

# Follow Me

Maurine Pyle

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## **Biography**

Maurine Pyle was born Maurine Hebert and raised in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She learned storytelling on the front porch from her grandfather, Daddy Sam, and other elders in her tribe. Cajun culture and Bible-belt influences were all around her; also there were African-American influences from the caregivers that were part of the Hebert family web.

Maurine has been singing for as long as she can remember. In high school she joined the chorus. When Maurine started attending Annapolis meeting she was moved to sing in meeting for worship and has continued this ministry.

She went to school in Louisiana where she was offered the opportunity to become an exchange student at a university in Mexico. She graduated from the University of Kentucky with a degree

in Spanish, preparing her to teach at the high school level. She is the mother of Ned Pyle, age 24 and Nick Pyle, age 16. She is divorced.

Maurine was raised as a Roman Catholic and became interested in Quakerism as a result of a conversation with her former mother in law who had just read *The Peaceable Kingdom*. She and her then husband were living in Maryland where they were roaming about the countryside one day and spotted the Annapolis Friends Meetinghouse near the state mental hospital. The usual attendance on Sundays was fifteen people, making it possible for her to find the right atmosphere for contemplation. Maurine is a member of Lake Forest Monthly Meeting, currently serving on the Ministry and Counsel Committee.

Community development has been and continues to be both vocation and avocation for Maurine. She has worked in a variety of settings, from a university to social services. She has developed and executed programs in conflict resolution, organizational change, and leadership development.

In May, 1997, she and a colleague participated in the Fifth International Conference on Conflict Resolution in St. Petersburg, Russia. Together they presented a day long workshop on partnership building. Additionally, Maurine presented a solo workshop on interfaith peacemaking.

Maurine is guided in all aspects of her work and life by Quaker principles and her faith in Christ.

## **Follow Me**

### **Up the magnolia tree**

Let your life be a story worth retelling, I always say. For me life is all about storytelling. Those ancient *griots* of Africa sitting around the campfire could recite all of the "begats" for their tribe, recounting tales of generation upon generation. Today I want to restore that storytelling tradition from a spiritual perspective, sharing the lessons I have gathered along the way. With you as my tribe, I will also sing in the spirit to gather you closer to the campfire. Please feel free to join in with my singing.

At the heart of my story is my love for Jesus Christ and his love for me. That love has made all the difference. I was surprised and overwhelmed by his love. From the moment I embraced Jesus, my former life was overturned. My life was no longer my own. He said to me, "Lay down your life, take up your cross and follow me," and I have been following ever since. This is a story about how I became a follower. Before that encounter with Jesus my first intention always was to lead, not to follow. And I started leading when I was very young.

My first kingdom was the magnolia tree in the front yard of my parents' house in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. I loved its smooth branches and fragrant white blossoms. There were small cones filled with bright red berries and glossy green leaves with a fuzzy undercoating perfect for writing secret messages. Most of all I loved being held lightly, but firmly, in her topmost branches. I suppose my mother would have scolded me had she known I was up on the highest

branches, but she was always too busy with her many children to spy on me. I was up so high I could see over the trees and look down upon the glistening lake below.

As the wind blew, her branches would cradle me, gently rocking me. Although I was feeling safe as can be, had folks seen me up there, they would have pointed out the obvious danger. But this experience became the pattern of my life -- taking apparent risks while feeling perfectly secure. Even then I knew that I was truly safe. For it was there atop the magnolia tree that I first learned to speak to God, to hear gentle whispers in my soul. Visions and mysteries enfolded me. There was just blessed silence, the wind and me, and the magnolia tree.

I knew even then that I could not tell others what I had learned there. Even a child knows the dividing line between everyday reality and the divine mysteries. Maybe children especially understand. They keep their mystical secrets carefully concealed until the moment comes to reveal them. High atop the magnolia tree I learned to let the winds of God blow me wherever it would.

***Song:***

*Up over my head, there's music in the air,  
Up over my head, there's music in the air,  
Up over my head, there's music in the air,  
There must be a God somewhere.*

**Which Way, God?**

Beginning in earliest childhood I felt called by God. The still, small voice was constantly with me. I was born *knowing*. I cannot ever remember not *knowing*. Dostoyevski said it so well: "All my life I have been haunted by God."

As I was growing up, I kept searching for a way to answer the ever-present and insistent message to serve God. For a female growing up Catholic in those days, the call to service could be very troubling since the Catholic Church of the 1950's and 1960's was intensely patriarchal, a society largely closed to women. Only nuns could serve God, but for them it was often a form of servitude. As my friend Sr. Anne, age 92, reports "the nuns were mainly servants to the priests."

Anyway, I knew I wanted to be a mother; therefore, no religious path seemed open to me within the church. As a young adult, I eventually left Catholicism quite angry over not finding acceptance of my gifts. From then on I became the sworn enemy of male dominated hierarchy.

