

JOURNEYS WITH BODIES AND SOULS

Nancy Duncan

The 2016 Jonathan Plummer Lecture

Presented at
Illinois Yearly Meeting
of the
Religious Society of Friends
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Photo by Sebrina Tingley

Introduction

I think I speak for everyone here when I say we have been blessed by a powerful group of speakers from outside our yearly meeting who have filled our sessions with a rich array of experiences and expertise to nourish our activist and spiritual selves as adults and as children.

Since 1961, it has been our practice to end our sessions by reaching within our midst to hear from a member of the yearly meeting about their own spiritual journey. This end-of-sessions talk is known as the Plummer Lecture, named after Jonathan Plummer, the first clerk of Illinois Yearly Meeting.

I have the distinct honor today to introduce Nancy Duncan, who will deliver this year's Plummer Lecture.

Let me be plain: Of all the human beings I know—and I know quite a few—I cannot think of another who is more giving of herself.

Nancy is the kind of person who will drop everything to help anyone, anywhere if she senses a need. She has an unusual ability to recognize and identify needs. Everyone in my family has experienced this first hand—she has been a co-parent, a perennial Thanksgiving host, a bringer of videos and other distractions

when there has been an injury in the family, a literal fellow traveler to Palestine...the list goes on. Members of our monthly meeting, St. Louis—where Nancy has attended since the early 1970s and where she served as clerk twice—have boatloads of similar stories. The same doubtless goes for members of this yearly meeting which Nancy has attended since 1975 and where she also served as clerk.

Most of us here also know that this special “Nanciness” has been bequeathed to a second generation through her children William and Katie and now Risa and into yet another generation in the person of sweet Jessie Ann.

Well beyond our places of worship and Quaker gatherings, Nancy has devoted herself to the most vulnerable and most in need of nurture and care in our society more broadly. For 35 years she worked at St. Louis Children’s Hospital as a pediatric nurse practitioner specializing in child maltreatment, family violence, and sexual assault. I cannot think of a profession that requires the willingness to look into the darkest and most painful corners of the human experience and offer succor and comfort like this one. Only someone as brave and giving as Nancy could do a job like this for this long.

Now it is time for Nancy to share with us the journey that has led her to be able to offer so much to so many.

Nancy will speak out of the silence. When she is finished we will settle back into the silence before breaking for lunch.

Steve Tamari

JOURNEYS WITH BODIES AND SOULS

Good morning Friends. It is a joy and very humbling to stand before you today. This task has been with me so much of the last year. This process has made me question my life in many new ways. I feel a renewed sense gratitude and maybe it is even fair to say a new sense of identity for it. I am keenly aware of the specialness of storytelling and what storytelling can accomplish in our lives. It is with this awareness that I faced this task. I have to say that so many of you are a part of this journey and made each step special.

I am the eldest of three children born at the height of the baby boom. My sister Marti is two years younger, and my brother Gregg is three years younger. My parents were married eight years before I was born. It made us very special that we came after many years of loss and longing.

I have come to learn that humans are such a jumble. We all have wonderful traits as well as really awful traits (at least most of us), and all of these traits sit in the same person. My parents were no exception.

My parents were from southern Illinois and moved to St. Louis after World War II because my father had spent a good part of his childhood there. They were both children of the depression and came with many scars. My father was neglected as a child and began drinking at age 7. By the time my parents met, my father was a full-blown alcoholic. My mother worked as a medical secretary, which she enjoyed very much. My father's work life could be described as anywhere from problematic to ridiculous. One year, I counted 12 jobs.

Shortly after they became parents of three small children, my father took all he had learned working for a television company and the jobs he had in the Army and opened Bill's TV Repair. Both of my parents worked on this business for several years. Mother did her tasks around the care of the three small children. I remember spending quite a bit of time in my father's shop. I loved

those times. I felt so special, and I knew somehow that he really liked having me there. Daddy was very good at answering all questions about what he was doing. The phone rang at the shop and home. As soon as I was able, I would answer the phone, "Bill's TV Repair. A service call is four dollars plus parts." Answering these calls actually became my first training for taking a medical history and making a diagnoses. My favorite part was asking questions and suggesting somebody adjust the horizontal control, the contrast, or plug in the set. After awhile I would figure out what tube had blown. I will never forget the thrill of announcing, "Oh, that sounds like your 6BQ6. They are \$2.00." When tubes were replaced by transistors that was the end of the business.

