

Plummer Lecture Given to Illinois Yearly Meeting, Seventh Month 2001

Marlou Carlson

Introduction of Marlou Carlson, by Roxy Jacobs

Most Friends know that Marlou and I share a friendship that we have carefully tended for approximately 20 years. Though arriving by separate paths, we both came to Duneland Friends Meeting at approximately the same time. It was in this context that I came to know Marlou Carlson as a woman who was favored by God with many gifts, and who brings to her giftedness a work ethic that demands that she give her all in everything she takes up.

Shortly after she began attending Duneland Friends Meeting, Marlou concentrated her efforts into developing our First Day School. This program would later become a model for many Illinois Yearly Meeting First Day Schools, and later, several throughout Friends General Conference. Marlou worked with the children, trained us as First Day School teachers, and continued to guide our children's religious education program for many years.

Marlou's interest in education has been lifelong. She received a Bachelor of Science degree in elementary education at Indiana University, Bloomington, followed by a Master of Science degree from Purdue North Central. Additionally, she participated in Teacher Training Laboratory Schools for Religious Educators. Most recently, she completed the 1998—2000 session of School of the Spirit.

Marlou has faithfully served our monthly meeting in other capacities as well. She has been our clerk, serves on the Ministry and Counsel Committee, and is currently our meeting treasurer. Marlou has often represented our monthly meeting when Duneland Friends participate in local meetings or community events.

When asked what she is most passionate about, Marlou will speak about opening oneself to the Presence in waiting worship. She also feels strongly about the importance of the worshipping community. As she continues on her spiritual journey, she sees her worshipping community as companions along the way.

SEEK YE FIRST THE KINGDOM

Sabbath & Community

Good morning. This is the Sabbath, a day set aside. This is a day different from other days. Scholars have taught me that the concept of Sabbath appears early in Genesis. The word holy first appears at the end of the creation story as God, instead of creating a holy mountain or spring where a sanctuary might be established, creates a holy day, a holiness in time rather than in space. The Sabbath is a celebration of life. It is a day for praise. It is a moment suspended in time, to pause and remind ourselves that everything that is truly worth having, is already ours.

Illinois Yearly Meeting Friends are a family of kindred spirits, a community of caring hearts and probing minds, searching for the path to peace. We look into each others' faces to see the reflection of our own deepest longings for spiritual sustenance and inner peace. This Sabbath is a time to notice that our lives are filled with opportunities for joy and creativity, for satisfaction and love. And yet, even as we allow our inner strengths to grow bright, we recognize that we need one another. For in truth, it is only through community, through reaching out to embrace each others' lives, that our true potential can be fulfilled. Lloyd Lee Wilson speaking to us in our session and in *Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order*, has reminded us that God is calling us to live in covenant with Him, and through that covenant in community with one another (p. 61).

Here in this room we are the worshiping community joined together to celebrate our life in the Divine Presence. It is an honor to have been asked to speak to you this First Day, to spend our Sabbath time with you in this way. The process of preparing this talk and of readying myself to speak to you was arduous. I eventually found myself telling my story and some others. Intermittently, there have been several serious attacks of butterflies in the tummy, during which I wondered if I could articulate anything or if I could even bring my self before you. The dear Friends of Duneland Meeting and of other meetings have stood firmly by my side the whole way, encouraging me and holding me in the Light. One of those Friends gently reminded me that butterflies are beautiful. My son spent several hours as my faithful editor. I chose to relate for you various spiritual experiences that have somehow changed me and to describe how they encounter scripture and Quaker practice in my life. As my preparation continued, I discovered, at last, that I am deeply grateful to you for the invitation to chronicle the workings of God in my life. You have been my companions along the way.

Church

My parents were from rural Indiana. My mother was the daughter of a relatively wealthy farmer. My father was the son of a poor carpenter. My mother grew up looking over the fields. My father lived on the edge of a tiny town and swam in the Tippicanoe River before the dam was built at Monticello and Lake Schaefer created. They lived seven miles apart, in different counties, and did not meet until they both attended Indiana University in Bloomington. After they had completed their educations and gotten their teacher's licenses, they moved to the most northwestern corner of the state and took up residence in Hammond. They became rather cultured urban dwellers, yet never stopped living by their rural values. They searched for a Protestant church, as that was what they had known in their youth, and finally chose the First Methodist Church. I like to think that I was Methodist before I was born. Seven months before my eleventh birthday, my brother was born. Named after my grandfathers, Merrill James was an instant success. He was a Methodist before he was born, too.