Later on, when I heard of the Quakers, I was delighted to discover their long history of equality for women. I resolved to find them. As many of you know, this was not an easy task. My attempts to find the Quakers met with little success. Finally it was through God's serendipity that my path crossed theirs. In 1973 my husband and I were living in Maryland. We loved to wander the countryside looking for colonial buildings. One day we spotted a "chapel-of-ease," a tiny church building where country residents could worship when severe weather prevented them from going into town. As I approached the building, I saw a small sign which read "Quaker

meeting." Aha! The following Sunday I joined their tiny worship group. The white-washed interior filtered a pure white light. In the pristine silence I found my joy. I was home at last!

When I was attending Annapolis Friends Meeting, I was in my early twenties and, like most people of my age, I was sure that I had all the answers. A challenge was awaiting me there in the form of my first Quaker mentor, an engaging gray-haired artist with sparkling blue eyes named Alice Ayres. Alice had a rather careless way of dressing. Her clothing was purely functional, never stylish. While I had my whole life mapped out in advance, Alice had no plans. She loved to tool around town on an old rusty bicycle festooned with a yellow ribbon, which she claimed kept thieves away. I loved her, but secretly I thought she was crazy. Alice was magical in every way, seeming to live in a somehow unconnected sphere of reality. Little did I know that Alice would become my greatest teacher for learning how to let go.

We used to sit on the lawn in front of our meeting house where she would conduct our informal lessons. One singularly important one was about community building. I would query her, "Are we a community yet?" Alice would always answer, "Not quite. We have more work to do." I have learned in all my years in community development that followed just how wise she was on this subject. Finding a perfect community never happens; it is always in process.

Alice firmly believed in healing through the connection of mind, body and spirit. She subtly taught me about the healing energies which surround the body. Here is a typical Alice lesson which was almost always in the form of a story. One day, she told me, she had stumbled into a ground level bees' nest and was enveloped by a swarm of angry bees. Calmly she walked to her car praying over and over, "God bless me. God bless me." She received nary a sting. "Try it!" she encouraged. "Love the bees, and they won't hurt you." I was thinking "Oh, sure, Alice." But somewhere inside of me I was intrigued. At an outdoor gathering of Quakers a few weeks later the yellow jackets were out in full force. Many people got stung, but not me. I loved the bees, and they gently crawled up and down my arm without harming me. "Alice must be sharper than she looks," I thought.

Then she did something that really blew my mind. Alice called together a group of Quaker healers to speak about spiritual forms of healing at our next quarterly meeting. Now these were Quaker heavy-hitters like Barry Morley, whom I greatly admired for their left-brained abilities. They told dramatic stories of healing experiences through visions, laying on hands, and other psychic phenomena. I was stunned. My sense of a common reality was being deeply disturbed. I asked myself, "What have I been missing with my narrow view of God?" It was time to let go and become more experimental with my spiritual gifts.

Now I look upon Alice as one of my greatest teachers. Her wisdom can be symbolized in the way she traveled through life, riding on a rusty bicycle with no planned route. At every intersection, she would stop and ask "Which way, God?" To this day I follow her simple guidance, following God's wisdom, as best I can, at every turn in the road.

***Song:***

*"Simple Gifts"*

*Tis the gift to be simple, tis the gift to be free,*

*Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,  
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,  
We shall be in the valley of love and delight.  
When true simplicity is gained, to bow and to bend  
we shall not be ashamed,  
To turn, to turn shall be our delight,  
Till by turning, turning we come round right.*

## **Envisioning a Community**

Building community has always my theme. In 1975 when I became a member of Annapolis Friends Meeting, we were a tiny community of about fifteen people worshipping together each Sunday. When I was asked to become the clerk soon after being accepted as a member, I found it very surprising. Later I became aware that the reason they asked me to be clerk was that no one else wanted the job. Generally being someone who steps up to leadership roles, I said "yes" with my usual confidence that I could eventually learn how to clerk.

As it turned out, my major role was to lead the meeting through a vision process to consider the query, "What kind of community do we want to be?" Over a three year period I led many small group discussions which eventually resulted in a vision to become "a community of reconciliation." They also envisioned a meeting house built within the city limits of Annapolis near the state capital. Secretly, I questioned the likelihood of this idea ever coming to fruition since ours was a rather poor, small meeting. Plus the site they had picked was amidst some very expensive real estate. But I never told them of my doubts.

At that same time I made the community aware that we had some reconciliation work to do within our own meeting. A rather odd and difficult man, a Presbyterian minister, had been attending the meeting for a while, but because of his peculiar manner the Quakers were quietly shunning him. I asked them how we could consider ourselves peacemakers without making peace with him. As a result we undertook a sincere effort to make him feel included, and he eventually found his place among us. Not long after that, I moved away to Illinois.

