

MY SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Nancy Strong, 3/8/2015

Thanks to Norval and Jennifer for asking me to speak. These spiritual journeys call us to a deeper place and have definitely enriched Newtown Meeting. Thanks - I look forward to hearing your spiritual journeys.

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Julia Balderston, a hardy member of this Meeting who lived to be 106, remembered as a child looking out across the field after a snowstorm. Whiteness covered the land as far as she could see. . . "This is the world."

In my growing up years, two questions play off each other:

What is "the world?"

Who is my neighbor?

Sensitivity as to Who is my neighbor came abruptly. My friendly "Hi, Nigger!" called from a porch swing to a black man passing by promptly received a hushed reprimand from my friend's mother and a stern reminder when I returned home from kindergarten. That passerby remains in my world - and perhaps I in his.

In those early years, as we moved between river towns in Kentucky and Ohio and my grandparents' home in Michigan, I had a very vague sense of people on the move - some to escape the flooding, most going northward for good jobs and a better life for themselves.

My own home was loving and ordered, with a wonderfully competent mother who taught music in public schools and from whom, in scores of ways, my younger brother and sister and I learned how to be good neighbors - and always attentive to the other family above or below us in our rental homes. Dad was a sociable, public-spirited parent who worked all his life with the S.S. Kresge Co. (forerunner of K-Mart). Both he and my mother took active roles in the Methodist Church, and meals in our home always started with a simple grace.

In my teen years I prayed for the One World that Wendell Wilkie, a Rep., called for when he ran against FDR in 1940. At age 12, I wrote in earnest, "We Are All One." My world was expanding.

At college in Ohio, during an on-campus Christian Living Emphasis Week in my sophomore year, I was spiritually troubled by man's lack of faith (why insurance?) and what I viewed then as waste in nature (so many acorns that would never know life). I continued to be disturbed, too, by the problem of evil in the world, as it came to me thru plays and films like "On the Waterfront." Remember Brando, "You're my brotha' - you shoulda' looked out for me." *You're my brother - you should have looked out for me.*

A highpoint during one Christmas vacation was a Student Volunteer Movement Conference in Kansas. Oh, the thrill of some 800 voices singing together "Thine is the Glory, risen conquering love." We had heady conversations on the bus ride back with a hitchhiker from the Fellowship of Reconciliation. While babysitting I had discovered a book on Gandhi and his work in India, and now I was hearing of the early freedom rides and other exciting work of non-violence being done in my own country by the F.O.R.!

Another rich contribution to my spiritual development was participating in a summer-long Students in Government Seminar in Washington, living in a row house near Dupont Circle with 90 other students from all over the country (including one Bill Strong!). We worked during the day - my job was in the Pentagon - and heard interesting speakers in the evenings. I managed to attend one of the sensational hearings on organized crime being conducted by Sen. Kefauver and have an indelible impression of six sullen Negro women in white hospital garb filing in to give witness - all heroin addicts. None of us at that time could have imagined what devastation our drug wars would bring to our nation and to our neighbors to the south.

As a political science major I looked forward to technical assistance work following graduation. After a year of temp. jobs and teaching in Detroit high schools, I returned from a summer in Europe to learn I had finally secured my dream job - with the United Nations Secretariat, working first in the press section during the General Assembly and later in Economic and Social Affairs.

My years in New York were rich. I was asked to leave the YWCA when peanut butter and jelly and bread were found in the dresser of my tiny room. But through my contacts with an Iranian colleague, I found a \$50-a-month cold-water flat a short walk from the UN. It was there that friends and I met regularly to discuss "Moral Man and Immoral Society" and other books by Reinhold Niebuhr, Lippman, Orwell, Camus, and others. I was on a spiritual journey, truly.

Apart from the joys in my work, I was nourished by New York's cultural riches: readings of Dylan Thomas, paintings by Goya, opera at the old Met, an informal session with Pete Seeger playing the pennywhistle at the Catholic Worker building on 2nd Avenue. . . And who can forget the powerful Family of Man exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art?

Though I attended church regularly, neither prayer nor the person of Jesus were a living part of my life. I was blessed most profoundly by the chance to *practice* religion. Here the Quaker influence was pervasive. On Friday nights I retreated to the lower East Side living room of the AFSC head to meet with Bayard Rustin, Buckminster Fuller, and other thinker-doers of the time, and joined weekend workcamps to paint walls and plug up rat holes in East Harlem, share the life of the pacifist Society of Brothers in their new-found intentional community in Rifton NY, and work with mental patients on Riker's Island, where I witnessed the change from locking up patients as prisoners to medicating them to where we could dance together.

In 1957 I left the U.N. to marry Bill Strong, my stalwart Quaker partner, with whom I had shared powerful gatherings at Kirkridge, a center in the Adirondacks where Newtown Meeting has held at least two retreats. After living briefly in Washington, Bill and I took the Key West ferry to Cuba for a memorable visit on our own before moving to New York's Upper West Side. There we joined the fledgling Morningside Friends Meeting on the Columbia campus and soon thereafter signed up for the 2-4 a.m. shift in a silent Vietnam vigil outside the recruiting station in Times Square - my first public protest. For Bill and me, our Quaker faith had become a focal point of our lives. Along with the birth of our first-born!