The church was a central part of our lives. Our family was in attendance every Sunday morning for worship and Sunday School, which were in separate hours. Though I could not have articulated it then, discussions around the dinner table of the sermon and the life of the church, were important food for a growing spirit. Sometimes there would be Sunday evening programs with a potluck. There were Sunday or midweek gatherings for committees, study groups, women's circles, or youth activities. My parents did it all. They were pillars of the worshiping

community; my brother and I followed along. Merrill in a white surplice looking truly angelic, performed as an acolyte lighting the altar candles. I sang in the choir and held office in the Methodist Youth Fellowship. If there was a wedding or a funeral in the congregation we all attended. We were a part of the community and we participated in all its functions. At home, we said grace for every meal. We had several translations of the Bible at hand for reading and study. I was taught to pray at bedtime. This was how we lived. There were times when I detested this life, especially as a teenager. Even though I had an example to set for my much younger brother.

I shall be eternally grateful to my family for the legacy of discipleship and discipline, for the introduction to the Bible and its stories which permeate our literature and culture, and for the gift of music which penetrated my soul through hymns, organ, and choir. Music filled my soul so deeply that years later many of God's whisperings to me in waiting worship were in the form of music. A song for every occasion. This was prepared soil in which the Word would eventually take root and become a personal life with the Divine.

Teacher

Kenwood, my elementary school, was a World War II pre-fabricated building with white clapboard sides and green trim. It was in the gym that I had an experience of understanding that set my life on the course of becoming an educator. The kindergarten teacher had arranged a special event. We first graders were to have a kindergartner partner and we were to help the younger students feel at home during their first visit to that huge space. We grown-up first graders were to sit with our partners, walk with them to the right spot at the right time and assist them in accomplishing their assigned tasks. As you can imagine, I took this job very seriously. And as we moved through that exercise, I was simply overwhelmed with a sense of usefulness. I can remember the sweep of polished wood floor, the sunbeams flooding in through the windows high on the walls, and the sense of protectiveness I felt for my partner from the kindergarten. I could remember how intimidating my first experience of that vast space had felt. If the power to create a good and safe experience was in my desire for it to be so, then that little kindergartner had one. Forever after that when someone asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I answered, "I want to be a teacher." At some deep-seated level there was a certainty that I was supposed to teach. As I grew up, it persisted. Surely it was a call.

So I became a teacher. I finished my Bachelor's Degree in Education at Indiana University. In June of 1963, I graduated and married Roy Carlson whom I had met at the Wesley Foundation, home of the Methodist Student Movement. A year later our son, Otter, was born. When my son was three years old, I accepted a teaching position in Chesterton, Indiana. This career extended for thirty years and included getting a Masters Degree. Though I never changed school corporations, I changed grades, from second grade at the beginning to fourth grade near the end. My life in teaching was filled with numerous adventures, some sorrows, and many joys.

Always there lived within me the conviction that the work I was doing in public education was God's work. It was my fondest hope that the children in my classroom would know Divine love even if we needed to maintain separation of church and state by not speaking of it openly. I wanted the message of peace on earth and the brotherhood of all people to be acted out on the stage between the desks. Many of my students were regular church goers, as was I. Yet heart-

wrenching hurts happened in the classroom and on the playground every day. It was appalling the way our lives revolved around owning expensive toys, clothes, or shoes and having the most elite of friends.

My very best intentions went into designing experiences for my children that would touch their hearts with truth and allow them to blossom, not just flit across their minds and be forgotten. One of my models was Sylvia Ashton-Warner who taught Maori children in New Zealand and wrote the book *_Teacher_*, about her experiences and successes. She discovered she could teach them just about anything as long as she started with what they already knew and related the lessons to the culture in which they lived rather than trying to mold them into proper English children. She was respectful of them in every way and they loved her for it. Those children were successful learners. They blossomed and learned to read and write in English as well. I wanted to be just like Sylvia Ashton-Warner.

I got a reality check at a concert recently. One of my students from years ago was attending with his mother who had been one of our best teacher aides. We were greeting each other, becoming reacquainted when he blurted out, "I'll never forget how you put grammar exercises on the chalkboard every morning. How I hated that grammar!" I stood there without clue about how to respond. His mother rescued the situation by observing dryly that it must have worked since he was doing so well in college. As always, it is the one called teacher who learns the greatest lesson. In this case it was not to presume that you know what it is that they are learning from you.

During most of the years that I was teaching in the public school, I was also working in religious education. The Methodist Church at that time sponsored a program of training for Sunday School teachers that included experiences with children under the guidance of a master teacher. I enrolled as a student at several of these "lab schools" where I expanded my knowledge of how to work with children of ages different from the ones I was teaching in the public school including nursery, kindergarten, and upper elementary children through the sixth grade. We did some beautiful work. Children blossomed. Eventually I attempted to recreate the lab school experience for several Illinois Yearly Meeting Friends right here on these grounds during our annual session. We had illuminating experiences together and several of the Friends who were in that group are still actively working with children.