Fifteen years later I received an invitation and an offer of a free plane trip back to Maryland to help Annapolis Friends Meeting dedicate their new \$400,000 meeting house, built in the exact location they had envisioned. I wondered how this tiny, fledgling group had ever accomplished such a mighty feat. Many hidden financial resources within the community had been revealed over time, but their nest egg had come from the Presbyterian minister who left a portion of his estate to the meeting when he died. By giving him a home, they had found one too.

### ***Song:***

*"Home, Glory"*

*Home, glory,*

*Home, glory,*

*There is room enough in paradise to have a home in glory.*

## **The Vision**

In the late 1970's I moved away from Maryland to the prairies of Illinois where I joined Lake Forest Friends Meeting. Before I arrived there I wrote a letter to the meeting introducing myself. Immediately I received a lovely note from Alice Walton, an elder of the meeting, offering me her friendship. I was so moved by her welcoming heart that I felt more confident that I could find a new home in Illinois. She was to become my second Quaker mentor named Alice.

Allie, as we called her, had a razor sharp intellect and a wicked sense of humor. Although in her 70's when I met her, she still had the air of a sly teenage girl. Her favorite fun was poking holes in Quaker stuffiness. Allie was a favorite mentor to many young Quakers like me; so many that it seemed impossible for her to support us all, but she managed with ease.

It was Allie whom I turned to when my spiritual path took a surprising turn in the early 1980's. It started innocently enough with a trip to the bookstore. As was my custom I gravitated toward the religion section where a book with modest green cover caught my eye. It was *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As I lifted it off the shelf, the Voice whispered to me, "If you read this book, it will change your life." Carefully reviewing it, I made the conscious choice to accept the challenge -- the risk -- and the leading.

Bonhoeffer was practically the only Christian clergyman to oppose Hitler's rise to power on moral grounds. He had left the safety of America and returned to Germany to continue his public repudiation of the Nazis, which eventually led to his death in 1945. As someone who had always been highly sympathetic to the Jews, I found his story compelling. His book was an illumination of the New Testament and the life of Jesus asking the central question, "What would adherence to the word of Jesus mean in today's world?"

Slowly with Bonhoeffer's help I began to consider whether there might be some truth to this "Christ divinity thing." Maybe it wasn't all mucked-up theology or male-created mumbo-jumbo. At the same time I began learning how to read scriptures using the *lectio divino* method, that is allowing the Spirit to guide me to the page and illuminate the meaning. Still I remained skeptical, until one night I had an experience which swept me into another reality.

I had been meditating in the evening, as was my custom, when suddenly a vision overcame me. I found myself kneeling with the women at the foot of the cross. There were the three Marys, the daughters of Rachel, weeping over their lost child. Slowly I lifted my eyes expecting to see the broken, dying body of Jesus, the symbol of my Catholic childhood. Instead I witnessed a bright light, more luminous and encompassing than anything I had ever experienced. In that single moment my heart was transformed by the great love of Jesus. I feel that I was given a momentary glimpse of the Divine in full glory. I knew that Jesus was indeed the Christ. All my doubts ceased. For the first time, in that moment of pure ecstasy, I became a Christian.

***Song:***

*"At the Feet of Jesus" At the feet of Jesus,  
Sorrow like a sea,  
Lord, O let your mercy come drifting down on me.  
Lord, O let your mercy come drifting down on me.*

## The Call

Not long after the vision occurred, I heard the Voice speaking to me again, this time with an insistent and clear message -- "Record your ministry." I did not understand what the message meant and for a long time I ignored it. As far as I knew, under Quaker practice everyone has the ability and responsibility to minister. When the Voice would not relent, I turned to Allie for clarification. She explained to me that the recording of ministry was an ancient practice which had been laid down by most Friends meetings. In earlier times it had been the way for Friends to acknowledge and recognize special spiritual gifts, particularly those of public ministers. Recording offered a process for holding ministers accountable by providing elders to support and guide them in their work.

Notwithstanding the historical precedent, she took my *leading*\* seriously and insisted on forming a clearness committee to consider it with other elders from the meeting. Those present were Daryl and Blanche Frey, Lou and Allie Walton, and Lynn Fitz-Hugh. After we met for careful consideration of my concern, the committee reached consensus that I should first present my *leading* to my local meeting. I knew that I had no choice but to follow their direction, and even though I was scared, I was committed. I knew that the meeting would have to struggle with my request, especially since my call to ministry happened in a Christian context.

The process of hearing my leading engaged the entire community for a over a year. I endured criticism, intense questioning and even a few direct attacks. My request had apparently reopened the wounds of those who had rejected Jesus -- "the victims of Christian malpractice" as Dan Seeger has called them. In the latter part of the 20th century Quaker communities have attracted renegades from many faiths who were wounded or disappointed by their childhood faith communities. Many of them are Christians. These people who heard me witnessing for Jesus, while at the same time making a claim to a vocation in ministry, were deeply unhappy. For a while I was definitely *persona non grata*. I asked God repeatedly to release me from this painful duty, but the message I received was "Accept this time of sacrifice and you will be rewarded later."

