Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Travel Tips for Spiritual Journeys

Alix Geard © 7 June 2026

Part 1: My journey through religion and related thought

Ka tangi te tītī, ka tangi te kākā, ka tangi hoki ko au, tīhei mauri ora

– The tītī calls; the kākā calls; so also I call: receive the breath of life!

I hau tuatahi ahau i te tūranga o Maungakiekie

– I first took breath at the base of One Tree Hill, in the old National Women's Hospital.

I tipu ake ahau ki te takutai o Tīkapa Moana

– I grew up on the shores of the Hauraki Gulf.

Ko Ngāti Ingarangi me Ngāti Aerana ōku iwi

– My ancestors were English and Irish.

Nō Tāmaki Makaurau ahau

– I am from Auckland.

Kei te Whanganui-a-Tara ahau e noho ana

– But now I live in Wellington.

Ko Geard tōku whānau

– My family is Geard.

Ko Alix tōku ingoa

– My name is Alix.

E kī ana te kōrero: "Nāku te rourou - nāu te rourou - ka ora ai te iwi."

– As it is said, "With your food basket and my food basket, the people will be well."

Nō reira rā, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa

– Therefore welcome, welcome, thrice welcome.

It’s been a while since I’ve led a service here. I’m once again going to split my musings into 2 parts, with 2 different perspectives on the theme of spiritual journeys.

I’ve heard positive responses from people in this community about the sharing of personal stories during our series of talks about spirituality. So in this first part I’ll share my story. In the second portion I’ll explore the journey metaphor. For now, settle yourselves and get comfortable – this’ll take a while.

Spoiler: I had a non-traumatic Protestant upbringing. It shaped me culturally but mostly didn’t stick religiously. It went hand-in-hand with valuing science and using the mind I’d “been given” to make sense of the world. But I’ve been to my share of Roman Catholic masses to sing the music.

There will also be a few *very* religious references.

In terms of religious background, my parents met and married at St David’s Presbyterian Church on Khyber Pass Road. My father was an elder, my mother had been involved in church music, and I gather they were both Sunday School teachers when they met. I was christened at St David’s, enrolled in the Cradle Roll and attended Crèche (pronounced cresh, with the French e-grave) and Sunday School there. As a very small child I once broke out in a rash which was somehow attributed to having gorged myself on chocolate crackles at a Cradle Roll event.

I knew the distant tune of the Memorial Acclamation from the main church – “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again” – the rattle of the tiny glasses that had held communion grape juice as they were carried up to the hall in their wooden racks to be washed, and the smell of coffee for after-service tea, coffee and conversation. On the whole, though, I had relatively little contact with what was happening in the church. Children went to church services for Christmas and Harvest festival, so I knew how things worked. I could look up the hymns from the board at the front where the numbers were posted. but my experience was mostly of being dropped off to the Sunday School and then listening to adults having conversations afterward.

I used to accompany my father on his “visits” as an Elder, mostly to the older members of the congregation who couldn’t physically go to church any longer. I remember making

them tiny posies of miniature roses with the stems wrapped in damp cotton wool and tinfoil, and being praised for being well-spoken and having a lovely complexion. It was people-pleasing work, and from a very young age I knew that was a way I could be helpful to others.

When the family moved east we transferred to Uxbridge Presbyterian Church in Howick. I did school holiday programmes through the local Baptist church, where as well as the usual arts and crafts, songs and listening, I got to earn a full-sized chocolate bar for memorising Bible verses. Being what is in dog-training circles called food-motivated, and coming from a house where Cadbury milk chocolate was rationed out by the individual square, this was an area where I shone. I suspect the memorisation training stood me in good stead for later study of literature, learning quotations to support the points in my exam essays.

The family later moved back to St David's. I did a reading in church about the lilies of the field, and how no man can serve two masters. There were after-church cultural sessions where I learnt Scottish songs like "Annie Laurie".

Alongside this there were what seemed to me at the time like absolutely normal Christian TV programmes, including the BBC's Songs of Praise. There were TV series, like "Sea of Faith". I was the kind of mid-teen who knew and liked Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach" which provided the name for that series. Important point: I grew up in a house full of books, hidey-holes to read, and no real notion that anything printed was beyond me.

