



Elle's info

Elle's home is nestled in a neighborhood at the base of the northwest side of the Catalina Mountains. As I walk down the winding path to Elle's home, I am surrounded by nature. Huge turquoise blue planters hold varieties of small cacti.

Large cacti and succulents line the path and wildlife figures enhance the yard. Fossilized fish and prehistoric organisms embedded in sandstone are displayed among large pots of plants clustered around the front door. There is a bench with pillows inviting one to sit and enjoy the front yard garden. Next to the front door is a sign "Home is where your story begins (Daniel Richardson)."

The interior of Elle's home is like bringing nature indoors. The living room windows frame the looming Catalina Mountains. The back of her home faces west and overlooks a verdant wash. I imagine Elle gets a daily dose of magnificent sunsets.

Each room is infused with nature. There are pictures and sculptures of sea and land animals of the Pacific, Africa, Central America, and the Pacific Northwest. The walls and shelves are also adorned with scenes and artifacts from cultures in Hawaii, the Southwest, and the Pacific Northwest. Affirmations are integrated with these artworks and found in niches around her home; a plaque with a quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson ("It is not the length of life but depth of life") is situated under Elle's desk. What is the significance of nature in Elle's life?

There are family photos, pictures of the Dalai Lama and reading material on Buddhism, spirituality, and cooking. One picture frame contained several surreal pictures of the heavens, waterfalls, and the ocean. A quote by the Dalai Lama is displayed ("This is my simple religion. There is no need for temples, no need for complicated philosophy. Our own brain, our own heart is our temple. The philosophy is kindness.")

Elle's story begins in Wyoming.

Elle is the second born of four girls. Her mother's family was Lutheran but the family was not active in church. At a young age, Elle had questioned the Lutheran religion. She remembered Lutheran as being a "strict religion." There were references to the Devil, good and evil, and teachings as being "judgmental." Elle's parents divorced when she was 6 because her father "abandoned the family." When Elle was in the 5th grade, she and her family moved to Washington state so her mother could pursue a college degree. There, she met and remarried. Elle's step-father adopted the four girls. Elle described her step-father as "generous, loving, a good man." After her parents graduated, the family moved to small town where her father was a public school principal. Elle mentioned that the family did regularly attend a Lutheran church because her parents felt "image was important" due to their careers (principal and school counselor). Elle commented, "Sunday school and church never resonated with me."

Elle's life-long challenge with depression began when she was 13 years old. At that time, depression was not talked about. Medications did not help. She did have several circles of friends who sustained her but she recalled that her friends would say she was "different" and there was a "level of depth" about her.

After high school graduation, Elle left to attend a university. At age 21, she married in the Lutheran church but never became active in the church. Sensing a need for something to “keep grounded”, Elle read books on Buddhist teachings and developed a profound appreciation for “nature as the great spiritual being.” She had a son and soon after divorced. Despite her depression, Elle never considered suicide but attributed her son and many mentors’ kindness as the foundation for her quality of life. She spoke of “people coming into my life for several reasons.” These mentors were people who came “together consistently and compassionately.” She added, “They took me under their wing and nurtured me.” All these interconnections made her realize her “purpose in life is to serve others.” In her personal life, Elle and her son traveled to distant and rural lands so her son could interact with people of various cultures. In her professional life, Elle received recognition for her work as a teacher and counselor although she “masked” her depression quite well.

In Elle’s later years, she was diagnosed with untreatable acute major depression. The degree of severity affects about 10% of people. In 1990, 2000, and 2007, she received Electro Convulsive Shock treatments; the 2007 treatments were more than was necessary resulting in continued depressions with cognitive deficits in memory, organization, and planning. In 2010, Elle had seen a television report on an experimental treatment called Deep Brain Stimulation. She called and expressed a strong interest in participating in a clinical trial. She was accepted and the surgery was a success. To illustrate her journey with depression, Elle showed me a picture of a dark and deep ocean vortex, of waters being sucked into an abyss depicting her depressive state of mind. After the surgery, Elle recalled feelings of “joy and contentment” depicted by a dramatic illustration of the Milky Way. What has sustained Elle? She reads the teachings of the Dalai Lama and nurtures an “inner faith.” She expresses her “gratitude for others and the interconnectedness with them.” HOPE has been her guiding force: “Even during my greatest challenges, possessing hopefulness defined me.” Elle concludes, “Life is worth living. My purpose in life is to contribute in a way that will outlive me.”

Ending Thoughts: Religion is perceived very differently for each individual. I came away with the idea that for these two interviewees, religion was static and confining. Instead their views are more in line with the liberating personal confidences of faith and spirituality that propel them to enjoy LIFE and not dwell on the inevitability of Death.

Illness, religion, and end of life perspectives

I am at a stage in my life where I have the gift of time to “think and wonder” how do illness, religion, and end-of-life perspectives mesh? The Continuum: A Multi-cultural Program grant has provided a way for me to bring forth this “back of my mind” question that would have otherwise stayed dormant. “End of life” topic is seen as taboo and avoided or mentioned in jest. Just asking for interviews was very

stressful but two individuals were willing to share their stories. Listening and writing about my interviewees' thoughts has given this topic relevance and reverence toward my interviewees' perspectives on end of life, spirituality, and religion. I remain moved, comforted, and uplifted by the wonderful individuality and outlook the interviewees conveyed.

John, age 73, was born in Wyoming. He had an older brother and sister and eight years later, his family grew with the addition of three more siblings. His parents were not religious; they drank and smoked a lot. When John was 14, his father and mother became "extremely active" in the Mormon church. All of John's siblings followed suit and embraced Mormonism while John rebelled. He did not believe in "organized religion" but characterizing himself as "responsible" he took leadership roles in the Church that he was "forced" into by his father.

When John graduated from high school, he secretly enlisted in the Navy because his parents had intended for him to go on a mission as many young Mormon men do. For four years, his time in the Navy took him abroad as well as stateside. He married a Mormon woman and resided in California. They eventually became parents of three girls. John continued to rebel against "organized religion" and did not participate in church activities.

John and his family moved to Utah; he worked his way through college, graduated with a degree in education, and worked in the public schools.

After 13 years of marriage, John and his wife divorced because he acknowledged his homosexuality and wanted to live his life truthfully.

John eventually met Steve and they moved to Tucson where they have resided for approximately 40 years.

In 2005, John was diagnosed with prostate cancer. He underwent a traditional course of treatment with radiation and medication. He marvels at the advances in modern medicine and is so appreciative of his medical care professionals.

What is John's attitudes toward religion and end-of-life? John continues to identify himself as a "jack Mormon" that is, one who picks and chooses ideas from organized religion. He comments "I am a Mormon. I don't have to go to organized meetings to substantiate my faith." He professes belief in his Church but as he states "My religion is between the Lord and me. My religion is the way I lead my life." An excerpt from a scripture that he remembers from his youth is with him to this day and guides his belief. John recites "The glory of God is intelligence. The more you can learn, the better person you will become." John is appreciative at being "fortunate in Life." He has the love of a husband and other family members, a stellar career, opportunities for travel and despite his cancer, being able to participate in physical activities. With each passing year, he finds his "faith is stronger internally" and

continues to reach out to help others. John is not afraid of death. He believes in "an afterlife that is a better place." Most importantly, a desire to "keep going" is sustained by enjoying time together with husband Steve and his faith. "Life is a gift" makes John live a day at a time, letting insignificant irritations go and not to "sit and fret about what could have been."