

A few weeks ago, in the early part of the fall, April, the two kids and I went on a spontaneous late afternoon hike to Wildcat Falls, a beautiful waterfall in Merrimack, NH. We love hiking with our foster kiddos: James, 5, and Liam 2.5. The boys just recently chose these new names as part of the reclaiming of their identities as members of our little family where we hope they will stay forever.

We had never been on this trail before, but found it easy to navigate. There was one primary path, about 2 miles in length, that took us through the woods, past the waterfall, and back around to where we parked our car. When we did reach a branch or divergence in the path, we stuck to the main trail which was indicated by triangle shaped, bright blue trail markers. They were attached to the tall pine and oak trees we passed.

The foliage was striking and April and I were admiring nature's beauty at every turn. James and Liam, on the other hand, spent most of the time admiring the blue triangular trail markers. Liam was sitting in a carrier on my back and every few moments exclaimed, "Blue triangle!" at the top of his lungs, while James raced ahead, looking for the next one.

It was so funny to us that the kids found so much joy in following the marked path. It was as if God had put the trail markers there, just as God had put the trees, rocks, and leaves. The kids were missing the forest for the trees, so to speak.

An important message/theme of Advent is clearly, and I think beautifully stated in today's first reading, and likewise in the Gathering song: 'Clear a path through the wilderness' for our God. We spend these weeks before Christmas in preparation for the coming of Jesus. John remarks in the Gospel reading that his role is to baptize in God's name, and that Jesus, who will come after him, will Baptize with the Holy Spirit. John was a trailblazer, for Jesus, who established our path to Eternal Life.

On this, the celebration of the 48th year of Dignity/Boston, we reflect on not only our entire history of almost 50 years of leading the way, trailblazing with the message, the Good News that God loves LGBTQI+ people and that we are worthy, whole members of the Church, but we also reflect on the trailblazing we have done in the year 2020.

When the pandemic struck our World, and hit us close to home, we reacted swiftly. We established a new path through the unknown. We did not know exactly what our community would look like in the weeks to come, or for how long the pandemic would last. But, we did know that we had a set of values to which we were committed. We were committed to social justice. We were committed to community building and connection. We were committed to liturgy and the Eucharist. We were committed to one another.

Through the surprising and largely unexpected challenges that we faced this year, these values, these trail markers, kept us on the path that although novel, was at the same time familiar. We were comforted by our social gatherings, our worship gatherings, our music, and our Dignity family. These are our touchstones. These are our constants.

We relied on the time, energy and talents of our community members who maximized creativity and commitment to establish new ways of worshiping and gathering together, while retaining the cores of our unique Dignity/Boston community: faith, friendship, prayer, music, dance, humor, inclusion, and deep faith and reverence to God.

I have been honored to serve on the Executive Board for the last four years, this year as the president. I am thankful to be part of this family, built and sustained by members who have joined the circle throughout the years, beginning in 1972. The same values that carried us through this challenging year were the ones that brought this community together when it was first established. They are the same values that marked and fortified this community's path amidst assaults from without: bigotry, hatred, rejection, threats, and another pandemic: HIV and AIDS.

The circle of this community continues to widen as we have welcomed new friends over the years, some even in recent weeks during this Covid pandemic. We have also welcomed back friends who have reconnected with us after time apart.

I have only been on this journey for 5 years with all of you as a member of Dignity/Boston. I am humbled to be part of this community whose history I learn more about each year. I am in awe of the accomplishments, toughness, and passion of this organization. I am grateful to be part of this family that has been through so much in the past 48 years. I know that you feel as proud and grateful as I do for this community that has been so incredibly resilient.

This year, I have personally found myself spending more time than in years past reflecting inward. I wonder if you have done so, too. As a person who experiences anxiety and depression, it was tempting for me to maintain the status quo. I was drawn to the news and the endless stream of updates on the virus that fed my sense of dread and fear. I was drawn to hunkering down and waiting for the crisis to pass. I was drawn to sleeping more, spending more time on my phone/on social media, and spending less time mindfully in the present moment.

I have challenged myself instead to spend more time in meditation, more time in prayer, more time writing and journaling, more time in nature, and more time reading. Some days I was more successful at doing these things than others! I have cultivated my hobbies: painting and photography in ways that I haven't since I was a kid. Maybe you've spent time focused on what grounds you and makes you happy, too. I have reflected on my personal relationships and their value to me, losses I have

experienced and what they have taught me, gifts I have received and my gratitude for them, and on my identity as a White, queer, non-binary person. I have challenged myself to grow.

This evening, as we celebrate our accomplishments and anniversary as a community, I would like to propose a challenge: next year, let's not only sustain our community through this pandemic; let's take this time to grow.

We have work to do. And this work is not just the work of reaching outwards: reaching out to show our support to communities and people that need us like those with HIV/AIDS, those without homes who visit the Friday Night Supper Program, and our transgender and non-binary siblings who live on the margins of the LGBTQI+ community. This work is also the work of looking inwards.

In what ways can we each reflect and work towards bettering ourselves for the benefit of our faith community? In what ways do each of us experience privilege? In what ways do we stick with the status quo when we may instead find opportunities for change? In what ways do racism and transphobia, inform how we see the world and our actions? How can we stretch and step out of our comfort zones as an organization in order to open the doors of our church wider to others?

Let us commit ourselves to the work of forging new paths for ourselves and this community, while we stay true to our values: love, faith, and hope.