\*\*\*Disclaimer: Not a polished, revised, refined product! ☺

It seems good to start a statement of faith with a thought about how I view and define faith.

I perceive faith not as certainty in particular beliefs or in holding to doctrines or creeds. Rather I perceive and experience faith as more of a willingness to accept and embrace uncertainty, even to rejoice in it. A willingness to give space to uncertainty, to hold space for it, and in doing so, live unlimited into the boundaryless, unbounded mystery of the Universal Presence, the Divine, the Sacred. Letting go of the need for doctrines and definitions of certainty … not without framework and foundation, yet not limited by them. Faith involves both transformation and evolution.

Universal Presence, Divine, Sacred – these are some references I prefer to use rather than the word ‘God,’ that fit to my spiritual experience. This thread of thought leads me to something else to address – how I prefer to refer to God privately, how I perceive and experience God. I have no problem with using the word ‘God’ as it is a common frame of reference for many. After all, many languages/cultures have a word/words for God/gods, because human beings seem to have always sought something beyond themselves, believed that there was Being, or a Being, beyond themselves, and created rich vocabulary for describing this Being and belief in Being, experience and relationship with this Being.

However, there are conventional images that accompany the word ‘God,’ especially in Christian community circles. Moreover, what I mean when I use the word ‘God’ is not aligned with those images or paradigms about God, especially traditional theological notions of God. I do not know God as a supernatural deity, straddling the universe, looking down on creation; a creator standing separate from (his) creation.

I cannot say I any longer hold to many theistic beliefs, yet the word ‘panentheistic’ might describe a part of the way I would prefer to conceive of God, a God-being. That is, “God in everything, everything in God.” Or “the Divine in everything, everything in the Divine;” Or “the Sacred in everything, everything in the Sacred;” Or “the Universal Presence in everything, everything in the Universal Presence.”

Living Spirit, Spirit-Creator … the many names of God, the many names for the sacred. I love to think of it also as the Ultimate, an Ultimate Reality, which we are in and which is in us, though we are not perhaps aware of it at a pure perceptual level of consciousness. This name comes to me from Thich Nhat Hanh, from a beautiful little verse of his, with this line: In the ultimate, I dwell. This Ultimate is something like the theologian Paul Tillich’s conception of God as “the ground of Being” and more than that, “the ground of Being-Itself.” And Paul the apostle who wrote of God as one “in whom we move and live and have our being.”

This Ultimate Reality, which I know as Belovedness and call upon as Belovedness, is something I believe that, as humans, we can know personally. Though I might use the word “Presence,” I use it not in the sense of person, for I do not perceive or conceive of God as a Person (never mind three manifestations of Persons in One Body). Somehow, when I examine the concept deeply, I hesitate to call the nature of this Ultimate, this Belovedness, ‘spirit’ (I don’t know why yet and it’s okay; perhaps the answers lie in quantum physics, quantum forces; are those spirit or energy; is energy spirit??). But yet, (it) is the very real Substance/Source of all that is … all creation, all continuing creation.

But then the question is - how does one pray to such a Being that is not a Being? I value prayer and I pray … but I do not pray ***to*** anything, to any Person, to any God, but I ***do*** pray, I meditate, I contemplate, I worship, and am still, ***in (within)***, this Belovedness. Because it is here with me, here in me, here all around, everywhere, and in all. I struggled, sometimes still struggle, with the need to have a specific form of address, a specific image of One to address, something of seen or felt substance, in my prayer … Yet there is a profound and indescribable intimacy that I experience in prayer, meditation, and relationship without use of those formal conventions. So, one can pray and be in relationship with Being that is not Being (I know, I would have lost most everyone in all of this – yet it is perhaps the simplest, clearest way I can put words to what is beyond words.)

So, in my statement of faith, could I say I believe in, have faith in, a Christian God, or a Christian Being? No, I could not. Whatever God is … whatever the Ultimate is …. whatever Belovedness is … is all beyond such human concepts, labels, and paradigms. God is not Christian … or certainly is not only Christian … though there is most definitely a basic Christian narrative of God (and many, many sub-narratives and interpretations and personal meanings!). This basic Christian narrative is not my narrative … though it remains as a thread in my narrative, in my spiritual journey and experience. That Christian experience, perception, interpretation, image of God, not mine … although I understand it.

So, in one sense, my very dear Christian friends, your God is not my God, but yet, in the sense of a transcending and abiding Belovedness, my Beloved and my Belovedness is also yours, ours. The former is a theological sense, the latter a relational and experiential sense … and to me, the higher one … the one wherein my faith, such as it is, dwells. We are, dearest friends, earnestly seeking to touch the Source and Fount of all being, whatsoever we term that, howsoever we experience it, and in whichever way we define and perceive it and ourselves in it, in relation to and relationship with it …

And relationship is vitally important to me; it is bread for me, my soul. Not only to experience relationship with Belovedness, but to experience the sacred through relationship with others. In a simple sense, my spiritual life, my faith, is about seeking the sacred in and through relationship and about offering the sacred in and through relationship. For me, relationship is about spiritual connection, about communion and community. Relationship is a sacred thing, spiritual, to me. I value spiritual friendship and fellowship immeasurably.

Even though I might no longer name myself Christian, I still choose to be in relationship with a community of Christians. I believe it is needful to have a spiritual home and family, a community, a place of fellowship, friendship, worship. It isn’t necessary to believe all of the same theology, to assent intellectually. It is necessary to be where love and grace are taught and lived, even ever so imperfectly, and where the spirit of Belovedness is present. And Belovedness knows no denominational or theological boundaries; it knows the heart and the heart knows it.

