THIS LITTLE LIGHT

Bonni McKeown

The 2018 Jonathan Plummer Lecture

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The Jonathan W. Plummer Lecture

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

From Illinois Yearly Meeting Minutes, 1960, by Harold W. Flitcraft

Bonni McKeown is a long-time journalist, citizen activist, and blues piano player. She feels led to spotlight the role of African American blues and soul musicians in the goal of healing communities and bridging divisions in society. She has pursued this goal for many years with commitment, integrity, and love for blues music and the positive effect it has on people. I can tell you from my own personal experience, as a long-time fan of traditional blues music, hearing Chicago bluesman Larry Taylor and Bonni and their fellow blues musicians is an exciting and cathartic experience.

Bonni co-produced Larry's two CDs, and coauthored his autobiography, *Stepson of the Blues*. Her major project now is to finish producing a movie, from his life story, entitled *The Rhythm and the Blues*.

Bonni's own roots are in her home state of West Virginia, where four generations of her extended family have owned and operated Capon Springs and Farms, a family-focused summer resort. She wrote the book *Peaceful Patriot*, to keep alive the story of her friend Tom Bennett, a conscientious objector killed while serving as an Army medic in Vietnam. In West Virginia, she organized citizens groups to support passenger train service and to oppose construction of a controversial four-lane highway.

Long an attender and now a member of Oak Park Friends Meeting, she co-clerks the committee on Peace, Justice and the Environment. Bonni's motto is Pray for Peace, Work for Justice, Boogie for Survival.

–Introduction by Judy Erickson

This Little Light

Thank you Illinois Yearly Meeting of Friends for having me give the 2018 lecture to honor Jonathan W. Plummer, 1835-1918. Jon Plummer's leading was to build Quaker organizations. He pulled Friends together to found both Illinois Yearly Meeting and Friends General Conference, to help Friends connect and increase our voice in the world. This year's ILYM themes are "witnessing" and "renewal."

We are here to witness each other as we follow our Divine leadings. We are here on the 50th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign to renew our commitments to live in truth and in love—in times when we have material abundance and times when we have not.

My earliest feelings of God came through Creation—Nature. Just like here, in summer in the West Virginia hills, you could watch the robins hopping on the lawn, cocking their heads, listening for worms. Fireflies would light the night with their courting flashes. Whippoorwills would chant through the night, the wind would riffle through maple leaves. Peeping tree frogs, sizzling cicadas, the hard gray rocks, the Great North Mountain. "This is my Father's World" was a hymn my sister, cousins, and I sang without question at my mom's Sunday School.

In the six-month summer season our parents could not take us to church. Sunday was the week's busiest day at our family business, the Capon Springs resort. One set of guests would check out, and a whole new set come rolling in. We looked forward to seeing old friends and making new ones.

My grandfather and grandmother, Lou and Virginia Austin, had gotten hold of the Capon hotel grounds in 1932. He was trying to sell the mineral water, but the hotel turned out to be the successful business. Capon was a popular spa in the 1880s. The

green-and-white buildings look like this meetinghouse in McNabb. Local people were glad to work for them helping fix the place up. Capon is like a camp with with family meals and raising the flag every morning. To many guests and local co-workers, Capon is a Garden of Eden. It feels like a second home. It is still my home. Even if I never quite fit in.

From his books on world religion, Granpa Lou distilled wisdom for everyday life. As he put it in his children's book *The Little Me and the Great Me*, everyone has a self-centered Little Me, and everyone has a GREAT ME that is God's spirit in us.

We can choose at any moment which Me to be. Sometimes our Little Me takes over. We grab a toy, or a dollar, from somebody. We push people out of the way to get somewhere first. We want to show off and be the center of attention. That is our Little Me.

But some times we are happy to be good sports, happy to share, to do something for someone else and let them be first. That is our GREAT ME talking. Our Great Me is kind and loving. People love to be around the GREAT ME, it is our light that shines from the inside out.

Our Little Me will not go away. It is the ego part of us. It is our individual human personality. It is here as long as we are alive. The Little Me can even be entertaining. But the Little Me is not a good leader. The Little Me gets careless. The Little Me can wreck a car. The Little Me gets us in trouble. We do not want the Little Me in the driver's seat.

But the good part is that our GREAT ME never leaves us either. The GREAT ME comes from God who created us. The GREAT ME is a wise spirit that guides us. We do want the GREAT ME in our driver's seat.

