

## **Joy like a fountain**

**Elizabeth Mertic**

**The 2008 Jonathan Plummer Lecture**

**Presented at Illinois Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends**

**McNabb, Illinois**

**June 22, 2008**



### **Introduction of Elizabeth Mertic, by Cathy Garra**

I first met Elizabeth Mertic and her young family - Ann, Tony and Helen - at my start at 57th Street Meeting in 1974.

I have experienced her good and steady presence ever since, and have seen how other Friends have benefited from it in 57th Street and Lake Forest Meetings, Illinois Yearly Meeting, and the wider Quaker world. Elizabeth's service has ranged from home-grown Swiss chard casseroles to bringing Friends together from around the world. She has a sharp ear for the accuracy of our minutes and a prodigious memory for the goings-on of Friends and their families.

One of the first rituals of Illinois Yearly Meeting I heard about was the Plummer Lecture, delivered to us each year by a Friend from Illinois Yearly Meeting. I look forward to hearing this morning from Elizabeth Mertic of Lake Forest Friends Meeting, on "Joy Like a Fountain."

## **Joy like a fountain**

Thank you, Friends, for giving me this opportunity. Especially I thank the folks who came together from the northern Chicago area meetings who persisted in the giving! As I gave myself over to the writing of this talk, I read the passage from 2nd Corinthians 5:18-19 several times. Our theme is about our relationship with God and with each other. If we know we are loved by God, we will love ourselves and all of our brothers and sisters. There have been some painful times in my life when I did not feel the arms of God around me. In recent years I've been able to feel the joy of experiencing the good in the people that I encounter through our mutual trust in God's love.

Many days I walk in my neighborhood and enjoy the flowers, trees, grasses, puddles, blue sky and my heart overflows. At the rise of meeting for worship I often feel joy upon seeing the smiling face of a child entering the room and spotting his daddy or mommy.

I look for joy in the every day acts of life. This is not to say that I don't get bogged down sometimes—I can always look for and find something to complain about or to criticize. But I am aware that I don't have to. My seven year old grandson is fascinated with toads, frogs and lizards. He can find them in crevices or invisible holes which surprises me every time. On a trip to Disney World in March he was delighted to spot the small, quick green lizards that are everywhere in the foliage. He would slowly sneak up to a lizard basking in the sun and try to grasp it by the tail. After a day or two he learned to catch quite a few, always returning them to a place where they could hide. This past August we were camping in a state park, in Wisconsin. He began to explore the vegetation to see what was there. He located two cicadas and fixed them on his shirt where they stayed for several minutes. When he had some free time he found them again, returning them to his shirt. He is completely caught up in the moment and is joyful. I can thank God for this example of joy through the person of my grandson.

When I moved to Evanston in May 2001 I was not sure of anything in my life at that point, except that I was much stronger than I realized. I had negotiated the purchase of my town house; I had a bank account and a car. My Lake Forest Friends Meeting was holding me in the Light.

In 2003 I signed up for a week long hike in the Grand Canyon. The group was all women over 30. We hiked down into the Havasupai Canyon down eight miles to the Havasu Indian Reservation. The next day we explored the area around the village including a large campground on the river. The following day was the really tough one: we would hike lower, to a waterfall and pool formed by the river, but to get there we would have to climb backwards down a cliff with each woman coaching the next one to make sure our steps were secure. I was never so scared. The thrill of getting down to that last step and seeing the canyon pool was unbelievable. We swam in the icy blue water and I was so cold and worn out that I could not fight the current. Fortunately a woman in my group saw me thrashing around and swam to me to help me over the deep section.

When I returned home I knew that I was ready for more adventure. My sister invited me to go to Bolivia with her in Feb 2004, and then to go on to Machu Picchu. We spent nine days with a group from the Unitarian Church of St. Paul doing medical supply provisioning in Bolivia, and six days traveling by local plane, bus and train through La Paz, Cuzco and, at last, at the mystical ruins in the rain forest of Peru. That was a truly wondrous journey and glimpse into an ancient belief system.

I was born in the Depression, the first of five children. My mother grew up on a farm in south western Wisconsin; my father in Ashland on Lake Superior. He was the middle child of parents who emigrated from Norway. Mother's ancestors came from England at the turn of the 17th century. Mother finished a two year degree program in Dental Hygiene prior to her marriage. Father attended the University of Wisconsin for several semesters but dropped out in order to find work that would support his wife and their baby. Our family was poor but so were all of the people around us. Since both parents grew up in poverty they knew how to cope. When I was four and my brother was three we moved from Madison to Baraboo.

