

When You Dance With God, Guess Who Leads?

Paul Schobernd

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Biography of Paul Schobernd

Paul Schobernd and Beth Hanks Schobernd are both native Illinoisans, having grown up just a mile apart in the rural splendor of Calhoun County, Illinois. Paul highly recommends marrying your best friend.

While trained as a teacher and administrator, Paul's first love has always been the study of the spiritual life and the living of the experience. His journey led him to Friends in 1983, but he has the distinction of having provided pulpit supply for Brethren, Lutherans, Mennonites and Quakers. He served as Field Secretary for Illinois Yearly Meeting from 1992 - 1994.

Paul and Beth have three children: Zachary, 23, of Nederland, Colorado; Zebulon, 19, of Normal, Illinois and Earlham College; and Zekiel, 16, a junior at University High School in Normal, Illinois. The dinner table and the rich conversation and humor that occurs there has been the greatest blessing imaginable.

He and his family came to Friends after getting lost in downtown Philadelphia. They ducked into Arch Street Meeting House quite by accident, with three little children in tow. A three dollar *Faith and Practice* began the journey, and Friends at Friends Hill Meeting in Quincy, Illinois completed the transition. The family now attends Heartland Worship Group in Normal, Illinois.

Paul is eccentric and eclectic. Ever since he figured out the difference between schooling and real education, he has never been able to satisfy his curiosity.

When You Dance With God, Guess Who Leads?

I imagine that most Quakers in Illinois Yearly Meeting have at some time or another given some thought to what they might say if they were asked to give the Plummer Lecture. It is in some ways the highest expression of affirmation that Friends in IYM have to bestow on each other, or at the very least it is an expression of our intense curiosity about the interior lives we all share. I am very pleased to be able to give this lecture, but I also must say that after the glow of the invitation had run its course, the cold dark reality of fear, a sense of unworthiness, the reality of personal hubris and limitations set in. Had I known what lay in store for me when I agreed to do this, I might be someplace else today!

There is nothing that refines the soul and burns away the dross quite so effectively as intense introspection and laying bare one's soul to God and to others. This has been my experience of the past year and what I give you today is the fruit of that spiritual labor. I have counted the cost and gladly paid the price to stand before you today. What ever you find that is good in what I say today, give the glory to God, from whom all good emanates. On the other hand, if you find my words disturbing or problematic, feel free to let it go for another day's consideration. Having said all this and realizing how somber some of this sounds, I want to back up and say that what I really hope we can do today is share something of the joy of our life together. This is a lecture about joy, and a celebration of how God has chosen to join the dance of life.

Any description of the spiritual life or a description of the spiritual journey is really just a set of snapshots taken from one perspective at one point in time. It is sort of like the comedian with an imaginary slide projector who shows you imaginary slides with a running commentary. Today I am going to show some pictures from my life as it was, my life as it is, and we will take a peek together at what may lay ahead. Ultimately, this is not about me; rather it is about the human condition and the relationship of humankind to God and all sentient life. One individual life is only a piece in the great story that is the mystery of our existence.

At the ripe old age of 48 I am simply too young to give this lecture. When I gave this lecture any thought at all, I always considered that maybe by the time I was 60 or maybe 70 -- then maybe I would be ready. I figured that surely by that point in my life I would have all the answers and I could then write the definitive guide to the spiritual life -- at least from my perspective. But, for

reasons that are not clear to me the call came 20 years too soon and so here I am -- a work in progress, a cracked vessel and a damn fool to boot some days!

I, obviously, do not have any definitive answers to share with you. In fact, every question that I ask simply leaves me with more questions. As I get older, I know less and less about more and more. For a man who started off so many years ago with a profound respect for Martin Luther -- a man who faced his accusers with the great statement of faith, "Here I stand, I can do no other!" -- this is a little disappointing to me. I always thought that eventually I could stand rock solid and never need to question my faith. I always thought that as I got older all the pieces of the puzzle would fall into place, and that eventually I would die content in the knowledge that I had tied up all of the loose ends, clarified all of the ambiguities and I would depart this world with an A on my report card -- the heavens would open and God would be pleased. What silliness.

Real life has fortunately de-railed that particular piece of mythology. Today, life is an ever-deepening mystery, a process that brings joy -- even when it does not bring happiness -- and it is an experience of profound humility as I realize the overwhelming gift that is our life.

