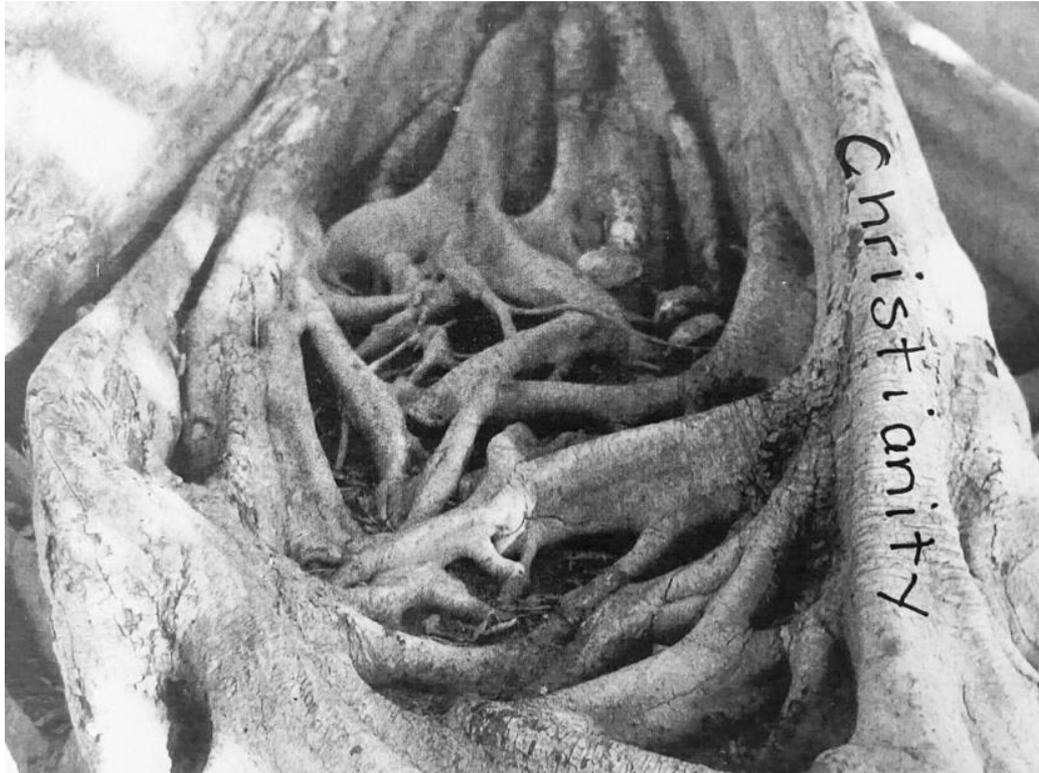


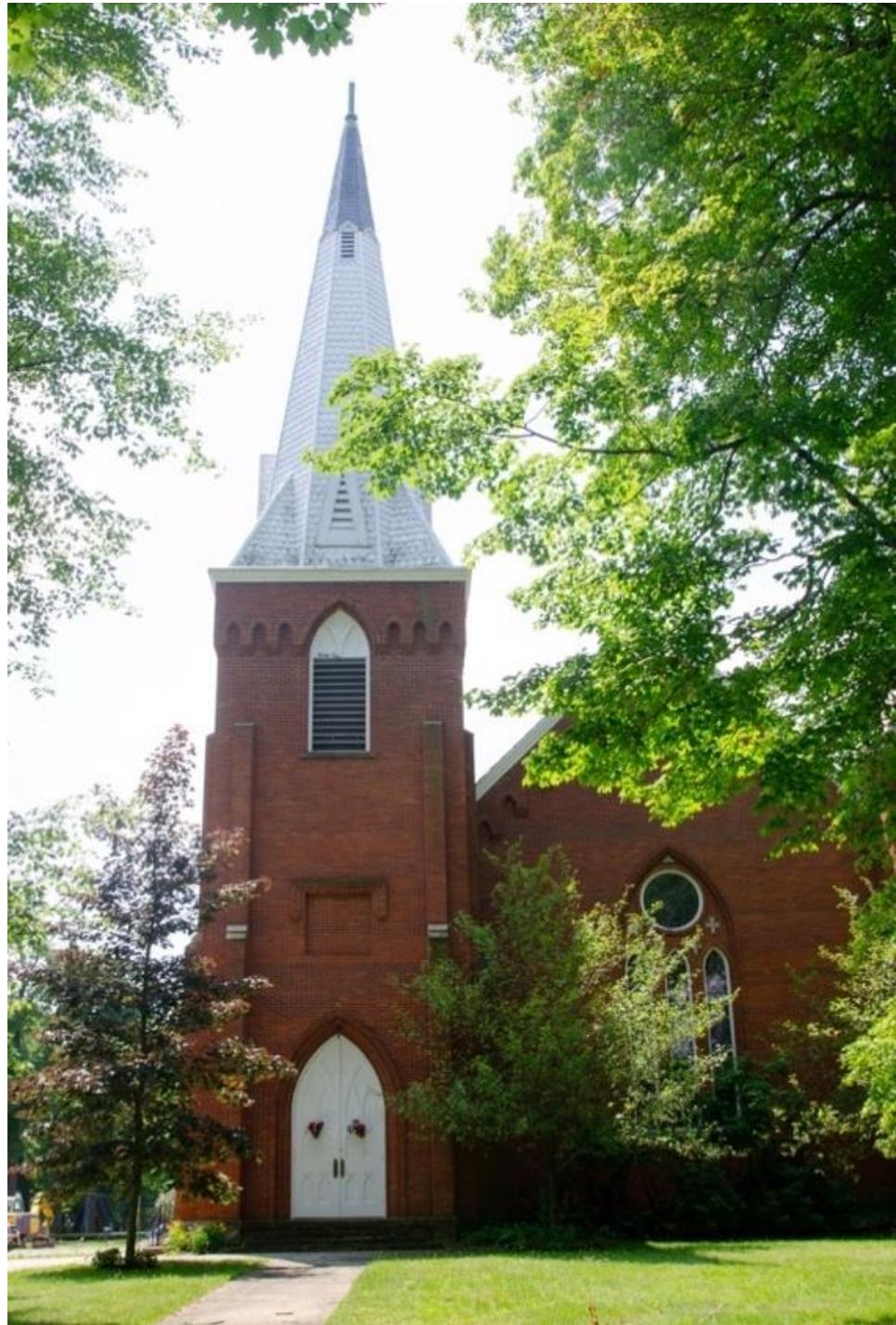
Rebel Spirits

Raised in the Colonial Church



*Work thou on for the poor & suffering slave
Though the great men should scoff and vile men should rave
And may God Almighty this nation divide
And for slaves and Mexicans quickly provide
What vast ropes of glory shall round thee be thrown
When the organ shall pour its deep mellow tone
When blest joyful spirits shall sing of the free
And the song rise up like the waves of the sea.*

Unfinished poem from Betsey's diary



May, 2025

Dear Betsey -

*Our fathers led the way west
following the steeple.*

*Both were schooled at [Yale University](#),
yours in one century, mine in another.
My mother studied with my dad for two of three years.
That wasn't an option for your mother.*

*Our families, yours and mine,
formed by colonial [Congregationalists](#)
in the tradition of European liberal education.*

*Your dad called to be the first "[settled minister](#)"
in this pioneering town on the eastern edge
of the Western Reserve.*

*Sybil Austin, wife of the town's founder, Judge Eliphalet Austin,
rode alone for 30 days, 600 miles on horseback
from Austinburg to your home in Connecticut
to convince your mother that
in that rich and cheap land
"there was a chance for her boys
to fight successfully through life."*

*Was that the case, Betsey?
Was your mother focused on the future of your brothers?
What about you and your sisters?*

*Rev. Joseph Badger, founder of the Austinburg church in 1803,
welcomed your family in 1811, then set off to Christianize Indians.*

*Did you ever hear his missionary stories as a kid, Betsey?
Did you wonder what beliefs he was trying to change?*

*In those early days did you explore the thick forests
breathe in the damp air, talk to the trees like I did?*

*My family also came to Ohio from New England,
from the backwoods of the northern cap of Maine,
a state hugged by Quebec and New Brunswick
whose shores are lapped by the Atlantic.*

*My dad had been called in the early 1940s
to serve six rural churches in [Aroostook](#) County.
Aroostook, a Mi'gmaq word meaning clear or beautiful water.*

*Dad and Mom worked hard to create community
in the land of lumber and potatoes.*

They also ruffled feathers, Betsey.

