

Knowing and Not Knowing

Margaret Katranides
The 2007 Jonathan Plummer Lecture
Presented at
Illinois Yearly Meeting
of the
Religious Society of Friends
McNabb, Illinois
July 29, 2007



Introduction of Margaret Katranides, by Beth Schobernd

Each year at Illinois Yearly Meeting, we invite speakers from outside IYM to come and share their wisdom as it relates to our theme. We have heard inspiring things this year from our speakers and have come to know them somewhat through their talks. But on First Day morning, we give ourselves a special treat. We look within our own community and ask one of our number to share his or her spiritual journey in the form of the Jonathan Plummer Lecture. We get to hear from people we know, or think we know, as they share their lives and tell us who they really are. To me, this has always been one of the highlights of Yearly Meeting. We get a chance to learn about, as Allie Walton referred to them in her 1976 Plummer Lecture, Quaker Saints and Other Ordinary People.

Today, it is my pleasure to introduce our 2007 Plummer Lecturer, Margaret Katranides. Margaret is a member of St. Louis Monthly Meeting. She has served as Clerk of Illinois Yearly Meeting, and is currently a member of Ministry and Advancement. When I asked Margaret what she wanted me to say by way of introduction, she gave me this very brief list of facts and said since

her talk was autobiographical the rest of her story would come out there. So I think I will stop here and let Margaret tell her story.

Margaret will speak out of the silence and we will return to silence when she has completed her talk.

Knowing and Not Knowing

It's good to be with you today. It's always good to be with you. Partly because as individuals you are precious to me, and partly because as a body the Yearly Meeting does so much for us. Here we learn to be better Quakers, we learn to love better, we learn to feel the Spirit of God moving among us, and we learn the joy of responding to it. We learn that in times of difficulty, Love will bear us up, and we learn how to be the face of Divine Love to each other.

I want to talk to you today about the ineffable. To describe the undescribable. I truly don't know what I'm supposed to be saying today, but I'll start with knowing and not knowing. We are born wanting to know. Watch a baby looking at the world, and you will see an intensity, a passion to know. Look inside yourself; when we are aware of not knowing, there's a tension, that is released when we come to know.

I started out life as Margaret Armour Woodhead, known to my family as Maggie. Now I'm labeled Margaret Katranides, the same but totally different from Maggie Woodhead. And sometimes, when I've wondered who I am, I've thought that if I ever needed a pen-name it should be Maggie Weeder, because when I'm weeding my yard I really know. Or seem to know. That's when I become one-pointed, and the doubts and the thinking disappear. There's something about that focused repetitive action that clears out the rubble from my mind as well as from the flowerbed. I love weeding. I've even been known to pull weeds out of other people's yards, though I try to restrain myself.

So when I say that I don't know what I'm supposed to be saying today, it has to do with that one-pointedness. I've spent a lot of time this year asking for guidance, but have not gotten to the space where doubting and thinking disappear.

I studied psychology to begin with because I wanted to find out what this knowing thing is—what happens in our brains when we come to know something. I was watching daily miracles as my children were growing; sometimes you could pinpoint the very moment when they went from not knowing something to knowing it. There was some kind of magic inherent in the nature of the living person. I wanted to respect and marvel at the mystery of it, but I also wanted to know *how* this magic trick is done. I remember being assigned an article titled "Tracing the Engram," written by one of the experts on learning and memory, and thinking, "This is where the answer is." I read that article, and then I re-read it, and what the author said was, "We don't know." There's a question here, and we don't have the answer to it. We know a tremendous amount about the structure, chemistry and functioning of the brain, but we don't know what it is to know — what it is that clicks, and you see it reflected in the face of your child, who *knows* that she knows.

Perhaps you've studied chemistry, and perhaps you've done that experiment with potassium permanganate where you measure the acidity of a solution by dropping, one drop at a time, a simple acid like HCl, into a tubeful of opaque, purple liquid. And suddenly, one drop more turns the whole tubeful to clear and colorless! Sometimes that's what knowing feels like to me. The opaque becomes suddenly clear. The doubting and the thinking are gone, and you just *see*. You know. You know that you know, and you know *when* you knew it. You can record which drop it was that made it all clear.