By now you are beginning to fidget and you are tired of the appetizers. You want to know where all this God talk is going. So, here it is. As I said, at the ripe old age of 48 I do not know very much, but I have not lived in a vacuum either. I have formulated some statements, and borrowed some others, that I live by and these are what I want to share with you today. In the process, I will introduce you to some of the people and experiences of my life. Some are profound, some silly and some transcend the limits of my ability to fully understand. But, what I do know is that these are gifts from God to be shared.

Now this first statement may underwhelm you, but I beg your indulgence. Stick with me here. The first thing that I know is that *God is*. I can hear the murmurs in the back row now, "You mean I got up and took a cold shower for this!" Don't go back to sleep on me yet. This statement is not so obvious to everyone, nor is it simple.

As a boy I lived with my family at the base of tall limestone bluffs along the Illinois River. Town was 5 miles away and the nearest kid a mile in the other direction. (My future wife also lived on the way to town, but that is another story.) Much of my early life was, by choice, spent alone watching the unfolding of nature and the seasons. Often I found myself at the top of the bluff watching life in the swamp, the river and the fields for as far as the eye could see.

Here I came to know God. In the wind and the trees and in this place little touched by modern man, I sat and I thought. I came to know the meanings and mysteries of life apart from the trappings of society and churches. When God spoke in the wind, I would often shudder because I also knew that death was in this place. There were Native Americans buried here and I knew that their graves had been defiled. I also was painfully aware of the copperhead snakes that were numerous in those early days. They made my journey to the bluff an exercise in mindfulness long before I knew what that word even meant.

In a mystical way that perhaps only God, children and old dogs know, life was a unified whole. I did not say perfect, but rather it was all of one cloth -- it was whole. The difficult part of the

spiritual journey, then as it is now, is coming down from the mountain and finding God and that sense of wholeness in the hubbub that is our everyday life.

My official religion at that point in my life was conservative Lutheran. I know that makes some of you shudder, but in that place and in that time it was a religion of joyful expectations and a good place to be. While I am a religious refugee in the Religious Society of Friends, I prefer to think that I am a refugee to a more complete fulfillment of my spirit rather than a refugee from my past.

In my Lutheran cosmology, God was an interesting personage. He was a little taller than my Dad and of course He had a beard, but the voice of God was unmistakably that of my Father! They both spoke with the same authoritative tone. Come to think of it, God really looked more like an old picture of my Great-Grandpa Schobernd. He was tall with white hair and a bushy moustache. Of course, he in turn looked a lot like an old picture of Wyatt Earp. It was all too confusing and what did I know about God? I was just a kid!

Through all of my training I eventually came to see that God had so many attributes -- omniscience, omnipotence, a beard, a bad temper, a loving nature, etc., etc. -- that pretty soon I knew that the God of the mountain, the God with no face or form, was the God that I really knew best. I knew in my young heart what words could not express.

I grew up in interesting times in a family that loved to travel. We traveled a great deal and we covered most of the continent in marathon excursions by car. Disneyland was new, interstate highways were just coming into being and we had a big old gold DeSoto with fins like a rocket -- at least for some of the journeys.

I was not going to tell this story, but since my parents are here today, I'll toss it in. In those days before our cars had air conditioners, we had an interesting contraption called an evaporative cooler. This thing looked like a length of stove pipe with fan blades in one end, a big wick in the middle which trailed into a reservoir of water inside the pipe.

The theory was that while driving down the road with this thing mounted in the front passenger window, the wind would blow in activating the fan which in turn would blow over the wet wick which would then send cool air into the car. It sort of worked, but it had two basic flaws. The first flaw was that it blew directly at the side of Mother's head. The second flaw was that we kids discovered that if you pulled the cord to wet the wick while going down the road, she got a shot of cold water up the side of her head. It was great fun, at least for some of us.

Now you may wonder what this has to do with the spiritual life, and if I may borrow a phrase from Garrison Keillor, I'll explain. He once said in one of his stories about his childhood, "We loved to see our parents' Christian faith tested right before our very eyes." I can tell you that if you give a rather high-strung woman a 70 mile-per-hour drive-by baptism, you will hear a lot of God words in very short order.

Back to my original story. During these travels I came to see God in nature in places that were different from my home. God was in sandstorms and snowstorms and tornadoes and

thunderstorms, floods and in the dark and quiet of the wilderness. Sometimes it was a fear-producing encounter, but always God was there. But as a budding Panentheist, perhaps my greatest place to see God was in the trees. We had a great many trees on our part of the bluff, but nothing could prepare me for the trip to California and my first encounter with old growth redwood trees.