*First, the war-time visits of conscientious objectors,
Yale friends, unsettled families
whose husbands or sons had fought and died in Europe.*

*Then Dad got the church to buy a camp on a nearby island,
cabins nestled amidst Balsam Fir, Yellow Birch, White Pine
for popular summer camps he organized for youth.
But it was the weekend retreats for women
that irked the working-class husbands
left behind to manage households.*



*Finally, my father challenged from the pulpit
the massive monopolistic ownership of the potato and lumber
transnationals, like the [Irving Company](#).*

*Secret meetings formed.
Disgruntled congregants conspired
to oust this rabble-rousing minister.
In an uneasy post-war America, my progressive parents
were accused of being [Communists or Nazis](#).*

*They were neither, but the labels
served the lumberjacks and potato farmers
uneasy with class difference.*

*My parents called a community meeting, to reconcile.
It was too late.*

In 1948 they left for Ohio, bringing Dad back to his home state.





*As I revisit this history
through the lens of trees
I'm reminded that
Mother Nature responds
in her own way.*

*If only we listen
to her messages.*

*In Ohio, your family received a title to land as "property"
a gift of colonization for settlers
a soulless gift not based on any sense of relationship
to all the living beings that sustain life in a place.*

*The deforestation of North America had begun.
Soon, it would destroy the soil, decimate ecosystems, and turn nature into commodities.*

*I'd like to believe that the human destruction of so much rich biodiversity
is being swallowed up by nature's amazing resilience and capacity for constant transformation.*

There's a monumental tree story here, Betsey.



As children, Betsey, you and I bore the label “preacher’s kids.”

Popular wisdom framed PKs as either model children or wild rebels.

In my childhood in Austinburg, being a PK was an asset.

I worked hard to be a “nice girl.”

But in my teens, those labels became a liability. As hormones were running wild, boys were running away from PKs.

What were the first signs of your rebellious self?

How did you stray from your father’s flock?

Already as children, you and I were familiar with nature bent to the service of men.

Sunday mornings found us in the pews loyally watching Our Fathers command their flock from their carved wooden throne.

*Who was the carver?
Who was the tree?*

The church was the centre of the community, and our dads had power.

Your father is described as a “learned, pious, and faithful pastor, and a devoted family man who undoubtedly passed on his religious fervor and educational bent to his children.”





*Like your father, mine was charismatic.
A kind of village priest for the community,
leading group singing, calling square dances,
playing Santa Claus for the local school at Christmastime.*

*[“Jimmy Crack Corn and I don’t care”](#) was one of the songs
we sang as we square danced in the grange hall.*

*Did you know, Betsey, that song was a favourite of Abraham Lincoln’s?
The lyrics refer to a slave named “Jim” whose master died,
freeing Jim to finally relax and drink “crack corn,” which was illegal.*

*My parents were teetotalers who never consumed alcohol,
more because of the domestic violence it could ignite.*

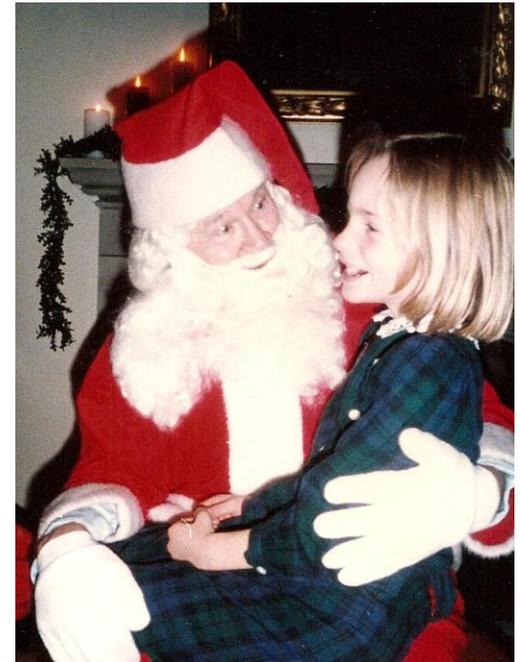
How about yours, Betsey?

*The temperance movement
was rising in your lifetime,
driven by a belief
that alcohol was a sin.
Drink led to moral decay
and social ills. Poverty,
violence, crime.*

*Yet apparently your dad
was sometimes paid
in whisky.*

How did that play out in your family?

*My mother called my dad a “saint,”
but that said more
about her own sacrifices—
she, the critical thinker and reader
who’d been cast in the thankless role
of pastor’s wife.*



How did your mother take on the role of pastor's wife?

She trained you and your siblings to sing four-part harmony. You even performed "singing lectures" in the sanctuary and sometimes took the show on the road.

Music, I felt, was the best part of the Sunday service.

Organ pipes drew my eyes toward the heavens, as if looking up at the tall spruce that had been felled to make the organ's wooden case.

The pipes' throbbing vibration made me shiver and--for a moment--believe.

