

FROM SLEEPINESS TO LIGHT

David Shiner and Nancy Wallace

The 2020 Jonathan Plummer Lecture

Presented Virtually for
Illinois Yearly Meeting
of the
Religious Society of Friends

October 24, 2020



Nancy and David, David and Nancy, I think of them as a unit because of the way their gifts complemented each other. I got to know them when their spiritual journeys brought them to Lake Forest Friends Meeting. I remember being on the clearness committee for membership of Nancy Wallace. As our gathering together progressed, I experienced being in a gathered meeting. I knew her compassionate intensity would contribute to our meeting and its members but I did not realize she would offer important insights to the yearly meeting and to Friends World Committee for Consultation. Friends from around the world were influenced by the gifts she shared with FWCC and she was changed by the experience of the diverse forms of worship she experienced. I did not get to participate in David's committee for membership but his active participation in all aspects of the meeting made it clear that he would be a valuable member. We shared the occupation of working with college students and I remember being at a state committee meeting and seeing him

walk in. He was a relative new attender at LFFM and we both kept looking at each other to determine if we knew each other. On that committee as in all my experience with David he demonstrated careful listening and consideration before thoughtfully responding. Over the years I have worked with David on many committees, been part of a spiritual formation group with him, and we shared responsibility for clerking the yearly meeting. He has a clear sense of how the Divine works with us as we worship together and carry out our business in worship. He is someone I can turn to when I am working on a spiritual issue. Both David and Nancy were individuals with whom I could engage in spiritual seeking. Nancy's work with FWCC led David to go with her to a triennial. His spiritual life was deepened by the experience and he too began to work with FWCC. This was one of the many things they were able to do together and he is now serving as the clerk of the Section of the Americas. I look forward to hearing how their love for each other and their unique gifts led them into service for the Religious Society of Friends. We will hear it in each of their voices with Nancy's being read by Marie Lindsey.

–Introduction by Janice Domanik

FROM SLEEPINESS TO LIGHT

NANCY: It is our understanding that the purpose of the Plummer Lecture is to outline our journeys towards faith. So, I started preparing to write this by thinking about what a faith journey might be. Is it a spiritual journey? We will put forth our journeys separately up to the point where our lives became joined, then talk about our combined journey, and finally come to an exploration of what faith and the spiritual life are for us now. Our circumstances have changed over the years, and what we experience and feel now is not the same as when we started. And, these sorts of journeys are not linear by any means. There are days when I feel quite close to God and other days where I know that my spiritual life is asleep. But, in general, we see the journey as one from a spiritual sleepiness to one of Light.

DAVID: Nancy wrote those words shortly after we accepted the invitation to write and present the 2020 Plummer Lecture. At the time we told the Planning Committee that we could not make an unconditional commitment, because Nancy had been diagnosed with advanced-stage lung cancer and we did not know whether she would live long enough for us to be able to finish it.

We suspected the path to presentation at yearly meeting would be complicated, but we had no idea how complicated it would become. First, there was the complexity of having to write together a lecture that had always been done before by a single individual. Then we had to attend to Nancy's physical decline, which happened more quickly than anyone had expected. Nancy wrote as much as she could in the time she had remaining, but not everything she wanted. We did not get to discuss the structure of the lecture very much, and she was only able to review some of the material that I wrote. And, of course, she was not able to see the

finished version. But she very much wanted our joint lecture to be presented to the yearly meeting even if she could not be physically present, and she trusted me to complete it. We did not know that the COVID-19 pandemic would delay that presentation by several months, so that was one more complication. But here we are—I in the flesh, and Nancy in spirit.

NANCY: I came to Quakerism from a religious past. I grew up Presbyterian with a strong Calvinistic bent. I recall once talking with Pam Kuhn of Lake Forest Friends Meeting about how each of us responds to situations. She grew up a Quaker, and when confronted she will come up with a Quaker response. I also can come up with a Quaker response if I have enough time—in a pinch, however, it will be a Presbyterian response. This is changing over the years as Quaker lessons get more deeply embedded in me.

My Presbyterian days ended when I was a young teenager. My father got mad at the local church, so we did not have to go anymore, which seemed just fine to me. When I was in my 30s, I went to church with my parents a few times. My father had made up with his church by then. I can see that Presbyterianism worked for them, but it was clear to me that I did not believe in its basic tenets. On one visit to church with my dad, however, I got one of the nicest compliments he ever gave me. On the way home, he said he was a lot older than I was then before he was willing to go to church with his mom. But I am getting ahead of myself.

In high school I got involved with Young Life, an evangelical Christian organization, for a bit. That was mostly because they had some cute boys, but those are the kinds of lures that draw many of us to a particular faith. At one Friday night meeting, I said that I would like to feel the presence of God in my life. People came up to me afterward, welcoming me to the fellowship of Christ, but I did not really believe that was what I had either said or meant. I was just expressing a feeling of being open. But their responses, and my inability to say that their responses were wrong, actually pushed me away. Besides, I fell out with the guy I liked the most.