I was raised to value truth and accuracy to a degree that I now suspect may have been neurodivergent. I could be a bit judgy and inflexible with that – mostly internally – about things I now see as the normal human hypocrisies. But it bothered me: why were people saying this thing and doing this other thing?

I remember a widely-publicised Christian outreach programme which leaned heavily into the slogan "It's Next Week" and sent out resource packs to families. I loved resource packs, but my family was already not in a good state to make use of that one when it arrived. I was even in the audience of Ian Grant's TV programme "The Herd", although

by that time it was as one of the young people the Youth for Christ members were trying to reconvert.

Because before I could make it to Bible Class and confirmation my family had reconstituted itself. The family fragment I was in was no longer church-going. I didn't feel this as a particular rupture at the time, mostly because there was a lot else going on, but also because I'd already realised that I wasn't a fit and that there would be a logical end to my involvement in church.

My moment of religious recognition went like this. We had a young, keen Sunday School teacher – the kind who played the guitar and taught us extra lyrics to "Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning" that included "Give me wax on my board, keep me surfing, O Lord". One Sunday he asked us to write down answers to the questions "What is a Christian?" and "Am I a Christian?". The slips of paper were gathered anonymously and read out. I was quite pleased with my definition, which as I recall leaned heavily on "only begotten Son" and "path to salvation" wording that, thinking back on it, hadn't really been part of my Sunday School upbringing at all, but felt like it was the correct, true answer from my wider reading. And then I came to the second question, and… I didn't believe that myself. I fudged the response with an "I'm not certain". As they were read out I realised that mine was the only answer in my class that wasn't a "Yes". It got a response along the lines of "Well, I hope you sort *that* out". That left me unhappy: I hadn't managed to tell the full truth – despite *almost* crunching out the right weasel words – and I hadn't managed people-pleasing… and I hated being in the position of trying to navigate when those conflicted. But I was clearly an imposter there.

So there was a gap in religious activity, but I was a debater, theatre kid, and I sang in every choir available and affordable to me, including the Auckland Youth Choir.

I started studying Engineering Science and ended up with a BA in English and Philosophy. Through that, I'd been exposed to theory of mind and philosophy of feminism, along with a lot of medieval and early modern writing.

I moved to Christchurch for my Masters. There I studied literary theory and feminist theory alongside science fiction and Old English riddles. I also did a lot of therapy, went to some rituals for solstice and women's groups, and hung out with a group of lifelong friends including some active atheists. I went to a Skeptics Conference with some of them, but – although I didn't disagree with them on fact, and I support having people to point out scams and stand up for freedom *from* religion – I found I didn't fit there, either. I'd started to realise I was looking for a blend of things that I couldn't quite describe, but it might include useful works, community and "enough" shared ritual.

Around this time I was on an early Usenet group (online forum) for people whose hobby was medieval recreation. I got involved in a discussion about burnout, because it's a hobby that can ask a lot from people. One person pointed out that the suggestions that had been made for dealing with burnout were all about patching yourself up so you could get back into the hobby, which was great for the hobby but not for the burnt-out person. Instead, they suggested, try things outside the hobby: here's a list. One of the things on the list was to explore the religion of your ancestors. Put a pin in that idea.

In the mid-1990s I spent a year studying in Wellington to get a library qualification. I went back to Christchurch to work as a librarian, to marry my Beloved, and to buy a starter house, which seems such a luxury from this vantage point of years.

I also came back several times to the idea of exploring the religion of my ancestors. What would that mean for me? My knowledge of my ancestors was okay but not great. I'd like to credit my reo Māori studies with making me research more about my whakapapa. Many of my English ancestors were Nonconformists or Dissenters, when the choice not to be part of the Church of England cut you out of a lot of aspects of civic and intellectual life, and was connected with class struggle. There are records of them exploring religious options by listening to travelling preachers. They seem to have formed house-churches with their dissenting neighbours, then banded together to secure graveyards, then eventually built churches. I think of them as stubborn, truth-seeking organisers, which might romanticise them a little.

Despite all that, my first approach was to explore aspects of the Roman Catholicism that my Irish ancestors brought with them to Australia and New Zealand. I got into liturgy

and translation and Vatican II, did a circuit around medieval and Renaissance books of hours, which have words as well as pictures, and at some point accepted an invitation to sing with the choir of the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament, Christchurch's Catholic Cathedral at the beautiful and lamentably earthquake-destroyed basilica on Barbadoes Street in Christchurch. From that I got a fantastic tour of western church music and the chance to observe cathedral Catholicism. I was, incidentally, fascinated that the priests didn't seem to compare notes and had some quite distinct and different ideas about what was praiseworthy and not within the confines of their sermons.