Our first summer in Baraboo was spent living near the entrance to Devil's Lake state park. My dad operated a gas station and root beer stand. My brother and I liked living in the rustic cabin nearby; my parents were relieved when a new job opportunity enabled us to move into a duplex in town.

I have known what it is like to be the child who knows inside herself that something is going on but not being openly acknowledged and that I must not rock the boat. I learned at a very early age to hide—my feelings and my presence in order not to be punished for imaginary sins. My father got angry frequently. I thought that I was the reason for his anger so I tried not to provoke his bad moods. I played in my room or I helped my mother in the kitchen to avoid being noticed. When we sat down at the supper table, I spoke only when spoken to or, rarely, to ask for the potatoes or the peas to be passed to me.

At school it was different. I was eager to answer questions put by my teachers and usually I had the correct answers. School became the place where I didn't need to hide. However, before I finished the second grade a big change occurred in my family. The US entered WWII in December of 1941 and my parents seized the opportunity to try something new. My father entered the Army Engineer Corps and my mother took a job as a dental hygienist for the military. My brother and I were sent to live with our aunt and uncle, strangers to us, and their two children on their farm in Minnesota. New school, new everything. Farm life was milking cows every morning before the school bus came. My favorite chore was bringing in the cows each evening. I began to live my fantasy of being Judy Garland by singing to the cows.

We went to live with Mother two years later, in Clinton Iowa where she worked in a different military base. During that school year my father returned from the service. My sister was born about a year later; by then we had moved to Streator Illinois. The next move was to Rock Falls Illinois where we settled for the remainder of my 8th thru 12th grade education. The younger of

my brothers was born in Rock Falls. And just six weeks before my graduation from high school came my other sister.

When your first eight grades are spent at six different schools, in six different towns you learn that there is not much point in making friends because you won't be with them the next year anyway. It was easier to hide. I talked to the birds and squirrels when I wandered by the I&M canal in Rock Falls and, if I kept walking, to the cows further along. When we were living in Clinton I had been allowed to wander along the edge of the Mississippi river below the bluffs. I was making friends with plants and animals rather than other children.

During my high school years, I participated in the Methodist Church youth group activities on Sunday evenings. A memory that stands out for me was a Saturday field trip by bus, to Rockford for a day of meeting other Methodist teens and learning about the world outside of our small towns. We heard a Japanese-American minister speak about his family's experience with internment camps during WW2. I knew nothing of the US treatment of these citizens until I listened to his story! Thus I began to learn compassion for those who are different from me.

In my senior year of high school, at the suggestion of my English teacher, I read "You Can't Go Home Again" by Thomas Wolfe, This was not a required book, but reading it made me realized that books could be more than just good stories. There were other adults who guided me. Elizabeth Crutchfield, who was my math teacher for my four years of high school, as well as my Sunday school teacher, was a big influence on me. She expected excellence in her class, from all of her students. My Aunt Rila was also important in my moral development. Both of these women had no children of their own, both were teachers at a time when the choices for women who did not marry were teaching, nursing and secretary. They set the example by their firm, strong guidance showing that a girl could take her place as a full member of society. They let me know that I had talents worth developing.

I applied to Antioch College in Yellow Springs, OH, although I was unaware of the connection between Yellow Springs and the RSOF. I was accepted but unable to go there since their student job program did not guarantee enough income to cover the tuition. A member of the Rock Falls Methodist Church knew about Kendall College in Evanston. Classes were held only in the morning and every student would get a job that would pay enough to pay the tuition. The college was very small, struggling to keep in business and so I gratefully accepted. I had the same teacher for French and for Psychology and she introduced the class to French impressionist painting at the Art Institute—a completely new world to me. She also laid the groundwork for valuing self awareness and learning why it is important to know thyself. Kendall was located only a block from the Northwestern campus. The whole student body was invited to hear James Lawson speak about Gandhi at Garrett Seminary in the spring. My response was very similar to the sermon given by the Japanese-American minister: amazement at the expression of the idea, unfamiliar to me, of non-violence practiced in a far away country and how it worked. I was not surprised when Jim Lawson was chosen, several years later, to train the lunch counter sit in demonstrators in the south.

Kendall didn't suit me. I heeded my father's plea to enroll in the University of Wisconsin. I moved from Evanston to Madison in the summer, and found a rooming house near the Wesley Foundation, and close to the University of Wisconsin Hospital which hired me in the cafeteria. The Wesley Foundation became my new "home" where I made some friends, learned to drink coffee and developed my interest in religion and the Bible.