Ah, but how did the inner life of the teacher prosper? Duneland Friends welcomed me to their meeting to me in December of 1979. It was not long until I was involved Quaker First Day School, studying Friends curriculum, and teaching lessons based on Quaker writings. Through the use of these materials I developed an awareness that I was planning the lessons for First Day the way that I planned lessons for the other classroom in my life. Carefully, I would determine what I wanted my students to experience and choose the material for instruction. Often it was a Bible story or one about a Quaker. I would figure out an attractive way to present it. I would craft finely tuned questions designed to elicit a response that would confirm what I thought was the point of the story. There would always be some way for the students to respond: art, crafts, music, drama, games, writing, or on special occasions cooking. Materials were gathered and made ready. The space was prepared ahead of time. There would be a snappy opening and a reflective closing. The emphasis was on transmitting knowledge about our heritage and spiritual

journeys as Friends or about the scriptures. At the end of all that planning and preparation, the children still had to buy into the program I had planned or that we had planned together. They needed to cooperate for the whole session to proceed smoothly and without conflict. As the teacher I needed to be in control and found myself sometimes trying to persuade the children to cooperate. I had a sense that they had not comprehended anything about my own spiritual journey or about the inner commitment of the Friends we studied. They seemed to see no relevance in the Bible stories. I fervently wanted our Quaker practice to be a way of life, not something you "did" on First Day. It was as though the First Day experience of the community at worship and lessons was completely removed from the rest of life. I grieved.

My work in the First Day School was encouraged by Friends. Yet deep inside, I felt that I was not being able to communicate my inner spiritual experience. Lessons built around a design for cognitive learning were inadequate for transmitting the joy of experiencing the Presence. Moreover, the children seemed unable, or perhaps unwilling, to communicate anything about their own spiritual lives. The writings of Henri J. M. Nouwen in his book, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, crept back into my thoughts. Reading the section of the book, "The Second Movement: From Hostility to Hospitality," I pondered the relationship between teaching and being hospitable. Nouwen defines his terms. "Hospitality, therefore, means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place" (p. 51).

When speaking of the relationship between teachers and students, Nouwen reiterates that the teacher is called upon to create a space, free of fear, where student and teacher can have a creative exchange of ideas, and where the students can grow and develop. He encourages the teacher to help students see that their own life experiences, their own insights, their own convictions are worthy. As he speaks of religious education he suggests that we be careful of imposing a doctrine or pre-coded idea and instead concentrate on offering a place where students can reveal their great human potential to love, give, and create, and where they can receive the affirmation that gives them the courage to continue their spiritual search without fear. As I read the words that expressed these ideas, I pictured a student and a teacher together in a space lit with golden light. They were comfortable with each other. The teacher was encouraging, even relentless, convicted, but not overwhelming. The student was smiling, and alive within, changing, growing, becoming confident in the experience of the Divine. I was filled with this image for years to come and somehow thought that Nouwen had described it. Later, when I reread to find the source of the image in his words, I discovered that it was mine, inspired by his words.

Telling Our Stories

I began to listen closely to my friend Mary Snyder from Eau Claire/Menominee Monthly Meeting whom I met while working with the Friends General Conference Religious Education Committee. Mary is the author of two FGC publications, *Jesus: Who Was He?* and *Opening Doors to Quaker Religious Education*. After having read the work of Sofia Cavalletti, a student of Maria Montessori, Mary began to collect little play figures with which to tell Quaker and the central New Testament stories. The children would actually play the story as it was told, using

their whole bodies to hear it. Eventually she actually designed, made, and marketed her own figures from wood for this purpose. There was a structural design for these lessons, just as there had been in the ones I had prepared, and, yes, the children needed to cooperate. The difference was that the teacher and the student were experiencing the story together, each entering its mystique at his or her own level, each opening to the message as he or she was able in that moment. The structure allowed a generous time for the children to do the work of responding to the story. Instead of having the teacher lay out the same art supplies for everyone, each child had the opportunity to choose the medium that would give expression to the spiritual experience bubbling within. A variety of supplies were available every week, providing a familiar territory in which to explore new dimensions of self. Everyone made an individual response rather than doing a project as a group using materials available only for that project. The story was not new every week. Sometimes the same story would be played over and over until everyone had enjoyed an ample opportunity to explore its nuances. Mary was not trapped in competition with today's media which provides a new image every few seconds in order to retain the attention of the audience. She understood that boredom results from tiring of input not from expressing an inner labor. Her openings were less snappy and more welcoming. The reflective closings bracketed a safe space and time in which children might explore their spiritual lives and in which the teacher might explore his or hers.

Another student of Maria Montessori and Sofia Cavalletti, Jerome W. Berryman, has written two books about this way of telling the traditional and sacred stories: *Godly Play: A Way of Religious Education* and *Teaching Godly Play: The Sunday Morning Handbook*. Though Berryman is an Episcopal priest, his depiction of the story telling process cuts right to the heart of what I think is Quaker practice in religious education.