Then there was a very long period where I did not see any point to believing in God. During that period I was approached on a bus by some evangelicals who wanted to convert me. This has never seemed to me like a good approach for persuading anyone. I

got ticked off and argued with them until they got off the bus, shaking their heads because they felt I was a lost soul. I, on the other hand, was more than a bit satisfied, since I felt that I was defending myself.

At around the same time as the evangelicals were trying to proselytize to me, I tried out Scientology. That was a mistake. After a few sessions I wanted out, so I asked for my money back. Surprisingly, they did refund it to me, but they also gave me a certificate of excommunication. Sometimes I wish I had kept that. But given that I was willing to explore Scientology for its spiritual dimension, maybe the evangelicals on the bus saw a spiritual need in me at that time that I could not see myself. There have been many things that have happened in my life where others could see things about me that eluded me.

Finally, in my mid-30s, almost everything about myself had started to elude me. I reached a point in my life where things really were not going well. I had hit bottom. Within a few weeks I entered crisis intervention counseling and a 12-step program. 12-step programs are very useful when one's life is in chaos. Their programs have been built based upon very good sources, or as I like to say, they plagiarized from the best places. That is good. It creates the basis from which the programs work. The fundamental principle is that if we try to control what we cannot control, it will make our lives unmanageable. This combination of intervention counseling and 12-step meetings turned my life around and sent me on a real search for a spiritual home.

I think the major thing that I learned from the 12 steps is that I really am powerless over so many things in life, and that trying to assert control when I do not have it really can make my life unmanageable. It also led me to a belief in a power greater than me.

One of the most memorable moments when this happened was shortly after I had bought my motorcycle, a Harley Sportster. I was driving it south from Rogers Park to Belmont and Kedzie, and the route was along Lake Shore Drive. It was very early. The sun was rising over the lake with that special light that comes early in the morning. As I turned onto Lake Shore Drive, I was totally overwhelmed by the knowledge that I was not making the sun rise, that there are forces in the world that are far beyond what I can do. It was a humbling moment where I saw more clearly than ever what I can, and cannot, control.

After a bit, though, I wanted more than what I was getting in the 12-step program. I was seeking access to those forces that were ongoing and faith-based, rather than recovery-based. That is when I started a more explicit search for a spiritual home.

DAVID: I spent most of my youth in rural New Jersey. My parents were farmers, cultural Jews who lived in an overwhelmingly White Anglo-Saxon Protestant area. They had no apparent religious sensitivities. My mother was indifferent toward religion, and my father was openly hostile. But they were pretty open by the standards of those far-off days about letting my two younger brothers and me try out different things, including the exploration of various religious practices, although they were never interested in that for themselves.

My parents did have a purely secular concern for Jews sticking together, which was undoubtedly heightened by having lived through the Holocaust. At a young age I picked up on the fact that I was expected to steer clear of shiksa (that is, non-Jewish) girls, and on no account to marry one. Of course, I eventually did. But by then I was past 40, and my parents were delighted that I had married anyone, Jew or non-Jew. Or, rather, my father was, and I am sure my mother would have been if she had not died of cancer in her mid-50s, two years before Nancy and I met.

My mom and dad shared a strong sense of ethics. They had a book on their shelves entitled *Ethics as a Religion*, which I always wanted to read but never did. It is on my bookshelf now, so maybe I will read it someday. Anyway, they were both highly ethical, although not always in ways that would appeal to, or even make sense to, people in any religious or political category these days.

They both had lots to do on the farm, so their ability to be involved in anything major beyond that was limited. But they were always helping people in small and sometimes unexpected ways.

Things changed in my mom's later years, meaning her late 40s and early 50s. My parents' farm was failing due to the rise and success of factory farms, so my father had to take a fulltime job elsewhere. That meant that the farm work decreased, and only the youngest of us three boys was still living at home, so my mom had more time for outside activities. She started and led a movement to bring effective schooling methods to the autistic children of New Jersey, including my youngest brother, Ariel. She even founded an organization for that purpose. She led that group for

its first ten years, then passed on the leadership torch when her cancer had advanced to the point where she could not do it any longer. She hoped to live long enough for my father to be able to retire, which would give them time to travel together and do many other things they had dreamed about while raising my brothers and me and doing the hard work they had done throughout their adult lives. But that time never came.

My mom's ethical orientation was pretty straightforward. My dad's was more complicated. He was politically conservative, and he got increasingly more conservative throughout his life. That would imply to a lot of people, probably including most of us here today, that his orientation to caring deeply about people he did not know personally was limited. And, in fact, he was no social activist in the contemporary sense of that term, but he had an unusually big heart. I hope this next story will help to illustrate that.

By the time my mom died most small family farms in the area had gone out of business, and ours was no exception. My dad tried several different jobs before eventually studying to become a nurse, after which he worked in local hospitals for many years. Shortly after he retired, he told me he wanted to do something on a volunteer basis to help people in need. I asked what he was considering doing, and he said he would like to help care for AIDS patients. I was taken aback because I knew my father was strongly anti-gay. But I did not know what to say, so I did not say anything.

