

Learning how to respect all places of worship



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When in Washington, D.C., long ago for a several-month assignment - and my first time living away from Utah - I noticed pedestrians with smudges on their foreheads. Ash Wednesday.

Hindus walked past with little bindi, the dots symbolizing the third eye that looks inward toward God. There were lots of men wearing yarmulkes, or kippahs. Baptist women hosted church-supper lunches every week. The legendary annual Quaker yard sale outfitted my apartment. Many other faiths abounded, too, and I was happily awash in a polytheistic community.

In my new apartment building, I met Kathryn, recently arrived from Minnesota. She spent Saturday nights drinking beer in Adams Morgan pubs, the conversations punctuated by her twinkling eyes and constant

laugh. Sundays, while groggy compatriots like me slumbered, Kathryn, in her 20s and with a penchant for vintage clothing, was in church.

She knew she could take a seat at the African Methodist Episcopal Church or the Lutheran Church or any other, and God would be there. I appreciated the cultural side of all the faiths I was noticing; she appreciated the religious.

Kathryn has lived and worked in more countries than I can identify on an unlabeled world map. Her passion for architecture has taken her around the world. Her work restoring ancient churches and other structures now keeps her far from her native U.S. because nothing here is old enough.

Not long after we became friends, I married Chris and Kathryn married Simon, a lovely man from Cornwall, a no-nonsense guy who had to travel to Tanzania to get Kathryn's attention long enough to propose. Luckily, she had malaria then so she was easier to catch.

Kathryn loves the world. She has a reverence. I once asked her to tell me all the countries she has seen. She said that I could ask about anyplace I wanted to, but she felt it was wrong to rattle off country

names like so many notches on a bedpost.

Once, Kathryn took us to a ruined cathedral near her home in England. Standing inside the dilapidated building, with pigeons nesting everywhere, cold rain pounding through the crumbled roof onto our heads, our eyes poring over moss-covered interior walls where ornate pieces had been chopped out and stolen, we listened with awe as our upbeat friend talked about returning this heartbreaking, hulking, broken shell to a beautiful, useful purpose. She wanted to see the church restored.

Some people take in stray cats - they can't help themselves. With Kathryn it's buildings.

She has talked conservation with Prince Charles and preserved buildings for the Aga Khan. She can navigate a Ford Foundation cocktail party and an unmarked dirt road in Andalusia with equal panache. Worst of all, she never brags about any of it - or even tells you. I only know about Prince Charles because I brought in the post when visiting her house. (Me, stupidly: "Kathryn, here's a letter with no stamp, just a little crown in the corner.")

When Kathryn and Simon visited us in Utah as the year 2000 approached, we presented them with choices for New Year's Eve

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activities. Kathryn chose a walk through Temple Square and the choir service at Calvary Baptist Church. New Year's Eve, two churchy choices. That's my friend.

Kathryn and Simon asked us to be their son Rees's godparents, so we were honored to ring in 2006 in Minnesota, participating as Rees's sponsors in his New Year's Day baptism at Kathryn's parents' church.

Rees and his sister Kerensa are lucky to have wonderful parents of different nationalities who have worked in Thailand, pledged their love in Zanzibar and skied both the Alps and Alta. Their parents are teaching them to be respectfully at home in church, any church. Their mom helped repair the ceiling of the Pantheon, is restoring a pair of monasteries in Mongolia and has worked with direct descendants of the Buddha and the prophet Mohammed. Holding passports since birth, these kids will grow up with the World Heritage Site list as their family scrapbook.

As for Chris and me, it is our great joy to be on a few of the pages, even if we keep having to go to church.

Back in Salt Lake City, I'm noticing that we have more churches than I had thought. It's so easy to say how monolithic Utah is, how singularly religious. But it's not true. There's not one denomination that Kathryn has worked to help that doesn't have a community in Utah.

On her next visit to Utah, who knows where my worldly friend will want to stop in and worship. Utah is ready for her. We have a diverse group of faith communities here. When will we notice that we're only monolithic because we keep saying we are?

Barb Guy is a regular contributor to these pages. © Salt Lake Tribune.