I had thought that going to Disneyland, which was the 8th wonder of the world from what I could see, would be the high point of the trip to California. I was even prepared to be impressed by the Pacific Ocean, but trees bigger and taller than any living thing I had ever seen absolutely astounded me. As a youngster of 10 or 11 I had the first of what I call "meltdown experiences." If God whispered to me on the bluffs in Illinois, in California He was calling to me in a voice that absolutely shook the very foundation of my being. In the presence of the trees I wept for joy and in awe. If anyone noticed I am sure that it was just chalked up to my already idiosyncratic behavior.

Which brings up the counter-balance to the joy. Often these experiences were also unnerving. It took me a long time to know that when God touches your heart it is okay to cry. It is okay to enjoy what you cannot comprehend, but your heart knows to be true. God is -- and that is enough to know. If I knew nothing else in life that would be enough to sustain my spirit. No matter how God has come into my life, by whatever language or through whatever imagery, I stand convinced that God stands very close to Her creation.

Which brings me to a second idea that is central to my life. This is not a new idea, but I firmly believe that there is that of God in every man, woman and child, and, I suspect, in all sentient beings if I may dip into my Buddhist lexicon.

What I find is that many times this is just a quaint Quaker platitude. We rattle it off when somebody has the audacity to ask what Quakers believe. Not wanting to appear dense, we drop this little gem on them and hope like crazy that we can make ourselves scarce before they get to the second unsettling question, "What does that mean, exactly?" It is at times like these that we often wish we had a good old-fashioned creedal statement -- something you cannot argue with. But, alas, we are often caught off guard.

Do we really believe this Quaker platitude? When life is going to hell all around us and God appears to be sort of remote, do we really believe and act as if we were certain that there is that of God in all people?

This was and is something of a tough question for me. In my best moments I know this to be true, and just as surely as I know this, I also know that when fear and anger creep into my life, I often forget this valuable corollary to the knowledge that God is.

When I left high school in 1969, I spent the summer working in Springfield before moving on to college in the fall. This was a time of intense change in this country, and it was a time of intense change in my life as well. Freedom can be a giddy experience when a country boy heads for town.

The culture in my home area has historically been very racist and xenophobic. In our hearts we knew better, but our fears and biases kept us firmly ensconced in our comfort zone. By this time in my life, I had forgotten my God on the mountain and I had settled for a second-hand religion that I knew with my head, but not with my heart. God kept calling me, but I could not pick up the phone.

Since God could not get through to me, He sent an angel to come to my rescue.

George was an unlikely angel and a unique man. I knew he was going to be special in my life even then, but as I reflect upon our time together I know he was sent to nurture my soul and my life.

Our parents and elders can take us only so far in our personal development. They can model right and wrong, courage and compassion, personal pride and a good work ethic, but eventually we must find other teachers, too -- or they find us.

George was a Black man, stoop-shouldered; he walked with a shuffle and sort of danced with his broom. He was a custodian. His eyes sparkled with compassion and mischievousness. He was the man God sent to teach me new lessons.

Actually, when I went to work, I was given to a diminutive white man named Walter. Walter's job was to keep me busy and train me to process requests for legislation, get me ready to handle the petitions for the upcoming Constitutional Convention, and to get me acquainted with all the places I would need to go within the capitol complex.

George and Walter were best friends. I didn't know any people of color and I definitely didn't know any white people with Black friends. I knew my life was about to change, but I had no idea how profound that change would be.

Much of my day was generally spent following people around carrying large piles of paper. It was a heady experience. I was often in the presence of the Governor or Secretary of State. I loved being close to power, but I also saw government at its most naked. My political zeal was wearing thin.

On the other hand, when George came in I was generally given to him to take care of all the shipping. We were quite a sight. I was 6 feet tall, 250 pounds, with a crew cut and engineer boots, following these two old geezers around the capitol. They were good to me so I loved the work. What they saw in me, I will never know.

The first thing I learned was their respect for each other. They were old friends, George from Springfield and Walter from Beardstown, but they found common ground together because they had good hearts. This was a time of great upheaval and dialogue about race and the war, a time of assassinations and revolts, love and a great deal of violence, but these two men could talk and joke about the great hurts and still be friends. I stood in awe.