I do not remember, as a very young child, being aware of my father's drinking. But by second grade, I remember being keenly aware of the signs of drink in him, of signs of stress in my mother, and beginning to worry about those things which are not on a child's assignment list. In a classic alcoholic family pattern, as the oldest, I became my mother's pseudo-partner. One of the sad consequences of that was it separated me from my siblings. It was fortunate that my father was never violent. Things could have been worse.

I do not really remember my father talking to me about anything spiritual or vaguely religious until I was an adolescent. However, when sitting on his lap as he read the funnies to me every evening,

I knew was heaven. My mother was the source of religiosity. She had been raised in the Methodist Church, then joined the Presbyterians. A few years after she married my father, she became a Catholic. So we were raised in the Catholic Church. I have come to see that I was actually accidentally raised Catholic. There were no Catholics on either side of our family. There was not even a Catholic church in mother's home town. And it was not her last stop. At age 75, she completed what I term a "mid-level" ministerial certification in her last church. Catholicism was just where she was when we were children.

I went to mass with Mother every single Sunday from the time I was born. After my siblings came, for several years, I continued to go with her to mass every Sunday while Marti and Gregg stayed home with Daddy. It was a special time, and it gave me many questions which she was extremely happy to answer. She

had me learn prayers by rote at a very young age, and I remember a profound feeling of comfort when we prayed our evening prayers. I do not think that feeling of comfort has really ever left. I loved having these long discussions with her about God and Jesus, heaven and hell, saints and sinners, and heaven only knows what else.

When it came time for school there was a huge problem. Being Catholic, my mother felt that I should be going to parochial schools. Also the bishop in St. Louis had just integrated the Catholic schools, and this appealed to her. However, they still used corporal punishment, and my father absolutely could not abide the thought of somebody hitting his children. This was the first argument I remember actually witnessing. They made a compromise, I would go to the parochial school but if for some reason I was ever struck I would immediately be taken to the public school. Kindergarten went just fine, but on the first day of first grade there were some children missing from the roll call. Some of my classmates knew that some of these children were going to the public school. This young nun got such a disturbed look on her face at that news that one of the students asked her what the problem was. She shook her head very sadly and said that it was just really hard to get into heaven if one went to public school. My heart froze. I knew immediately that if I got hit I was going to hell. Of course I told no one of my concern, and I saw children getting hit many times a day. In retrospect I worked up a pretty good case of anxiety which went on for a long time. I did get hit one day for subtracting wrong. I got so upset I threw up in my math book, and they had to call my mother to come and collect me. I still did not tell her my real fear. She told me not to tell my father. That did not help with the anxiety.

The bright spot though was religion class. I loved religion class. I loved stories of saints and especially the child ones. I loved learning about the complicated Catholic systems, original sin, mortal sin, venial sin, heaven, hell, purgatory, limbo, sacraments, holy days of obligation, and on and on. I loved learning all those esoteric words and memorizing catechisms. I just found it fascinating.

Actually, I think the church provided a refuge from the chaotic facts of my alcoholic home. Bill collectors, alienated extended family members, shut off utilities, repossessions, and evictions

somehow seemed less scary and more manageable because I knew what I was supposed to do and what I would get if I was first and foremost a good Catholic. I am very grateful to the Catholic Church for providing that structure in a chaotic storm.

So this was a situation that nobody could really call good. Somehow though I knew I was loved, and I knew my parents loved each other. They shared a sense of humor, which they gave to us and carried us through so much. They also had a wonderful sense of playfulness. Their humor and playfulness made life somehow tolerable. I see there was a tide of love carrying this very complicated little family.

The other thing that seems unusual to me is that my parents gave us extremely healthy messages about sexuality. I am going to summarize their messages as “it’s normal, it’s healthy, it’s a gift, it’s really wonderful, it’s very dangerous, you need to talk about sex, and you must be very careful.”

One night when I was 10, my mother got a phone call from someone saying they were from Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and that they had her husband. She said that was not a funny joke and slammed down the phone. Recovery proceeded slowly. I see those first years as an epic struggle not only for my father but for the whole family. I think I was 14 when sobriety finally took.

AA and Al-Anon formed the core of my parents’ life from then on. My father finally found his calling as an alcoholism counselor. I think it is fair to say he became quite the charismatic figure in the AA community. I went to my first Al-Anon meeting at age 11. Those were the days before treatment centers came in vogue. The people in AA would take each other into their homes to sober them up, pouring orange juice and honey down them to stave off *delirium tremens*. Having three young children, my dad decided it was not a good idea to bring men home. There were however several nights when I woke up thinking I had gotten in bed with my grandmother on the foldout couch in the living room, and when daylight came it was some strange woman who was there to sober up. Our daughter thinks these experiences gave me too broad a concept of normal.