Hold that. Feel the clearness. Notice that the doubts and thinking disappear with the purple color. For a second, before your mind starts processing, asking questions and proposing answers, you know at your core, one-pointedly, that something magical and also perfectly natural has happened. It happened both inside the tube and inside you. In that instant, the essence of you and the essence of the solution were united. Of course, at that moment you could not have said all these words about it. You were the essence of simplicity, just knowing, not describing or explaining.

Sometimes we think that knowing means being able to explain. This is a dangerous myth; left unhindered, it can lead to theology. But knowing is an aspect of being that is a whole dimension away from explaining. Let me give you a couple of real-life examples.

My first husband died in a plane crash. Our children were nine and about-to-turn six. Some weeks later, I remember standing in our livingroom, thinking, "I'm a widow. I don't know how to be a widow." And suddenly I felt a certainty that I would be shown how, as the days went on. I didn't know where that certainty came from. It was a discrete piece of knowledge, unsupported by any framework of belief that I then had. It just was. I was 35 years old, had been a confirmed, rational agnostic for 15 years, and I had just been given a piece of knowledge that I fully trusted. I tried to figure it out, and the best I could come up with was Jung's "racial unconscious," that maybe through the generations humans had evolved a body of internal knowledge to be called on in times of need, though I wasn't convinced of the reality of that. That explanation was only a hypothesis, but the knowledge I had been given was real knowledge, not to be disputed. The knowing was independent of the explanation.

When Aris died, I had already decided to study psychology, so I went and signed up for graduate school. As I studied brain function I became aware of the fact that mental and physical activity were two sides of the same coin, and I organized my work around the processes by which mental functioning affects health — medical psychology. A very simple technique I learned early was progressive muscle relaxation; by teaching it to others I got to the point that I could very quickly let go of most of the tension in my body. So one day as I was flying back home after a professional conference, the plane hit a patch of very bumpy air over the Mississippi, and I realized that we were on the same airport approach my husband's plane had been on when it went down in a storm. My mind flashed quickly through fear, then anger that my children might be left with no parents at all, and then the realization that there was nothing at all I could do about it.

I chose to let go of the physical tension, which was the only thing I could control. And then I had an almost wordless thought that it was going to be all right. Not a prediction that the plane would land safely, but a confidence, a certainty that *no matter what happened*, it would be all right.

There's an old hymn that goes, "Leaning, leaning, safe and secure from all alarms/ Leaning, leaning, leaning on the everlasting arms." That song could have described my experience - except that I was an agnostic, and had no image of God, let alone of God's arms, or how God might use arms if they existed. And still I had that sense of safety, no matter what might happen. Not just a sense of safety, but a knowing, not to be argued with, and independent of any explanation, rational, scientific or theological. In both of these experiences, there was knowing - that crystal-clear moment when there was truth, incontrovertible truth, truth that did not need any reasoning or explanation to support it because it stood for itself. "You will be shown the way," and, "No matter what happens, it's going to be OK."

At the time of these knowings, as I have said, I was an agnostic. I had rejected my early religious training because it had no logical basis, and seemed mere superstition. As a child, I had believed religious propositions, but had no knowledge. (Early Quakers called this having "the shadow but not the substance.") In my undergraduate years, trained in mathematics and formal logic, I saw the intellectual dishonesty in believing things, or trying to believe things, that I didn't really know, so I rejected religious belief and speculation. I wanted my life choices to be on a firm foundation, not a shaky fabric of comforting stories.

So there I was, a widowed mother, with things that I knew at the core of my being, with no logic, no explanation, but as firmly true as anything I had ever known — perhaps more firmly because of the lack of supporting thought, not even a religious framework to compare them to and say, "Yes, this is consistent with my belief." I had no internal structure of thought that could have given rise to these knowings, no conceptions of a spiritual reality that could confirm or disconfirm. I just knew them, and I had a sense of having been *given* the knowledge, though I didn't know from where (and wasn't willing to fabricate any stories about it).