I finally took to spending some of my afternoons and evenings with George. He took me under his wing and into his home.

Nighttime would find us outside the rotunda, smoking cigars, sometimes having a shot of whiskey out of a paper cup -- and then we talked. We talked about people, about race, about the dignity of being human, we talked about women and marijuana and jazz.

He never argued with me. He would listen and then weigh-in with some idea that would come crashing right through my self-delusion.

We were an experiment initiated by George. He taught me how to live in a city and he taught me how to live with people who were in some ways different from me. He showed me that the human soul and the human condition are not determined by race, color, religion or background. George was not a Quaker. I was not a Quaker. But he taught me by example that there is that of God in every person.

It wasn't until years later that I figured out the whole scope of this social experiment that George conducted. He used his young white friend to expose his own family to the questions of race and shared humanity.

I was only grudgingly accepted and I could feel the anger directed at me because of the color of my skin. We learned together in the uncomfortable crucible called the family table. From the last supper to the table talks of Martin Luther to our own homes today -- so much of what we know comes from our time together as we break bread.

George saved my life in more ways than one. His lessons were often forgotten and my old imprinting has come forth, but he is never far from my thoughts as I interact with the world. Particularly, I remember him when I am about to stick my foot in my mouth.

But race was not the only lesson I needed to explore to see that of God. Perhaps the most difficult lesson was to learn to see God in those whose sexuality was different from mine.

As a teenager I had a friend who I had no idea was gay until during a break in a night of drinking, he showed me a wedding ring -- his life mate was a shipmate in the Navy.

Until that moment, I had never known the depth of my feelings about sexuality. I had been taught that homosexuality was against the will of God, I had no experience to know how to deal with it, and perhaps I was afraid to look at my own sexuality. Being heterosexual was difficult enough without confounding the problem.

To my own shame, we were never again friends. I couldn't see the God within him, so I ran away.

It wasn't until many years later as a school administrator during the early 80s that I got my next lesson in homophobia. Kids have been calling each other's sexuality into question for as far back as I can remember. It is an ugly rite-of-passage that I hope will one day pass away. At that time, I

had barely heard of AIDS. It was some vague thing that only affected gay people -- it wasn't something that good God-fearing people got. Just as God rained fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah, these people were reaping the vengeance of God and the wages of sin. Besides, we didn't have any gay people in Illinois -- Chicago didn't count. Nothing like a good shot of better-than-thou moralism to make you feel good about yourself.

Then a trickle of young people, whose names were sort of familiar but you didn't really know, started coming home in coffins. There were rumors, closed caskets, fearful morticians. Most of these young people came from cities, California or New York. They had left after high school and never returned except for brief visits to family. These were our unknown children. We feared their sexuality, or they feared us, so they went away into exile to find new families. We slept better knowing we were above all this and safe from these perversions.

But then they came home. They came home to challenge our smug beliefs. They came home to scare us with a secret too terrible to believe.

We buried these children quietly and we would have let them rest in shameful silence, but then the AIDS epidemic became a reality. We had to learn to speak about sexuality. We had to find out how to love and to live with people who were the same but different. We had to learn that there is that of God in all people -- even those we fear. We learned that AIDS was only a disease -- our fears made it an epidemic.

If you are beginning to get from some of these stories that I was a slow learner in God's school of life, you are correct. I now know that it has only been the grace of God that has allowed me to grow. Without that grace, I would still be trapped in a level of sinful ignorance trying to re-make the world in my image. There is nothing smug in my understanding. No one knows better than I do how far I have yet to travel in my journey toward God, but my faith is unshaken because I know that God is saving the best for last.

That, I suppose, is a good segue into my third belief statement, and that is, "the revelations of God are never-ending."

Ever since humankind decided to start writing down religious stuff, we have been arguing about its inspiration, its authorship, its applicability, etc., etc. We have fought wars, taken millions of lives, and generally been barbaric to each other over just these issues. As I was writing this section, I happened to look at my copy of an old Mennonite book entitled *The Martyrs Mirror*. It is a huge tome detailing all the known Christian martyrs from the time of Christ through the 16th century. Don't read it before meals or at bedtime! Stephen King is not even an opening act for this book.

What came to me in re-visiting this dark piece of literature is how strong our fear and our pride can be when we do not know the in-dwelling Christ, the divine teacher, the Spirit of God that passes all understanding. The martyrs chose death, but those who killed them were already more spiritually dead than they could have ever imagined.