As you know AA has a spiritual basis. My father did not really talk about his relationship with his higher power but I could see it happening. I could also watch it happening with his AA buddies. After a while, I came to see that I was actually witnessing miracles.

I was in high school when one of my closest friends was

diagnosed with a tumor. I came home and told my mother that Barbie had a tumor in her neck. My mother said, "Oh that's lymphoma. She'll be dead in six months." Sometimes my mother had a problem with her filter. I lost it. She could not put me back together. This was the first time she just could not console me. Then daddy came home. He took me off privately. He calmly explained that we really did not know what was going on and did a wonderful job of talking me down. Then he said this was definitely a situation that called for the serenity prayer. Together we prayed for the serenity to except the things we could not change, the courage to change the things we could, and the wisdom to know the difference. I was overcome with a peace and calmness that I can feel to this day. It was the first time that I had the experience of knowing in my marrow that whether or not things turned out the way I wanted them to, it would be O.K. Barbie is still alive today.

By the end of eighth grade my father made an executive decision that I would go to public school high school. I am very grateful for the education I received at that school. Grateful as well for being there and meeting my friend Shelley, a platonic soulmate. Shelley was the person with whom I learned about spiritual sharing and was the first person with whom I felt a deep spiritual connection. This connection lasts to this day. I cannot believe that I am so lucky as to be able to say that this was the first of many such friendships—many of them are this room today.

I was a senior in high school in 1968, a year defined by tumult. I became increasingly disturbed by what I saw as not much of a response to the civil rights struggle by the Catholic Church. I remember going to confession at the campus church at St. Louis University, a Jesuit school. I was confessing to this Jesuit that I was working up a great deal of animosity for people who did not get on board with the civil rights movement. I thought this was a problem. I was completely lacking in compassion for these people and was really angry with them. It just seemed wrong, and I did not know how to deal with it. The Jesuit who was hearing my confession must not of been tracking. He told me I really should not worry and that he knew how I felt. The university had been forced to admit blacks. It was really hard but that was just the way it was going to be. I walked out of the confessional with the first crack in my faith. The Sunday after Dr. King was shot, no mention of it was made at mass. As my mother and I filed out of the

church, bewildered, the man behind us said he was so grateful that they did not talk about the killing of that “expletive.” I began to wonder exactly where I was.

A Jewish classmate and friend of mine came to me and told me he was taking instruction to be Catholic. He asked me to be his godmother. It was a dilemma. I was full of doubts about the Catholic Church, but I had this feeling that my doubts should not cloud Abron’s experience. Shortly before the baptism, in discussing his instruction, I learned of some new mortal sins, one of which I was committing. I probably would have learned of these had I gone the Catholic high school. I was shocked and certain that had I been committing a mortal sin there would have been something in my heart or soul that would have known it. There would have to be damages somewhere.

The baptism was at the end of the summer. I had many doubts but had not done anything related to a process for leaving the Catholic Church. I went to mass every Sunday and went to confession regularly. I thought I should just go do these things for Abron’s sake. Then after the baptism, I would have to make an assessment of my Catholicism and decide where I stood.

The baptism went O.K. until the very end when Abron and his godparents had to say the Apostles Creed. My heart began to race, I got dizzy, nauseous, and very nearly passed out. I did not need an intellectual assessment of my Catholicism. I walked out of the church that day and never went back. Oddly enough, no one else in my family did either. Our home had been hit by a tornado right at that same time, so we had to move and no one ever went to the new parish. I knew I was not ready to give up on the idea of some kind of transcendent being or higher power. I just had no idea how my relationship with that Spirit was going to play out.

For financial reasons, I went to the community college. After my first year I was desperate to find a way not to live at home. This led me to a job in Paris as an au pair. It was a very interesting experience but I was horrendously lonely, among other things. I had not found a church. I knew next to nothing about the Quakers. I knew they were pacifists. I had seen *Friendly Persuasion* and could give a fourth-grade answer if somebody asked me who founded Pennsylvania. There was a billboard that I passed by daily walking to school. It talked about *Des Amis* and the Quaker Center in Paris, just blocks from where I was living

and working. It was extremely intimidating to think about just walking into this place. After a while I had myself convinced that if only I could make myself go to this place I would not be so lonely and things would probably be working out better for me, but I could not do it.

