

Chipping away at anti-Semitism

Reverend Susan Auchincloss wants to change the language

Although she describes herself as a shy person, Woodstock resident Reverend Susan Auchincloss has taken on the mission to address anti-Semitism in Christianity. Having garnered 400 signatures on an online petition to remove prejudicial language from the Sunday church readings, she is steadily moving forward on various fronts.

Auchincloss, formerly an interim priest at St. Gregory's Episcopal Church in Woodstock, directed her petition at the Consultation on Common Texts (CCT), a group of scholars from various Christian denominations that meets annually to set the readings, or Lectionary, to be used in churches around the country throughout the year. When Auchincloss learned that the CCT had put her petition on their schedule for discussion at their meeting in Toronto this May, she decided to attend.

"I'm gun-shy when it comes to having people angry at me," said the slender, soft-spoken priest. "The petition was not conciliatory. It wasn't rude, but it was straight from the shoulder. In Toronto, I anticipated a frosty reception. I almost didn't go, but I thought I should stand by my assertion."

To her surprise, she received a cordial welcome. The deliberations that would address her petition occurred during private sessions that she could not attend. Only the forum on the morning of the first day is open to the public. However, she invited herself to lunch with the scholars and had a friendly conversation with the secretary of the CCT about the issue of anti-Semitism.

"Driving home, I felt deflated," she recalled. "I had no evidence that anything had been accomplished, except that I proved I had a little courage."

A few days later, an email came from the secretary, indicating that a letter would be sent to all the signers of the petition explaining that the CCT could not take action on the language and that "it's up to the different denominations to make these kinds of changes. They wouldn't cop to the fact that they can do something." Sexist language in the Lectionary has been changed, and there's no reason, said Auchincloss, that anti-Semitic wording cannot be altered as well.

However, the email did state that the CCT is taking the issue seriously. At next year's meeting in New York City, the group plans to devote the entire public forum period to a Christian-Jewish dialogue.

"It's amazing to me," marveled Auchincloss. "I thought, holy smoke, they see there is a problem. This dialogue could start the whole ball rolling. It's immense."

Meanwhile, she is chipping away at anti-Semitism along other avenues, such as making changes to the examination required for ordination in the Episcopal church. She explained, "A group of us are trying to introduce Episcopal legislation at the national level to make one of those exam questions demonstrate that the candidate has a grasp of the anti-Judaism element in our tradition. At top levels of the church, there are many statements to the effect that we don't countenance this kind of prejudice, but the seminaries aren't teaching it. The clergy don't understand that we've moved on."

She feels that retraining the clergy is vital. She is in touch with Bruce Chilton, director of the Institute of Advanced Theology at Bard College, who is crafting a Ph.D. program that can be taken by clergy on the job. His curriculum addresses inter-religious relations.

The Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies (ICJS) in Baltimore is, said Auchincloss, "one of the leaders in the field of bringing Christians and Jews together for dialog and mutual study. I was down there a few weeks ago, talking to a rabbi and



Reverend Susan Auchincloss

a Catholic seminary teacher. In the fall, I can start an inter-religious study group up here." Chilton is willing to take the group under the umbrella of his institute.

Using materials put together by the ICJS, Auchincloss and her husband, Stuart, have been running a local pilot project with another Christian couple and two Jewish couples. Although the couples didn't know each other at the start, she said, "We have become so close by honoring and respecting and appreciating what we hear from one another, without feeling we have to change or adopt other people's views. It's a good feeling to be able to have irreconcilable differences and still have immense affection for each other."

Asked to cite an irreconcilable difference, she said promptly, "Was Jesus Christ was the Messiah?"

Despite the care used in putting together the materials, noted Auchincloss, "There was one point in an early lesson that sounded very condescending toward Jews, and one of the people in the group took umbrage. The beauty of it was that it was fine to take umbrage — no one felt they had to defend Christianity. Just respect, listen, care. I did say I'd

write to ICJS saying it should be corrected, and got letter back saying, 'You're right, we'll change it.'"