We can listen more to our Little Me, our ego, or more to God, through our GREAT ME. It is a sliding sale E … G… O… D — the more of ego, the less of God. Every minute of every day we must choose which force will lead us. Which Me do you think people would rather see? Which Me would you rather be? Which Me would God like to see you be?

How do we get less of the Little Me and more of the GREAT ME? Simple as breathing. Blow out the Little Me *(exhale together)* and breathe in the GREAT ME *(inhale)*.

For the six winter months, as I grew up in the 1950s, our family inhabited Germantown, a Quaker-influenced neighborhood

in northwest Philadelphia where my dad had bought a house on the GI Bill—now we know many Black veterans did not have the same opportunities for housing. Life was never boring. My mom took us shopping at the little stores on Germantown Avenue. My elementary school was full of Jewish kids who recited the 24th Psalm and carried copies of the novel *Exodus*. At home in our basement, my sister Laurie and I wrote books, tended doll houses and dinosaur sets. My parents took us downtown on streetcars and trains, to museums with mummies and dinosaur skeletons and a giant human heart; to the Academy of Music, and Phillies baseball games. Our minister at Second Baptist Church, Granpa's friend Dr. V. Carney Hargroves took our youth group on ecumenical trips to other churches—even to a synagogue where we heard the rabbi read the Torah in an awesome dignified chant.

About the time I first heard my fellow Girl Scouts banging out a boogie-woogie on an upright piano in the Sunday School room, Black people began moving from the South to our neighborhood. I was fascinated, but like many other white people, my parents moved us out of Philadelphia in 1962 to Winchester, Virginia, nearer Capon.

My grandfather did not feel that way. When I was 13, Granpa and I watched Martin Luther King speak his dream at the March on Washington on Capon's lone TV set. Granpa had a dream too—of Capon as a place where all kinds of people could come enjoy one another's company. Capon had hosted an AFSC conference in 1959 which was attended by low-level diplomats from Iron Curtain countries. I ran around getting their autographs.

In Philadelphia, Granpa tried to reach out to Black community leaders, but a culture gap limited him. His parents were Rumanian Jews. Classical symphonies and Irving Berlin operettas dominated his record collection. While some Black people could join Granpa as classical music fans, he did not know how to relate with African Americans. But in my preteens, folk music, rock'n'roll, and soul music, all based on African American blues, was breaking through on my transistor radio. Music later became my bridge to where Granpa could not go.

But for the mid-1960s, I was stuck in the eighth grade at Handley High School in Winchester. No big museums, trolley cars, or baseball stadiums. Just a southern town with a snooty in-crowd which once rejected the hometown country-western star

Patsy Cline. Bullies found a great new target: me, the Yankee nerd with bobby sox who carried a brown briefcase to school. In the halls they hooted and hollered and made fun. When the in-crowd rejected you, everyone else turned their backs. If anyone tried to be nice to me, the in crowd might make fun of them too.

Cut off from a social life, I earned all A's and B's. I practiced shooting basketball. I asked my piano teacher to show me the scales and chord patterns I had learned on folk guitar. Music has a mathematical order. One could learn the chords, play by ear, and sound OK. After a while God sent me a couple of athletic friends, Ginger and Ann, who helped me stand up to the bullies. With Black girls on our basketball and volleyball intermural teams, we soon started winning. We got together with our phys ed teachers and pushed for more girls' sports.

The best part of my senior year was overturning the rule which kept us from having prom dates from outside the school. Even Handley's in-crowd hated that rule; they wanted to invite their friends from horse country in Clarke County. When the administration denied our class officers' petition for change, I went over their heads and wrote a letter to the Winchester newspaper. Other students and parents' letters followed.

It was a success! The school board changed the rule, and I invited a Capon guest friend to our newly opened prom. Swishing in my ivory-colored formal, dancing among in-crowd and smiling former outcasts, I knew we could change the world.

In the 50 years to come, I would join the marches for peace and women's rights. I would lead movements to save southern West Virginia's Amtrak Cardinal train, and to stop an unnecessary and destructive highway called Corridor H. I see trains as energy-efficient, community building technology, while overbuilt highways tend to destroy towns and alienate people. Today I advocate for blues music to help heal the struggling communities that created it. I currently co-clerk the Oak Park Friends' committee on Peace, Justice and Environment.

