

The Magazine of the **Florida Humanities Council**

FORUM

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The New Face of

RELIGION

in Florida

VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Gracing the counter of a tiny Vietnamese restaurant in Tampa are two statues of Buddha. One is fat and golden, representing happiness and good cheer. The other is smaller, orange in color and occupies his own sacred corner, surrounded by fresh fruit, sweet wafers, a Lotus flower and burning incense.

He is the "economic" Buddha, explains Phu.ong Lu, 37, who works with her relatives at Dong Phu.ong Vietnamese Restaurant and is a devout Buddhist. "Every morning when I come to work," says Phu.ong Lu, whose name means red summer flower, "I arrange the altar, light incense and pray for myself, my customers and aunts, uncles and cousins who work here. I ask him to watch over all of us, let nobody fall, trip, or hurt themselves, that customers come happy, leave happy, and we have good business."

The daughter of a high-ranking colonel in the South Vietnamese Army, Phu.ong Lu, then 12, left Saigon with her family three days before the city fell to the North Vietnamese on April 30, 1975. Leaving their possessions behind, the family immigrated to Apple Valley, Minnesota. After earning a degree in economics and marketing at the University of Minnesota, Phu.ong Lu moved to Tampa in 1987 to own and operate the storefront restaurant. There are approximately 22,000 Vietnamese residents, many of them practicing Buddhists, in the Tampa Bay area.

"The difference between Buddhism and other religions is that Buddhism teaches you not to live in luxury. You can be happy having absolutely nothing."

"Buddha gave up everything because he wanted to find enlightenment in himself and for all his people. His philosophy is that you were born into this world with nothing and you will leave this world empty-handed."

"I know who I am. I know what makes me sad and what makes me happy — just the little things in life, that everybody in my family is in good health, that we have a job, that we wake up in the morning and see sunshine."

"I have had a lot of people who have tried to talk me into changing from Buddhism into another religion and to me there are only three things I never will change — my name, my religion and my look. What I was born with I will keep. I explain to these people that my religion teaches me to be kind and good just the same as theirs. I don't ever see the Buddhists going out and forcing other people to change their religious beliefs."

— Pamela Griner Leavy



PHU.ONG LU

Phu.ong
Lu



A license tag reading "Choose Life IMHIT" hangs in Florida State Senator Jim Sebesta's St. Petersburg office. A pro-life Catholic, Republican Sebesta, whose district encompasses parts of Pinellas and Hillsborough Counties, successfully sponsored a bill during the 2000 legislative session calling for the state to make the controversial tag available.

However, an ongoing lawsuit by pro-choice advocates has brought distribution to a halt. Sebesta and his allies counter that tags (and their proceeds once sold) are not a religious statement but merely encourage women who have decided to carry their pregnancies to term.

Born to an Irish mother and Czechoslovakian father in Pontiac, Illinois, and educated at Chicago's Loyola and DePaul Universities, Sebesta, the father of six children, moved from Illinois to Central Florida in the early 1960s.

"When we first came to Florida from Chicago I worked in a little town in Central Florida by the name of Frostproof. I was the only Catholic in the whole town. There were some very strong anti-Catholic feelings over there. I mean real strong. In fact it took me a long time to convince people who lived there I

wasn't a fire-breathing ogre who took my directions directly from Rome. I actually had three things wrong with me — one I was Catholic, two I was a Yankee, three I was a Republican. The combination of those three things was bad news. I was elected to the Lake Wales City Commission when I lived there. Now, I haven't seen any anti-Catholic feeling for a long long time.

"I believe very strongly that there is a supreme-being and that we are held accountable for our actions, both in omission and commission. You can do it either way. I believe strongly that all human beings are treated equally in the eyes of God and we should do the same. In my every day business dealings and in my political life I've tried not to burn any bridges, tried to live the golden rule.

"I have been asked how I can be pro-life and still be in favor of the death penalty," says Sebesta, a real estate developer who managed property operations for the Catholic Diocese of St. Petersburg before his full-time political career.

"I don't have any problem with that per se because these are two entirely different things. Abortion in my opinion is killing a child who has done zip to society, absolutely nothing. Whereas the death penalty is reserved for a person who has been convicted by his or her peers of a capital crime."

— Pamela Griner Leavy

Jim
Sebesta



Sharon Harvey-Rosenberg didn't attend Hebrew school or celebrate the Jewish coming-of-age ceremony for girls known as Bat Mitzvah. Raised a member of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) faith in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, she is the granddaughter of an AME minister in Philadelphia.

When Harvey-Rosenberg was a young girl her parents let her go with friends to visit rabbis, attend synagogue, and read Judaic books. She converted to Judaism at the age of 31. "People think I made this big jump from being a Christian African American to being an African American Orthodox Jew," says Harvey-Rosenberg, 42, a reporter at the *Daily Business Review* serving Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach County. "The truth is I have, but I haven't. Some of the key values of Judaism were also in my parents' home. My parents raised me to be a kind and caring person. I always thought my soul, the Yiddish word is *neshama*, was connected to the Jewish religion. Surely there were influences in my background, my upbringing, my friends. But I think I was born this way and I was born into a family that encouraged me to find my path."