It is my firm belief that divine revelation continues today. The voice of God will never ask you to smite Methodists with the jaw of an ass, or ask you to march around knocking walls down while playing your boom boxes at full volume. God will not call you to do evil. Neither will She tell you whether Tide or Cheer is better in your wash. God's endorsements are limited.

But if we will listen, God will speak. Sometimes God speaks in words, sometimes in the wind, sometimes in your voice and sometimes in mine, but God will speak to us. "Be still and know that I am God." As one author phrased it, "This is not a divine suggestion. It is a divine command."

It never ceases to amaze me to what lengths God will go to get our attention. Free-will being what it is, the choice is always ours, but God does not get discouraged easily.

We have so many opportunities to hear God. We can hear Her word in scriptures. We can hear Her words in the words of a child. We can hear the voice of God when we pray and when we meditate and especially when we sit in Meeting for Worship -- if we listen with our hearts instead of only our ears.

We can hear God in our dreams and in visions. We can hear God in the passionate sighs of love fulfilled. We have only to listen.

I am a person given to visions. Fortunately they don't come too often, but when they do I have learned to listen. There is no spiritual hubris in this. My life would be a lot simpler without this input, but if God says, "Write," then I write. If God says, "Share this," then I share. If God says, "This piece is between me and Thee," then that is where it stays. Visions used to scare me spitless. I knew for sure I was losing my mind. It wasn't until I was guided to Friends in 1983 that I learned I had been given a gift rather than a curse.

You may ask how I know that God still speaks. All I can say is that She speaks in my personal experience and in my experience in Meetings for Worship. That is all the proof I have.

My first vision was in 1967 after a fatal car accident. Health care in rural America is no longer what it was, thank heavens. Three hours after the accident, I was finally in an Intensive Care Unit with fractured vertebrae, massive contusions, and failed kidneys. The prognosis was death or permanent paralysis. But God had other plans for me, and She had some lessons for me to learn that She could only teach me if I was in a position to listen.

The chronology of events is lost in the fog of time, but not the details. They could have happened yesterday.

I don't know if Moody was studying near-death experiences in 1967, but I know we would not have had that book in our school library in Calhoun County, regardless. Oh, how I wish that I had known about near-death research before this next step in my journey. At any rate, I was in the hospital, at peace and content to die. I know that some brain research indicates that these feelings may be the result of oxygen-deprived brain tissue, but I also know that when you experience it you don't care why -- you just care that it is.

I found myself drawn toward a bright light, but more important than the light was the sense of all-encompassing love. I was returning to my true source and the homecoming was one of pure joy. But before I could get settled in, God very clearly said I had to go back. I did not argue, but I did not want to be separated from Her presence. She told me I was to live and that I would walk. There was no fancy theological language. All that was said was that it was not my time and that I would not be paralyzed. Now go home.

When I returned I found myself back in the hospital hovering about 3 feet above my body. My mother and father and a doctor were by my bed. I heard the discussion and I saw my parents' tears. I wanted to tell them that it was okay -- I was really fine -- but I could not make them hear.

During this time my body was full of glass shards. I had not even been moved enough to get the glass out of my hair and out from underneath me. I was very uncomfortable even though I was in a coma. Then the screaming began and my discomfort suddenly got worse. There was yelling and crying. It sounded like I had been consigned to hell. Even though I was unconscious, I could still hear the frightful sounds of human suffering.

The anger boiled up inside of me. I wanted to put a stop to the damned noise. I would have killed to have made it go away, and with malice in my heart my ethereal body floated to the other end of the room and around the striped curtain. Vengeance was almost within my grasp when I saw the face of a woman named Mary. She was suffering the aftermath of gall bladder surgery.

In an instant, God melted me down again. Hatred became compassion. Her face was the face of God and I could not be angry with the Beloved. I returned to my body and was out of the coma on what I believe was day three.

I was shaken to my core when I awoke. I forgot about the love of God and went right into fear. I was ready to bargain off anything if God would let me live and walk. I remembered the vision, but still I kept thinking I had to do something to earn back my life. I spoke of this vision to a minister, and his look of horror told me never to speak of it again. The last thing I wanted was to be the recipient of an exorcism. I learned to forget and it was 15 years before God told me it was time to re-visit the lessons She had taught.