One experience particularly stands out in my memory. The business meeting had called a threshing session to give the entire community an opportunity to focus on my *leading*. As I scanned the room, I noted that a psychologist who rarely attends meeting was present. My first thought was that he had been asked to check the sanity of a woman who hears voices. Mystics can be easily psychologized these days. This was a tense occasion for me. I wanted nothing more than to hide away and never see these people again.

And yet there were times of acceptance of this cross I carried, accompanied by a deep peace. A notation from my journal of that period reads, "The day of change is approaching. I whirl and turn in a joyful dance uncertain of where my feet will land. Trusting all in God's wisdom, rejecting human thought and advice. Peace surrounds me. Step out onto the water simply because you are bidden to do so."

I told them the story of the guidance to record my ministry. It wasn't hard because I had already related it to many people in the room before. There was silence and then someone responded. It

was a young Evangelical Quaker who chanced to be visiting us that day. I never forgot his words. He said "If we feel Maurine's calling is genuine, we should write it on our hearts, affirm it with our lips, and rejoice with her." I wept being so moved by his words. To this day I believe he was an angel sent to comfort and encourage me.

A few weeks later the clerk approached me to say that the business meeting could not reach consensus on my request. I told her that I felt the recording had already taken place since I had done as St. Paul advised, "I will announce your name to my brothers. I will sing your praise in the midst of the assembly. I will put my trust in him" (Hebrews Chapter 2: 12-13). After all, recording of ministry was simply meant to be an acknowledgment of the call by placing one's ministry under the care and guidance of the meeting. I had accomplished recording my ministry. The next step would be to find spiritual guides.

***Song:***

*My stronghold, my savior,  
I shall not be afraid at all.  
My stronghold, my savior,  
I shall not be moved.*

## **Traveling Partners**

You have noticed that my journey often sends me outside of life's norms, yet I have never been alone. Like the Quaker ministers of old, I have always traveled with companions. Mentors are constantly being sent to guide, support and counsel me as I travel along. Although my meeting has never appointed anyone to oversee my journey, as was the custom for public ministers in earlier times, I have always been accompanied. I could never trust and dare the way I do without the tender care of my traveling companions.

Besides the two Alices there have been many other mentors in my life. I have always known that I should not attempt to follow this mysterious path alone. In the early 1990's, I encountered several powerful guides who are with me still and who have influenced my ministry deeply. I have just returned from spending a week with one of them in Tucson, Arizona. Bill Lofquist and his lovely wife Mary offered me a scholarship (a free plane ticket) and their home in the desert for a wonderful retreat as I completed this Plummer lecture. In my field of community development and prevention, Bill is one of the shining lights. Years ago I took the bold step of introducing myself to him by telephone and asked him to come to speak to my college students the next time he was in Illinois. He generously offered to do so without charge, which is very characteristic of Bill. He is a slow talking Southerner with the heart of a die hard radical. That Southern drawl of his provides a great cover for his social change agenda.

Not long after we met he invited to me to join his national training team. What a surprise! He was choosing me, an unknown quantity, as his traveling partner. Like any good mentor, he had recognized my hidden gifts and knew that we would make great dance partners. I lean on Bill for courage because he always hones tightly to the truth, although experience indicates there can be painful consequences. He is my role model for showing fierce courage in a world that hates



change. With him in the world, I don't feel totally crazy for being who I am. Thank God for him. I can always count on someone being just a little bit farther out on the limb than I am.

Through Bill I met another magical change agent named Hugh Suenaga. He was invited to join Bill's training team at the same time I was. Hugh is Japanese-American, and initially I found him inscrutable. At our first training session I sat next to him for several days without finding out much about him. To tell you the truth, I had written him off. Then a month later he wrote me a letter which in essence said, "You are my best friend in the whole world." I asked myself what on earth I had missed in our interaction. It came to me that this man was a powerful prophet who was able to see our future relationship. I decided to enter into friendship with him in complete trust. Of course, he was right about us becoming best friends. That is exactly what happened.

Hugh has often appeared as the magician in my life who provides me with encouragement and financial support necessary to move the process. Here is one example. In December 1996 my colleague and partner Sharon Colby asked me if I would like to go to Russia to make a presentation at an international conference on conflict resolution. I just laughed at her, saying "We have no money for such an adventure." Besides, I could never imagine that they would choose me. I knew Sharon would be a shoe-in selection because she is an international trainer. She is unrelenting when she gets one of these notions, so to placate her I filled out the application forms. I had little hope we would ever get there.