"A storyteller who uses concrete materials in telling the story does not need to memorize the lesson. It is the moving of the pieces of the lesson that is important. This allows the story to tell itself, and the words to follow. The attitude and language that the storyteller uses to tell the story is individual, and needs to come from the storyteller's own relationship with the material. This human and spoken quality in the communication keeps the existential context present even in the silences. . . . If the heart of the metaphor in the sacred story, parable, of liturgical act has been found and embodied by the material, then it will be something that is open to be worked with by all ages and stages of faith development. Everyone can relate to universal themes because they are so fundamental. . . . When a good material is combined with an elemental form of language in the spoken part of the presentation all the people sitting around the circle, from the oldest adult to the youngest child, can become involved in the lesson. Most important, this means that the storyteller can be authentically involved in showing the children how to use this powerful language despite developmental differences between them" (p. 36).

The first time that I actually tried to create this safe space in which teachers and students could explore their spiritual lives together was right here on these grounds with the children attending the yearly meeting annual session. There we were under our tent, Berryman's details in my head and Mary Snyder's figures in our hands. We played the story. No one had to be asked to cooperate. The figures moved, the words came. We told the story. The children moved off to choose their expressive work for the day. They left each other to concentrate. It was quiet, not silent, but quiet. Some children spoke with the teachers as they worked. Time expanded and,

glory be, we felt the Presence. My heart enlarged with the sense of freedom and peace. We were each doing our own inner work, not work designed by someone else. Each of us was learning. The Inward Teacher had come to us all. We were smiling and happy, engrossed and contented. Those three hours were a time of wonder I shall never forget. In the afterword of *Opening Doors to Quaker Religious Education*, Mary Snyder writes, "In this book, we offer many ways to invite people of all ages to the Inner Teacher. We acknowledge that the effort to hear new meaning in old stories, biblical and Quaker, is life long—and many times aided by the presence of children. In talking about our experiences with Faith and Practice and with the Bible, we are not looking for final answers, but opening ourselves to the Light" (p. 131). The children and teachers under the tent that day were indeed opening themselves to the Light.

Marty Grundy in the introduction to *George Fox and the Valiant Sixty*, by Elfrida Vipont, remarks on the importance of telling our stories: "It is vitally important that we remember our stories. They inform who we are. They furnish our imagination with scenarios that offer an alternative to those provided by the insistently intrusive dominant culture. They provide examples of how to meet adversity, how to love faithfully, where to find Truth. They offer a framework in which we can place our own unfolding experiences of the divine and of difficulties in our faith communities. They can provide us with a common language and set of images. The theological interpretations can continue to change to meet the specific needs of individual Quakers and of the Religious Society of Friends at this time and in the future" (p. vii.).

I think that she was referring primarily to the stories of the early Friends, but I find that this principle applies to the stories we tell about the lives of Friends who came later or to stories from the Bible. In the religious education setting, it applies to each of us as we share how the Truth is prospering within us. It even applies to the function of the Plummer Lecture.

The Living Water

In my elementary school years, it was my privilege to spend a couple of weeks of each summer with my grandparents "in the country." In order not to show favoritism I would spend some days with my grandmother Malone in tiny Buffalo, Indiana, and some days with my grandparents Davidson on their farm in Pulaski County. I loved my grandmother Davidson, not least because she allowed me to walk "back to the creek" alone. In those walks was an experience of God that remains vivid in my memory and a part of my spiritual life to this day.

The farmhouse stood in the junction of two mile marker roads. The gravel road to the creek ran north along the side of the orchard and barn. I would leave the barnyard by the big gate, carefully closing it and set my feet upon the dusty road. I am sure that I walked this walk in most seasons of the year. My parents and I, and later my little brother, visited my grandparents about once a month, year round. But it is the walks I made during the extended summer visits that I refer to here. I can feel the uneven gravel under my feet as I sought for a flat path in which to walk, tires of trucks, farm machinery, and cars having scooped out ruts in the gravel, pushing the big pieces to the center and side. I can still see the little puffs of dust that tailed my footsteps. Even if the day was mild, there was no shade for about a third of a mile, and the sun beat down upon my head and shoulders as I walked. A rolling hill prevented my seeing the remnants of the woods near the creek until I had come up over the top. What a relief it was to see the green through the

heat shimmering above the road and the cornfields. Soon, my body would be in the cool shade of the trees.