Ours was a singing family, whether in the car, camping, or at home, holding hands and singing grace before meals.



*Johnny Appleseed was a favourite:
"Oh, the Lord is good to me, and so I thank the Lord,
for giving me the things I need
the sun, the rain and the appleseed."*

*Ever the meddler, I later changed that line to
"Oh, the Earth is good to us."*

*United briefly in song, our family would pause our busyness,
look at each other, and often break into laughter.
Those moments were also lightened
by the passionate voice of my younger brother, Van.
Though he could not pronounce the words clearly,
he sang at the top of his lungs, in monotone and an octave lower.*

His singing spirit taught me that you don't have to carry a tune to sing.



*I inherited my father's love of leading singalongs—
at camps, in community choirs, at protests.
I got students to sing in my university classrooms,
even opening keynote speeches with song.*

*If I started out with singing—put the words on a screen
and got the audience to sing along—they would soon be
participants, and not merely observers.*

We could change the energy in the room!

*You brought music into your anti-slavery talks, Betsey.
When meeting with abolitionist leader Garrison
and women's rights leader Lucretia Mott in Philadelphia in 1857,
your host promised not to tell them you were coming,
“so when you break forth in song
you will take the people all by surprise.”*



As I trace your life, I watch you follow your father's footsteps, Betsey, in religion, education, and political action.

*In your early 20s, the revival movement swept through the town, "watering the spiritual seeds planted in your heart by your articulate, persuasive pastor/father."
Your interests shifted from the temporal to the eternal, you became "a follower of Christ."*

Our dads travelled a lot, our mothers holding the family fort.

I sometimes felt that my dad was too busy saving the world to spend time playing with five kids at home.

Jealous for my father's time, I would wake up in the dark to accompany him to the [Sunrise Service](#) on Easter morning. I relished those two hours, the sunrise a magical event, the slow emergence of light out of dark, birds greeting the dawn. And me, with my dad all to myself.

In the eyes of many conservative Ashtabula County Christians, Betsey, you walked away from your "first love" of Christ, replacing it with an agenda of social reform.

I experienced a similar tension when we moved from Austinburg to southern Ohio for my high school years. Jackson had several churches, most of them evangelical. We attended a more liberal Presbyterian Church that advocated social action.

Still, I envied my friends at those big revival meetings, walking breathless to the altar with their boyfriends, to be saved. So much more emotional, romantic than our intellectual church and its sombre rituals.

I wondered, was I missing something?





*As an extrovert, I poured myself into leadership roles
in church youth circles, church camps, speech contests.*

*With your outgoing personality, Betsey,
you gathered people around you like a magnet.*

*Following our charismatic fathers,
we were both raised in progressive Christian homes
more shaped by a social gospel than by dogma or Biblical literalism.*

Your family immersed in the abolitionist movement.

*My parents dedicated to loving relationships,
a commitment to the social justice causes of the time.*

*The social actions my father and mother initiated when I was a child
included supporting rural communities,
visiting inmates in the local prison,
receiving refugee families from Eastern Europe,
connecting with racialized churches in nearby cities,
creating schools for persons with intellectual disabilities.*

Liberal domestic missionary work.

*Even when I went on to reject institutionalized religion,
worked in solidarity with liberation movements in Central America,
my parents supported my activism;
it fit their social gospel mission,
resonated with the base Christian communities
so integral to Latin American revolutions.*

*Still, there were blind spots and missteps.
There's a rumor that my dad participated in a black face
minstrel performance in the church in the 1950s,
likely oblivious to the racism that act embodied.
If he were alive today, the memory would horrify him.*

We all have ghosts.

We were all shaped by the colonial church and state.

The summer after high school graduation, I joined church-related projects integral to the Civil Rights movement. An integrated ecumenical summer project saw me working with Catholic seminarians and a young black woman from the deep south.

During my first year at Otterbein College I created an outreach program, Students Concerned Over People Everywhere (SCOPE). (Sounds ambitious, doesn't it?)

We created projects for 200 student volunteers in inner-city black neighbourhoods to tutor kids, organize recreation programs, support community development initiatives.

In grad school, I organized a conference for 100 international students to connect with 100 American students. We called it COSMOS—zooming into the self and out to the universe!

During summers, I was exposed to Appalachian mountain culture, while coordinating a “war on poverty” project, and working at a Y camp in West Virginia forests.

That’s when I realized I was an animist, knowing that whenever I entered the woods in those hills, I would talk to trees, and they would speak to me.