I came away with an appreciation for the role of ritual and the ways long-lasting organisations structure themselves to survive the changing of personnel over years and generations. A bit like the medieval recreation hobby, the *idea* was that there would be benefits for both the organisation and the individuals who made it up. But any version of an organisation that had survived and would continue to survive had interests which meant it would tend to value itself over individual members. That's a pattern I see in groups of people that still makes me hesitant to commit, even when I'm happy as a supporter and fellow-traveller.

I also came away with enough church Latin from singing all those Mass settings that it was *somewhat* helpful when I travelled to Italy.

Years passed. I moved to Wellington for work and dragged my partner with me as I managed websites for organisations that have since been merged out of existence, including the LTSA, LandTransportNZ and, with its merger now approved, the Ministry for the Environment.

Highlights of my journey from the last couple of decades include finding courses online, such as Robert Sapolsky's course "Introduction to Human Behavioral Biology" for Stanford University. This fascinated me, as it worked its way from cells to individuals to groups, assessing what was happening from stimulus to response. It chimed with and cast new light on what I'd learnt in my years of therapy and critical theory.

At some point I answered the online Belief-O-Matic's 20-questions quiz about "your concept of God, the afterlife, human nature, and more". My best fit, alongside Atheism, was something called Unitarian Universalism. I tucked that away to explore later.

November 2022 was a tough time: I was very ill myself when my father died in Auckland, which was still easing out of its lockdown. I'm grateful for modern communication tools which let my family collaborate to prepare his funeral. We don't have a family religion, but we did find family patterns to adapt.

In the early months of the following year, 2022, I searched the web. I found the US-based Unitarian Universalist Association's web pages. The 7 – or 8 – principles resonated with me. There was an associated group in New Zealand. It was in Auckland, but it held its services on Zoom. I've been "here" – virtually – ever since.

I've appreciated many things about Auckland Unitarians, to the point that I've been a little sad that I didn't find it earlier, in other phases of its and my existence. I've enjoyed the company of the people here, including in circle groups and the Wednesday Zoom. Through ANZUUA I've done courses on leading services and on theology. It's been a framework for reading, thinking and deciding to act.

It hasn't been all plain sailing. I learnt that one of the joys of associating with a living tradition is that it might change on you. While no one was taking away the principles that had drawn me in, they did refresh them with values which are lovely and powerful but I have to work to get them to speak to my mind as well as my heart. And although I've led services here, it seems each time I get close to formally signing the book to join, something happens to spook me.

I've arrived here as someone fascinated by how people come together: because of all the yearnings and frictions that make us people, and despite them. We make our journeys touch in ways that are mostly better for us all and for the societies we live in. And that's a constant gentle challenge as well as a support.

Part 2: Travel Tips for Spiritual Journeys

When we were planning this service, I gave it the title *Travel Tips for Spiritual Journeys*.

If I'm honest, I chose the title somewhat flippantly, and then never got around to changing it.

Partly that's because I have a slightly complicated relationship with the word *spirituality*. Ruby mentioned recently that some of us here have complicated relationships with religion and spirituality. I'm certainly one of them.

I'm looking for something. I've spent most of my life looking for something. But I don't usually call it spirituality.

And perhaps that's where I'd like to begin.

As Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists, we affirm both the acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth, and a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Those two ideas have always mattered to me.

Not because they tell us where we must arrive.

Because they give us permission to travel.

I've done a fair amount of travelling in the ordinary sense.

I've travelled through most of Aotearoa. Overseas, I've spent much of my time in Europe and Australia. I've made pilgrimages of a sort: to places that mattered to me, places that shaped my family, places connected to my ancestors.

But I've also spent much of my life wandering intellectually.

I began university studying engineering.

I finished with degrees in philosophy, English, and library and information studies.

That's not a straight line. It's not even a particularly sensible line.

But it taught me something important.

The best thing we know today may need to be revised tomorrow.

The map is not the territory.

Certainty is often temporary.

One of the most valuable skills we can learn is how to sit with ambiguity.

That lesson seems increasingly important in the world we're living in.