On Sunday evenings, the various church locations close to the campus offered students free supper and a challenging program. At the Wesley Foundation we students planned the weekly event and designed a poster, which we silk screened and posted all over campus. Another part of the Wesley experience was the annual retreat at Weona Lake Camp for a weekend away from it all! We also tried a new idea of small groups dialoging, scheduled on a weeknight. For the first year it was very successful as no topic was off the table. We stayed with the same group of 10—12 people every week. Religion made more sense to me and my confidence in my ability to express myself grew that year. Our minister led a Monday evening discussion once a month, inviting those who wanted to critique the sermon to meet him at the University Club. I knew that this was special. My Wesley Foundation activities watered the seed of my interest in social concerns. In my senior year, during the winter break, I attended a Methodist Student Conference in Lawrence KS, where there were several hundred college age, religiously motivated young people. I was seriously considering becoming a missionary after the week was over.

While I was an undergraduate in Madison, a friend and I met Francis Hole, a professor in the Agriculture school where he taught about soils and worms. The occasion was the anniversary of the death of Gandhi; student and community organizations had set up outdoor tables with information on peace and related topics. Francis was at the table with information about the Madison Friends Meeting. My friend, also a Methodist, had suggested that we both attend this event and she was quite taken by the idea of Quaker worship so we both paid a visit to the meetinghouse a few weeks later. Some in IYM may remember the last visit of Francis to this yearly meeting when he brought his soil auger to show us the fertile prairie soil and sang his original song about worms.

The individuals whom we connect to initial experiences in a new aspect of living and learning have a great impact on whether we want to go deeper. I am not sure that I would have gone to that first Meeting for Worship in Madison if someone else had been handing out the literature. The Light does shine more brightly in some than others!

At the end of my junior year I was suspended due to my poor performance. I had failed one class and gotten a D in another; the university had a policy of suspending a student for a semester and requiring counseling before the student could return. My counselor was an older woman who did help me with understanding my behavior as self punishment. Unfortunately, she was in declining physical health so my work with her came to an abrupt stop when she died. As I look back some fifty years I am grateful for her brief presence in my life. I was able to return to school for the spring semester with some growing awareness about how to understand my anger and free up my

capacity to express the resentment I had inside me.

That year I attended the Madison meeting enough times to become acquainted with several people including a couple who lived in an apartment over the offices of the Progressive Magazine. For most of that year I participated with them and another three or four older Friends in something akin to a Spiritual Nurture group, although that term had not yet entered the vocabulary of Madison Friends. This coincided with my semester break from UW. I have appreciation for the group of Quakers who included me, an inquirer into Quakerism, in that process of knowing God.

I finished my class work at UW in the spring of 1957 and found a position teaching English in the tiny village of Auburndale WI. I lived in Marshfield, attended the Methodist church on Sundays, but I did not make any friends that year. During my free time that year I became very interested in the story of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. I read whatever I could find in the public library as well as newsletters from organizations promoting their cause. I had already read some of the stories about the Holocaust and I felt much compassion for what the millions who died had suffered. I read James Baldwin's "Notes of a Native Son" I would go on to face my dilemma about what I would do after graduation—take an ordinary job as a high school teacher or go to Africa and be a missionary. Looking back I realize how ignorant I was about the world and how patronizing my attitude toward the third world and the poor in the United States. I also followed the events at Koinonia Farms, Americus Georgia, which I had learned about while at UW. The Wayland Foundation was a block away from the Wesley Foundation; sometimes we attended each other's programs. Their minister was an outspoken pacifist.

The next year I moved to Chicago. I found the 57th Street Meeting where I stayed for a few days while looking for a room to rent in Hyde Park. A meeting family took me in; the room was on the third floor with a bath but no kitchen. I was hired by Barrington Dunbar, a Quaker, and the director of Newberry Ave Settlement House, as a six week summer day camp worker. I learned to ride the elevated train from Hyde Park to the Maxwell Street neighborhood and home again. Now my life was exotic! I saw people who did not look like small town Wisconsinites and who spoke with accents that I could not understand at first. The children that I was in charge of each Monday through Friday from 9 to 4 were all African American with much curiosity about me as they overcame their shyness. We rode the buses to the museums and beaches and amusement parks and compared our sack lunches and they were happy and so was I because I could not have managed any major problems had there been any. Or so I told myself.