After a semester, I threw in the towel. I went back to St. Louis and the community college. I took a course that summer and made friends with a lovely man who was a Bahá'í. I knew less about Bahá'ís than I did Quakers. I was delighted and surprised to learn that central tenants include the unity of all religions, the equality of all races, and the equality of the sexes. They espouse peace and are community-focused. They do not ordain clergy and have no sacraments or liturgy. They do not gamble and do not drink alcohol. Plus, these people were really nice. This list made me think I really had come upon my true home. I actually came to “Embrace the Faith” and became a Bahá'í. The first meeting I attended after joining was a study group for seekers. After the study portion was over and several people had left, a man looked around the room and said, “All the non-Bahá'ís are gone. Now we can talk.” This was a punch in the gut. How could I have let this happen, again. Just where was I? Turns out the secretive aspects of the group were not made clear until after one joined. So pretty much from my first day as a Bahá'í, I was a complete failure.

At the same time a new neighbor moved in across the walk, an unusual young man with whom I struck up a friendship and enjoyed long talks. When we got to the religion part of life I told him I was a Bahá'í. The first thing out of his mouth was, “Oh, you don't want to be a Bahá'í. You want to be a Quaker.” He was a newly convinced Friend. That seemed very presumptuous to me but quite interesting given that I was where I was because months earlier I could not make myself go into the Quaker Center. We ended up dating, and I just sort of slipped out of Bahá'ísm.

It was very important to Phillip that I accompany him to meeting on Sunday morning. Meeting for worship did not come easily to me. What came back to me while I was trying to learn to sit in meeting were all those Sundays I had gone to Latin mass with my mother. During meeting for worship, I think I was able to go to the place I went to as a small child at church. During mass, I had heard this Latin language that made no sense, it was white noise that played while I went inside. So I sat in meeting trying to go

inside and trying to fashion this new relationship with the Spirit.

I was having a little battle inside because I have an oppositional streak, and I certainly was not going to embrace a religion just because my boyfriend did, even if it felt right. Truly, I will always be grateful to Phillip because I have a feeling I might not have persisted in bonding with meeting for worship had it not been important to him. But I knew if I were to join these peculiar people, it would have to have nothing to do with anyone else but me, the meeting, and the Spirit.

I was given unconditional love by the Friends in the St. Louis Meeting. I have never had one of those experiences where I was blinded on the road to Damascus. What tends to happen to me is that I am walking down the road, one foot in front of the other, and I look back and I think, “What happened? How did you get here?” With any luck I am in a place that feels right, where I feel I am being well used and I have a sense of the love around me or a sense of being able to give love. This is what happened when I found myself deep in the St. Louis Meeting.

I watched people in the meeting function. I watched how business meeting ran. I saw behaviors that were helpful, and I saw behaviors that were a hindrance. I learned to listen for the Spirit in what people said. I made mental notes on how I wanted to be as well as behaviors to avoid. I learned to communicate with people on a deeper, spiritual level. I began to reestablish and redefine my relationship with God. I began to open up, trust and let the Spirit work—a lesson that for me, I do not think, will ever end.

I saw how these Friends were in their families and with their children. And I came to understand in the core of my being that that was how I wanted to be with my children, who were as yet theoretical. Somewhere in my heart I think it was the children that sealed the deal.

Phillip and I did marry under the care of the meeting. I however had not yet requested membership. The following summer my grandmother died. I was sitting at a graveside service, outside Mt. Vernon, in an old Baptist church yard cemetery. It was a beautiful early summer day. A young, well-meaning minister was saying a lot of words. My head was swirling, and my heart was heavy. I knew in my marrow what I needed was to sit there in silence. And then I knew what that meant, I must be a

Quaker. I came home and applied for membership. I still choose to see that moment as my grandmother's last gift to me.

I kept leaving school and going back because I had no clear idea what I was supposed to study or do. I do not think it is quite accurate to say that I had a leading to go into nursing. There was a whole lot of intellectual exercise that went into this idea. No one, myself included, ever asked if I was being called to this. But I am still amazed that once the decision was made, things played out as if it was someone else's agenda entirely.

I applied to the most unlikely school and only that school. It turned out to be a perfect school for me, and I am grateful to this day for the education I got there. I must have had some sense of a leading or maybe a pushing. When my husband was fired from his job right before I was to start the program, I remember Shelley asked me if I could still do this. I clearly remember saying, "This sounds very strange but I think it's going to be O.K. because I have this feeling this is where God wants me and this is what I'm supposed to do." It was the first time I articulated such a concept. The marriage to Phillip ended in divorce, a loss due to his mental illness. Depression plus other assorted diagnoses just made it impossible.