I have been speaking about knowing in definitive language, rather absolutist, as if I had it all down pat. There are some qualifications to consider, however. One is that my clearly knowing something at a particular point in time does not alter me totally and forever. The fact that I knew, and still know, that I will be shown how to proceed has not kept me from stewing about the future and what I should do. And the fact that I knew, and still know, that no matter what happens it's going to be OK has not kept me from being alarmed, worried and sometimes frantic about the world's twists and turns. I'm better than I used to be. Little by little I'm learning to trust more. But as our Quaker forebears used to say, convincement comes first; conversion may take a while.

The other qualification is that sometimes events can throw me into a tizzy where the only thing I know is that I don't know anything. I don't mean that in the enlightened-Buddhist sense of keeping a "don't know mind" so that one can be constantly open to learning. I mean it in the despairing sense of, "Here I am, 68 years old, been a Quaker for a quarter of a century, and I still don't know anything."

Interestingly, this happened about a month before I was asked to give this talk. Until then I had thought that I had really learned a lot, and if I were ever asked, all I would have to do is sit down and organize what I knew in some coherent form. But then some dear Friends (unintentionally, I now believe) threw me into total questioning: who am I, what am I here for, how am I supposed

to function, all became questions with no answer. I was in grief and confusion, and all I knew was that I must wait. Answers could not be hurried. So when I was asked if I would give this lecture, all I could say was, "I'm going to have to trust that the committee was rightly led, because all I can say for sure at this point is that it's OK to not know anything." And all year long as I struggled to wait, to listen, to hear, that has been the working title of my talk, "It's OK to Not Know Anything." It was a bit of an overstatement, of course; deep under the confusion I knew that God is there for me, that I will be shown the path (if I don't think too much and get in the way), that no matter what happens it's going to be OK. And I knew that Divine Love will be a part of whatever happens today, connecting us all, reflecting our connection, and I can lean on that.

You may be wondering how I got from being a confirmed agnostic to being a Quaker with confidence in, and a growing dependence on, the untouchable, undescribable, but very present Spirit of God. It was a series of steps, many of which seemed purely rational at the time — though hindsight may suggest that they were unseen and unsought leadings by that Spirit.

Aris and I had joined the Unitarian Fellowship in Carbondale because we wanted to adopt, and the homefinder at the Division of Children and Family Services told us it was more likely to occur if we belonged to a church. We saw ourselves as spiritual, though irreligious, in that we cared deeply about the quality of human life about kindness, justice, beauty and truth — but we had not seen the need for a spiritual community, and might not have found it if the homefinder were not so strongly urging it. We had had some contact with Unitarians, and we asked if they would do, and were told yes. So we attended the Unitarian service the next Sunday, found that we could honestly live with it, and the following Sunday asked if we could join, telling them frankly why we wanted to. They were welcoming. They were also very like us in their rational spirituality, and continued to be a supportive community for us as long as we lived there.

The Unitarians didn't meet over the summer, though, and we had friends in the little Friends Meeting who suggested we come and meditate with them. They didn't require us to answer any questions or listen to any theology. Come to think of it, some of them may have been agnostics, too believing in an abstract spirit of goodness and a moral imperative more than in a dynamic God of Life, Love and Power. But they meditated on Sunday mornings and then ate and had fun together. We thoroughly enjoyed our summer sojourns with them.