In fall 1967, I entered West Virginia University (WVU) School of Journalism as a freshman. My 10th grade English teacher, Mr. Diamond, a former newspaper reporter, had warned me, "You'll never make money."

But a lot of money was not my goal. West Virginia had a long tradition of labor hell-raising and a small vocal group of

peaceniks. Even the conservative fraternities on steep, cobblestoned High Street blared soul music—Jackie Wilson, "Higher Higher" from their jukeboxes on Friday afternoons. The times were just high.

I was turned loose on the WVU campus just as birth control pills arrived. First I chased the white football players who thought I was a nerd—then the friendly, hunky black football players. One refused to go out with me in public—because his (white) girlfriend might find out. A big waste of my time and energy, not to mention self-esteem. Late in my freshman year I dated John, a Black, blind, terrifically talented classical piano player. My parents found out and objected, which made no sense; they were classical music fans. And did not we sing that song in my mom's Sunday school, "Jesus loved the little children, red and yellow, black and white"?

But my biggest crush was on Tom Bennett, a bright, popular little guy three years older than me who was about to flunk out of WVU. Hanging out with the campus ministers and the Ecumenical Council, going to meetings about war, racism, and poverty, Tom questioned the Establishment and found it difficult to focus on a career within it. He joined the Army as a medic. He did not believe in the war but could not in good conscience apply for a college deferment from the military and watch working-class guys go fight and die. Tom saw the light of God in every person and felt he had a mission to bring it out. He died February 11, 1969, age 21, trying to save a fellow soldier in Vietnam. He should have been a minister, a doctor, a Congressman. He was cut down, instead, with so many others in a useless war.

My only way to make sense of his un-lived life was to write a biography: *Peaceful Patriot, The Story of Tom Bennett*, published by Mountain State Press in 1980. But there is no getting over Vietnam, as our country keeps repeating its wars of aggression. Where have all the flowers gone? When will we ever learn?

A few years of hard knocks and women's consciousness-raising groups showed me I did not have to emotionally depend on a man. Men are humans. All humans are all sinful and fickle; so spake my religion professor, the colorfully conservative Dr. Manfred Meitzen.

As a reporter, I loved moving freely among street people, governors, cops, foreign students, artists. On the WVU *Daily*

Athenaeum I broke a barrier and became a woman sportswriter. Once an insensitive football player, who was white, abused me on a date and then made fun of me in front of the other players. But I got back at the whole team. I stopped writing about football and started writing news stories about womens' sports.

During my first newspaper job in Danbury, Connecticut, in 1971, evangelical people on the newspaper staff convinced me to read the Bible and Christian tracts. I have still not comprehended that "Jesus died for my sins"—which are many— but I knew I could no longer depend on human resources to control emotional ups and downs in my life. I had to take the leap of faith, follow Jesus' example, and let the Creator plan my life much better than I could. I did not manage to surrender my life to God all at once, for I have a habit of hanging onto things. It came one piece at a time. At a later job on the *Post-Herald* in Beckley, West Virginia, I took over the church page, which gave me an excuse to hang out at the Black New Era Baptist singing convention.

In 1976, I worked six months in the Beckley office of Congressman Ken Hechler (D-WV) a populist progressive who succeeded in winning black lung disease benefits for coal miners. I put some of this expertise to work 20 years later as Hampshire County co-chair for progressive Charlotte Pritt in her 1996 campaign for governor. She beat Joe Manchin in the Democratic primary, only to have party operatives turn tail and help the Republican defeat her in the November general election. In another 20 years, I campaigned for Bernie Sanders and again saw the Democratic party establishment thwart the people's choice. Behind party labels the vested interests pull their levers—the man behind the curtain in the *Wizard of Oz*.

Just before my fourth newspaper job on the Charleston, West Virginia *Gazette*, God let me make my life's biggest mistake: marriage. I loved his half-Italian West Virginia family, but never understood him nor the emotional dynamics of marriage. Neither did he understand my activism. After 10 years we divorced. Miraculously my daughter Lou is not a mistake and neither is my funny, conscientious son-in-law or their four bright-eyed young ones—dedicated charismatic Christians. We do not always agree on religious theory but as a family we can get ourselves where we need to go.