I attended the Sunday morning meeting for worship at 57th Street often, and began to get acquainted with the regulars. Gradually it dawned on me that these good people accepted me as their equals and welcomed me as a Quaker-in-training! There were several young single people and we got together for some trips to the beach and to the Indiana dunes. My strongest interest in all of this new religious practice was around peace and social concerns. Part of me still wanted to go to Africa and improve the lives of those far-away strangers. I also wanted to end the discrimination against African Americans that I saw first hand. Few people of color were regular

participants in this Meeting, even though the Hyde Park neighborhood had many African American and Asian American residents.

My summer job ended after six weeks but I found a full time job at the Mary McDowell Settlement in Back of the Yards where I learned about the interaction among Polish immigrants who had come to Chicago to work in the stockyards and newer residents from Mexico. Programs for children after school and evening adult English classes as well as day care were offered to the community. I liked that work at first but realized that my education did not really prepare me for it. In 1962 I signed on with the Chicago Board of Education and was assigned to the George Washington High School at 110th and Avenue O. I looked forward to classroom teaching again as well as earning more money; I was still paying off student loans.

I married later that year and in 1963 my first child was born. Being a mother required relearning. Even though I had helped with my siblings, I needed to learn some lessons from experience. Before I became a mother I vowed that I would not make the mistakes which my father and mother had made—no, not me. Imagine my despair when I heard myself saying the exact words, in the exact tone of voice, to my first born when she spilled milk on the table and the floor! I read Dr. Spock and tried to implement his methods. I read magazine articles on parenting, too. Then my daughter went to pre-school where she showed me just what I needed to know: that she knew how to enjoy herself without interference and that she was truly a creative and happy three year old.

After my third child was born, the depression that I had experienced as a student was visiting me again, more strongly than ever. I told myself my life would get better with time. That was not the case. I was a full time, stay at home mother who did not fully enjoy spending my days with only young children. Following my pattern of hiding, I did not seek out adult company. I was grateful when other moms invited me to visit and bring my children along but I could not bring myself to invite them back. I wanted closeness but I backed away from that which I thought I wanted.

My younger two children were enrolled in a Montessori program. Parents were encouraged to observe the children. I saw my child, as well as the others in her classroom, demonstrating competence in so many practical life skills and also becoming writers and doing math and getting along with others. I tried to copy the approach used by the teachers when I talked to my children, although I didn't always maintain it.

Being a Quaker and a parent meant that I must allow them freedom to make mistakes. Because of the pain that I had known when I was a child, I did not want to inflict any pain on my children yet when I faced a choice of doing the right thing there were times when I did hurt my children. Here were the occasions for big life lessons. I also discovered that my spouse and I were sometimes of very different minds regarding the right thing for the children which meant that there was more pain being spread around

I began a new job at the Ancona School where my younger two children were enrolled. During

the years that I worked there my confidence in myself grew by leaps and bounds. The job involved many aspects of the management of the school; personal computers were just starting to be available for small offices and the school was growing and changing. My bosses were kind and encouraging human beings; the faculty wanted to teach there and the parents wanted their children to learn there. I felt that I was appreciated and that my work contributed to the overall school community welfare.

My job was an important piece of my growth as a person. The school community was supportive and caring; most of us were women with school age children or grown children so we knew the demands placed on us. The work days were full but there was lots of satisfaction in being part of a strong organization dedicated to the best in education for the children. The 57th Street Meeting also nurtured me as I grew my leadership skills. I taught First Day School, served as Recording Clerk, Treasurer and Presiding Clerk.

Meanwhile my mother developed breast cancer. She was only 66. She had a radical mastectomy and was cancer free for about four years. But the cancer had slowly metastasized into her spine. From my home in Chicago it was a three hour trip to her home in Madison WI, where she slowly declined as her cancer spread. One of my sisters still lived in Madison, my brother in Madison and the other sister in Watertown when our mother first developed cancer. In July of her 72nd year, she died in the hospital while I was at home in Chicago. I look back with much regret that I did not see more of her in the last years of her life; what might I have learned about myself if I had given more time to her then?

Our family was living in South Shore in 1978; we moved farther south and east in 1983 which increased my commuting time but not to an intolerable level. By 1988 all three of my children were out of high school, my husband was commuting about two hours to work three days a week—it was time to move. The two of us left the southeast side of Chicago for Lake Villa, near the border with Wisconsin. I began a new commute of two hours each way, five days a week. We began attending the Lake Forest Friends Meeting. After eight years I was exhausted by the end of the week so I gave up my job, thinking that I would find another job in northern Lake County.