When I had finished my coursework and most of my dissertation, we moved to Durham, North Carolina, for my internship. There was a Friends Meeting there, and a Unitarian Fellowship; I tried them both, and felt more at home with the Friends. Partly, I think, that was because they were more welcoming. Partly it was because I had been an angry pacifist since about age 16, and an angry feminist for a decade, and the anger was wearing on me; I thought I might learn to be peaceful among Friends. And partly it was because I had read a little about meditation, and had been introduced to the radical (for me) concept that logic and rationality are not the only ways of knowing; I didn't want to cheat myself, so I hoped to explore this new dimension and find out what there was to it. I was still an agnostic as far as having any knowledge or faith in God was involved, but I had a mind to "come and see." I entered Quakerism with something of a "don't know mind," and that has been a great advantage for me; there were few religious myths that I needed to overcome as I opened myself to a new search for truth.

At this same time, daughter Daphne was attending the thriving Unitarian teen group, and son Peter was attending Mt. Level Missionary Baptist Church, which he later joined. I was impressed by the deep feeling for God experienced by his fellow worshipers, though they got to it through ecstatic singing and preaching, which were quite foreign to me. There also seemed to be a genuine transformation in them, visible in their love for each other and in their daily lives; we could observe the latter in our next-door neighbors, who were members of that church. If I had not been a skeptic with respect to the dogma, I could comfortably have made Peter's church my own. But I was still committed to intellectual integrity, and could not assent to any doctrine that I was not deeply convinced of.

To my delight, I learned that the Quakers held the same view — that we should not profess what we do not possess. They were quite comfortable letting me take my time in feeling out the Truth; they put no pressure on me as an attender, and later when I asked for membership, my clearness committee wanted to know only that I was an honest seeker, open to finding, and that I could accept the others in Durham Meeting and North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative) for what they were and what they had found. Of course they were curious to hear what I had found; I remember telling my clearness committee that in the silence I was becoming aware of "something deep inside" that I was not yet ready to call God, and that I had a sense that my son's church was touching the same thing, though they reached it through repetitive words, and the Quakers reached it without words, by discarding words.

At that time, I had read very, very little of the Quaker literature, and seeing early Friends' descriptions of that sense of groping and touching something unnamable was still in the future for me. Later on, I would read these descriptions with joy, because they referred to something I had known without looking for it. I knew that there was something there; it was not my imagination, any more than the piece of furniture you bang into in the dark is your imagination — you may not know what it is, but you can not doubt that it's real.

After two years in Durham, I got a job at the VA Medical Center and moved the family to St. Louis. Daphne went off to college, Peter found a new Missionary Baptist church, and I became a regular at St. Louis Meeting. It was several years later before I transferred my membership, though; I waited until I had stopped thinking, "We don't do it that way in Durham." Actually, the differences were pretty small, and I fitted in easily. I was what I called a "reverent agnostic;" I still didn't know what this spirit thing was, but I knew that I felt an awe and reverence for it, and that when I touched it in worship it changed me somehow. I was becoming more peaceful, and a tad less judgmental.

Another thing that helped me explore a little more was my clinical work. I was assigned to the medical/surgical section at the hospital, and my work was to help patients improve health behaviors, to do psychotherapy when issues were impeding physical healing, and to help them adjust to changing health status, including impending death. My training in graduate school had been to view extreme religiosity as psychopathology, and otherwise to ignore religious issues. I also felt some qualms in dealing with the topic in a government institution. But my patients taught me that religion is an important part of our psychology, often a personal strength, and rarely an impediment to mental health. They also taught me that I didn't need to share their belief system in order to be helpful. One elderly man, a few days before his death, told me that what

made him saddest was not being able to go to church and hear the singing; together we sang a couple of stanzas of "What a Friend we have in Jesus." It probably didn't help him as much as it did me. I realized that it didn't matter that I had not found Jesus to be a friend; he had, and it made sense to me because I had experienced friendliness in this darkness I was groping in.