I never failed to stop in that patch of woods. In among the trees and underbrush was an old milk house. The roof, door, and window were gone. What was left were four snug walls of stones covered with moss. I could walk in through the door opening and feel the ancientness of the stones and how they held the cool of the shade under the trees. Gratefully, I would sink down against their grayness and let them cool me. And I began to learn of silence there. The sounds of the summer woods surrounded the little house: the rustle of squirrels in last year's leaves, the buzz and whine of insects, the crash of a falling branch, the song of flitting birds, the caw of crows, the chirp of crickets and whirl of grasshoppers. I noticed how my listening changed to hearing and finally to opening. Often I felt the sweet calm that I now associate with rest in God. "The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms" (Deut. 33:27 NIV). So it was with this quieted mind that I continued on to the water.

Returning to the road, I would travel the few remaining yards to the bridge over the creek. Now I had completed half a mile of walking. My body stills knows at some cellular level, just how far half a mile is. Upon arrival at the bridge I scrutinized the running water through the gaps between the planks of the bridge floor. Then I would examine the banks through the railings, upstream and downstream, wondering if other people or animals might have also come to creek. Finally I was ready to scramble down the bank to the edge of the water. The bank was steep even though I carefully chose the place with the most gentle grade. Close to the stream's edge, I hunted out a clean grassy place to remove and stash my shoes and socks.

Eventually, I put my toes in the water. The shock of cold traveled up my spine producing a little gasp. The goal of my walk had been achieved; I was wading in the water. It was clear and flowed along smoothly here by the bridge. The stream bed was sometimes covered in pebbles and sometimes rippled sand. I remember being fascinated by the pattern of the water ripples in the sand and amazed at how hard it was to walk barefoot on the pebbles. Hopping from sandy place to sandy place, leaving my footprints in the ripples, I made my way upstream a bit out of the shade of the larger trees, coming to a bend where the water was more shallow, the flow less powerful, where water striders played on the surface. Here too, were tiny, minnow-like fish schooling, darting silver, swirling close and away.

Turning downstream I hop-walked back to the bridge and under it. Underneath it was dark and shady. There were a few rocks so that the water bubbled, a soothing endless music. A hoot or two tested the echo of my voice, creating a big hollow sound that silenced the birds and insects for a moment.

Wading across and out from under the bridge, I squirmed around on a large rock until I found a faintly comfortable place to sit and began to watch the water erase my footprints and create those ripple patterns in the sand again. My attention shifted gently to the pattern of dappled sunlight on the running water and more deeply on the ripples. A sense of peace and eternity settled over me. Again the sweet calm transported me and again I rested in God.

Of course, I did not have those words for it at the time. Yet, even though I was a child, I recognized this experience as wonderful and hugged it to my heart with joy. When I discovered that it was repeatable, my heart leapt. Much later in life I associated this experience with what I understood about the living water.

You remember the story from John 4:4-42 (NIV). Jesus is on his way from Judea to Galilee. He is passing through Samaria and comes near the plot of ground that Jacob had given his son Joseph. He is tired. He sinks down in exhaustion by Jacob's well to wait while his disciples go into town after food. A Samaritan woman bearing her water jar comes to the well to draw water. Jesus speaks to her. This is unheard of. In their laws, Jews consider Samaritans beneath them. They neither look upon them, come near them, nor speak to them. In addition, it was a woman alone to whom Jesus spoke. This was another breach of the social custom. Not only does he speak to her, he asks her for a drink. She is shocked and rightly so. She asks him, "How can you ask me for a drink?"

He answers her by saying, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

The woman looks around and observes that Jesus has nothing with which to draw water and she knows just how deep the well is. She asks him just where he is going to get this living water and does he think he is greater than Jacob who gave the well. He answers this question, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

There is more to the story. Jesus crosses all the boundaries between this woman and himself. In spite of her skepticism and heritage, he includes her in his vision. He tells her, "Yet a time is coming and is now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." Then he tells her that he is the Messiah. "I who speak to you am he," he says.

This exchange transforms both Jesus and the woman. The message imbues them with fresh energy. The Disciples come back with food and urge the Rabbi to eat. He is no longer hungry or exhausted. He tells them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about. My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work." The woman hurries off to spread the word among the villagers that a prophet had come. They are so moved by her testimony that they invite him to stay for two days. "And because of his words many more became believers."

I think my experience of rest in God as I waded in the creek and the woman's experience of living water at the well are kin. What I understand from my experience is that the Divine is present always. I just need to be open to it, to move into it, to invite it. As I trudge along the road in the hot sun, as the woman bears her jar to the well, we are both preparing ourselves for the cool earthly water. It will quench our thirst, sooth our fevered brows and fill our bodies with peace. Then the teaching is given at just the right moment. The living water is like this. If we are able to receive it, then we can participate in the eternal spirit of God. We will understand that all

other things are secondary, the presence of God is first. Of course we will need that earthly water again. But the spiritual water comes first. Without it, we are ordinary. With it, we are part of something eternal. We can understand; we can take it into our lives if only imperfectly. It is such good news!