In a few days we received a surprise visit from our friend Hugh. It was a very special time of friendly connection and healing for all of us. At the close of our visit he drew two envelopes from the breast pocket of his jacket and gave one to each of us. Each envelope contained ten \$100 bills. Sharon looked at me and said calmly, "I guess this means we are going to Russia." We had never told Hugh of our plans. Later we were invited to present three workshops, and thanks to Hugh's angel gift as a down-payment, we were able to raise all the money we needed for the trip to St. Petersburg.

Sometimes it is hard to remember that Sharon has not been my friend all my life; we have only known each other for about ten years. She is the person I *must* speak with each day since we serve as spiritual guardians for each other. Thanks be to God for sending Sharon who shares my gifts for social change and community healing. Together we have the courage to risk everything.

To explain our relationship I will tell you one brief story from our trip to St. Petersburg. Among our Russian students were two women named Luda and Tatiana, who fell in love with Sharon. They were constantly coming by our dorm room to ask her out for a walk. I used to tease Sharon because she does not speak Russian, and they spoke little English. "What on earth do you say to them?" I queried. She just smiled mysteriously. Clearly, they were engaging in spirit talk, which is universal. On the day we were leaving, Luda came to give Sharon a good-bye gift. It was a silver ring in the shape of a serpent. Luda told her that the serpent is the symbol of wisdom and that she was giving the ring to Sharon so that she would be reminded of her wisdom. Then she turned to me and slipped into my hand another silver ring which had a smaller serpent engraved on it. "Wear this, Maurine, to be reminded that you are the guardian of Sharon's wisdom," she said.

I have often heard of the intuitive gifts of the Russians, but this was truly extraordinary. How else could Luda have known that my nickname for Sharon is "the Scarecrow?" Just like the scarecrow in the Wizard of Oz, she forgets her wisdom. And Sharon calls me her "dueña", which means her guardian. How could Luda have known these central truths about our relationship? Sharon and I serve as guardians for each other's wisdom and health, and our relationship makes us strong.

There is one other important group of traveling partners I want to mention, my Shalem group. We are five women who have been meeting monthly for the past few years for mutual spiritual direction. The method we use was developed by Sr. Rosemary Dougherty, a member of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, based on the Quaker clearness process. Janet Means, Janice Domanik, Elizabeth Mertic and Pat Bogie are my spiritual partners. (Claire Cafaro has moved away, but remains with us in spirit.) Nothing I can say will do justice to the power of this group. We meet monthly to pray for each other. We cry together. We heal our wounds. I know that no matter what trials I am enduring, that Shalem (which means wholeness) will put me back together. We teasingly call ourselves the Rosie the Riveter angels. Our pledge is to travel anywhere our sisters needs us to provide invisible moral support in any difficult passage.

Accountability and support for my ministry have come about quite naturally. God is constantly sending me angels and spiritual guides. As you can see, I have never been alone on this journey.

***Song:***

*"Angels Hovering Round"*

*There are angels hovering round,*

*There are angels hovering round,*

*There are angels, angels hovering round.*

## **My Quaker Blueprint for Change**

For twenty-five years I have been using Quakerism as a blueprint for my work in community development. Whether I was engaged in prison reform, interfaith collaboration or prevention activities, I always found that Quaker methods really work best. What I mean by Quaker methods is -- consensus decision-making, the use of silence, and conflict resolution, to name just three. Of course, underlying it all is the principle of "walking cheerfully over the earth, answering that of God in everyone."

I am still amazed at what can be accomplished when we simply accept others as they are. My secret and most powerful method, though, has always been loving the people I work with. I recall a remarkable conversation I had once with a prisoner who was being held in detention, whispering to me from his darkened cell. He told me about his mother whom he missed very badly. He responded to me with trust because I was responding to him with pure love.

I want to tell you of one experience using my Quaker blueprint which had remarkable results. It happened at a private university where I was a newly employed admissions director and part-time faculty member. I am telling you this so that you will know just how lowly my status was when something magical happened. One afternoon I received a phone call from Ruth Goldboss, a

peace activist buddy of mine. Ruth is the kind of person who is always on fire with a new idea. Her ideas are usually very good so I listened carefully. She told me that during her prayer time that morning she had received a vision of a drama which would teach children about altruism using one of the stories of the *Righteous Gentiles* who rescued Jews during the Holocaust. A few years prior Ruth had helped to create a memorial park in Evanston which honors the deeds of these unsung heroes.

She asked me if I would help her reach someone in the college's drama department with this idea. I agreed to carry the message forward, but I wasn't sure anyone would listen to me. When I spoke to the theater arts director, he loved the idea and immediately asked the dean to support the project. The dean loved the idea and persuaded the higher university officials to support it. And on and on. Within two years we had created the Honor of Humanity Project, a collaborative effort of a local interfaith community group and the university. We created and produced an original play for children called *Angel in the Night* which won a national award and is currently being produced in schools across the country.