Running parallel to my nursing career was my maturation as a Quaker. As I look back on things I realize that these two trajectories were actually intertwined. The more I learned about how to be a Quaker—being in community, speaking truth with love, speaking truth to power, trusting strength would be given, trusting way will open—the better nurse I was.

St. Louis Monthly Meeting, Blue River Quarterly, Illinois Yearly Meeting, and Friends General Conference fed my soul and brain, challenged me, pushed me, and carried me—that means many of you in this room today. I came to see that there were people and situations in these bodies of Friends that literally filled in the spaces where I needed to grow. It was in my monthly meeting that I became aware of something I am going to call spiritual intimacy. Sometimes it would be in the context of a spiritual direction group or in the context of a spiritual friendship, and sometimes it was not in any formal context at all but just how over time some of us came to relate to each other on a very raw and spiritual level. We became comfortable calling each other to account and being called to account, nurturing each other and

nurturing each other's children, and most importantly staying in relationship with each other. I always recall with delight that at the end of a meeting retreat with the ILYM Field Secretary, he commented, "You know, not only can I not tell which child belongs to which adult, I can not tell who is married to whom." I could not think of a better compliment for a community.

The relationship that I have had with the children of these different Quaker bodies has been one of my life's most unforeseen joys. I have learned so much from them. Many remain in my life and continue to be amazing teachers and examples.

My first job at St. Louis Children's Hospital was staff nurse in the emergency room. As time passed I noticed a pattern. Whenever a sexual assault or sexual abuse case presented to the emergency room everyone else went to the bathroom, and I would be standing there. Remember that my parents had taught us to talk about sex using proper words and to be comfortable with the subject? Well, apparently no one else's parents did. I was fine taking these cases. This happened so often that people started to automatically assign me maltreatment cases of all sorts. This was 1979, and we were just starting to learn so much. I got on the hospital-wide committee that studied the emerging literature and practices. This committee of volunteers cobbled together the best information they could to provide the best services for the children we saw.

None of the hospital physicians wanted to deal with the sexual abuse/sexual assault area of child maltreatment. It became clear to me that if I became a nurse practitioner I would do a better job than nobody doing that job. So I did that. It really was a very good fit of skills and need. I wrote a job proposal. After quite some time, the hospital decided it would be a good idea to put somebody in that position. I held that position for 28 years. It was during this time, child abuse came on the radar of the medical community. Huge changes followed. It was a most exciting time in that field.

I did not start out with a leading to work in the child maltreatment area. One could say I fell into it, or maybe one could say I was pushed. I came to see rather quickly that helping to ameliorate the consequences of sexual violence and child-abuse was how I was called to answer the testimony of nonviolence.

Working in pediatrics provides one with limitless opportunities

for spiritual growth and practice. I learned that prayer and the intention of affirming a child could help me get through the hardest cases. Performing the first pelvic exam on an abused child and tending to acute sexual assault victims always required lots of prayers. Sitting with parents in their deepest pain and speaking hard truths with love almost forces spiritual growth. Learning to have compassion and trying to see that of God in someone who has just fatally injured a child or tortured or traded their child for drugs are really hard lessons. No professional training ever taught me these things. It was walking with Friends and understanding that, like in meeting for worship, it is not me, it is the Spirit who does the work. I just have to invite the Spirit and get out of the way.

There was a time for me at which my nursing and my Quakerism converged. Eldora Spiegelberg beloved member of St. Louis Meeting and one of my dearest mentors, landed in an ICU on a ventilator for six weeks. This was really an awful time. Eldora could not talk with the tube in her throat. I knew she was a member of the Hemlock Society and would probably be quite angry at what was happening. Then there were issues around her medical treatment that were absolutely destroying my whole idea of what I thought healing was about. It was a very bad time. It was in a meeting for worship toward the end of this six weeks that I was given a message. It clearly went:

Look into my eyes
See who I am
Respect me
Take my hand
Share your strength
Help me know it will be O.K.

I knew in my heart that these were the messages Eldora was giving us as we sat by her bed all those weeks. I did not know if this was a prayer, a poem, or a list of orders. I did know that these were the things I was called to do in all my patient interactions.