As a mother, you do what you have to do. For some reason, God created head lice. They invaded Lou's first grade class. After a

mad romp with Nix shampoo, Lou sat down with phonics books while I, the Nit Police, combed her head. Soon she knew every a, e, i, o, u.

When Lou was eight, God again helped me make lemonade out of lemons. At the Capon farm, I was shearing Christmas trees, shaping them into cones using whirling blades mounted on top of weed eater handles. I moved too close to my buddy, and the saw whacked into my left wrist, severing nerves and bones. For three months, gripped by pain, I stayed with my mom and dad. We decided to homeschool that year, and my mother helped Lou practice her arithmetic and find leaves for her collection. Back at our country homestead, Lou took charge of carrying firewood from the shed to the stove, one stick at a time, to keep us warm for the winter. My left hand got better after I practiced hymns on piano. Lou watched the occupational therapist work with my hand to bring it back. She later went to WVU and became a physical therapist. God works for good in all things if we can just follow.

Music helped me cope with frustrations at Capon. I had started recycling at the hotel kitchen and initiated nature walks and live music shows for guests. I organized the history archives and drafted a history book they still sell today. But for 18 years at Capon, I failed to sell to my cousins the idea that we should redevelop the farm and focus our marketing more on ecotourism. My work style was project-oriented while my cousins spent many faithful hours on the job. I was forced out of my position in 1998.

Driven from the Capon Garden of Eden, I found Hopewell Centre Friends Meeting of Winchester, Virginia and realized I should have been Quaker all along. Not only did the silence give me time to reflect on my exile and next steps, Quakerism supported my work as an activist while challenging me to grow spiritually. One woman of lesser means at the meeting warned me, “Don’t get too attached to the outcomes of your efforts.” Many endings are not happy. And no one gets out of this life alive. Blues music comes from situations which have no answer. The original blues was the moans of slaves chained to the bottom of a ship. Blues is what you sing to keep your sanity, like the pushups Larry Taylor did in solitary.

Ken and the late Katharine Jacobsen, my spiritual Conservative Friends mentors, took a journey to the West Side to hear Larry Taylor’s band play. Right away they noticed that people

would come to the club looking beaten down, but they would start laughing with their neighbors and leave in a much happier mood. You sing the blues to get rid of the blues. As Father Chris Griffin, the vicar at St. Martin's Episcopal Church on the West Side, said at our "sing your own blues" workshop last month, blues is sort of a stop for sinners on the way to heaven. Blues is music for imperfect people. Do we have any imperfect people here?

Blues music is magic. The playful groove that makes hard times bearable. Formed from African rhythms and played on European instruments, blues is the root of jazz, rock, hiphop—even part of country and bluegrass. Blues lets people tell their stories. Let's sing "Sweet Home Chicago," a Great Migration blues story about leaving one place and moving to another for a better life.

For three summers I took blues classes at Augusta Heritage Center, a folk music camp at Elkins, West Virginia. Using the groovy pre-WW II barrelhouse piano style that started in southern juke joints, I learned to play bass lines and found a new lower voice to sing.

Two of my Augusta teachers were from the acoustic women's group Saffire—singer Gaye Adegbalola and piano player-songwriter Ann Rabson. Ann told us she would offered to donate repairs for the old piano at BLUES on Halsted on Chicago's North Side—only to be told the piano was a memorial to the great Sunnyland Slim, to sit mutely on the tiny stage, never played again. I started to realize that the blues music biz is way better at honoring dead musicians than supporting live ones.

Meanwhile, as the 1990s wore on, activism grew tougher. Political power brokers were parrying our tactics. The highway department changed its public comment meetings and started tape recording hearings in private rooms. You spoke alone to a machine with no reaction from your fellow citizens. Secret service people began swiping signs from highway protesters' hands at a Clinton-Gore parade in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, in 1994. The overbuilt Corridor H highway was backed by huge vested interests like big oil and trucking with their scores of lobbyists. We had only our wits, our friendships, small donations—and our convictions.

After our battle ended in 2000, much of Corridor H got built, though our opposition has still managed to stall construction/destruction in two environmentally sensitive

areas—around Blackwater Falls and on the Virginia-to-Wardensville stretch near Capon.

Things in America kept going from bad to worse. September 11, 2001 brought a wave of fear and separation. Festivals were canceled. The Patriot Act invaded banks and libraries, and the military-industrial complex took the driver's seat. Millions around the world, including 500 at a candlelight vigil in downtown Winchester which Hopewell Centre Friends helped organize, protested the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. The war started anyway.