Some years ago, in order to consider the quality of worship in our meeting, Duneland Friends studied together William Taber's Pendle Hill Pamphlet 306, *Four Doors to Meeting for Worship*, 1992. In the introduction, Bill explains that the key to understanding Quaker worship at its best is to remember that the culmination and focus of Christian worship has almost always been the act of communion. Upon entering into that experience of communion, we realize that we did not create it with our worship; what we did was to enter a reality which has always been there from the beginning of time, waiting for us to join it. "It is always here within us and beside us, available to us as an invisible stream into which we can step at any time. The heart of worship is communion with this invisible but eternal stream of reality in which is the living and eternal Christ. Worship, then, is something which can be entered at any time of day or night when we are ready to step into that stream, either through the grace of God or through our own great desire . . ." (p. 3-4).

My eyes were riveted to the page, my breathing changed. I was transported. So this was what I had experienced as a child! My half-mile walk was my expression of desire to enter not only the stream of cold water and round pebbles, but the eternal stream of reality in which is the living and eternal Christ. Ah hah! And this was worship! Well I never! The best part was that I knew how to do this. I knew how to step into that stream physically, yes. But also with my spirit, for I had done it time and again on those long ago summer days. Just as my body knew how that water would cleanse and cool me, so my spirit knew at some cosmic level that the eternal stream was always there just waiting for me to step in. I had felt the embrace of the earthly stream and the embrace of the eternal stream as I rested there by the creek.

Later in his discourse, Bill describes the "gathered" meeting: "It is as if we have stepped into a living stream full of renewing, healing energy, a stream which reaches back and forward across time so that we are in some mysterious touch with all of those who ever have and whoever will come into the transforming Presence of the Living God and the eternal Christ" (p.17-18).

Love and Peace

The years of my marriage to Roy were tumultuous to say the least. He owned a spirit breaking free. He was a musician, a dancer, an artist, a poet. He was a visionary and a prophet. He was not a breadwinner nor a contributor to house beautiful. And he was able to love his fellow humans unconditionally. He loved me with all my eccentricities and faults. His love was in no way contingent on my being a certain way. When he just could not understand me, he would cock his head and with a twinkle in his eye say, "You are an amazing woman, Marlou." With (f)Friends and prisoners, and especially with children, he looked into their souls and spoke to the Divine in them. Sometimes he was badly treated, or derided, yet his capability for loving others was not diminished. His yearning for Friends to experience the Spirit and let it flow through them endured. From him I discovered that it takes profound self esteem to accept unconditional love. The admonition to love one's neighbor as oneself took on new meaning and demanded inner

work. I was impelled to recognize my worthiness in order to accept and treasure the love of another human being, or, for that matter the unconditional love of God himself. Through my experience of Roy's love, I caught a fleeting glimpse of how my love of self might enlarge my love of God which in turn would foster my ability to love others. From I John 4: 11-12 comes the observation, "Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives and his love is made complete in us."

Spiritual Friendship

One of the most meaningful parts of my spiritual journey has been to participate in a spiritual friendship with Friend Roxy Jacobs. When Roxy and I first started to meet as spiritual friends, a few years ago, it was because we both had need to articulate our experience of God. We were each longing for more spiritual depth in our daily practices, our prayers, and in meeting for worship. We were having some difficulty discerning whether the messages we seemed nudged to give from the silence were really for others or whether they were of the "return to center" variety. The language in which they were phrased seemed too Christo-centric, perhaps offensive to less Christian members of the meeting and to those who were refugees from their religious pasts. And we were also experiencing some difficulty with how to listen to the messages from others, how to be discerning listeners. We were each struggling with promptings to act in the role of teacher, nurturer, or elder. So we made a tentative beginning. We had been friends for a number of years, but this seemed like plunging into very deep water. We wondered how we could suffer our trials and failings to be revealed. We wondered if we would be spiritually aware enough to recognize God's presence. We wondered if we could find the words with which to communicate.

The beginning was a commitment to meet each week for six weeks to discuss something we had read that was true to our experience and to allow God to lead us from there onward. *Encounter with Silence* by John Punshon, *Essays on a Quaker Vision of Gospel Order* by Lloyd Lee Wilson, *Reaching Out* by Henri Nouwen were on our early reading list. Sometimes we would examine a Bible story or teaching arising from our experience as First Day school teachers or from our daily scripture reading. As the first six weeks period came and went, we began to gain more confidence and to speak about our reading less (though it remains enormously important food for us) and more about our experience of God in the minutia of our lives. Sometimes we found (and find) reflections of our experience in the reading that is most illuminating, helping us understand what it is that God might be doing with us.

Now I am frequently conscious of the third presence when Roxy and I meet in this spiritual practice; God meets us there. The spiritual work is accomplished in a way that is continually amazing.