If no other doctrine or principle or law seems so necessary to me, this one does: To love your neighbor as yourself … to love from a soul-perspective, not an ego-perspective.

And one other reason I remain in the Christian community is Jesus. For whatever all I don’t believe in concerning Christian theology …. oh, I do believe in Jesus; I do belove Jesus! (The word believe was used in the sense more of belove, in biblical times) Oh, how I belove Jesus!

Here again, do I believe the entire biblical story of Jesus, all of the details, such as virgin birth, to be inerrant, to be perfectly factual or historical? No, I do not. And yet I believe the accounts to be truthful (in some cases, perhaps truthful metaphor or parable), as meaningful accounts of how people perceived and experienced and knew Jesus. Beautiful spiritual-relational stories of Jesus and of the early community of Jesus-followers; stories of their spiritual journeys, their faith journeys, as inspired by Jesus.

I do believe Jesus existed. But more than that, I believe he is real now; he is here now, as Beloved and as Belovedness. But, historically, I believe he was a real human being, a man who was also a revolutionary mystic, a progressive social reformer, a spiritual activist – a man who was both enlightened and holy and yet an ordinary human being. One who was the express image of God … One who knew he was in God and God in him. One who had an intimate relationship with God, to the extent that he called God not only Father, but also Abba, or Daddy. God was his Beloved; he was God’s Beloved … a beautiful expression of Belovedness, of justice, of compassion, of Goodness.

I do not believe that it was planned, that it was a plan of God’s from before time, that Jesus would die for the sins of humanity, as a scapegoat, a sacrificial lamb. I do not believe in substitutionary atonement … such a doctrine is not even in alignment with principles of Jesus, and indeed cheapens the very real, powerful, and agonizing sacrifice that he did make. He was willing to live and to die sacrificially … because God was his Beloved, because the community of God, his community, were also his beloved. He was committed to deep spiritual and moral principles of truth, justice, and compassion; he was committed to transformation, to reconciliation, to redemption, to restoration. None of this was he willing to compromise for the sake of saving his life … and he deserves to be honored and loved for all time, for the depth of his enlightenment, his compassion and passion, and his sacrifice.

I do consider that the Jewish followers of Jesus, a Jew, understood his words, his life, his death through the lens of their history, their law, their cultures, and the scripture and prophecies they knew. They used these to make sense of their experience with him, to frame their stories of him, to carry forward the faith they knew, but in a new way.

I see Jesus as Truth, even more than I see the Bible as Truth. And yet I respect the sacredness of the Bible, as it expresses a sort of a spiritual evolutionary journey, spanning thousands of years and diverse perspectives, perceptions, spiritual journeys and experiences of diverse individuals and cultures. It is a rich experiential source of how people have been in relationship with God, of how images of the sacred have been formed, re-formed, and transformed. There is much value, timeless spiritual truth in the Bible … and yet much danger in taking it literally, without accounting for the various sociocultural contexts contained within it.

The Bible is not, to me, the sole source of spiritual wisdom … though it remains foundational and inspirational to me. I am grateful to see Belovedness, to see the wisdom of Love, wisdom so much like Jesus’, in many other sources, and to know that despite the diversity of faith traditions and spiritual conceptions, there is a singular seeking of the Ultimate, a drawing from what is finally the same Source. And I would not want to deny or limit what pours forth from that Source, whatever human vessel it pours through … whatever form it takes, no matter how lowly or lofty …

In my spiritual journey, in my spiritual becoming, I seek to bring many threads together … the thread of science included. Science and religion, science and spirituality, are not mutually exclusive, but can live together in peace, in a both/and relationship. Quantum physics, the entertaining notion of quantum theology, the parallels between Buddhist philosophy and quantum concepts, have all opened up intriguing spiritual perspectives to me ... and the fields of neurology and psychology too have rich potential for revealing the spiritual threads in the fabric of the cosmos and in us. Even our brains seem to be designed to yearn after the sacred, to seek it, to experience it …

We are indeed spiritual beings in a spiritual universe. Life and existence are spiritual. The ordinary is spiritual. Sacredness is everywhere … from the DNA in our cells to the stars above us. And indeed, the relationship between our DNA and the stars is intimately intertwined … for of the same stuff stars are made, so are we made.

And so my faith is also about wonder and awe.

Who knows, maybe one needs to discuss one’s view of heaven and hell in statements of faith, maybe not. But here’s a tiny bit … I don’t believe in the Christian conception or dichotomy of Heaven/Hell. Rather, I like to think of Jesus’ words, the Kingdom of Heaven is within. And of a song I know, which says, Heaven is here/when the mind is clear. This leads into Psalm 46, Be still and know that I am God … be still and know that Heaven is here. We are here in it, we are participating in it, and we are even creators within it! \*\*\*\* And is there Hell? Yes, such that we humans create for ourselves and others, also. But a place of eternal punishment? No. This is not what Jesus knew, nor is it of the God Jesus knew, nor is it anything that pertains to a God of Love, to Belovedness.

Nor do I believe in original sin; I believe in original goodness and boundless grace.

So, I am still left with questions, and new ones arise all the time. But this is actually good – that in seeking answers, I learn more questions to ask! And I learn (as the poet Rilke says) to live into and love the questions, the questions that may never really have answers and maybe it’s okay that there aren’t absolute answers. And that happiness, joy, grace are all possible without the answers … and maybe they are found in the questions and the embrace of uncertainty and mystery. That’s more what faith is than knowing anything.

But in the end … my statement of faith is simply Belovedness. I am beloved, I have a Beloved. Belovedness ***is*,** and I am in it, and it is in me; all are in it. In this truth, I live and move and have my being.