Years later I mentioned that incident to my middle brother, Danny. Danny told me that he had the same conversation with my father around the same time but that unlike me, he had responded. "Dad," he said, "You do know, don't you, that almost all AIDS patients are gay?" "Sure," my dad replied, plainly puzzled by the question. "So," my brother continued, "since you don't approve of homosexuality, why do you want to do this?" My father was a man of few words, and he took his time groping for the right ones. Finally he found them. "Danny," he said, "they're young, and they're dying."

So the importance of trying to do the right thing was instilled in me from a young age. I came to regard ethics as important, even if I did not always practice them as well as I should have.

Over time, I discovered that a purely secular approach to ethical issues was not enough for me. Maybe it was because the views of right and wrong in the small farming community where I had been raised were so different from those of my parents, and

because both of those were so different from what I had experienced during my college years in the turbulent late 1960s and early 1970s. Maybe it was because the approaches to ethics set forth by the philosophers I studied in college were so varied. I do not really know. But it was not until much later that I consciously started on a personal spiritual quest. In fact, one of the things that brought Nancy and me closer during our courtship was our realization that we were both on spiritual paths, and our interest in exploring those paths together.

NANCY: Our combined spiritual journey started almost 30 years ago, when we went to Rogers Park for a Unity Church worship service. I was attending there regularly at the time. We were going someplace else on one of our first dates, and I suggested adding a stop at Unity Temple. They had the best music—the organist was fantastic—but sometimes they would get things wrong. Once I was listening to the minister give a sermon and she said, “The ancient Greeks thought X.” Well, this is probably a case where I knew too much, but really the ancient Greeks did not all think anything, any more than Quakers do. So then I was lost for the rest of that service. I really liked the meditation bits, though. David went with me that day, and we had fun.

At the time I was struggling with the fact that my romantic relationships had been unfulfilling and usually ended badly. After I ended my last bad relationship in the late 1980s, I had an insight. It seemed like all the good guys were married, and the unmarried guys were jerks. My insight was that there must have been something that turned jerks into good guys, and that that something must be marriage itself. So I decided I would not date anyone unless he seemed to be on a marriage track.

I did not really know how to change my behavior to conform to that realization, but it seemed important for me to try. So after the Unity service we went to the Heartland restaurant, where the next conundrum occurred. Do I order a veggie meal in support of David’s vegetarianism? But we had worked together for years, and I had eaten meat next to him in the lunchroom. To forego meat just because it was a date seemed more than a bit co-dependent. So I ordered chicken. It was a good first step.

DAVID: Nancy and I learned how to build a relationship together, step by awkward step. Part of our awkwardness involved unlearning previous behaviors. Another part was the fact that, for

most of the next year, I was teaching in Oxford, England, while Nancy was here in the States. Nancy continued to attend Unity Church for a while after I left for England, but the minister's sermons increasingly failed to "speak to her condition," as we Quakers like to say. For my part, I started attending Holy Trinity Church, the spiritual home of C. S. Lewis, which was near where I lived in Oxford. I found the services to be powerful and was often moved by them, but I was always aware that my future was not going to be in Anglicanism or a similar type of religious setting.

Even at a distance, and partly because of it, our relationship flourished. Soon after I returned to the States, Nancy and I got married and bought a house near Lake Bluff, about 30 miles north of Chicago. We were happy to be together, but neither of us had yet found our spiritual home.

NANCY: Which brings me to my first experience of Quaker worship. Soon after David and I were married, a friend and I decided to attend Evanston Friends Meeting to check out the Quakers. I had no idea what Quakerism was, but my friend thought it would be insightful, so I went along. I was still on a spiritual quest at the time, sampling lots of churches, so that was not unusual. We were greeted and entered the meeting room to sit down. Finally, after most of an hour had passed, someone rose and gave a message that touched me as I was back then. It gave me the motivation to come back again.

DAVID: Soon after that, Nancy discovered that there was a Quaker meeting in Lake Forest, only a few miles from our new home. She suggested that we attend a service together. I did not know anything about Quakers. I would not have even known they still existed if Nancy had not visited Evanston Friends Meeting a few Sundays earlier. So I went, but I had no expectation that Lake Forest Friends Meeting would soon become my spiritual home, and that it would continue to be until we moved to Chicago many years later.

At our first meeting for worship we were greeted by a woman named Blanche Frey. Blanche was what we Quakers call a weighty Friend, someone who was wise in the ways of all things Quaker. In fact she had just delivered the 1993 Plummer Lecture, *Ruminations on Faith*, at Illinois Yearly Meeting's Annual Sessions a few days earlier, although of course Nancy and I did not know anything about that at the time. Blanche spoke with us for a long while after

meeting for worship that day, gently but firmly encouraging us to attend at least six Quaker meetings for worship before making any decisions about whether the Quaker path was the right one for us. So we did. I soon discovered that regular attendance deepened my spiritual sensitivity, even though I did not know exactly how or even what that meant. It just kind of happened because I kept coming back.