The anti-slavery movement moved you, Betsey, to question the complicity of the Christian church in the racist roots of the United States: “slaveholding is a heinous crime in the sight of God.”

You denounced the church for having “clothed itself in the garb of selfishness, avarice, & wickedness.”

You charged that the American church was “as deeply imbued in the sin of slavery as was Pilate in the murder of Christ.”

You were a natural orator, Betsey, a kind of public poet.

My junior year at a French university exposed me to Catholics, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and atheists, resulting in a classic identity crisis at age 19.

You tasted other Protestant denominations, but remained within Christianity. Strong anti-Catholic prejudice fueled contemporary Protestant fears that most Catholics were “papists, self-seeking money-mongers who did good deeds to buy their friends out of purgatory.”

That fear that arrived on the ships with the British colonizers ran both ways. I could see remnants of it, Betsey, 120 years later in Austinburg of the 1950s. The parish priest of a Catholic friend of mine would not permit her to participate in the Girl Scouts meetings—held in our Protestant church basement.



In my work in solidarity with social justice struggles in Latin America starting in the 1970s, I witnessed the extreme polarization of a Catholic Church on a continent colonized by Spain. Catholics represented both massive wealth at one end, and, at the other, a liberation theology with a “preferential option for the poor.”

Often, Jesuits were behind the innovative popular education programs that I both witnessed and facilitated in Central America in the 1980s.



Padre Fernando Cardenal, Joshua, and me in Managua (1987)

Jesuits, such as [Fernando Cardenal](#), Minister of Education when I worked in revolutionary Nicaragua. My son Joshua Myles Fernando carries his name.

Based on those experiences, I was hired in 1985 to create The Moment Project at the Toronto-based Jesuit Centre for Social Faith and Justice.

While my co-workers were diverse faith practitioners or agnostics, I worked closely with the Jesuit director, Michael Czerny, and co-taught with him a course in Social Theology at Regis College.

In 1989 Michael left the centre to replace one of the [murdered revolutionary Jesuit Priests](#) in El Salvador, then worked on AIDS programs in Kenya. He ended up at the Vatican, coordinating its refugee and migration programs.

In 2015 he drafted the [Laudato Si](#), "On Care for Our Common Home," the environmental encyclical of Pope Francis, the Argentine who took the name of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals and the environment.

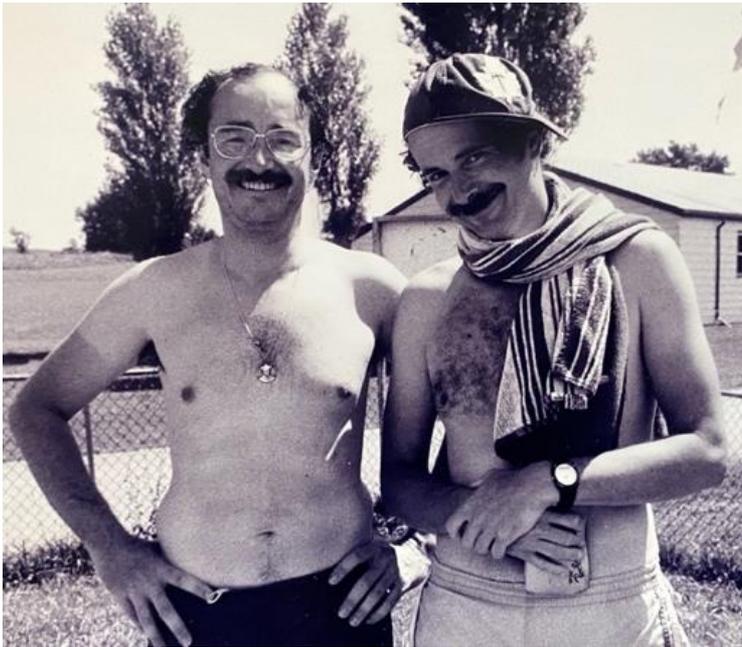
Sharing with the Pope a stand with the marginalized, Michael, in 2019, was made a bishop one day and a cardinal the next. From no robe to green robes to red robes within two days!

I imagine you would admire Francis's vow of simplicity and the courage to challenge political leaders who perpetuate genocide or brutal deportations. He eschewed the opulent dwellings in the Vatican and chose a simple wooden coffin for his burial.

You were also more comfortable, Betsey, in simple dwellings. You eschewed the opulence and customs of "refined society."

"Then people become more selfish, the beauty and simplicity of real kindness is exchanged for the form..."