Another patient, a young man dying of AIDS, was a Buddhist, and he was troubled that he didn't have the energy or concentration to keep up his practice. He said he kept turning back to it, but he couldn't keep it going. I had no idea at the time where the words came from, but I told him that the turning back is the most important part of the practice. I was not just trying to console him - I blurted out something in a moment of sudden clearness. As I look back now, it seems that God was using me; I never decided to say that - the words just came out. Later reflection confirmed for me that while consistency in our spiritual practice is good, it's the return to Spirit, whether moments, hours or days after the last contact, that is so very important. At the time, though, all I had was that clear knowing. Then I saw how it resounded in my patient, who became visibly peaceful; freed of that worry, he was able to follow his own spirit where it was going. From patients like these I learned how to listen better for the movement of the Divine, and I developed a clearer sense of how it feels to be touching God — which was all the more useful when I finally got to the point of being able to use that name.

So how did that name come into play? An artist in our Meeting wanted to follow the method for enhancing creativity that is laid out in *The Artist's Way*, and she invited a group of us to do it with her. The first discipline prescribed is to write three pages, first thing every morning. Don't think, just write; the idea is to skim off the surface stuff, so you'll be free to move into deeper creativity when you get to whatever your art medium is. I dutifully did this for a long time, many weeks, though I regretted that trees were being cut down to make the paper I scribbled my drivel on. After some time, I turned this writing habit into a journaling habit, daily writing my reactions to things that had happened, my hopes and fears for the day to come, even description of what was happening outside my window. Eventually this included my impressions of how these things came about and what might be the spiritual significance of them. But I wasn't ready to name any spiritual power, because I was afraid that a name I had used in another context (such as the Episcopal church of my youth) might drag me back into the conceptual framework that was attached to it in that context. So I used empty brackets whenever the sentence structure called for a noun. This went on for a good long time before I decided that I was sufficiently sure that I didn't know anything about God, so that I could use the name without insidiously adding unproven characteristics to it.

Meanwhile I had studied up a bit on Quaker literature, both on worship and on discernment and decision-making. And I sat in the meeting for worship for business and watched. I knew we were seeking God's guidance, and that if any big disagreements came up, we were to let God decide them. It was a curious exercise, since I had no clarity on what God is, other than a name I was beginning to be ready to use for something I bumped into when I got really deep inside myself. Everything I was reading, though, said the key is to listen deeply, without preconception. (Preconceptions are kind of like water-wings; you have to take them off if you want to go deep.) And I found that as I practiced going deep, during a difficult discussion in business, I encountered a current underneath the talk. And the more of us that were going deep, the more that current was drawing us into unity. The struggle would end as Friends recognized that a

decision had been found. I remember after one such meeting saying to another member, "I still don't know what God is, but I'm beginning to know what God does."

When I was called on to clerk my Meeting, I was very grateful for this learning. For one thing, I knew that I didn't have to make things happen in the business sessions — my job was to present the issues, clearly and orderly, and help the participants listen to God. It is God's work to bring us to unity. I kept an imaginary sign on the clerk's table; it read, "It is not I who is doing this." And when my term was over, I passed this imaginary sign on to the next clerk, and then I took my seat in the circle and tried to support the clerk by going deep.

One of the amazing things about meeting for worship for business is that we don't have to agree on who or what God is in order for it to work. We don't even have to be sure individually of what God is. All we have to do is go deep, be willing to be moved, and be patient. Relax, lean; whether it's current or wings or an old man with a beard, God will take us where we need to go.

§

So what is God? Or who? For me, it varies. Sometimes God is personal, sometimes a force, sometimes a movement or an activity or an ambience or an orderliness. God seems to come to me in the form I need at the time. Except for those stretches when I feel no Presence at all, when I feel bereft and desperate because God refuses to put in an appearance. It's very hard to talk about this without saying more than one intends to. For instance, if I say "God refuses," I am imputing all manner of things that I didn't mean to — personality, for one, withholding, maybe even callousness or cruelty. And anyway, how do I know that in those dry, "abandoned" times the cause is God's refusal to appear? Many mystics have said that we have these dark nights of the soul because God in his goodness knows that they will help us grow. All I can say is that I have never experienced God as that kind of manipulator. It seems more likely that when I am unable to experience God's presence, it is because I am not really open.