Alvin Toffler's book *Future Shock*, published almost as long ago as I have been alive, described the experience of too much change in too short a period of time.

I think many of us know that feeling.

I've spent most of my working life doing jobs that didn't exist when I chose my first post-school education.

Now the foundations of those jobs are shifting again.

Technology changes.

Institutions change.

Entire professions change.

And our personal landmarks change too.

Growing older sometimes feels like watching the landmarks of your life disappear.

My childhood homes have been removed or demolished and replaced by townhouses.

Churches that shaped my early life have been desanctified or demolished.

Employing organisations that once seemed permanent have been merged, renamed, or dissolved.

Places that once anchored my understanding of the world no longer exist in the form I knew them.

If we're waiting for a stable map before beginning our journey, we'll be waiting forever.

The Spanish poet Antonio Machado wrote:

"Traveller, there is no path. The path is made by walking."

I think that's one of the most profound descriptions of a spiritual journey I've encountered.

Because many of us imagine that spiritual growth means finding the correct destination.

The correct doctrine.

The correct belief.

The correct answer.

But perhaps the journey is not about arriving at certainty.

Perhaps it is about becoming the sort of person who can continue travelling.

Who can continue learning.

Who can continue responding with courage and kindness when the map changes.

The sources of Unitarian Universalism support that idea.

We draw wisdom from many traditions.

Religious traditions.

Humanist traditions.

Earth-centred traditions.

Science.

Reason.

Direct experience.

Prophetic voices.

We are encouraged to learn from all of them.

There's a saying attributed to Abdullah ibn Mas'ud:

"If you're given truth, accept it, even from an enemy;
if you're given evil, reject it, even from a friend."

I like that.

It reminds us that truth is not owned by any one tradition.

Wisdom can arrive from unexpected directions.

Part of our task is learning how to recognise it.

For me, that has involved exploring traditions that weren't part of my upbringing as well as getting deeper into traditions that are.

Listening to Jewish scholars discussing the Tanakh.

Learning from Buddhist teachings.

Reading philosophy.

Studying psychology and human behaviour.

Paying attention to science.

Learning from people whose assumptions differ profoundly from my own.

Not because I expect any of those sources to provide a final answer.

But because each may illuminate part of the landscape.

I also find myself reclaiming language that I once thought belonged exclusively to religion.

Words like *ritual*.

Words like *sacred*.

Even words like *spiritual*.

Human beings are ritual-making creatures.

We gather.

We share meals.

We sing together.

We tell stories.

We mark transitions.

Whether we explain these practices through theology, psychology, neuroscience or culture, they matter.

Ritual is a technology older than writing.

Not every ritual works for every person.

But human beings have been using ritual for thousands of years because it helps us navigate uncertainty, grief, joy, change and community.

One thing menopause has taught me – rather more vividly than I expected – is how much of what I think of as "myself" is influenced by biology.

Chemistry matters.

Brains matter.

Bodies matter.

The boundary between the physical and the spiritual turns out to be much less clear than I once imagined.

Perhaps that's another travel tip.

Pay attention to the vehicle you're travelling in.

You are not a mind dragging around an inconvenient body.

You are a whole person.

Another travel tip is this:

Learn from other travellers.

You don't have to walk every path yourself.

The experiences of people who came before us are maps – not perfect maps, but useful ones.

The world's religions contain many things, among them accumulated observations about what helps human beings flourish and what causes suffering.

The sciences contain accumulated observations about how the world works.

Literature contains accumulated observations about what it feels like to be human.

All of them have something to teach us.

And finally:

Don't be surprised if you end up where you started, but seeing it differently.

T. S. Eliot wrote:

"We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time."

I think that's often how spiritual journeys work.

We leave home.

We explore.

We question.

We lose certainty.

We gain experience.

And eventually we discover that the point was never simply to arrive somewhere else.

The point was to become someone capable of seeing more deeply.

So if I were to offer a final list of travel tips for spiritual journeys, it would be this:

Travel lightly.

Carry curiosity.

Pack humility.

Accept that your map may need revision.

Learn from fellow travellers.

And keep walking.

Because whether we call it spirituality, wisdom, meaning, growth, or simply becoming more fully human, the path is made by walking.

Amen.

Meditation / Discussion questions

Is there a travel tip that you've taken to heart for your own spiritual journey?

What tip would you share with someone else?