I love the homely kindness of the 'log-cabin,' it is beautiful for it is the true soul. It will share its last crust with its fellow.....Give me the frank, whole soul of some of our log-cabins, and I can dispense with all of the 'Bon-ton' of Broadway and not feel myself the loser at all."



Jesuit Centre colleagues Michael Czerny & Tim Draymin at staff retreat 1988

I wonder, had you known Catholics in Pope Leo XIII's sphere, would you not have had a monolithic notion of them as only wealthy and corrupt papists?

You might have found ecumenical allies for your efforts to challenge other forms of oppression.

Certainly your work on labour rights would converge with both Popes named Leo.

There is still the struggle for the rights of women—the new terrain you championed, Betsey, out of the anti-slavery struggle.

That remains a challenge for the new Pope, still ensconced in the most patriarchal colonial institution in the world.

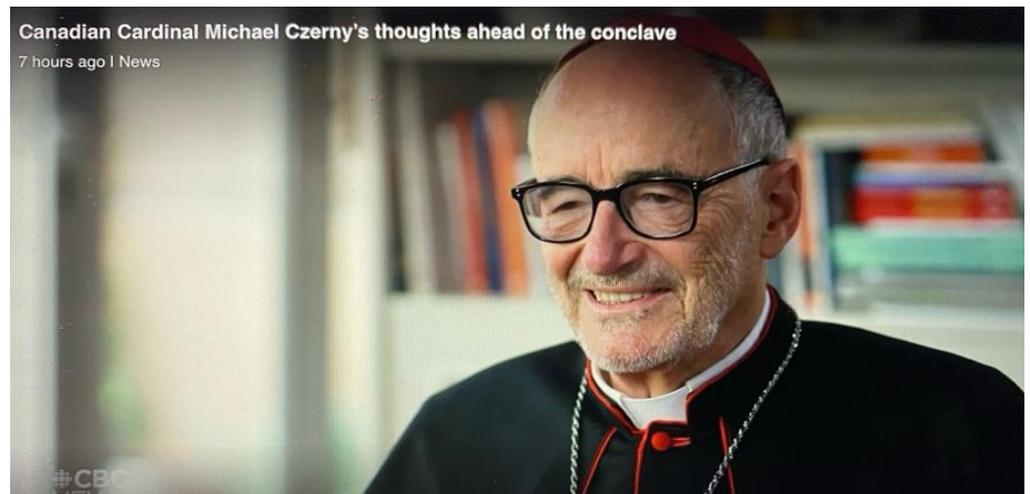
As I write this, my former colleague Michael is now the Cardinal commenting on Canadian media about the selection of the new Pope Leo XIV, the first American Pope but also a citizen of Peru, home of Gustavo Gutierrez, father of liberation theology.

The former Chicago-based Robert Prevost takes his name from Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903), known as the Pope of the Workers for his 1891 encyclical on the Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor, which provided the outline for modern Catholic social justice teaching.

That 19th century pope, whose life overlapped with yours, Betsey, was deeply influenced about social justice by the anti-slavery movement that was your life mission.

While Americans now claim Leo XIV as Chicagoan and a White Sox fan, this 21st Century pope has black Haitian ancestors. He challenges the current oligarchs of our shared country across class and race, around social and environmental justice policies.

Indigenous peoples in Canada hope the new Pope will repatriate their artifacts, as promised by Pope Francis, after his repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery.



*Living in multicultural Toronto,
like working in Latin America, introduced me
to a great diversity of religious and spiritual practices.*

*I witnessed the impact of the [Doctrine of Discovery](#)
and how the cross accompanied the sword
in the colonization of the Americas,
in particular, the [Peruvian Amazon](#).*

*Meeting with women in the Ladies Intellectual Society, you
“denounced colonization and deemed slavery to be
conquerable only by the moral power of the gospel.”*

*You opposed the Mexican war as a pro-slavery conflict.
You even wrote a satirical play mocking President Polk
and General Taylor as pawns of U.S. expansionism,
guilty of the [massacre of Monterrey](#).*

*A strong critic of the government, you continued lobbying,
resolved not to be disheartened
by the “gag rule” passed in Congress.*

*I might prefer the word “imperialism” to describe expansionism,
but your critique two centuries ago presages
the anti-colonial perspective I’ve developed, working with social
movements throughout the Americas.*

*You challenged the Puritan Fathers of the church,
and were “denounced as heretical and skeptical
by the narrow-minded and bigoted.”*

*I wonder if the evolution of our activism, Betsey—the need
to question inequities of all kinds—aligns more with
the [theology of liberation](#) I was introduced to while working
in the early years of the Nicaraguan revolution.*



We both strayed from the fold of our Christian family upbringing in other ways, Betsey.