Miami Beach residents since 1993, Harvey-Rosenberg, her husband Avi, sons Tali, 8, Gabriel, 5, and daughter Yael, 2, moved to Florida from Manhattan after the couple found it too expensive and difficult to raise a family in New York City. They were looking for a place to live that was both fun and religious and found it on Miami Beach with its thriving Jewish culture, close proximity to South Beach and excellent Jewish school system. The three children attend the Rabbi Alexander S. Gross Hebrew Academy.

Sharon Harvey- Rosenberg

"To be Jewish to me is to be observant. Being observant means I keep Shabbas, the Jewish Sabbath. From sundown Friday to about an hour after sundown on Saturday I don't turn on electricity. I don't get in the car. I don't shop. But I live a life that's very enjoyable. It's like a 25-hour time out to meditate, hang out with friends, walk on the boardwalk on Miami Beach. On Friday night it's the candles, the wine, like a lovely dinner party that happens to be religious. On Saturday morning we walk to shul (Yiddish for synagogue). I consider it my day to be unplugged from the intrusion of technology in our lives."

"Our religion teaches us to treat people as you would like to be treated," says Harvey-Rosenberg, who always wears a head covering, a wig or sheitel, ("I think I'm into my early Diana Ross-look now"), skirts to her knee and doesn't wear shorts or a bathing suit in public. "As a reporter being religious means basically reporting a story in a way that I would like to be treated, being very ethical, very objective and committed to the truth."

"A true religious Jew believes not just in the rituals but in the intent. There is a marriage between what you believe and what you do, a deep connection. A marriage between the laws, the things that we practice and the way we treat people. There can't be a divorce. It's a true ritual between the marriage and the behavior. You light candles for ritual but also because you want to bring more light into the world. You eat kosher food but also have to have a kosher mind, kosher words, kosher sayings, and act kosher in the way you treat people, do your business deals and in the way you dress."

— Pamela Griner Leavy

Patricia Sprinkle lives in two different religious worlds. The Miami author of murder mysteries and spiritual self-help books for women is active in the Presbyterian (USA) faith, currently serving the denomination's national headquarters as planning director for the Presbyterian Year of the Child.

At least two Sundays a month, Sprinkle attends church with her husband, Bob, a pastor in a non-denominational charismatic Christian church. When Sprinkle's commitment to the Year of the Child is over in 2001, she intends to make her husband's church her fulltime spiritual home.

"I will move my attendance to support what he is doing," said Sprinkle, 56, who is completing her master's degree in religious studies at Florida International University. She earned her undergraduate degree in English and creative writing at Vassar College. "This is a congregation where you

expect the power of the holy spirit to be active for healing, to instruct some, to give words of wisdom when needed. My husband has a vision for this congregation, a gateway fellowship because Miami is a gateway city. We are committed to the international populations that come through this community."

"Religious values, to me, mean a concern for an educated faith. It's not just an emotional thing, it involves the depth of your mind as well.

In everyday life religion is the foundation on which you make all your decisions. It means you spend your money for causes instead of stuff. You buy a house people can come to rather than a house to show off. It means you try to arrange your day so peace and quiet time is a primary part. You give part of your time every week to people who need it. I think it just sort of changes the way you look at the world. You are here as a child and servant of God, that's your job."

Sprinkle's latest book is *The Remember Box*, a non-fiction novel about hate and racism set in 1949 in rural North Carolina, including murder and abduction. "Murder mysteries are one of the few forms of moral literature left," Sprinkle said.

"*The Remember Box* is about a girl whose uncle sent her a box about things that happened in 1949 in his life, things that bring back memories of that year. Her uncle had been given a hard time because of his stand on race. The little girl is sitting there realizing that down at the core of everything there is goodness nothing can wipe out.

"To be in touch with goodness in the frenzy of suffering and pain seems to me to be something worth doing in life."

— Pamela Griner Leavy



WISHING HE HAD A THEORY IN KEY WEST

He wanted to have a theory, all great poets have theories, even though they're nuts (the theories, that is): Yeat's gyres, Pound's money, Williams's triads, Olson's breath, Bly's deep images, and acres of poets turning Catholic or renouncing Catholicism, what fun to be so sure of oneself, what fun recanting one's previous sureness. And writing poems about all of this, that was the point, the poems spill out from theories, pure peas from piddling pods.

His theory was, to have a theory you need mainly hunger & meanness which live on theories like cannibals on missionaries but what could he do in this generous sleepy town at the end of the world. And him a vegetarian besides

— Peter Meinke,
from *Trying to Surprise God*



JERRY BOGGS

Amy Jo Smith used to be known as Sister Maureen Joseph. Three days shy of her 19th birthday, Smith entered a convent to become a member of the Dominican Sisters. "I was a very religious little girl and felt God was calling me, that I had a vocation," says Smith who as Sister Maureen Joseph served as a schoolteacher and administrative assistant. "I was very idealistic and I think I still am."