In 2000, I began visiting Chicago to protest the demolition of Maxwell Street, the world-reknown outdoor market and birthplace of Chicago blues. Immigrants from Europe, Asia, Latin America, and the Deep South, got their start on Maxwell Street, buying and selling anything. Shoppers tossed coins in the hat for blues, country, and gospel street musicians. The city, University of Illinois at Chicago, and developers tore down most of its historic stores in 2001. Maxwell Street Foundation has recovered the history. A few vendors still trade on Desplaines Avenue, several blocks away.

After Lou earned an academic scholarship to WVU, I launched my "Barrelhouse Bonni" folk and blues piano act. Networking at national blues events to find gigs, I saw hints of injustice lurking behind the fun. At the Blues Foundation's 2001 International Challenge finals in Memphis, two excellent heritage Black acts lost to a Canadian restauranteur's band.

Behind this particular Oz curtain lurked a clique that promoted white imitators above Black blues artists whose parents created the music out of their sweat, blood, and tears. In the 1950s Sam Phillips of Sun Records admitted he made a conscious decision to promote Elvis Presley over Howlin' Wolf. In the 1960s, bluesmen gained exposure when British rock guys appropriated their music, but the industry was up to the same old tricks. The cover of Marshall Chess' 1969 *Fathers and Sons* album, featuring Muddy Waters and his white students Paul Butterfield and Mike Bloomfield, shows a Black deity passing the spark of life to a white Adam. Fans failed to question that image. Now white artists dominate most so-called blues festivals around the country, as if the Black music god had fathered no Black children. I knew all this. I still wanted to make a difference. I went to Sweet Home Chicago in 2003 to test my piano skills with the professionals.

The Monday jam at Buddy Guy's Legends was, and still is, led by soul singer Jimmy Burns. I could see that summer night that the wiry, dark-skinned drummer in Jimmy's band was oblivious to everything but the music. Dressed in a blue and red sports jersey and a backwards baseball cap, he drove the group with a crisp and swingy backbeat. A world of joy and pain flickered across his face. At the end of each blues line, he would add magnificent little rumbles and flourishes.

As the song ended, the drummer came back from whatever planet he was on, grabbed a microphone and took center stage. He hummed a musical riff to the guitar player and directed the bass and drums to come in. The music boiled up into a one-chord Delta trance. From inside the rhythmic whirlwind, a huge voice swept through the room. The spirit of 6 foot 4 inch, 300 pound Wolf was howling through the singer's small frame. Startled tourists looked up from their catfish and beer and exploded into applause.

During the jam, after I had played a song on the keyboard, someone tapped me on the shoulder—the wiry singer and drummer who'd channeled Howlin' Wolf. "Not too many folks play piano that way anymore," he said. "I'm Larry Taylor. Jimmy Burns is my uncle. My stepdad was Eddie Taylor. He was on VeeJay and other record labels. Toured all over the world. Played guitar with Jimmy Reed."

"Bet you could get a lot of people to come out and hear the real blues," I said. "Why don't you start your own band?"

Six months later, Larry formed a blues and soul band to play both the music of his stepdad's generation and his own era. Lacking music business connections, I put together a list of festival and club venues, wrote a bio for Larry, set up a website and sent out some promo packages. And with a few phone calls to people he already knew, his calendar should fill up with gigs in no time, right? We should have heeded the song by Larry's former band leader, A.C. Reed: "I'm in the Wrong Business."

First, my timing to enter the music business was terrible. The 1996 Federal Communications act had brought on media consolidation. Centralized, standardized music programming replaced local radio DJs, favoring artists who already backed by high-dollar promoters. Digital technology began reducing the value of recorded music to pennies or nothing, compared to the $1 we had paid for two songs on a 45 rpm record in the 1960s.

Second, like other humans in business, we were not immune to wrong decisions, missed opportunities, narrow attitudes, bad moods and habits, or feet in mouths.

But third, and most aggravating, blues impresarios seemed not to know who Larry was and did not care. Everybody already had their stakes in other acts. We would hire talented, out of work guitar players only to have other bandleaders snatch them.