How many times must one person be taught that God is, and that there is that of God in everyone, and that God continues the dialogue with Her creation? To be honest, I still don't know the answer. All I know is that I am never alone in the universe no matter how alone I may sometimes feel.

Beyond my visions, I have found Meetings for Worship absolute miracles. If there is an area where I am a Quaker minimalist, this is it. If I had no other experience among Friends than the miracle of silent worship, I could be content. If you could bottle and sell Gathered Meetings, I would be a willing addict.

In no other corporate setting have I ever so profoundly felt the presence of God. How can I express with words that which words cannot describe?

In a sense so profound that I hesitate to even try to describe it, we are the Body of God. The hymn writers have given us songs that tell us that God has no hands but ours, and no feet but ours. But when we gather in expectant faithful waiting upon the Lord, out of the silence we become one -- one with each other, joined at the heart -- and one body, the Body of God gathered in mystical communion. This language may startle you, and if it does then I have touched the right spot.

We are the custodians of a miracle, no less potent than the Catholic mass or Protestant liturgy. God has come to teach Her people herself, and we are a facet of the corporeal manifestations of God in holy communion with humankind.

We often treat our tradition of Meeting for Worship rather lightly. We often talk too much and outrun our light. We give news updates and weather reports instead of waiting upon the Spirit. Even with all of that, the real miracle is that in spite of our fidgeting and ego-inspired blathering, God can still speak. How many times have we experienced the grace of God when we expect it least?

I will tell you a little story about one of my early Meetings for Worship at Friends' Hill in Quincy. Iris Bell is perhaps one of the dearest souls I know -- a gifted healer, and an intuitive. She was forever speaking my mind when I wouldn't speak. It would scare me sometimes how accurate she was.

One day, I was fretting about water baptism. I was a lifelong Lutheran and giving up water baptism was a big hurdle. I had not yet learned to replace original sin with original blessing. Iris leaned forward and put her hands on my shoulders and helped me to relax. She knew the condition of my soul. As I sat there on the porch in the swing, calmer now but still intent, I asked God to help me with this dilemma of water baptism.

Just then it started to rain. As I sat there beside Beth rocking back and forth in the porch swing, I raised my face toward heaven. And as the rain streamed down my face, God said in a voice so clear, "If you want water, here it is." I was shocked beyond words. I was literally shaking. From then on I knew in my heart that the baptism of the spirit is all that is needed. God loves and sanctifies without any effort on our part. All God asks is that we listen and learn. We never have to earn back our own lives.

The fourth thing I know to be true is that the Body of God also encompasses our living planet. Perhaps one of the greatest displays of hubris by humankind is to anthropomorphize God and then enter into a duality that fails to recognize that while God is in-dwelling in each of us, our spirit is also grounded in the earth which gives and sustains life. If there is a sin to be leveled against the Christian faith that I love, it is this sense of estrangement from the world.

God loves His Creation and if it is true that we are created in the image of God then we need to be about our Father's business. It is our royal privilege to live as a part of this intertwined web of life. We do not have the right to destroy that which God loves. And because God first loved us, we have the obligation as sons and daughters to care for the garden.

The Earth lives. That statement does not contradict any other aspect of my theology. In fact, it ought to make me more mindful regardless of whatever else I may believe.

We now know that, in many aspects, the universe is holographic. In every cell in our body is the blue print for life. Even the smallest shard of holographic plate contains all the information of the whole. We now know that underlying our orderly Newtonian reality lies another reality where our everyday rules do not apply. Not all reality is predictable or linear. What is a particle, what is a wave? If I observe an event, does it change reality?

All of these questions and observations ought to lead us to a more humble understanding of our place in the world and the universe. What we do not know may cause us to destroy the fount of our existence if we do not realize that we are both the garden and the gardener, that being at the top of the food chain can be a dangerous place, and being in that position requires responsibility.

It is my personal experience that the Earth is a living entity. It was known by our forebears long before the concept of Gaia was known. We fall asleep for years at a time. We lose our sensitivity to feel and hear the life, the heartbeat of the world. It sings a song that resonates in our souls if we will listen. It is much like listening in prayer, meditation, or in Meeting. I stand before you as an unabashed hugger of trees -- and as a man fraught with his own contradictions.

My earliest meltdowns that confirmed God's existence and care also confirmed my knowledge that God and Creation are inextricably intertwined. There are many ways of stating this, but for me the reality is simply that we cannot escape the inter-penetration of all existence with all of the inherent ambiguities and inconsistencies.