NANCY: And I kept coming back too, again and again. I also read a lot of Quaker books, because folks who sit quietly on Sunday sure like to write. I read the writings of the early Friends and their struggles. Later on, I visited England and stood in Lancaster Jail with the door closed (scary even without the bodies and the offal), where I know that George Fox and Margaret Fell spent time when they were being persecuted. I read Quaker theologians. I even wrote a few things myself, but never for publication before now. That is because I have never thought I was going to be a great spiritual person. I generally have been happy with being a nice person who tries to do good things.

DAVID: I became a member of Lake Forest Meeting in 1995, and a couple of years later Nancy did too. A few years after that we started attending Illinois Yearly Meeting's Annual Sessions, which soon resulted in our becoming involved with an even broader Quaker organization, the Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC). We also attended our first Friends General Conference (FGC) Gathering around that time. Each of those larger Quaker events was enlightening, exposing us to increasingly broader and more diverse bodies of Friends. It was as if Lake Forest Meeting had provided us with a comfortable introduction to Quakerism at a level we could handle, and our ability to benefit from attending larger gatherings of more diverse and complex groups of Friends grew over time.

At my first FGC Gathering, which took place here in Illinois in 2002, I took part in a workshop with a weighty Friend from North Carolina. His name was Lloyd Lee Wilson, and his book *On the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order* was one of several that was crucial in fostering my spiritual growth. As many of us here are aware, FGC workshops meet daily for several hours throughout the week, despite which—as those who have attended FGC gatherings can attest—there never seems to be enough time.

Lloyd Lee started off each of our sessions with silent worship. One day in the middle of the week, he allowed the silence to continue for longer than usual. I started to grow restless after about five minutes of silence. After ten I was positively antsy. What was going on? Did not Lloyd Lee realize that our time together was too valuable to waste in that much silence? I mean, silence was fine during meeting for worship, but this was a workshop where I was trying to learn important lessons from him and the other participants. So time was a-wastin'. Or so I thought.

After about ten more minutes of restless but, I hope, quiet fidgeting on my part, Lloyd Lee finally broke the silence. With a huge grin on his face, he said, "Wow! Those last ten minutes—they were really something, weren't they? I'll remember those last ten minutes." I looked around the room and saw heads nodding. And then I understood. I had been in the presence of that blessed event we Quakers call a gathered meeting—brief, but gathered—and I had missed it. It was a memorable episode in my Quaker education.

NANCY: My understanding of what we are waiting for when we sit on the benches each Sunday is corporate worship. What that means is that it is not individual meditation. Individual meditation is something that I can do at home. I do not believe that I can do corporate worship sitting by myself. I can pray. I can meditate. But I cannot do corporate worship. There is a power when we sit together on these benches to worship that I cannot have by myself. I felt that the second time I went to a Quaker meeting. The power of the corporate worship at that meeting, which I later learned is what we Quakers call a gathered meeting, was very palpable to me. It was unlike anything I had ever experienced.

Still, sometimes I sit on the benches and feel sleepy. I am pretty darn sure that sleeping through meeting is not spiritual. For that matter, what is a spiritual life? And, most importantly, do I even have one? That raises the question of what is 'spiritual'? Does it have anything to do with religion? With faith? With God? With the Divine?

I remember having a conversation with a young Friend who asked if she could be a great spiritual person and still sleep late. I thought about it and said I did not think so. I do not believe I have changed my opinion about that over the years. There is something

about waking early and seeing the light shine in the window in the morning that creates a deep connection to God for me. Mind you, I do not always wake up early, but I understand that early light has a particularly spiritual strength to it.

Now, how strong one is spiritually depends upon many things. There is an individual component to it, since it is only an individual who goes on a spiritual quest, but how one sets out to do that has many roads. Does one go to an ashram, or to a monastery, or do it by oneself in one's living room? Does one need an organized religion to be deeply spiritual? Or can organized religion sometimes be a barrier?

For me, worshiping in the manner of Friends is and has been an aid to my spiritual life. We Quakers do not rely on dogmatic assertion like many other religions, but on a combination of public worship and personal revelation, frequently together in what we Quakers call a gathered meeting. So I appreciate the waiting worship that we do, but even I sometimes wonder if I would like a bit more of a query or a very small sermon on occasion. On the other hand, I am leery of being dependent upon a priest or minister to guide my spiritual life. Still, sometimes I look at people who are able to give their lives to Jesus (or whomever), with a certainty of belief which I have never had, with a bit of envy. It seems simpler to me that one could just accept a fixed dogma and creed and go forward. I have never been able to do that. My quest has always been more eclectic. It has been the pursuit of harmony between me and the divine.

DAVID: Soon after Nancy and I began attending Lake Forest Meeting, she showed me a passage from an old Quaker book she had picked up from the meeting's library. I have long since forgotten the title and the author's name, assuming I ever knew them, but the passage read something like this: "The boy asks the girl, 'Do you love me?' when he should really be asking her, 'Do you love God?' For it is God who brings us together, God who is steadfast far beyond our human weakness and uncertainty." Nancy and I did not discuss that passage, then or ever. But neither of us ever forgot it, and it affected us in tangible ways. Before every meal we shared for the next quarter of a century, we held hands and entered into a brief period of silence which ended when one of us said, "Thank you, God, for all your blessings." I still do that. It is not always as easy for me now, but it is as important as ever.