In mid-2004, as my bicycling landlords in Wicker Park were selling their house, I moved to the West Side, upstairs from Larry and his wife Janice and family. I rode my bike, even in that somewhat-dangerous neighborhood. Sometimes I would take the kids to the park and the library. Rent was fairly cheap (but still not cheap enough for an independent artist). The blues were real, like the gun-toting drug dealers in the alley and my electric piano getting stolen.

During that time of floundering, I got to know Judy Erickson, Sarah Shirk, Pam Timme, and other Oak Park Friends. I did odd jobs for Marti Matthews and cleaned house for Wil Rutt, who is now at Northside Meeting. Ken and Katherine Jacobsen, of the Ohio Conservative Meeting, were teaching spiritual formation for Friends from all over Chicagoland, including Earl Smith, then staying at the Fellowship of Friends in Cabrini Green. I became involed in regional meetings of Chicago-area Friends. Friends reinforced my efforts at practical simplicity—saving, reusing, bicycling, secondhand clothes. I have asked for help, and try to return the favor, such as doing dishes when I am a guest.

At the end of 2005, I realized Larry was caught in a longstanding drug addiction. Money problems, sickness, car trouble, and upended plans had become a chaotic way of life. I fled to Charleston, West Virginia, to do freelance writing. I stayed with my Methodist friend, the late Sandy Fisher, a women's activist who had quit drinking and was going through a divorce. We attended AA and Al Anon—and political meetings. At Charleston Friends, I got to know another yearly meeting, Southern Appalachian Yearly Meeting and Association (SAYMA). Though I saw the Charleston meeting was not ready to confront racism, I did help organize the Charleston (West Virginia) Blues society. We documented the under-reported African American musical history of our capital city. Like like so many other places, Charleston had destroyed its thriving Black business district, including many of the jazz and

blues clubs. I honed the "sing your own blues" workshop with Doris Fields, West Virginia's "first lady of soul."

Also, with Chuck Riecks, a retired Army chaplain, I organized Friends of the Cardinal. a West Virginia rail passenger group, and my dad helped write some letters to Congress. I played Barrelhouse Bonni gigs in my parents' senior home.

In 2008, I went back to Chicago to finish what I had started: Larry's autobiography. It was one man's journey through America's racial and musical landscape. Now it had a new chapter: he had recognized that the drugs he had been using to escape had only added to his blues, hard luck, and trouble. He began going to a clinic and set himself on the spiritual path. He played occasional festivals, clubs, and arts venues when we could book them, but no promoters appeared. The more mature, devout, and independent Larry became, the more the blues industry ignored him. I was appalled that his betterments were not being rewarded. This was not the American Dream.

"Bah humbug," said Larry, "the American Dream has always been a hoax for Black people. It's the New Jim Crow. The slave masters favor certain entertainers, ones who will do what they're told. They work bluesmen and women hard to make money for themselves—so hard that a lot of musicians get sick. Black artists have been penalized, they've lost work for speaking about these things." To quote Leadbelly, "If you say a thing about it, you in trouble with the Man."

The way opened for both Earl Smith and myself to occupy the vacant Quaker parsonage near 107th and Western in the Beverly neighborhood, southwest Chicago. Earl had been the ONLY white male to attend a Pendle Hill weekend on white privilege in 2007. Earl and I, with Friends there, tried in vain to revive the waning Chicago Friends Meeting, which was affiliated with Friends United Meeting and Western Yearly Meeting. One good memory: In our meeting house, a neighbor, Sabrina Penn, staged her own play about her great-grand uncle, Father Augustus Tolton, America's first Black Catholic priest now up for sainthood. After helping organize the Disability Pride Parade downtown, Earl moved to Barnesville, Ohio, where he serves on all sorts of Stillwater Meeting committees and keeps up his studies in genealogy, history, and weather.

In 2010, on my own Peaceful Patriot Press, I published a limited edition of Larry Taylor's autobiography, *Stepson of the*

Blues, and we did a speaking tour of Chicago area libraries. I thank those of you who bought this rather cumbersome book, with its little-known West Side history. The South Side, Chicago's first Black neighborhood was established in the late 1800s by people of some means. The poor and working class African Americans migrated after World War II, directly from places like Mississippi and Arkansas to the West Side. They worked factory jobs which then vanished overseas. That is why the West Side is the Best Side for the blues.