My parents were disappointed that I didn't stay connected to the progressive church. I know I caused them pain. In my 20s I tried to educate them about my causes, gifting them books about homophobia, racism, sexism, and free love...!

They gave little pushback in response to my rebelliousness, concluding that "creative people have to find their own way." They remained open and growing, proud of my social activism that resonated with their understanding of Christ's basic teachings.

Other reformers like yourself, Betsey, including abolitionists and women's rightists, were drawn to the spiritualism taking hold in the late 1800s. You and your sister Cornelia studied the theories of German doctor and astrologist Franz Mesmer, who believed there was an invisible natural force within all living things, including humans, animals, and vegetables. Did you talk to trees, Betsey?

In your later years, you visited many places known to have powerful mediums, seeking to communicate with your father, who had died in 1835. Your father continued to be a strong presence in your life, Betsey, as did my father in mine. What was it about our fathers?

I was the only sibling to offer a eulogy at my father's funeral. A year later, I co-facilitated a social justice workshop at a multifaith memorial, honouring him in a mosque. That event revealed his own broadening notion of spirituality. In the early years, he was always ecumenical but primarily going beyond the Protestant fold to collaborate with Catholics and Jews.

My mom and dad were radicalized in their retirement: volunteering in rural Japan and in the Muslim region of the Philippines, creating solidarity projects with Central America, and standing on an Ohio street corner to protest the Iraq war in their 90s.



The mosque then was a logical place for a social justice workshop honouring him a year after his death.

I can still see his t-shirt exhibit hanging from the balcony, promoting the causes that he supported actively til the end. After his death, I began to uncover stories about the organizations he started – around disabilities, hunger in Darfur, peace in El Salvador – I had never realized.

At the same time, I didn't want to reproduce his retirement driven by external causes, With little time for reflection, writing, play.



*He remains present in my life
through the crab apple tree
framed by my back window*

*I can speak to him daily...
no matter the season.*

*Today the tree was in full bloom,
exuding a fragrance
as sweet as my father*

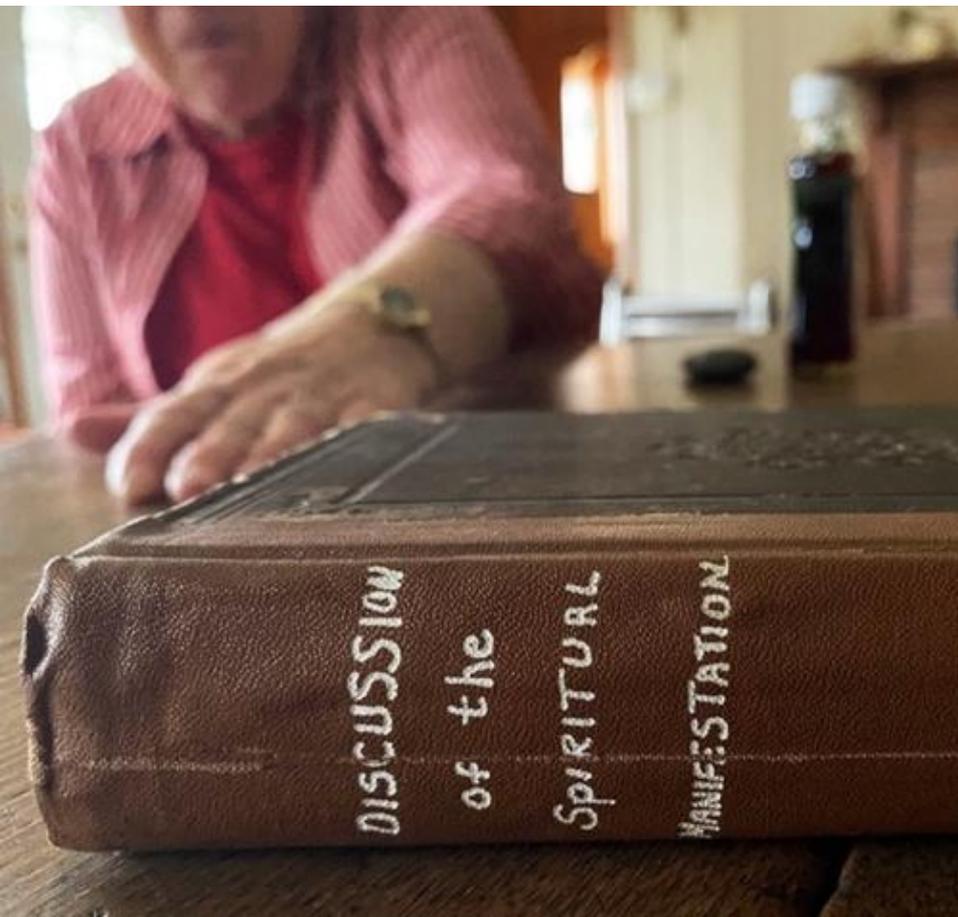
*Then a sudden spring wind
shook the branches bare
as white petals rained
upon my spiral garden
creating a soft bed
on the flagstone path*