Jesse Alsup and I met at an AA Halloween party in my parents backyard. Very soon we were pretty sure we had found our soulmates. On our first date we shared more deeply than I had thought men could do. Maybe it was the same chemistry that led to my parents marriage six weeks after they met. Jesse first

proposed on the third date. He too was divorced and had a very charming three year old daughter.

Jesse was not a Quaker but he was quite the sympathist. His AA spirituality and my Quakerism melded very well. We were married under the care of the St. Louis Meeting. Jesse brought joy in my life in a way that I had not known before. His sense of humor could make me laugh at almost any time. His vision and perspectives were unique and keen, and he wanted to be well used.

For the most part I loved being a parent with him. His daughter, Katie, is legally my step child. I learned from Katie that love does not read legal documents. Katie gave me incredible joy from almost the first time I met her, and there is no way I can love her more.

Our son William added as much joy as Katie in his own way of being in the world. William and Katie are always my best teachers, and now I am learning from their children and families. There is just no way to express my joy and gratitude for sharing life with these amazing people. Every time I spend time with either of our children I invariably come away with the feeling that I am a better person for it. I am keenly aware that they survived in spite of the flaws both in me and their dad. I am also aware, that as with me, Friends in the Quaker community filled in those spaces that their father and I could not. For this I give thanks.

Jesse had his own demons. He suffered from clinical depression since the age of 10. When depressed he had that disordered thinking that can be so hard to deal with. I came to see that he was pulled to health and illness in almost equal measure in a continuing struggle. For a very long time, he really did a lot of things to try to be healthy. Then, somehow, he just could not anymore.

Jesse checked out of life for a very long time. It was a very hard time for our whole family. I was never clear what to do during that time. I think the rest of the world could not understand why I just did not leave. All I can say is that I was never clear what to do.

After a very long time, he very slowly began to get better, then he got much better. For six months things got much, much, better, with some dips. Then one beautiful spring morning he walked out the front door to get the car from the mechanic and died. I am forever grateful for those last six months.

A great tide of love came and carried William, Katie, and me through that really hard time.

So now I am in that phase of redefinition called retirement. It is clear to me that I am still learning and hopefully growing. I do not know how to finish a story about an unfinished journey. I am very grateful for this opportunity. It has made me see how incredibly full my life has been. The uncut version of this would have gone on at least three hours.

It is my sincerest hope that we can all continue to walk together and carry each other and laugh and love and grow together.

THE JONATHAN W. PLUMMER LECTURE

Beginning with the 1961 sessions, Illinois Yearly Meeting of Friends proposed to annually honor its first clerk by designating the principal or keynote address, the Jonathan W. Plummer Lecture.

Jonathan Wright Plummer, acknowledged by Quaker Torch Bearers, as the father of Friends General Conference, was born in 1835 at Richmond, Indiana. He died in 1918 at 83 years of age and lies interred at Graceland Cemetery in Chicago.

When he was 39, he moved to Chicago, where he was first with E. R. Burnham & Son, wholesale druggists. Later, this was the Morrison-Plummer Company, wholesale druggists, and is now known as McKesson & Robbins.

He introduced profit-sharing in his business and he practiced tithing, giving one-tenth of his private income and one-tenth of the income from his drug business. He also loaned money freely to people in need. He advocated prison reform.

“He did go to Meeting, headed committees of action, and notably in 1878 wrote letters which were albatrosses about the neck of pious epistolary correspondence. Illinois Yearly Meeting, which he helped to create in 1875, was housed in the country near McNabb, Illinois. Here he came once a year by train to meet with Friends from 10 neighborhoods of Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois, and Indiana, as well as with spiritual leaders from other Yearly Meetings.

“In 1878 he came with a project as clear as a blueprint. Its framework was a conference and its aim to co-ordinate widely scattered activities.... Jonathan Plummer desired a conference that would consider all the social testimonies of Friends. As a result, minute 52 of Illinois Yearly Meeting’s proceedings in 1878 set him at liberty to prepare an address of invitation to the several Yearly Meetings for holding a general conference once in five years or oftener.”

He gave the opening address at the World’s Parliament of Religions (held during the ‘93 Fair), expressing hope for greater helpfulness and for co-operation among all faiths.

“He was not a pronounced religious mystic, as were many earlier Quakers. He listened to the ‘still, small voice,’ and this prompted both charity and vocal ministry.

“He measured up to the test of greatness set by Goethe in that he expressed clearly what others felt but were unable to express. He lived in the midst of what shall not pass away. Whoever is the messenger of its truth brings surprises to mankind. Such was Jonathan W. Plummer.”