When Larry's wife Janice died in 2013, he and his two youngest teenagers needed a home. I invited them to stay with me in the Beverly parsonage. As a writer craving solitude, I would not have chosen the house-parenting role. Members of Chicago Friends, too, knew our meeting was not strong enough to take on housing a homeless family. Nevertheless it seemed the only right thing to do. I asked the meeting for forgiveness, not permission, and was never quite forgiven. No substitute for the kids' real mother, I bumbled through, with my backyard garden and three walkable coffee shops to keep my high blood pressure in check.

Larry and the kids looked for low income housing and even obtained two vouchers, which expired while city hall was sitting on millions in federal money instead of putting people in apartments. We had to get out of the parsonage, as Chicago Friends Meeting was laying itself down. Finally the teens found temporary housing with relatives. Larry and I both left Beverly in April 2017 and moved to the West Side. A year later, thankfully all the kids have jobs and are working to support their own household.

Under Garnet Fay's diplomatic clerkship, Chicago Friends Meeting transferred its parsonage and meeting house to First Evangelical Friends of Blue Island, a Spanish and English speaking church. The Evangelical Friends join the rest of Chicagoland's Quakers at the Howenstines' corn roast each Labor Day Weekend.

After my parents died in 2012 and 2013, I treasured the clothes, music, dishes, tools, and practical lessons they left me, but felt finally liberated to pursue my dream—the movie, *The Rhythm and the Blues*, I had written based on Larry's life story. During 2015-16, I used up my parents' inheritance and went into debt trying to produce a short version of it. A series of disasters overtook the production and we failed to finish. I have never

recovered financially, but after two years I have gotten tired of being ashamed. Instead, I am praying every day. With producing partner Darryl Pitts, we look to raise $500,000 to match one group's offer of $200,000 to finish this feature film. It will validate Black Chicago's lived experience, as well as entertain blues fans everywhere.

Moving to the integrated West Side of Chicago neighborhood of Austin, near Oak Park, in 2017 has given both Larry and myself stronger roots for our mission. Oak Park Friends welcomed my membership and hosted Larry's talk in May about his spiritual journey. I have been able to write freelance stories and my West Side Blues blog for the *Austin Weekly News*, a satellite paper with the *Oak Park Wednesday Journal*. I am promoting blues music as a positive cultural symbol for neighborhood based development, and for peace in the hood. We know blues is healing music, but when people realize its real value, we and other musicians can make a living.

Living on faith, keeping household order, and managing social security and freelance checks, we have each been free of major illnesses. Larry offers his Muslim prayers. I do my meditations. We focus on gratitude, knowing we are both better off than many right now. Because of our financial insecurity we must trust God, day to day. No room for more stuff in a studio apartment; no money for things that might get one into trouble. Larry sends greetings to all at ILYM and says he hopes to develop relationships with Friends in the coming year.

Jumping on on the Cardinal every few months, I keep up with my family back east, thanks to the unconditional hospitality of my daughter and sisters. I look for ways to help bring diversity, harmony, and prosperity to the family business at Capon. I cannot leave either home, so I ride back and forth, as in my song "Travelin' On," and work to keep the train running. The Cardinal, and all of our country's long distance Amtrak trains, are currently in peril, because the new Amtrak president, Richard Anderson, does not understand that trains are an essential public service in small towns and big cities both. He wants to cut services just as more people than ever are riding trains and demanding more. (Please hold Amtrak in the light.)

As a bridge person between country and city, Black and White worlds, my direction now is to bring you some gleanings from my life experience.

One meets obstacles in attempting to do good in this world. Sometimes people need more time to see the vision that we ourselves see. Sometimes the opposition turns out to be a misunderstanding, or it is God's way of redirecting us to another mission or duty. Other times, God is calling us to persist and overcome the obstacles.

Every so often, the opposition comes from darker places. As blues people like to say, "the Devil is busy." Especially in today's unstable economy, people who do not rise above human tendencies to worship money and celebrity can easily become tools of the "principalities and powers" that the Bible talks about. Today's Pharaohs coerce people by giving out jobs and favors. When this does not work, they resort to Mob tactics. They may spy, interfere, bribe, steal, threaten, terrorize, enslave, rape, maim, and kill. And then cover up their dirty work.