Laura was two when we moved to Latin America in the early 60s to do relief work in Peru, and five when we returned three years later. Our son Tom had been born there at Christmastime, and what open, caring, venturesome souls they both have become, buoyed by superb marriage partners!

In Lima we were fortunate to form a small Quaker worship group and develop strong friendships with a few neighbors in the middle-class Peruvian development where we lived. Still, on hearing of the assassination of John Kennedy, I was surprised by our nation's impact on the world then, made most apparent to me when the symphony concert that evening began with a prolonged moment of silence.

Our return to the States included two deepening Quaker experiences: leading an AFSC summer workcamp in a Mexican village, and being part of the Pendle Hill community in the fall. As we prepared to leave the village, we hosted a farewell fiesta for the villagers. Everyone was busy save Hector, who sat outside playing a guitar. I was feeling upset and ready to speak to him when I looked about and saw people contentedly singing along as they hung the pinatas and laid out the plates of papaya. I realized I had a hang-up with work.

When we settled into the Pendle Hill community for the fall semester, I knew immediately the topic of my term paper: *Work*. The concept has changed radically over the centuries - work is sometimes the self-fulfilling handmaiden of leisure time, and sometimes - or for some people - a mindless, numbing activity that leaves only a leftover of time for creative living. Do we need to rethink work? To reconstruct a fuller sense of play? Where, after all, does present-day leisure entertainment - at all class levels - take us? For me, this opens up human challenges that I need to think through. The lack of meaningful work, the challenge of robots, the reluctance to accept limits, the willingness to harm or take advantage of others - sometimes even our own children - call us to consider not just our differences, but our likenesses, too.

I find that despite all my experience I have still to learn how to move with grace and enthusiasm across class and race lines. The Prickman family, living under matting in a barriada on the edge of Lima, once gave us a precious family huaco - in part perhaps with the unspoken hope that we could find medical help for their hemophiliac son. But I did not. Nor do I know really how to host a meal, or tip, or purchase items from others less well off than I, so conscious and guarded am I of my privileges.

At the same time, I have to ask myself, Am I equally aware of my class/race deprivations? What am I missing? Starchy me when it comes to the music enjoyed by younger members of my own culture! How ready am I to be truly open to this remarkable family of man, to "go global?" To share and protect the creations of this magnificent world? How do we do that? How can Newtown Meeting do that? Or Pennswood, as it seeks diversity?

Bill's work in family planning took us in the sixties to Boston, where we were both deeply involved in peace protests, war tax resistance, and fair housing. We were supported - again - by a small group of committed Quakers living in both the black community in Roxbury and the white community of Newton MA. I got my first peace training through an organization of strong, dedicated women - leading workshops, visiting a veterans hospital, editing the Voice of Women newsletter. It was an exhilarating time of change, but also a despairing time as we faced the brutalities of the spreading, everlasting Vietnam war, and racial discrimination and assassinations here at home. Our faith seemed challenged as never before.

Our children and their friends brought joy and fun to our lives. I welcomed, too, my year of teaching an innovative course to sixth graders in Newton MA, beginning with archeology and early man, and then focusing on the Inuit community of Canada. The kids and I learned an important truth - that in tough times, when food is scarce, you live in community and share what you have. Watching them make their "A-ha!" discovery was a thrill.

Illness in Bill's family brought us in 1972 to Newtown PA, where we knew Lorraine Cleveland, a valued member of Newtown Meeting and a cherished mentor to many of us. In our jobs at George School and the Broad Street Bank, Bill and I grew a lot. But the nuclear weapons build-up in the 80's impelled each of us, independently, to leave those jobs to become full-time volunteers for peace.

I undertook weapons research at Friends Center in Philadelphia which led to my work on the State Freeze Board, laying the grounds for a national peace organization. Locally I joined a small group of WILPF women to challenge the Thiokol Corp.'s role in the development of the new MX missile. After over a year of weekly demonstrations on the two-lane road outside the company's headquarters at the edge of Newtown, we ended our protest with a successful shareholders resolution and a memorable outdoor service based on Micah: *They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.*

We weren't alone. In the spring of 1982, friends from 26 organizations met at Pennswood to form the Bucks Alliance for Nuclear Disarmament, which in time, thanks to Barbara Simmons and a host of other committed members of this Meeting, morphed rather seamlessly into The Peace Center with an emphasis on positive peacemaking in our schools and communities. It had taken faith and hope and endless effort to "walk the walk" through the very real threat of nuclear war.

My successive years of service at Pendle Hill and Pennswood, and Newtown Meeting as well, enriched my life immeasurably. I welcomed, too, the experience of pruning grapes at Koinonia in Georgia, picking cotton in Nicaragua, and working for Habitat for Humanity here and abroad, followed by a decade on the staff of a housing group that provides shelter for homeless families in Bucks County. Capping this were thirteen cherishing years in Princeton, working with many friends "to grow a town where everyone is safe and respected."

Looking back over a lifetime, I cannot tell you how much Bill and I have cherished our lives in the company of incredibly stimulating, caring, and committed individuals like yourselves. I am forever deeply touched, too, by the courageous and inspiring acts of ordinary individuals, known and unknown, throughout the world . . . our world.