What happened? How could one phone call produce so much? While no one was watching, I was grounding this effort solidly with Quaker methods. It wasn't all a cake-walk, by any means, but God was with us. Like John Woolman, my motto is "Let us see what love can do."

I have continued using these tried and true methods of community development. They do work like magic. I will continue to take my bows, but it is the wise old Quakers who taught me how.

**Song:**

*"The George Fox Song"*

*Walk in the Light wherever you may be,*

*Walk in the Light wherever you may be,*

*With my old leather britches and my shaggy, shaggy locks*

*I am walking in the glory of the Light, said Fox.*

## **Spiritual Companions**

God has called upon me to become a spiritual companion to others as well. Now I want to tell you of a time when I companioned a lonely spirit. This story began about ten years ago. As I walked into an Evanston coffee shop one day, I was greeted by a nattily dressed elderly gentleman. With a twinkle in his eye and his arms outstretched wide, he greeted me saying loudly, "Hello, my darling, will you marry me?" I sat down next to him saying I could hardly refuse such a charming proposal. He handed me his business card which was inscribed with "Jack Goodfriend, a frustrated Don Quixote." In the corner of the card was a tiny green windmill. Sitting before me was a small, intensely cheerful version of the Don himself. I was to learn all about his frustrations later.

Jack and I began meeting weekly for coffee where we mainly exchanged jokes, and political news. As we were parting after one of our visits he told me casually, "I know when I am going to die." After he left it struck me what he had meant. Only people who intend to commit suicide know when death is coming. Since all I had was his business card with a post office box, and no

address, I wrote him a letter. I enclosed a booklet about Viktor Frankl, the famous Austrian psychotherapist who had survived Auschwitz, and who had a philosophy that all lives have meaning. I prayed that Jack would rediscover his life's meaning.

A week later we met again in our usual spot. He thanked me for the book and told me that several years before he had told a woman in coffee shop that he planned to kill himself, and she gave him *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl. God's little joke on us deepened our friendship.

Jack had a sad story. He was basically homeless when I met him. Oh, yes, technically he had a place to sleep, but he had no connection with his old life. His wife was dead, and his children were not on speaking terms with him, for good reasons. Jack had made many mistakes in his life and was reaping what he sowed. The only possession he had from his former life was a scrapbook of letters from famous people he had known: the governor, the cardinal, the chief of police for Chicago. It also contained news clippings which chronicled his activities in the community. Jack was a very bright guy who had been a successful business man in his earlier days. He held onto this remnant of the past to give his present circumstance some meaning.

What was my role in his life? I simply continued to walk by his side through ten very tough years. Suicide attempts, hospitalizations, moves from one place to another, and finally arriving at the nursing home. My friend Sally Mackert and her family and I were his only friends. Somehow our friendship with this lonely man enabled him to be reunited with his family eventually. I don't want to give the impression that Jack was helpless. He was a full partner in his own recovery. Often it was his sassy sense of humor that pulled him through his trials. He liked me because I always got his jokes.

In return Jack saved my life. I mean that. He visited my house once for Thanksgiving dinner and later told me he was horrified at the way I was treated by my husband. He was courageous enough to warn me about how dangerous my marriage had become for me and my boys. At the time he was confronting me about my marriage, I was supporting him financially. Jack took a great risk and that got my attention. He was unrelenting in advising me to save myself and my kids. After a year I found the courage to take his advice. I often wonder what turn my path would have taken without Jack, my "good friend indeed."

From this remarkable experience I learned that God has called us to be companions to one another. We are asked simply to walk with the person in need, to offer our hand, to be present and compassionate in sharing their pain. They will also be walking with us, giving us strength and encouragement. It is this sharing of gift and grace that brings healing. Could it be that the next homeless person you meet might be a heavenly messenger sent to you?

***Song:***

*"Balm in Gilead"*

*There is a balm in Gilead to heal the wounded heart*

*There is a balm in Gilead to soothe the sin-sick soul.*

**St. Louis Cathedral**

While attending a conference in St. Louis in 1991, I took a stroll along the banks of the Mississippi River. I call it my sanctuary water because I grew up dreaming near its muddy banks in Baton Rouge. Along the river's edge I spotted an old Catholic cathedral made of grey stone. The sign out front said it was the first Catholic church built in St. Louis. Being curious about the architecture, I made my way down some narrow stairs into the gift shop where it was indicated I could enter the church. An old gentleman behind the counter announced to me, "Mass will start in five minutes." Inwardly I groaned because I had no desire to be anywhere near a mass. As a recovering Catholic, I had taken the pledge to stay away from mass many years ago. I did attend church once a year when I visited my father, but only as a courtesy to him.