Powers-that-be control the major media. We need to look elsewhere for truth. Check out independent on-line commentators and also question what they say. Look past labels like "communist" or "terrorist," "conspiracy theorist," or even "right wing" and "left wing." Question the official explanations of the 1960s assassinations, 9/11, and other historical and current events. Larry says a lot of Americans live in an unreal world with curtains drawn to shield ourselves from unpleasant truths. We cannot change things until we face truth and love each other anyway.

Larry Taylor and I are not conspiracy theorists; we are first hand witnesses to the police state in action: strange noises on our phones, cars that get taken by police, and hassles getting a drivers license. Unwanted FBI visits to Larry's family. Even his wife's death of an infection after an unnecessary biopsy in Mt. Sinai Hospital.

With his Muslim religion and his Malcolm X-like history, Larry seems to land on government watch lists. He wrote several federal agencies to please take him off, his interests are in music and his goal is not to return to the streets or to prison. Like many Muslims, Larry has denounced the use of violence by extremists of any religion. He is a former gang member who does not carry a gun. When Chicago police have stopped him on "probable cause" and detained him, usually without charges, Larry knows his rights and has peacefully talked his way out. He says God tells him what to say. These situations are beyond my white middle class experience, and I cannot conceive how I would handle them.

Despite gaining skill as a songwriter and bandleader, Larry still seems to be blacklisted in the music business. Both leading Chicago blues record companies have rejected Larry's music. Emails to over 100 worldwide festivals have netted him only one for this summer—where one Quaker fan thankfully pestered promoters. Fans are the ones who must now demand African American acts in blues, rock, and roots music festivals.

We keep trying. Like Leonard Cohen sings, we look for cracks where the light gets in. Larry and I have both concluded we must leave our enemies to God and follow our directed paths with kindness. From those surveilling us, we hide nothing. We are not ashamed. We will be living witnesses to Friends' testimony of Integrity.

I call on Illinois Friends to share the good spirit we find at our blessed McNabb. I would like to see us direct more resources to help Black community leaders. I cannot guarantee we will recruit more Friends of color from these efforts, but we will learn much from going where the people are and offering to help where they want help. The American Friends Service Committee knows this. They need more support for Chicago urban peace-building and advocacy.

I am glad for your feedback on my programs at Annual Sessions, and for suggesting places to talk and perform. I thank Friends who donated to my Chicago blues mission through my Fractured Atlas fiscal sponsorship. Your donations help us use blues music to heal the 'hood and bring city and country folk together. Find me outside after the program and after worship. I have information about the blues education programs of Larry Taylor and myself. Singing, writing and talking is how we make our living.

The role of an artist's and activist is to be grateful for what God has given us, and to create better ways of life. It is at times a lonely and risky path. Kind words keep us keeping on.

In closing, how do we discern our lives as the world convulses? Friends are good at listening to that still small voice, every day, every hour. The way I follow the example of Jesus is by having faith to follow, to stay in my lane, and do what God says do. Faith without Works is dead. Be grateful for whatever God gives me, and God will send more blessings. If tempted to get angry and blame someone, I check to make sure I have done all my own work first.

How can we tell if that message in our head is really from the Divine, from our GREAT ME, not through the ego, our Little Me? I can ask: is it kind? does it serve truth? Is it the best for all concerned? If I clear my mind and ask, God will often give me a to-do list. I can visualize myself doing, as we say in AA and Al Anon, the "next right thing." Then the next step, and the next will be given to us. In these small steps, my faith renews. *(Breathe out the Little Me. Breathe in the GREAT ME.*)

Does the Almighty love our little offerings, when we tend our garden, when we spend time with an animal, a child or an elder, when we shout on a picket line, draw a picture, clean a house, or sing a song? Love us enough to forgive our doubts and the crushing sins of ourselves and our nations?

Will everything good we do in our lives be washed away in a flood or burned up in the fire next time? I hope not. But Hope is a mere four letter word; Trust and Faith are five letters—much more substantial. *(Breathe out the Little Me. Breathe in the GREAT ME.)* One moment, one day, at a time. Let our light shine.

If you do run into the Devil, you can always sing this song by the late Johnnie Mae Dunson Smith, the Queen of Maxwell Street. It is called "I Won."

I thank Illinois Yearly Meeting of Friends for inviting me to give the Plummer lecture at this blessed spot and being willing to listen to issues raised in my work. Let's close with a Friendly song from my mother's Sunday School, "This Little Light of Mine."