For several years Nancy and I lived at Prairie Crossing, a conservation community in Grayslake, some 40 miles northwest of Chicago. Toward the end of our time there, we were visited by a couple of Jehovah's Witnesses. They had noticed a Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) sticker on our window that said "War is Not the Answer," and they told me it appealed to them because they, like the Quakers, were religious pacifists. I welcomed them into our home, and they gave me some of their literature. Then they asked if it would be OK for them to come back for another visit sometime in the future. I said sure, so about a month later they did.

That went on for a while. The visitors would not hang around our house for long, just a few minutes, during which they would ask me questions about my beliefs and offer me more literature to read. After a few visits, one of them asked if I would be willing to spend longer periods of time talking about the Bible with them. Nancy was not interested, but I was. So I agreed.

I spent the next two years studying the Bible under the direction of two Jehovah's Witnesses. They visited our home about once a month, and were always serious but friendly. They followed a predesigned program of religious education, but were willing to answer any questions I had. So occasionally I would ask them about what I took to be contradictions in the Bible, especially ones that came up in that day's lesson. They always had a plausible answer—a misunderstanding on my part, a context I had overlooked, another Scriptural passage that made sense of the supposed contradiction, or some other type of resolution.

I did not have the knowledge, then or now, to know for sure whether their explanations held water. But that was not what was most important. The main lesson was that I was forced to realize that my supposed ability to poke holes in the Bible was based not on any problems with the Bible itself, but on my pride, on my thinking I understood things that I really did not. That is not to say that there are not any contradictions in the Bible, just that I was in no position to determine whether there were or not. That realization helped me appreciate the Bible more fully, because anytime I found myself being critical, I internally went to a place of humility.

My encounters with those Jehovah's Witnesses awakened me to acknowledge how little I really knew about God or the Bible, and in fact how little I really knew about much of anything. It

would be hard for me to overstate how much that gentle but relentless destruction of my pride helped to deepen my faith.

My ego was being humbled in other ways too. At the time I was volunteering in poor communities on the south side of Chicago. Part of the work involved canvassing. Volunteers would go into local neighborhoods in pairs, one “homie” and one outsider like me. We would knock on doors and invite local residents to become more involved in creating a better future for themselves and their community while also asking them if they had any material needs, such as clothing or food, that the organization could help with.

My most regular canvassing partner was a young man. He was a local resident whom I will call Raul, because that was his name. Raul had had little formal education but he had a shy smile and a big heart, and I quickly became very fond of him. He and I would be sent out on canvasses with a script which we were supposed to read verbatim to anyone who answered the door when we knocked. The script seemed kind of wooden and uninspiring to me, and I would occasionally adjust some of the words as I read it aloud during our canvasses. I would also add emphasis with my voice, and sometimes with my hands. The locals would generally listen to me politely, with Raul standing by my side, smiling but saying little if anything. It worked out OK, but not all that well. I figured the main problem was with the script.

One day we decided that Raul would read the script instead of me. I am not sure why we did that—maybe just for variety. Frankly, I had some concerns about it. Raul did not read all that well, and neither his voice nor his manner showed much affect. And he read very slowly, which made me doubt whether we would get much accomplished that day. So I was kind of nervous.

But I need not have been. Yes, Raul read in a manner that would have led any formally educated person to wonder whether he had finished high school, which in fact he had not. But the locals responded to him with an enthusiasm that they rarely showed when I read—or improvised from—the script. And I am not talking about just a few people; I am talking about almost all of them.

That night, and for the next few days, I turned the situation over in my mind. Why was it that people had not responded nearly as well to me, with my clever turns of phrase and emphasizing gestures, as to Raul, who stood stiffly and read haltingly? I could have concluded that it was because most of them had the same

skin color as Raul and not me, but by then I had been around the neighborhood too much to find that explanation convincing. It was something else. Maybe it was the fact that he was simple and sincere and I was—at least in this context—a guy who had taken too many acting lessons giving a sales pitch. Or, to put it in the language of the Gospels, Raul spoke like one with authority, and I spoke like one of the scribes.

NANCY: When people ask me about my faith I tend to say, “Oh, I’m a Quaker. I attend Evanston Friends Meeting,” which is pretty lame. It does not really speak to my beliefs, the ones that have me go every Sunday to worship. So what is my story? It starts with sitting in silence and feeling the power of communal worship. It includes lifelong friends and a sense of community. But mostly it is that worship touches my soul when it works, and it transforms me. It is my feelings of amazement in working with Meeting for Business when a topic is blocked and someone says, “Let’s go into silence,” and the Spirit moves the assembled body to discernment. How does that happen? It feels so miraculous.