In 1994 I was serving Illinois Yearly Meeting as a member of the Nominating Committee. There was an opening for someone to represent IYM to Friends World Committee for Consultation, Section of the Americas. I had been much impressed by Helen Jean Nelson's enthusiasm for meeting Friends from other countries as she shared her experience of participating in the Triennial FWCC meeting held in Japan sometime in the 1980's. I knew a few Friends from Western and Indiana yearly meetings, mostly through serving on the staff of AFSC, and later on the AFSC nominating committee. I was curious to widen my experience with Friends of different traditions by filling that FWCC representative spot, with my own yearly meeting. I told the others on the Nominating Committee of my interest and they all responded positively.

I had to wait for March 1995 to come around before the next annual meeting of FWCC took



place; I traveled to Portland OR with much eagerness when the time came. The sessions were held in a hotel downtown; I faithfully listened to the business discussed, and I attended my first committee assignment which was on the Site Selection Committee. The really good stuff happened on the Friday night when all of us were assigned to small groups of 5 or 6 and transported to local Quakers' homes. In Portland there are local meetings that belong to the liberal, unprogrammed worship tradition, and there are churches which are part of Northwest Yearly Meeting in the pastoral tradition.

So there I was having supper with some Portland Quakers, such as a pastor of Reedwood Friends Church, a professor at George Fox College as well as the host family who worshipped with the closest unprogrammed meeting. Of course we were all on our best behavior; the conversation deepened as the evening wore on and I noticed that these Friends were comfortable with one another while not always agreeing about how Quakerism is practiced. And in several other homes in Portland, a similar experience was unfolding for the other participants in that annual meeting.

I made some friends; I picked up titles of books that I wanted to read to help me to learn about Friends around the Americas and I looked forward to sharing my experience when I returned to LFFM. I completed two three year terms as an ILYM rep; in my final year I helped host the annual meeting of FWCC at Illinois Beach State Park. During those six years I served three years as the treasurer of the section so I attended the meetings of the Executive Committee as well as the annual meetings. I developed a greater understanding of how a Friends organization with a big name was staffed by a very small team, and how many others volunteered their time and knowledge to expand the vision and raise the money to make it all happen. In 1997, I attended the FWCC Triennial Meeting in Birmingham, England.

Friends from Japan, Korea, India, Australia, Kenya, France, Germany, Scotland, England, Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Bolivia, Cuba and the US—more than 300 in number—were there. The days began before breakfast with worship, and lasted until well after dark as we all tried to jam as many discussions and business sessions and “worship and sharing” into each of the 10 days given us. A group of Kenyan women approached me late one evening: they wanted to know about infant baptism among American Quakers and they were randomly gathering some women from the US by pleading with us to be part of the late night interest group. I recall that about 5 Americans accepted the invitation and we had a lively discussion for nearly two hours. I could sense that the concept of the sacraments as symbolic not overt was losing ground with many Kenyan women because bringing in new members was important but newcomers wanted baptism for their babies. We discussed other Quaker practices as well, including the Kenyan church worship service that often last for more than two hours. When a family spent an hour or more to travel to the church, it seemed necessary to sing, pray, and preach until everyone was satisfied.

While I finished my final year as treasurer of FWCC, I accepted the post of clerk of ILYM. I need to keep myself engaged with productive volunteer activity. I was not employed for pay; I

was living far from my children my friends and I was now divorced. Participation in Friends activities allowed me to ignore the pain in my personal life. I was asked to consider serving FWCC as the clerk of the Section of the Americas to begin in 2002. I felt that mixture of gladness at being asked and fear that they were calling the wrong person. How could I possibly fulfill the shoes of the previous section clerks? And, to make it all even more of a challenge, the Friend who had been the Executive Secretary had resigned which meant that I was to face the challenge of working with the Executive Committee to hire a new leader for the section.

I met with a few Friends from my meeting who helped my find my way and I accepted. I led the FWCC Executive Committee through the task of hiring the new Executive Secretary; over and over I have seen the wisdom of our decision as she had guided the organization into the 21st century. Another piece of serving for FWCC was being part of the Central Executive committee, composed of clerks and Executive secretaries from all four sections, and which meets each year. I have a much greater understanding of the Quakers in Europe, Africa and Asia as a result.

I have learned more about the nature of depression and how it affects more than one generation. I can also say that casting off the mindset which sneaks up and whispers “you won’t do that right” etc, is hard work. My healing, through my own efforts and professional help plus the love of my Quaker community continues. We are all being healed when we are letting God guide us. Joy like a fountain, cascading over all.

Hallelujah!

It is a good thing to praise our God;  
praise is beautiful, praise is fitting

God’s the one who rebuilds Jerusalem,  
who regathers Israel’s scattered exiles.  
He heals the heartbroken  
and bandages their wounds.

Psalm 147