In 1991, while traveling with my family in South Dakota, I had my first experience of God speaking through a power vortex in the Earth. This may label me as a certifiable eccentric, but it was real nonetheless.

We had driven a long way, all day and into the night, and we were tired. We had a cabin reserved outside Rapid City. It was a beautiful, cool, clear night and bed was the only thing on anybody's mind. My night, however, got cut short. God conducts class at the most inconvenient times!

Sometime before dawn, I had a vision. It was an elaborate vision in three parts. Each was a story of sorts and at the end God told me the significance of each part. Then came the scary part. God said, "Get up and write this down."

Now I'm a reasonable person and I was willing to play along with God's little joke up to a point, but I did not want to go outside. I was tired, it was cold out there, and besides which, except for the moon, it was dark.

When it became obvious that I had no choice in the matter if I hoped to get any sleep, I got up and wrote down the visions and the meanings. To this day, I visit these stories and try to glean from them what I am to know.

It wasn't until the next day that I realized that we were in the shadow of the peak that the Lakota Sioux believe to be the center of the universe. I had come across the prairie to a holy place to hear the voice of God.

What will our world be like if we continue to destroy the power and wisdom of the Earth? What will be the heritage of our children and their children's children if we cut ourselves off from God's speaking through our living, breathing planet? We cannot afford to lose our place in the creation. Only we can speak and care for this living, pulsating Body of God of which we are an integral part.

We no longer have the luxury of ignorance and avarice that has brought us to the brink of extinction and millions of other species to that point already. God is giving us choices. She speaks in any language and through any medium to which we will listen and respond, but we are not heeding the call.

This is obviously an issue that transcends Friends. This is an issue of survival of life itself, Creation and ultimately God. If a planet dies and there is no one left to hear the death rattles, did it ever exist?

The important point in this aspect of our spirituality is that, in spite of our own perceptions to the contrary, we never *were* separate from the rest of Creation. As in John Woolman's vision when he saw the masses of humanity and was told that in the future he could no longer consider himself a separate being, we must grasp that vision and make it our own. Separateness between people, between people and God, and between people and Creation is a myth that has plagued us for thousands of years, but which now threatens to bring down this fragile house of cards.

In the New Testament when Jesus spoke about serving Him by serving others, He said, "In as much as you have done this to the least of these my brethren you have done it also unto me." It is not a far stretch to take Jesus' words and apply them to the Cosmic Christ and the beloved Creation. What we do to one, we do to the other. Underlying our uniqueness is the common ground of creation, which binds us together-different perhaps, but cut from the same divine cloth.

This was about where my lecture ended, after the first draft, but yet I knew it needed something. But what was it?

After feedback from Wayne Benenson, my coffee partner of 10 years, I finally knew what was missing. During this spiel about my spiritual journey and the truths that I have known, I had emphasized mostly the good aspects of my journey and I had left out the parts about the dark and my very personal demons. For all the good that I have experienced I have had to first cross some treacherous waters. If you are to find the first part of this speech relevant, I must share with you the cost to me and to others. No journey is undertaken without cost.

Depression -- both clinical and the garden variety -- have been my constant companions on this spiritual journey. It has caused me to doubt myself and to create and attract anger. Often, my family paid the price for my journey to the Light as I was alternately withdrawn and angry,

depending on the day. I have ridden a roller coaster to find God -- so much for a purely peaceful journey. Perhaps the most difficult part of this for me was finally admitting that even Santa Claus could be depressed, and no matter how I tried to hide the pain from others, depression was never very far beneath the surface.

I had to recognize that you can find God in the dark as well as in the light. When I was desperately seeking to find something solid, and when I felt myself being swept away, I had no choice but to grab hold of that spiritual anchor. To not take God's hand is to risk one's sanity. To believe there is hope when there is no logical reason to do so is the ultimate act of faith. Such is the reality of depression. It beats down the spirit inside, but paradoxically it also demands a spiritual response in order to go through the experience.

I have been fortunate. I have always come back from the edge of the abyss and have always found my loving family and my God welcoming me back. Today, the lows are not as low nor do they last as long, but I know that my demons can re-emerge if I let myself slip from mindfulness. It is a full-time job.

Depression has not been my only teacher from the dark side. Migraine headaches have been my curse and my friend for the last two decades.

It used to be that I simply cursed the bad brain chemistry which made me vulnerable to migraines. It has only been in recent years that I have come to see these painful visitors as friends.