My worst dark night came a year or so after I left my job at the VA Medical Center. The VA was becoming less and less a place where I could do the work I'd felt called to. I was not feeling a new call, but I quit, thinking I would sit in silence and God would show me what to do next. I did after a few months begin tutoring, which I had long felt an urge to do, but it didn't feel like a full-time calling. My mood was a mix of bitterness because I felt squeezed out of the VA, and came to realize that only the patients had appreciated what I did there, and of frustration because God wasn't cooperating by providing me a new leading. Not surprisingly, at least in retrospect, the bitterness and frustration prevented me from getting into God's space, going deep in the Spirit, although it did allow me to go deep into depression. Medication helped lift me up some, but didn't bring God back into my life. I continued feeling sad, lifeless and abandoned, until one day I actually prayed.

My quiet times up till then had been stilling, waiting and listening, but no praying. This time I actually prayed, "God, I can't do this by myself. If I'm ever going to find my way, you're going to have to do it for me, because I can't." I felt no expectation that God would help, useless and worthless as I saw myself, but as soon as I prayed I felt a warmth around me, as if I had heard the

words, "Well, of course," spoken with a smile, as if God were saying, "What else did you expect?" Lovingly, acceptingly, willingly.

It was OK with God that I'm not as smart as I used to think I was. It was OK with God that I couldn't find my way out of a paper bag without help.

One more note about the dark night of the soul. I did not go through it alone. There was my husband who loved me when I couldn't love myself, and knew I could come through even though I felt totally lost. And there were individuals in Meeting, especially in my spiritual direction group, who listened without trying to fix me, and offered to love me on God's behalf, because I couldn't believe in God's love, but I could feel theirs. They helped immeasurably, and I offer their example to any of you who may find yourselves on this journey of accompaniment.

§

I have had the opportunity three times to participate in a workshop called "This I Affirm," led by David Shiner and Nancy Wallace. They guided us through a set of steps that led to each of us writing what we have found, for sure, in our seeking. Each time mine was slightly different, but always carefully limited to what I really knew, and expected I would always know. What I remember from one of them is that I wrote, "There is that..." and then I stopped, and had to go back into silence to see if there would be more. I think this half-sentence stems from the time when I would go deep and feel something, which I took to be Spirit, but could not identify further. And then my next line came, "There is that which loves me..." because I have never felt the Presence to be anything but loving. Even when God laughs at me it is done lovingly, and I have to laugh, too. And then, "There is that which teaches me, and guides me, and gives me the ability to change..." Did I add that God does these things slowly and gently, knowing that I'm not terribly flexible and might break - or fear breaking - if I am bent too far too quickly? I recently ran across one of these, and I offer it here because I have not yet been able to improve upon it:

There is that.

There is that which I have no better word for than God.

There is that which loves, which loves me and makes me love.

There is that which is love, beauty, energy, intelligence. It is seen in people but not only in people. Sometimes I see it in rocks, sunlight, leaves, shadows, squirrels and spiderwebs. Would they exist without it? I don't know.

There is that which is not in objects but in relationships. In the spaces between objects, and in objectless space, if there is such a place. It is the love, beauty, energy and intelligence of connecting.

God moves in us and moves us. God teaches us, and teaches us to

be teachable. God takes away fear. God takes us as we are, without blame or punishment, loves us, heals us, and calls us to courage and patience and harmony.

God joins us together, when we allow ourselves to be joined.

God shows us that we are already joined, even when we felt divided.

§

God loves me and makes me love. I had never doubted that I loved people. But while I wanted God and relied on God, it took me a while to love God, even after I knew God loved me. When I began to experience loving God, it wasn't reciprocation — I love you because you love me; it felt seamless. There was just love, it had no direction, it was a suffusion, a unity of love. (This is dangerous. It's what got James Nayler in trouble, I think, because he couldn't explain it so people would understand.) God and loving and my consciousness were all undifferentiated. Sometimes I experience this loving when I am trying to relate to someone that I don't totally admire or appreciate; in worship, in uniting with God, God's love for that person can come through me, and my resistance to loving the person is dissolved.