My personal understanding of one’s spiritual life is that it is a connection with God. In Quakerism the connection is considered to be immediate insofar as it is not mediated through a priest, the Bible, or any other medium. Each of us has the ability to connect with God in the same way as the prophets and Jesus did. Sometimes that does seem to be how it works. For example, the first time I ministered in meeting for worship, I was sitting next to Blanche Frey at Lake Forest Meeting. Her husband, Daryl, was in the last stages preceding his death. I was thinking of something that I was going to say to Blanche about Daryl after meeting, but then I suddenly found myself on my feet, with words coming out of my mouth. I no longer know what I said, but it was a pretty scary moment for me because it felt like it was not me talking but rather like I was channeling a divine presence. I also experienced a time when I was having difficulties in my life. I mentally reached out to God and felt the almost physical sensation of being held by a feminine presence. It was what I needed at that moment.

I realize that these are mystical moments. They are not given to me very often. I tend to think of my relationship with God as my participating in the continuum of the Divine. I feel that there is a divine presence that permeates the world, and I can participate in it to whatever level I am capable of at that time. All of creation

also can participate in this, just as all members of a meeting can participate in a gathered meeting.

DAVID: I have attended only a handful of gathered meetings for worship since becoming a Quaker, but I have discovered that gathered meetings can take place outside of meeting for worship. I believe I learned this most convincingly during my service on the ILYM Faith and Practice Committee, F&P for short. I felt privileged to be asked to serve on that committee, since I had greatly admired its work for years. In fact, part of my discernment about whether to accept the offer involved reflecting on whether I was worthy of the honor.

Janice Domanik, a longtime Friend and friend and an experienced member of the Faith and Practice Committee, drove me to my first F&P meeting. On our ride there, she said something like this: “David, there’s one thing you should know about this committee. When we consider anything that someone on the committee has written, we consider it as a gathered body. It doesn’t matter who wrote it, or why, or how long it took them to do it, or how many drafts we’ve already discussed. All we’re concerned about is whether it reflects God’s will for the yearly meeting.”

I was moved by Janice’s statement. I was of course aware that the Quaker ideal is to attend to leadings of the Spirit, not to the egos of individuals. But I must confess that until then, although I had witnessed a great deal of generosity of spirit in Quaker business meetings, I had experienced little of what Janice was describing.

But she was right. From the very beginning of my first Faith and Practice meeting, it was clear to me that the committee was unlike any I had served on in my substantial time among Friends. No one on that committee was ever defensive about criticism of anything they had written. In fact, when considering a text, some or all of us often could not even remember who had written it, at least not right away. It simply did not matter. I am sure the fruits of that approach led to the Yearly Meeting’s appreciation and acceptance of F&P’s work, even though it was invisible to those who were not on the committee.

I do not mean to overidealize this. At one level, we were just a small group of Quakers taking on the service we had agreed to do. I do not recall our ever explicitly referring to what we were doing as a spiritual exercise. I cannot even say whether the other committee members—Peter Lasersohn, Sara Pavlovic, and Colleen

Reardon—saw it the same way I did. But, for me, the experience of serving on the Faith & Practice Committee was one of being truly gathered. It confirmed the power of the Quaker manner of decision-making at a deeper level than I had known before then. It was one more step in my understanding of how deep we can go in the Quaker faith if we are willing to let go and let God.

NANCY: My spiritual story includes a sense of myself within the Quaker tradition, a tradition that is based in Christian principles but is open to continuing revelation. It allows me to love the messages of Christ and yet reject bits I do not agree with, and yet still feel whole. It is the love of God working within me and other people, God’s favorite vehicles. For me, Quakerism is less about meeting for worship, important as that is, and more a way of walking through life—kind of “answering that of God in everyone,” imperfectly as I do.

DAVID: I have learned a lot from evangelical Latino Friends about walking through life with gratitude and serving joyfully. I served on the Nominating Committee for the Section of the Americas of FWCC for six years before becoming Clerk of the Section in 2019, and I came to notice a striking difference between asking a US Friend and a Latino Friend to serve on a committee. As anyone who has served on a Quaker nominating committee knows, you are lucky if half the people you ask to serve agree to do so. In my experience, most of those who decline say that they are too busy. But I have never known a Latino Friend to say “no” to a request for service, regardless how busy they are. As best as I can tell, those Friends take requests for service as a sign that God has called them to the work, so they are glad to say “yes.” Learning that from them has been a great gift to me.

I have also learned a lot from Latino Friends about the nature of the worship experience. When we gather for worship sharing at an FWCC event, I am struck by the fact that most ministry from unprogrammed Friends consists of personal reflections, often beginning with the word “I,” while almost all ministry from Latino Friends consists in adoration and praise of God, with words like “I” or “me” rarely being spoken. Most of our Latino brothers and sisters have lives that are harder than ours, but they embody a deep sense of gratitude toward the divine. I have tried to learn that lesson from them too.

NANCY: Does the presence of some mystical divine moments constitute a spiritual life and journey? Or is my spiritual life broader than that? How about the time David and I went to our favorite bed and breakfast in Sheffield, west of McNabb, last July? We decided to go there partially because I had been diagnosed with advanced lung cancer, and we were reeling from the news. I had not received any treatments yet, and we had no idea where our lives were going. It was a very unsettling time.