Roxy and I bring the most perplexing and nettlesome of our life's questions to the spiritual friendship time. We discover that God gives us the words with which to tell the Truth. We are able to examine events in our lives for the lessons that we need to learn. We practice our skills of discernment. Each of us has old self-esteem wounds that need to be healed. Part of what we learn is about our distinct gifts. Glimpses are given of how they are being used in the current situation. We have discovered that we are able to hear things from each other we could take in nowhere else. We are given the strength to support ourselves and each other through the trials. Courage is

gathered for the next bit of living. Comfort is shared for the heartbreak each of us experiences. Prayers are offered and repeated and repeated.

How different this is from other ways of dealing with problems. When we bring our lives to God through each other, rather than to a social/psychological counselor, the focus is not on "I", but on God. The emphasis is not on fixing an aspect of our lives or personalities, but on what God wants for us. The point is not that we need to improve, or grow, or be healed, but that we are asked to be open to God's work however we are now. What a change of heart this is for us. What a wonderful revelation. Turning always to God. Where is God in this? How is God at work in this incident? What is God trying to teach you? What is the Truth? Every week we turn again and again to God.

Our spiritual friendship practice has become as regular as meeting for worship. We are religiously setting this time aside and preparing ourselves in a way that makes it a Sabbath time. We find all of our life enriched, our worship more centered, our prayers more constant. We are in awe. We are thankful for the gift of spiritual friendship and are profoundly changed by it.

Living Reverently

In 1998 I was gifted with the opportunity to enroll in the School of the Spirit, a two year program of study in spiritual nurture. The founding teachers had names you may recognize from their writings: Sandra Cronk, Kathryn Damiano, and Fran Taber. The course included heavy reading, writing of research and reflective papers, field trips to old meeting houses, small group work in spiritual direction, evaluation by my support committee, and the most gathered worship I have ever experienced. My inner life changed forever. Reflecting, I pondered living reverently.

It has been more than four years since I retired from public education. It was an early retirement, taken with much gratitude for many fulfilling years of teaching in the elementary school, and with the deliberate intention of having more time for the volunteer work in religious education that I was already doing among Friends. Without much introspection, I was serving on the Religious Education committees of my monthly meeting, yearly meeting, and Friends General Conference. Through the FGC RE committee, I became involved in initiating the Traveling Ministries Program. As a retiree, I hoped to do all this work more thoroughly and perhaps even add a dimension or two. I was expecting time to open before me like an expanse of blue prairie sky. It didn't. I was expecting tasks to be like play because I was so eagerly anticipating them. They weren't. I believe I have learned something valuable about the rhythm of activity and reflection in my life and how work needs to be centered.

Among the first lessons presented in my new life was the contrast between work required by employment and work undertaken by choice. In the former, decisions are made according to convention or by someone else. An individual approach may be taken toward how certain tasks are accomplished and the results may take on a distinctive flair. Still, the individual has not chosen that task nor discerned whether it is fitting. Work undertaken by choice needs a different quality of discernment and careful centering in God. As the days went by, I noticed that I was experiencing my Quaker volunteer work, much the way I had experienced the unchosen tasks of my public school work. Somehow the work was there without my having discerned whether I

was called to it and without my having held it up in prayer. I still yearned for the time to pursue interests, engage in favorite pastimes, and heed artistic whims. As I worked, God wasn't present in my heart to the extent that I had anticipated. I was surprised. I had expected that when the pressure of the secular schedule was removed there would be a great sense of relief and joy, and the presence of God would automatically flood in to infuse my work.

A longing for joy in the presence of God very soon led to establishing a spiritual practice as the anchor of each day. Every morning came to include a time of reading both inspirational pieces and scripture followed by prayer and worship. The blessing was that now there was time unscheduled by the secular world in which to enjoy this practice. It was something of a shock to discover that all sorts of things needed discernment: which tasks to continue, which to lay down, which to do now, which to do later, and which new tasks to consider. It was not just the "important" tasks of clerking the First Day School committee meeting, or writing my piece for the book for Quaker parents that needed the discernment and prayer. It was everything. Dusting, dishwashing, and weeding all needed discernment and prayer. All the mundane things of life needed to be held in prayer if I wanted to experience the Presence of God in all those things. If I wanted to experience the joy of God's presence during the committee meeting, I needed to invite God's presence while I packed the suitcase. If I wanted God's presence during the time set aside for writing, I needed to invite it while I dusted the desk and sharpened the pencils.