In 1976 she decided to leave the order and channel her idealism in a different direction. No longer a nun or a Catholic, today Smith, 62, is a Unitarian Universalist, active in the U.U. Fellowship in Gainesville and a lay campus minister at the University of Florida campus.

Amy Jo
Smith

Instead of a creed, the U.U. denomination espouses a set of principles that includes the "inherent worth and dignity of every person, respect for the interdependent web of all existence, and a free and responsible search for truth and meaning."

"I left the Dominican order because I had to get out from under that structure and find myself," says the Detroit native who first came to Florida in 1975 to serve as an administrative assistant at St. Petersburg's Free Clinic. "I was a liberal Catholic and liberal Catholics are hard to find in Florida. Maybe if I had found a place for myself in the Catholic Church when I was searching, I wouldn't be a U.U. now. At first I stayed a Catholic when I left the order. The church was accepting. My family was accepting. But I felt rather lost."

In 1981 Smith had moved to Gainesville. She visited the U.U. fellowship to "look for friends and see what Unitarian Universalists were all about."

"As a Catholic, I naturally had some reservations about going to a Protestant church, I sort of tiptoed in. People were very welcoming and didn't try to baptize me or change my beliefs. If they had I would have run very fast."

Her final split with Catholicism came after twice teaching a U.U. "Cakes for the Queen of Heaven" curriculum for women and coming to more of a realization of the patriarchal influence in religion.

As a nun Sister Maureen Joseph was a "bride of Christ." In 1985 Amy Jo Smith married Stan Erickson, a retired University of Michigan psychology professor she met at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. Erickson died this past spring.

"Stan always said he had quite a challenge following my first husband," Smith laughingly recalls. "That I changed my name for my first husband and wouldn't change it for him."

— Pamela Griner Leovy

William Hoeveler made the toughest decision of his life in August. A Coral Gables-based district judge, he wasn't this time faced with a decision from the bench. His wife of 50 years lay in a semi-comatose state. Ill for a long time, she was in extreme pain and breathing only through the aid of a ventilator.

An Episcopalian for 47 years, Hoeveler, with the blessing of two priests, made what he calls a religious decision and "pulled the plug."

"That certainly was a religious decision, more than any other kind as far as I am concerned. I contacted two different priests, two different doctors. I sought advice, and everyone assured me it was right. When you see that a patient or a loved one is going to essentially be a vegetable, there isn't much question that it's fair to them and to everyone else. Everyone I talked to, and I talked to many, said there was no question about it. The church supported me and a priest was there with me."

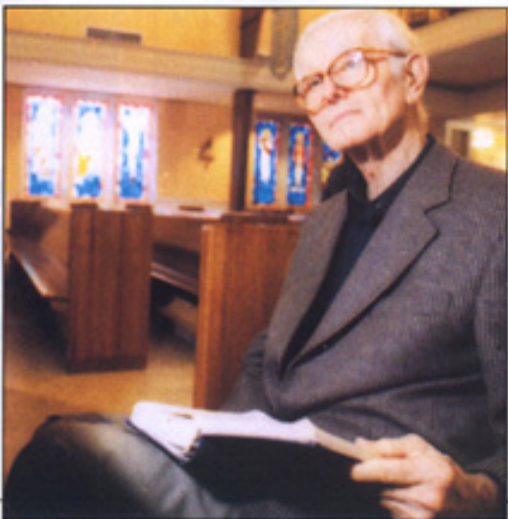
William Hoeveler was Catholic and Griffin Smith was Presbyterian when the couple married in 1950. "We both wanted a common ground to educate our children. I was brought up Catholic, but I was never confirmed. I guess you can say I was almost a Catholic. I did go to the Catholic church until we got married, and then we both picked Episcopalian."

"It's a Catholic church. We have the same sacraments. The Episcopal church has more thinking, is more liberal. Everyday teachings are very much like the Catholic church with the exception of the belief in the Pope. Also priests can get married and it's been proven to be somewhat valid and a good course of life for priests. As for women priests, I think that's good."

Hoeveler, who suffered a stroke in February just one day before he was to preside over the initial hearing on the controversial Elian Gonzalez case, does not advocate the assisted-suicide practices of Dr. Jack Kevorkian. "That's very different, very dangerous. Sanctifying euthanasia is a different story. That's a conscious patient making a deliberate, overt, attempt to cause his death."

Hoeveler does support Democratic vice-president candidate Senator Joe Lieberman's call for more religion in everyday life. "I endorse his view 100%. I think we are too much directed against religion. I think there is room for faith in government and everyday life."

— Pamela Griner Leovy



ELIA WICKSTEIN