She is also continuing her research. Recently she read the book *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (W. W. Norton, 2013) by David Nirenberg, exploring how language carries anti-Semitism forward. "He shows how intellectual life in the western world has structured itself around anti-Judaism," said Auchincloss. "Philosophers use Judaism as shorthand way of saying 'rigid, hidebound, legalistic, theoretical,' as opposed to the Greeks, who are seen as expressing the lushness of life."

In addition to addressing language, she insists, "We have to publicize the ways in which our spiritual life depends on Judaism and always has. Look at the prophets, how powerfully they spoke out about social justice. Jesus carried it forward, but without that Jewish tradition, what would he have had to offer? We read the psalms in church every day."

Her progress has made Auchincloss less shy. She has been invited to speak on a panel at the annual meeting of the International Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations, coming up in October. "That says to me that even though I'm at the grass roots, in this village — I've never had a high church office; I could not be closer to the earth — and yet, I think because it's right, it's true, and many people have recognized that, they want to hear from me." Now retired, she currently volunteers at the Episcopal parish in Saugerties.

She is also dazzled by the effectiveness of a simple petition, which she has taken offline now that the CCT has responded. "Most people don't think this is an issue because they never thought about it. If you just read the petition, even if you didn't sign it, you couldn't go back to church and say it doesn't matter."++

Violet Snow

For more information, or to support the efforts of Reverend Susan Auchincloss, see her website, <http://faithnotfault.org>.

IN TOWN

Ruel Bernard reads at Harmony

Ruel Bernard, Woodstock native, perennial do-gooder and world traveler, will read from his work in progress, *From Woodstock To the World: Travels of a Native Son*, at the Harmony Café on Friday June 21 [from 6-8 pm?].

The book, a memoir encompassing 25 stories of 50 years of travel and social engagement, chronicles the trajectory of Ruel's life, emphasizing the influence of the cultural phenomenon that was his home town in the change-filled era of the 1960's. The first five chapters take place in Woodstock and then the travels begin: beginning with a year on the road in his teens; to working as a construction laborer in New York's Little Italy; through a drug crisis and subsequent intellectual awakening in a saw mill in Oregon; through years on a hippie farm commune and traveling the hippie trail in Mexico; at the home birth of his second daughter; then building houses in Nicaragua for the revolution; building houses for 13 years in Puerto Rican squatters villages with American teenagers; hiking into the mountain jungle in Guatemala to act as human shields in the war against the indigenous people; sneaking past the military to visit a rebel Zapatista community in Chiapas; starting a housing project in the western Andes of Ecuador; and traveling on yearly trips through China, Southeast Asia, India and Ethiopia with the love of his life, Akiyo Kawabata.

Ruel, who was brought up, along with his six brothers and sisters, on Glasco Turnpike out near Shady, was 14 when his mother drove him and his 13 year-old brother Terry out to the famous Woodstock Festival to drop them for the weekend.

He believes that the Woodstock of the sixties was a unique crucible for the development of his young human spirit: the land itself, the mountainside that was his playground as a child and the local hill people who had their own unique culture; the liberal, mind-expanding spirit of the artists, including his parents and many of their friends, drawn to Woodstock since the founding of the Byrdcliffe art colony in 1901; and of course, the youth revolution that had somehow chosen little Woodstock, New York as one of its epicenters, drawing impressionable young local kids like Ruel out of the woods and down into town to hear news of a big, wide world outside.

The twenty-five chapters of subsequent travel and especially the life-style choices that surround, allow and infuse that travel, all harken back to what Ruel believes was a foundation established inside his spirit by that unique time and place. In that sense he sees the book as not just a memoir, but as an ethnology — a deeper look at those values that were Woodstock according to one person, and trace out over time how those values manifested themselves in this person's life — a tribute to the quality of Woodstock community life at that time.

At the Harmony Café, Ruel will read from three Woodstock stories covering the period 1964 to 1971. He is especially encouraging people who were in town in those years to attend. He knows his memory is spotty and expects a lively discussion.++

Tad Wise

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