the principles set forth in the Unitarian Universalist faith. This does not mean I pray to any set god or goddess. Neither does it mean that I deny their existence. It means that for today, I do not have to accept any manmade doctrine in order to “believe.” I believe there is a power greater than I. On some days, that is the magnificent power of the elements of nature. On other days, it is the nurturing of the female divine, expressed as Mother Mary or Yemanjá. And on some days, it is the more masculine, yet gentle, force of a Buddha.

I learn from others what they believe and how that fills them with peace. I do not need to convince them that my way is right. This acceptance of others only strengthens my faith. I am more whole at this point than I ever thought I would be. I am filled with certainty that my faith, like my life, will be constantly evolving. I am okay knowing that I do not need to define my spirituality. To know that there is an energy, a life force, and a power greater than me is enough.

This is my path to wholeness. And as my favorite coffee mug reminds me, in its bold orange print, the most important part is to simply “Believe.”