Sometimes, God comes through me, and my resistance is dissolved. This, I think, is what Robert Barclay was referring to in his famous report, "For, when I came into the silent assemblies of God's people, I felt a secret power among them, which touched my heart; and as I gave way unto it I found the evil weakening in me and the good raised up..."¹ Similarly, Isaac Penington wrote,

He that hath the least taste of faith, knows a measure of rest, finding the life working in him, and his soul led further and further into life by the working of the life, and the heavy yoke of his own laboring after life taken off from his shoulders.²

Can we claim this? Paul of Tarsus said, "Not I, but Christ in me." Can we look inside ourselves and see God's life and power changing us? I mentioned earlier that one of my motivations in affiliating with Quakers was a desire to be less angry, to be transformed into a more peaceful person. It is happening, but slowly, slowly. Part of me wants to let go and be totally changed. Part of me holds back. It will take years to pick apart that resistance, at the rate I'm going, and I may not have enough time. "Late have I loved thee," said Augustine of Hippo, and there's a matching wistfulness in me, because I have spent so much time resisting, holding onto my desire to be right, to avoid believing things that weren't so. Jelaluddin Rumi wrote,

What is the point of reaching the sea and being satisfied with a tiny jug of water? There are pearls in the sea, and from the sea heaps of ravishing, strange, and precious things can be won. And you are satisfied with just taking some water? You call yourself intelligent? ³

No, I'm not satisfied, but I'm still holding back, in spite of how little time I have left.

God is Life and Love and Power, a river flowing through us. We can resist the flow, or we can let it take us. How much do we dare let it flow? It may sweep away everything we cling to, if we let it. It may sweep us away from our mooring on the shore. We do not know, and can not choose, where it will take us at the moment we accept the power of the flow. It may take us into a swirling, suffusing, seething love, with no beginning and no end. It may take us on an errand to a dangerous part of the world — to a war zone in Asia or Africa, to prison, or to the Pentagon. (Or it may take us back to a sinkful of dirty dishes in our own meetinghouse.)

You also know the sensation of the current pulling at your feet. Quakers are people who have come to the River, but most of us do not yield to it. We love the River, and we come to its edge to feel it — to be soothed by it, to feel our hope renewed when we are discouraged, to absorb some nourishment from its rich water. But most of us do not let go, do not let ourselves be caught up in it.

I do not know why I don't just jump into the Sea, along with Rumi. Is it fear of loss, loss of what I leave behind, loss of self? Or is it because I'm really where God wants me to be, standing at last by the River that I took so long to reach? How do we know what to do? How do we know?

§

I have a yearning for my leadings to come in words, on scrolls, with angels and trumpets, so I couldn't doubt them. But they don't. The closest I've ever gotten to a leading in words was, "Go to Afghanistan." This came at a time when I had a strong concern for how the Taliban was treating women, and I longed to be able to do something about it. But I didn't know what I was supposed to do after I got there, and this was a problem for me, even though I knew that 17th century Quakers had picked up and made even more difficult and dangerous journeys, with no more explicit instructions than "go to Barbados," "go to Boston," "go see the Sultan." And I worried about whether it was a genuine leading, or just my righteous feminist indignation coming out. And besides, my passport had expired.

So I waited, feeling disobedient, and after a while I had passport photos taken. But I didn't do anything more and I felt very uncomfortable, so finally I sent for a passport renewal. And then I sat and said, "OK, God, what's next?" And I got nothing, no instructions, not even a repeat of "Go to Afghanistan." So I said, "OK, I have my passport, if you decide I should go somewhere, let me know." Remember the Friend who said, "Live up to the Light thou hast, and more Light will be granted thee"? The corollary is that if we don't live up to the Light, follow the leading, we're likely to be put back a grade. We'll have to listen and follow little leadings faithfully and learn to be worthy of the big leadings.