As odd as it may sound, my migraines have saved my life. Sometimes they are the pressure relief valves that stop me dead in my tracks when I am physically or emotionally out of control. These old friends keep me constantly aware of my own mortality and my very mundane humanity. You can't take yourself too seriously when you can't walk straight or without assistance and you find yourself kneeling before the porcelain throne in the bathroom. Whatever pomposity you might be harboring goes right down the drain -- so to speak.

So I guess the last question I need to address is, "Where is this particular life I know as me going?" Another tough question.

On my best days I am the essence of spacious awareness. My cosmic vibration is in tune with the universe and I tingle with the sheer excitement of being alive. On my not-so-good days, I am just going through life in a blah sort of way. And on a really bad day, I retreat into the medicated fog that numbs the migraine that forces me to put distance between me and the world.

It is no small grace to know one's own weaknesses and to see one's self as others might. As with St. Paul, God has chosen not to remove my affliction -- I have asked and God has said, "Not right now." I can also say with St. Paul, "I see through a glass darkly." But while I wait to see more clearly, the real grace is that I see at all. While I may not like all that I see when I look inside, I at least know that it is me, unvarnished and without embellishment. It keeps me humble-- as I see myself in the presence of God.

Many years ago, a professor in the area of general semantics drilled into our heads the concept that words do not mean -- only people do. I rarely write anything without experiencing the writer's equivalent of post-partum depression. Today is no exception. I may mean, but you are in control of how my words are perceived. So, I feel the need to adjust your meaning-making while I still have the chance.

If you walked away from here today after hearing my last words regarding depression and migraine thinking, "Oh, that poor man! Isn't it terrible that he suffers so much?" I would be most displeased. Life is more than the sum total of the pain we have endured. It starts from the position of joy, and the sweetness is tempered by the pains we experience.

People suffer. You do. I do. Everybody does to some extent at some stage of life. From birth to death, the potential for pain is always there, but we are more than that experience. We are the totality of our experience with life and with God. I hope you can go away saying, "Oh, how God must love Paul! Just look at how fulfilling and interesting a life God has given him!" That is how I see the story of life and that is what I want to impress upon you. Look for the grace that God always provides and let that be the measure of the quality of our lives. My story is no more or no less than the total experience of my interaction with that grace. I have fallen into the hands of the Living God and am refined by the experience. My life has value because I have lived it in communion with the Divine. That communion, as with all of life, is often messy and sometimes painful, but the value of the journey far exceeds the cost. If you can see beyond the pain, I encourage you to focus on the complex joy that can be at the center of all our lives. Life is inherently good and my life is no exception.

Well, that just about sums up my story. Now you know the Yin and Yang, the light and the dark of my life. This is what there is to tell as of August, 1999. The story will continue to unfold. My story, your story and our stories all inter-twined will roll on into the future. We dare not guess what lies in store for us. No doubt there will be marvelous things and frightful things in never-ending supply.

Sometimes I have had to be dragged into the present and prodded into the future. I think that I have now learned to walk that path more authentically and cheerfully. Most importantly, I walk the path by choice. It makes it so much easier when you are aware that you need not ever feel alone. Our spirits are interwoven over time, space and eternity, but we must see with the eye of the soul if we seek that assurance. Aloneness is just another perception, just another illusion. We need each other.

Well, by now you are tired of sitting and swatting flies, and your brain is full and now my brain is empty.

What I have shared is what I know as God has given me to see it. There are so many things I would have liked to share today, but these were the ones I was given. The others are no less important, but I am reminded of the story of the new preacher who found himself on his first Sunday with only one parishioner, who happened to be an old hog farmer. Deciding not to hold back, he preached his whole sermon to this audience of one. When he was done, the preacher asked the man how he liked it. The farmer said it was good, but it was a mite long. Now the

preacher, being an educated man and seeing a teachable moment said, "But if you are out feeding your hogs and only one shows up, don't you feed it?" The farmer thought a minute and said, "Well sir, that's true. I would feed that one hog, but I sure wouldn't feed him the whole dang wagon load."

Speaking as one who is considered -- by some -- to be a little short of a full wagonload at times, I find it is time to stop scooping off the wagon today and head back home. You will have to fill in whatever I was short of this morning.

So with that I leave you now to go back into the silence to commune with God and with each other and with the Creation of which we are a part. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be worthy offerings.