You still believed in a Christian afterlife, Betsey, but were critical of organized religions, especially for their hypocrisy around equal rights for women and blacks.

You found spiritualism “more worthy of respect”, writing that nothing in my experience has incited in me such desires for purity (and) spiritual elevation as the belief that I am in the spirit world, th’o invisible to me.

Were you familiar, Betsey, with Indigenous world views that there is a spirit in all living things, human and more-than-human?

Were you drawn, as I am, to the mystery?



You found others open to communicating with spirits and formed a group in northeastern Ohio. Your niece received messages from your father through a deceased doctor in the spirit world.

Recognizing that many would be skeptical of this practice, you wrote to a friend You know the ridicule which would be heaped upon it

These might be the same who were not open to abolition or women’s rights, you countered I am not frightened because it is new – old things were once new [and] once disbelieved

Yet you also were open to the critical questions and exposure of fake mediums. ..the fact that we become confounded by conflicting statements proves that the thing is not understood [and] to intelligently condemn we must investigate.

When I slept in your home in the fall of 2024, I found a book that might reveal secrets you held with others.

Oh, Betsey, how I would love to dig into this book and those discussions...!

*There were times when
I felt your presence so strongly
that I could see you there
[relaxing in the rocking chair](#)
in the parlour.*



*My spiritual path also deviated from mainstream beliefs,
but has been more eclectic, Betsey.
Anti-colonial and feminist critiques of Christianity have unearthed
pagan practices more connected with the natural world
from goddess and wiccan rituals to ecofeminism.
Aspects of these ideas resonate with my experiences
with Indigenous communities and earth-based spiritualities
which I embrace for their reverence for all beings as sacred.*

I have dabbled in Buddhism, creating [gathas](#), drawn to its cyclical vision of life – from birth, growth, decay, death and new birth, and to its embrace of imperfection and impermanence. Reminding me that I could die today.

Mexican Day of the Dead rituals speak to me, too, countering the death-denying culture I live in, creating a time and space for me to remember my ancestors. Every November 1, I light candles on the stones of my spiral garden; each year multiplying the number of candles to include new spirits, recently added.



I've come to honour the diversity of religious and spiritual practices that I encounter in multiracial Toronto, my home for the past 50 years, but I cannot accept aspects of them that do not respect the integrity and right to exist of all living beings, the more-than-human, and in the human realm, regardless of gender, race, ability and sexuality.



Despite your critical questioning of the institutional church, Betsey, you were consulted on the design for the current First Congregational Church built in 1874-1876.

You proposed the stain glassed windows surrounding the sanctuary honour the early settlers of Austinburg, including your family. Memorial Windows that were a departure from the conventional biblical scenes in most church windows.

The sun pours in through the mammoth vertically framed glass warming and illuminating the worshippers seated in the pews.

Was the colonial settlement the dominant story of the Austinburg church?

Was there ever any question of whose land was dispossessed in favour of the newcomers?

Who made the bricks? The glass? Who cut down the trees?

Which trees now hold up the structure and decorate the sanctuary? American beech, sugar maple, white oak, red oak, elm, white pine?

What happened to the sacred space of nature?

*In your memory, Betsey,
for all you had done
for the local community,
your funeral in 1876
was the first service
held in the new church.*

*The church that had
shaped your life
and that you,
through your own
activism and charisma,
had also shaped.*

*I feel the long shadow
of the Austinburg church
with its steeple
reaching for the sky..*

*While the tree speaks
to a spirituality
grounded in the Earth.*





As my eyes were drawn to the tip of a [Totem](#) pole in Ottawa, Canada's capital, last week I thought about how encasing it within a glass "museum of history" removes it from the cycle of life including disintegrating and returning to the Earth

Perhaps we cannot escape the contradictions



How would you define your spirituality. Betsey, if you shared with me this moment in time?