Ignoring the old man's message I decided to go into the cathedral for a quick tour. As I entered the church, I could hear people praying the rosary. It was Veteran's Day, and the church was filled with people praying for the war dead. "What kind of Quaker could walk away from this scene?" I asked myself. So I knelt to pray with them. When it was time for mass, the Voice firmly said, "Stay." I agreed. I noticed that I felt comfortable being there. How strange. When it came time for the Eucharist, the Voice urged me to join them at the altar. Again I felt comfortable as I walked down the aisle and shared in this most sacred ceremony. With God's permission I took the host and the cup for the first time in 19 years.

As I returned to my pew and knelt to pray, I heard the Voice once again. Again the instruction was quite specific. I was asked to give a message to my friend Pat Bogie, a former nun and a refugee from the Catholic Church. Right after hearing the message, I wrote it down on a postcard for her. Here is what it said: "A renewal of faith and healing will extend to your community and to those whom they serve." I knew the community meant the School Sisters of Notre Dame, Pat's former order. I did not know how my friend would react since she was an angry Catholic renegade just like me, but I took a risk and sent the message to her. Pat's response was to keep that message on her desk at work for a year and to read it frequently. By the end of the year she had healed her wounds and rejoined her order as an associate member.

Pat invited me to become an associate as well, which I did. We have both found joyful renewal of our Catholic heritage among the School Sisters of Notre Dame. Their mission is: "to empower others -- especially women and the materially poor; to evangelize and be evangelized -- being sent and supporting those sent to confront unjust structures and challenging situations." I have found that their mission matches my own perfectly. The School Sisters of Notre Dame remind me of my favorite Quaker heroes. They support people who are imprisoned, empower the poor, and develop the gifts of women.

Last year I was invited to attend the School Sisters international conference in celebration of the 150th anniversary of the order's founding in America. We rejoiced hearing stories of the adventures of Mother Theresa and Mother Caroline, their dynamic founders, who challenged frontier America by building schools and orphanages in the wilderness. They did all of this while wearing heavy habits, which makes them akin to Ginger Rogers who danced as well as Fred, except backwards and wearing high heels. Over 500 religious women attended the conference from around the world. What power! What joy!

My sister-sponsor Sr. Anne Mayer, who is in her 90's, was so energized that I could hardly keep up with her. After the main program had ended, Sr. Anne declared it was time for lunch and ushered me into the dining hall where she declared, "Let's sit here!" As I sat down I scanned the table and noticed that she had not been shy. Our lunch partners included the leader of the worldwide order of School Sisters and the papal nuncio, the Pope's representative to America. The *Papal Nuncio*, the Pope's representative to America. The *Papal Nuncio*, a kindly gentleman, quickly fixed his gaze on me. Apparently deciding I must be a novice, he called me to his side for a special blessing. All the while he was blessing me, I kept wondering, "Should I tell him that I am really a Quaker?" I chose Quaker silence as my answer.

By this point in my story you may be wondering why I don't simply choose one faith path or the other. My answer is that God sent me down both of these paths, and that is how I must travel until further instructions arrive. In the meantime I will accept papal blessings as well as Quaker ones. Without my being aware of it, I was led back to my childhood faith tradition while still remaining a Quaker. Now I teasingly call myself a "Quatholic." The School Sisters delight in my dual path, and even my local meeting has accepted it. What a neat trick God played on me.

**Song:**

*"Seek and Ye Shall Find"*

*Seek and ye shall find,*

*Knock and the door shall be opened,*

*Ask and it shall be given,*

*And the love come a tricklin' down.*

## **Why Jesus?**

As I was traveling the difficult road to record my ministry I learned that there are hidden Christians in our Quaker communities. I remember hearing Allie and Lou Walton speak with anguish in one clearness committee, saying they were tired of not being able to express their Christian faith openly for fear of criticism from the community. I then realized that the journey wasn't just about me. There were others like me who were in hiding.

One of my Quaker heroes, Lucretia Mott, describes the problem so well:

*It is lamentable that the simple and benign religion of Jesus be so encumbered with creeds and dogmas of sects. Its primitive beauty obscured by these gloomy appendages of man -- its investigation of honest dilemmas checked by the cry of heresy and infidelity. I long to see obedience to manifest duty leading to practical righteousness, the Christian standard, the fruit of faith.*

Lucretia was recorded as a Friends minister in the 19th century. She lived out her truth under very difficult circumstances. Although she had received the recognition of her calling into ministry as a young woman, her radical Christian faith kept getting her into trouble with those conservative Philadelphia Quakers. Lucretia sincerely practiced the message of equality that Jesus exemplified, and she carried it to its logical conclusion -- equal rights for women and freedom for the slaves. Lucretia was not afraid to radically challenge the accepted values of her

day. What gave her the courage to confront unjust structures was her faith in Christ. Wherever you are, friend Lucretia, "Thank thee kindly. Thy light still shines for me."

