

THIS I BELIEVE
By Mary Ragland
Wildflower Church
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When Eva Andries first contacted me several months ago to tell you what I believe, I told her that would give me some time to figure out what I believe, and she laughed as if it were a joke. I wasn't joking. Then I received an email from Eliza saying that she was looking forward to hearing "my wisdom." That's a heavy responsibility coming from someone who has spent years studying belief systems.

I believe that I live in a gray world. By this I don't mean graying, as in aging, although I'll admit that most of the people I now hang out with either have gray or no hair, or "only their hairdresser knows," as the commercials used to say.

Nor do I mean a colorless world, because my world is full of color. I am a quilter, and have learned that the patterns of a quilt can only be seen if the colors chosen have a strong color contrast. I am also a gardener, and gardeners spend a lot of time arranging growing things based on their textures and colors.

By gray, I mean shades of gray, as opposed to a world made up of the clear contrast of black and white. Most of my shades of gray came about because of my experiences and memories of some significant periods in our history. I have read about those times in history books, novels, and commentaries, but I also remember my experiences.

For instance, I was born the year that Franklin Roosevelt took office, in the depths of the great depression. I have read about how people went hungry, lost their homes and businesses, migrated to find work. I was a child growing up on a Colorado farm with 5 brothers and sisters. Living on the farm, we were never hungry, and I was the much-loved youngest child in a loving family. I did not know how close we came to losing the farm, nor what a sacrifice my parents

were making for their children. The economy forced them to prioritize, and they chose educating their children over new cars or clothes, or a bigger house (maybe one with more than one bathroom for 8 people.)

The depression was a bad time for our country, but it was a good time for me. Shades of gray.

I have read much about World War II, about “The Greatest Generation” and the “Last Good War.” I experienced the whole-hearted patriotism of the press and the newsreels. I saw the placards in windows with a blue star for each son or daughter serving in the armed forces. Our placard had four blue stars for my four brothers. But my memories are of when one of the blue stars in our neighbor’s window was changed to gold because of the loss of their son somewhere in the South Pacific. He had been my brothers’ playmate. Or the memory of my mother’s alarm each time the phone rang, thinking of her four sons serving their country. Or the recent experience of hearing my sister-in-law, as she slid into the depths of Alzheimer’s shortly before her death. She would recite word for word the radio announcer telling that her husband’s (my brother’s) infantry division was in full retreat somewhere in France. That experience was so seared into her memory that she could repeat it long after she had even forgotten the names of her own children. World War II may have been a glorious time for our country, but it was a frightening and stressful time for my loved ones and me. Shades of gray.

In 1970, 16 years after the Supreme Court declared segregated schools unconstitutional, I was living in the Texas town of Brenham when they finally integrated the elementary school. My son was in the fourth grade. My children had a good experience in the Brenham schools, and benefited from going through the experience of integration. It should have happened much sooner than it did. However, the vibrant African American community centered on the school sort of disintegrated as it became a part of the dominant culture of the community, and many of the very qualified African American teachers and administrators, who had worked so hard to educate their children in the segregated schools, were relegated to positions of less respect in the integrated schools. Shades of gray.

In my last job, I was privileged to visit schools all over Texas and the nation, conducting research on schools that had been deemed successful by the state accountability systems. We

looked at what the staffs of these schools were doing to get their students to pass state and national tests. We saw lots of dedicated people working very hard with the students, and the students were learning to perform well. What these school staffs were not allowed to question was whether the tests were a good measure of student learning. Shades of gray.

It is because of these shades of gray that I am comfortable and fulfilled at Wildflower. Rather than demanding any particular belief, our UU principals guide us. This is a safe place to explore shades of gray without recrimination. This community nurtures my head as I explore, and also nurtures my heart.