The next lesson that became apparent was about the number of activities which could be sustained in the reverent life. As I began to consistently hold each undertaking in prayer, I noticed that when it was set aside for the day or completed, I would sink into quiet and reflection, giving thanks. Sometimes, the number of minutes needed for this period of reflection was large. I noticed that God spoke in these quiet times and that I wanted to listen attentively. These became times of savoring the enjoyment of work or of satisfaction in a job well done. A rhythm of reading, prayer and worship followed by work, then reflection and thanksgiving blossomed in my daily life. It seemed that if one allowed this rhythm to flow, enjoyment and awareness of God's presence increased. The light in the shiny glass, the warmth and softness of the dry towel, the beauty of the polished surface, the fragrance of a plant, the regular angles of a stack of stamped envelopes brought that deep inner joy recognized more completely, God's blessed presence. During these quiet times my attention would eventually be called to the question of what should come next. With prayer, I would be able to discern the next step or task. More and more the work became God's. More and more I noticed that I was too busy. There were simply too many tasks to give time to this naturally developing rhythm. If I did all the tasks on the list, I wouldn't be able to yield to the rhythm. The rhythm was God given. I longed to comply.

How was it that I had taken on all these many tasks? Pondering, I saw that I had considered myself unworthy unless I was in service to others. If I was not doing good works, I was nobody. For years I had been committing the great sin of not believing that I was a worthy soul, a true child of God, by just being. When I saw a need, I plunged right in to fill it, correct it, save it, or do it "right." The question, "Is this my task?" had not been examined. Without thinking, I had planned each day with one task after another. I had joined the hectic society of frantic over-doers. Even in "retirement" I was overwhelmed and uncentered.

Over the years I have delighted in sharing responsibilities with others whose developing gifts I was encouraging. The discernment and calling forth of the gifts of others are peculiar Quaker skills that I treasure and gratefully learned more about through the experience of School of the Spirit. Yet I perceive that upholding another is also a kind of work. Being a presence while another is growing in the Spirit requires a level of energy that I have come to appreciate anew. In some cases sharing the responsibility is harder and requires more thought and prayer than doing the particular task oneself. Nurturing another is work, inspired by God, demanding prayer, centeredness and time for reflection and thanksgiving. The lesson seems to be that in discerning whether to take on certain work, thought needs to be given to the care of others. One does not do Quaker volunteer work in a vacuum. A considerable amount of the work is done in committee meetings or in pairs. Carrying out the will of God requires loving attention to the others involved in that work. Everyone needs to be encouraged to listen to the "still small voice." Another part of this lesson is that the aspect of nurturing others increases the magnitude of spiritual energy in the work. The amount of attention needed for any given task, then, is increased, however lovingly, by the need to be a nurturing part of the community. Again I felt the longing to yield to the rhythm. I longed to be always centered in God, to embody a deeper level of respect for other children of God and for God's work, to live in an attitude of reverence.

This longing leads to less work, more carefully chosen, with enough time left for centering every aspect and for worship, prayer, reflection, and thanksgiving. I ache for simpler tasks, done more reverently, for the glory of God. More listening and less work seems imperative. Gently laying aside some of my work seems right. The more work laid aside, the clearer is the call to do so. In *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today*, Joan Chittister describes treating everything as though "they were the vessels of the altar." To hold life in loving hands is a call that compels contemplation. Recently I set my word processor to printing in tiny, pretty letters on a scrap of bright yellow card stock, the prayer of Niklaus von Flue, Swiss saint. It just fits in my hand.

My Lord and my God,
take all from me
that hinders me on my way to Thee.

My Lord and my God,
give all to me
that furthers me on my way to Thee.

My Lord and my God,
take me from me
and give me wholly to Thee.

*Mein Herr und mein Gott,
nimm alles von mir,
was mich hindert zu dir.*

*Mein Herr und mein Gott,
gib alles mir,*

was mich fordert zu dir.

*Mein Herr und mein Gott,
nimm mich mir
und gib mich ganz zu eigen dir.*

As we close our time together, let us sing hymn 100 from *Worship in Song: A Friends Hymnal*. "Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God" has words based on Matthew 6:33, 7:7, and 4:4. The "Historical Notes" in the back of the hymnal tell us that the composer, Karen Lafferty attended Calvary Church in Costa Mesa, California, where she worked with the Maranatha Music ministry. Karen eventually felt the call to become a full-time music missionary. The words of this hymn embody a message from God to me that I need to hear over and over. It seems that I learn slowly of these matters and need lots of reminding. What more beautiful way to hear the message than in the music of this hymn. If I could always turn my heart toward seeking the Kingdom first, I know that my life would be deeply different. Perhaps you also will be invited by this music to seek the Kingdom first.

Seek ye first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness,
And all these things shall be added unto you.
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, allelu, alleluia!

Ask, and it shall be given unto you. Seek, and ye shall find.
Knock, and the door shall be opened unto you.
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, allelu, alleluia!

We shall not live by bread alone, but by every word,
That proceeds from the mouth of God.
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, allelu, alleluia!