Another leading that took me a while, but finally did become clear, was about paying for war. In the 1960's, when I read about US planes dropping bombs and napalm and defoliants on Vietnam and Cambodia, I knew that I was guilty, too, because I had paid for those planes and what they dropped. But I didn't know what to do about it. I had met people who lived below the taxable income line, in order to avoid paying for war, but I wasn't there yet. I was also uncomfortable

with tax resistance, because it would put members of my family in distressing circumstances, which they had not felt led to endure. I temporized, putting notes in with my tax returns, writing on my checks "not to be used for war purposes," knowing these actions would have no effect. The sense kept growing in me that I was called to do something more, and finally, after I was retired and receiving a monthly retirement pension from the Federal government, it came to me that there was no way I could keep the government from getting my money, but that by refusing to *send* it to them, diverting the military portion of my taxes to peaceable purposes, I could force them to recognize that I was not giving it voluntarily.

And then came that sudden moment of clarity, of knowing. Early Friends wrote of feeling a weight, a burden, when they had a leading that they had not obeyed, and feeling a physical release from that weight when they had completed the required task. I have felt this release of tension since I decided to divert my taxes; in spite of the loose ends, I feel joy and lightness from having done what I can, with the clearness I have received.

§

I need to become better at feeling for nudgings, to learn to trust the Nudger, and to let go of the yearning for scrolls and angels. I need to practice Isaac Penington's "Be little," until it becomes a habit. I would like to quote at length Penington's further advice, and if it commends itself to your hearts as it does to mine, do take it with you:

There is that near you which will guide you; O! wait for it, and be sure ye keep to it; that being innocent and faithful, in following the Lord in the leadings of his power, his power may plead your cause in the hearts of all his tender people hereabouts; and they may see and acknowledge, that your meetings are of God, that ye are guided by him into that way of service in his holy fear, in which he himself is with you, and by the movings of his Holy Spirit in your hearts, hath engaged you. Be not hasty either in conceiving any thing in your minds, or in speaking it forth, or in any thing ye are to do; but feel him by his Spirit and life going along with you, and leading you into what he would have any one of you, or every one of you do. If ye be in the true feeling sense of what the Lord your God would have done, and join with what is of God, as it riseth in any, or against any thing that is not of God, as it is made manifest among you; ye are all in your places and proper services, obeying the blessed will and doing the blessed work of the Lord your God.⁴

Sources for Quotes:

¹ Britain Yearly Meeting, *Quaker Faith and Practice*, 1995.

² *The Works of Isaac Penington*, Vol. 1, p. 36. Quaker Heritage Press, Glenside PA, 1995.

³Jelaluddin Rumi

⁴ Steere, Douglas V. & Vining, Elizabeth Gray (Eds.). *Quaker Spirituality: Selected Writings*. p. 155.

Biography

Margaret Katranides grew up in small-town Massachusetts, and was a member of the Episcopal Church in her youth. Her first job after college was teaching mathematics in a girls' boarding school in Istanbul, run by the Congregational Church. Amerikan Kiz Lisesi was not responsible for her becoming agnostic.

She and her husband, Aristotle Katranides, had a daughter, Daphne, and adopted a son, Peter, before Aris died in a plane crash. She then studied at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, receiving a Ph.D. in Psychology, and after internship at Duke University Medical School, moved to St. Louis, Missouri to work at the Veterans Administration Medical Center. First a member of Durham Monthly Meeting (1981), she transferred her membership to St. Louis Monthly Meeting in 1987.

Margaret married Harry Desroches, also a VA psychologist, in 1987. With his three adult children, a son- and a daughter-in-law, and their combined seven grandchildren, they rejoice in an extraordinary diversity within the extended family, soon to become even more diverse.

Margaret has served as clerk of St. Louis Meeting and of Illinois Yearly Meeting, and currently is a member of the IYM Ministry and Advancement Committee. She enjoys helping children broaden their intellectual horizons, and helping adults and children find treasures in their spiritual search within the Religious Society of Friends.