Everything that has happened to me since my vision of the women at the foot of the cross can be placed at the feet of Jesus. Why have I allowed my life to be overturned by him? The only way I can really explain it is to return to the Bible for illumination. One of my favorite stories is Jesus' meeting with the woman at the well. It's just an ordinary day for a Samaritan woman who goes to the well to draw water. There she meets a traveling rabbi who speaks to her, asking for a drink from her vessel. Immediately she knows that this is no ordinary man because he is breaking the cultural boundaries which say Jews do not speak to Samaritans, and especially not to women. There is something in his manner which appeals to her. He treats her differently, with respect. So she poses a question to him, the way she sees the men do it. She asks him whether it is right to worship on Mt. Gerazim, as her people have done traditionally, or in Jerusalem, where the Jews claim God must be worshipped. Jesus answers her by saying that there is no right place to worship. That a day is coming when people will worship God in spirit and in truth.

To me he was saying that it truly doesn't matter where we worship or what we call ourselves because God will hear us anyway. Quakers have honored this approach by accepting that God could be reached by many paths. An example would be John Woolman's sojourn among the Indians when he expressed a desire to learn from them. Or the journey of Mary Fisher, the 17 year old English serving girl who traveled halfway around the world to deliver a message to a Middle Eastern Sultan. The message was, "Our God is one." Quakers are well known for their appreciation of differences in culture, gender, and religion. Mostly Quakers have broadly defined who belongs in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Looking at Jesus through Quaker eyes, I see a man who was radically different from the people of his time. To my mind his actions are saying that the boundaries erected by human beings are often artificial and should not separate us from each other as children of God. Hearing that I am a Christian, some people are prompted to ask me if I believe that Jesus is the only pathway to God. I say that he is *my* way. I also believe that Jews, Native Americans, and Buddhists have genuine and acceptable paths as well. Becoming a follower of Jesus does not necessarily make me narrow of mind. In fact, my walk with Jesus has enlarged my vision to include all those who worship in spirit and in truth.

When we start out as children on the journey to the Divine, we are innocents wandering on a journey in search of perfect love. As adults, we are more likely to be seeking after Truth (capital T.) In this process we may reject the images or teachings of our childhood. I find that images can provide a convenient means for reviewing beliefs. I would like for you to pause for a moment and imagine what picture comes to mind when you hear the name of Jesus. .... Is it the image of shepherd leading his flock? Or perhaps a golden-haired man standing knocking at the door? Have you rejected your childhood images of him as too facile or do you continue to draw comfort from them?

When I image Jesus, I see an itinerant rabbi crisscrossing Galilee, preaching and healing as he goes. I see a profoundly radical lover of women who consistently displays his deep understanding of their lowly status in the world. Like George Fox I have had personal encounters

with Jesus, and he speaks to my condition. George felt that Jesus was speaking directly to him- and from those messages he crafted our Quaker faith. After all, we were first known as Friends of Jesus.

Many of you have inquired into the Koran and the Bhagavad Gita. Among you are those who find the traditions of Judaism to be beautiful and timeless. Others seek out the mysteries of Buddhism. Why are we corporately unwilling to consider the New Testament as another of God's sacred texts? Why do we not give Jesus equal time as one of the world's greatest spiritual guides? By allowing Christ's words to illuminate our minds, we can overcome some of our childhood wounds. Why not think of Jesus as a welcome, not a wall?

For several years I carried the image in meditation of me following Jesus as we climbed a steep mountain path. There was little room for error since one side was a sheer drop off. He walked in front of me showing the way. All I could see was his back and where he had placed his feet. There I also placed my feet. I have received comfort and courage from this vision. He beckons once more, "Follow me."

I would like to close with a poem by a dear friend, Todd Anderson, which he composed for me. It is called "The Passage."



*The path goes on through forest deep  
Where darkness lurks and willows weep  
And now descends  
To unknown end  
Through briars thick where fell things creep.*

*Fearful though my steps may be  
Upon a path I cannot see,  
My master bade  
Me walk this way  
Through hoarded hate and soul's debris.*

*So on I go, and where I tread  
Upon the path a light is shed.  
A glimmer faint  
Seen free of taint  
For love stands now in hatred's stead.*

*Now all the treasures I've amassed  
Stand worthless on the path I've passed  
For I've been shown  
That love alone  
Will light my way back home at last.*

*I walk the path now free of fear  
With joyous heart for now I hear  
The sound I've known  
Would guide me home  
My Master's call, so pure and clear.*

**Song:**

*"Follow Me"*

*Follow, follow, follow, follow, follow, follow me,  
Whither shall I follow, follow, follow,  
Whither shall I follow, follow thee,  
Through the green wood,  
Through the green wood,  
Through the green wood, green wood tree.*

\* In Quaker parlance, a *leading* is a specific direction given by God.