While we were staying at the B&B, we spent a day in Princeton doing a walking tour and scouting restaurants (they have some good ones). On the drive back to Sheffield we had the windows open, the music playing, and the summer evening sky around us. It was a perfect early summer evening: light, clouds, the road with the verges teeming with summer growth, the temperature, and the music we were listening to. I turned to David and said that this could go on forever, and he told me he was feeling the same way. It certainly felt spiritual. It was a state of blessed harmony.

DAVID: I was driving our car from Princeton back to Sheffield that evening. We had a good day, but we were still full of anxiety about Nancy's totally unexpected cancer diagnosis a few weeks earlier. At one point we were riding down a long straight stretch of road. Both of us were totally silent. The evening was silent too, and as I drove I gradually felt my worries dissipating as a sense of the absolute perfection of the moment enveloped me. I remember my eyes brightening and the characteristic set of my mouth slowly turning into a smile. Just at that moment I heard Nancy's voice. It entered my consciousness like a blessed vocal ministry, the kind where exactly the right thing is said at exactly the right time, not breaking the silence but somehow perfecting it. Harmony indeed.

NANCY: Harmony, well, that is something that I have had to draw on recently. It is hard to feel harmonious when doctors are pouring poison into one's body. But that is when it is most important. As a Friend said not too long ago, maybe there are times when one must be carried by one's friends, when the times are hard and I cannot do it for myself. Maybe my sleepiness is my need to be carried when I am not able to be present. But it might also be that when things are going well, I can be spiritually sleepy.

But cancer, I confess, is a pretty big deal. I sometimes wonder if I am boring people when they ask about it. It has, however, challenged me to think about what spiritual tools I have to help me live with it. For example, the expression “fighting the cancer” just rings spiritually wrong to me. The term “fight” seems so non-Quakerly. Besides, these tumors are part of me. They are my cells that are misbehaving. Better that I engage or talk with them and ask, What do you want? What do I want? What is their meaning? Perhaps I should ask the tumors if they might be willing to leave. That seems more like an approach that mirrors what I have learned as a Friend. And it seems more harmonious.

DAVID: Over the years, Nancy and I would talk about spiritual sleepiness. We rarely had it at the same time, which was fortunate. To counter it, we continued to attend meeting for worship faithfully. Sometimes that did not seem to help right away, but in the long run it always did. And for both of us, although not exactly in the same ways, the steps of our mutual faith journey sustained us, both individually and as a couple, in ways we could have hoped for, but could not have expected.

NANCY: Once we received the announcement that I had cancer, I think both of us reached back into our past for those supports that we hoped would help us deal with our new reality. One of the first and main places we sought support from was the ancient Stoic philosophers. We started with Epictetus. One of our first readings was this: “Remember when you are kissing someone you love that you are kissing a mortal.” While that would always have spoken to me, it was particularly poignant knowing that my life expectancy had been probably shortened. There were things I could control, and things I could not. The cancer was one of those I could not.

DAVID: The ancient Stoic philosophers were sort of the original 12-steppers. They distinguish between what we can control and what we cannot. They advise us to focus on the former and let go of the latter, since dwelling on what we cannot control is futile and will only make us unhappy. The Stoics did not invent the Serenity Prayer, but they could have.

One of the main Stoic beliefs is that death is nothing to be feared. “I cannot escape death,” Epictetus said almost 2,000 years ago, “but at least I can escape the fear of it.” Nancy and I always

found quotations like that to be inspiring. And up to the point when she was diagnosed with cancer, I would probably have said that I believed that. But once that happened, I started having my doubts. If I really believed it, why was I feeling so anxious, even desperate? Was it something I only wanted to believe but in fact did not, or maybe even could not?

Since then, I have come to believe that much of faith is like that. We go from day to day concerned mostly with the mundane: what to eat, what to wear, what we'll be doing at work, and so on. Then something happens that makes that whole way of life, that way of being, seem irrelevant. That could be something that affects billions of people, like COVID-19, or something that affects only one's individual self. In either case, like Paul's awakening on the road to Damascus, it cannot be ignored. In my case, I can safely say that very few events are more likely to induce an awakening than the news that the person you love most in the world has been given a death sentence.

My attraction to Stoic beliefs, like Nancy's, was enhanced over time by a growing sense that God is in charge, that all is and will be well even if it makes no sense to me from my tiny little perch in this gigantic universe. Stoics, like Christians and many others, believe that we are pilgrims in this earthly life, that we have been given our time here as a precious gift, and that we should act in accordance with that knowledge. That is easy enough to believe when things are going well, at least for me, but cataclysmic events test our faith. In those times, we become like Job, and we have the choice to respond with gratitude or bitterness.

Shortly after Nancy's cancer was diagnosed, one of her in-laws suddenly and unexpectedly dropped dead. He was only 48 years old, and he left behind a wife and two young children. His sister later told friends and family that she no longer believed in God because of that tragic event. It is not my place to render judgment on her, or on anyone—as Jesus tells us in the gospel of Matthew, “Judge not, lest ye be judged.” For myself, though, I would like to believe that such trials bring me closer to God, not further away. But while God is steadfast, I am not. My faith continues to be a work in progress—hopefully progress toward the Light.

NANCY: How sleepiness opens to the Light, to being where God wants us to be, is a process that takes time. It helps

to have some hardships to overcome. But, perhaps not too much or too many.

Part of my process leading back to God is a core belief that we were never kicked out of the Garden of Eden. This is still the garden, but our false illusion keeps us from seeing it. My belief is similar to the concept of sin that says that sin is refusing God's love. When we turn our backs on God's love, it clouds our vision of where we actually live. Too many people spend life hoping for another life in heaven, believing that this life is not enough. So we spend this life hoping, planning, and wishing for another life, and we let this one pass by unappreciated. God has given us so much. Let us rejoice and be thankful.

DAVID: We Quakers like to say that we are holding people in the Light. That is a precious phrase and a precious practice. I do not believe it means that we are asking the Divine for some specific outcome, but rather that we are asking, on that person's behalf, for the healing that God wants for them. That might include the physical disease being cured, but healing is different from curing.

At the beginning of January of this year, Nancy and I embarked on a road trip to points west. It went wonderfully until the middle of February, when her breathing problems got so bad that we had to return to Chicago a week earlier than planned. Even during the good times on that trip, though, Nancy often experienced discomfort, and sometimes it got pretty debilitating. On the last Sunday in January, when we were in southern California, she was physically unable to attend a Quaker service. But we agreed that I should go.

I did not know of any Quaker meetings in the area, so I looked them up. I found out that there was a Christ-centered Friends church some 40 minutes away. I have always enjoyed attending the worship services of Friends who do things differently than we do here in ILYM, and Nancy did too. So even though there was an unprogrammed meeting about the same distance from where we were staying, I decided, with Nancy's encouragement, to attend the evangelical one.

The service included hymns, icons, a sermon, and other elements of religious practice that are familiar to most Christian denominations, but not to unprogrammed Friends. At one point the pastor asked if anyone had any prayer requests. I thought about responding, but I felt too much like an outsider, so I did not.

After the service ended, the pastor came up to me and introduced himself. After we had talked for a while, I confessed that I was very worried about Nancy because of the advanced stage of her cancer and the physical suffering she was experiencing because of it. He suggested that we pray together. So we did.

“Heavenly Father,” he began, “I commend to you your faithful servant Nancy, and I humbly ask you to heal her body.” He continued on that theme for a while, talking about her suffering, my concern for her, and the boundless love God has for all people. Then he added, “But Lord, if it’s not in your plan to heal Nancy’s body, we ask that you heal her spirit.” He went on in that vein for a few more minutes before bringing the prayer to a close.

There are many aspects of that prayer, both in form and in content, that would be entirely foreign to liberal unprogrammed Friends. But, thanks to my experiences with FWCC, I have learned to distill spiritual truth from the words and practices of Quakers of every stripe. I was deeply grateful for the care and compassion that pastor showed for Nancy and me. But, more than that, I recognized that he was doing what we unprogrammed Friends do when we ask for someone to be held in the Light.

NANCY: So, facing death. I get anxious and then start to think, “Well, this is death, then.” That relieves the anxiety mostly. Then I start to think, what about X? But I cannot do anything about most of the X’s in my life. I cannot control who will win the next Presidential election, and I cannot finish all my volunteer projects either. I am probably not going to be able to simplify things enough for David (water the ivy—it is our wedding ivy) either. The future is getting short. What can I do? Be present and loving now. That is also part of my story of being a Quaker. I am not sure that 30 years ago I would have thought that way. How I orient myself toward people is better for being a Quaker.

DAVID: How Nancy oriented herself toward death was also better for her being a Quaker. She had learned her lessons well—lessons from Quakers, from Stoics, and from her experiences in life. She had internalized them, and she acted on them.

NANCY: One of the things my homecare attendant, Denise, said to me was, “You’ve got to fight this.” I told her, “I’m a Quaker. We believe in that of God in everyone. If I’m truly looking for that of God in you, I can’t fight you. And even our Lord, when they

came for Him at Gethsemane, didn't fight. He told His followers to lay down their weapons. He knew it was His time." That moved her, more than anything I did.

DAVID: Nancy lived out her life in the best Quaker tradition: with integrity, with a concern for others and for the earth, and with a recognition of and a love for God's benign presence. She was full of gratitude for the life she had.

NANCY: To be one of the lucky ones who survives 5-10 years with stage-4 lung cancer, one has to have luck. I have been so lucky with marrying David, my friends, church, and family that I guess I used it up. It has been better by far to have married David and had all those wonderful years than to get a few more at the end and not to have had the last 30. It has been such a good life. I have no complaints.

DAVID: Nor did Nancy act as though she had any complaints. She was sad when she first came to understand that a physical cure was out of the question, but she was never angry, never resentful, never bitter. She became more and more sleepy in her final days on this earth, but it was not a spiritual sleepiness. Whatever the future held, Nancy knew she was being held in the Light. And she remained open to her future prospects, even though that future was not going to be the one we had planned. That was typified by the words she said to a compassionate local Quaker a few short weeks before she died.

NANCY: I don't know if I believe in an afterlife. But, I guess I'm going to find out.

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.”