

Jonathan Plummer Lecture, August 1, 1993
RUMINATIONS ON FAITH
Blanche V. Frey



I think that when one is asked to give the Plummer lecture what is wanted is an expression of personal faith or an expression of some aspect of one's beliefs or concerns built over the years. When I was asked I said "yes" because I thought it would challenge me to put my faith on paper in an intelligible way.

Many of us who have been selected go through the same set of emotions: First, elation that a great honor has been bestowed on us. Then the realization comes: "Good heavens, what do I have to say that is worthwhile?" But in the end I have come around to thinking that if others have the faith in me, then I should have the faith in myself, with all the gifts I have been given, to be able to say what is in my heart and to express to some degree the essence of the faith I feel to be central to my life.

There: I have already used the word "faith" in at least two of its meanings. The first meaning is "confidence" or "trust". The second, or religious faith, is more elusive. By "the essence of my faith" I mean a combination of trust in a great creator, or God, an undergirding force I cannot prove but know to be true; and, specifically, a trust in the Quaker way of looking at religious experience and in living everyday life.

In Christian thought faith has been defined chiefly by the writer of Hebrews 11:1-3:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it men of old have received divine approval. By faith we understand that the world was created by God, so what is seen was made out of things that do not appear.

Here it is interesting to note that in the history of the English language, the word "faith" was first used solely in its religious sense. Later came its use to mean "trust" or "confidence" in the secular sense. Over half the instances of the word "faith" in the New Testament are in Paul's writings. Paul is thought to have written much of the book of Hebrews.

Thomas Aquinas, the great thirteenth century Roman Catholic philosopher and theologian, defined faith as "the act of the intellect assenting to a divine truth because of a movement of the will, which is in turn moved by the grace of God." Luther depended more on the element of trust, while Calvin called it "a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence

towards us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts by the Holy Spirit.” (1)

I like Paul Tillich’s definition, “the state of being ultimately concerned.” We are concerned about many things, but if one thing “claims ultimacy it demands the total surrender of him who accepts this claim, and it promises total fulfillment even if all other claims have to be subjected to it or rejected in its name.” (2)

This is the ultimate concern or faith exhibited by George Fox as he wandered around England in 1647 trying to find the answer to his spiritual quest. In his *Journal* he writes,

As I cannot declare the misery I was in, it was so great and heavy upon me, neither can I set forth the mercies of God unto me in all my misery. Oh, the everlasting love of God to my soul when I was in great distress! When my torments and troubles were great, then was his love exceedingly great. Thou, Lord, makest a fruitful field a barren wilderness, and a barren wilderness a fruitful field; thou bringest down and settest up; thou killest and makest alive; all honour and glory be to thee, O Lord of glory! The knowledge of thee in the spirit is life, but that knowledge which is fleshly works death. (3)

His faith blossomed into the opening that Jesus Christ could speak to his condition directly and into his life’s pilgrimage.

This is the faith of Thomas Kelly when he writes with great passion in his essay on “Holy Obedience.” He calls on young people to

... be faithful to Him until the last lingering bit of self is surrendered and you are wholly God-possessed.

The life that intends to be wholly obedient, wholly submissive, wholly listening is astonishing in its completeness. Its joys are ravishing, its peace profound, its humility the deepest, its power world-shaking, its love enveloping, its simplicity that of a trusting child. ... It is the life and power of George Fox and of Isaac and Mary Penington. It is the life and power of John Woolman who decided, he says, “to place my whole trust in God,” to “act on an inner Principle of Virtue, and pursue worldly business no farther than as Truth opened my way therein.” ... And it is the life and power of some people now in this room to smile knowingly as I speak. And it is a life and power that can break forth in this tottering Western culture and return the church to its rightful life as a fellowship of creative, heaven-led souls. (4)

It is the faith of the father whose epileptic son Jesus healed and who cried out, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (5) We, too, cry out, “I believe; help Thou my unbelief!” For few of us attain to Thomas Kelly’s level of devotion and surrender of self; to live in the adoration and presence of God while we at the same time go about our daily business. But we know such a life is possible. I have seen it in the face of Thomas Kelly. I have seen it in the life of Howard Brinton, scientist and philosopher, who devoted himself to Quaker scholarship and teaching. What a dear, great, and humble man he was, Howard Brinton! He had a rare gift of simplifying and clarifying complex ideas and trends, as he does so well in *Friends for 300 Years*. It is a story of faith, faithfully told.

Again, Tillich defines faith as “the total and centered act of the personal self, the act of unconditional, infinite, and ultimate concern” -- “the passion for the infinite.” (6) For many in today’s world, this claim may be material success, or nationalism, or ethnicity -- all false gods. For God, Tillich says, “is the fundamental symbol for what concerns us ultimately. ... God as the ultimate in man’s ultimate concern is more certain than any other certainty, even that of oneself.” (7)

How does one develop and affirm one’s faith? First, the chance of being born into a particular culture. Second, one’s spiritual mentors. Third, through reading, the arts, and audio-visuals. And fourth, through experiences that give one new insights and maturity.

I was born into a rather affluent WASP -- white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant family in Dover, Delaware. I was the fourth of seven children. I had three older brothers and three younger sisters. My mother -- stately, Victorian, and gentle -- was an accomplished violinist. We always had music in the house. We had a large house and yard, trees to climb, a beautiful garden, and meadows to roam.

My father, a successful attorney, served on various state boards and commissions and was active in Republican politics. He was gone a great deal. When I was born he is said to have exulted, “Now I have someone to dance with!” I never danced with my father. He was a non-practicing Methodist. My mother was a Quaker.

We lived in a neighborhood of gentfolk who cared about us. Neighbor children gravitated to our big family. Within the immediate neighborhood we had a great deal of freedom; but we always knew the boundaries, and my mother required obedience, modesty, and truthfulness. A favorite saying of hers was, “It takes two to fight.”

Dover, the capital of the state, had only about 5,000 inhabitants. The blacks lived in a part of town I never saw, and I never knew an educated black person until I was grown. Of course the schools were segregated. My mother had Jewish musical friends, but on the whole we looked askance at Catholics and Jews. Most of our friends were Episcopalians or Methodists.

I joined a Friends Meeting when I was at the discerning age of twelve. My sister Ann and I attended the local Episcopal church where we had close friends and where my parents had been married. Occasionally some of us drove over to the small Camden Meeting, three or four miles away. I liked its friendly people. Our Episcopal priest was a high churchman with great dignity and authority. From the pulpit he would proclaim that those who were not baptized would go straight to hell. I was worried and took my concern to my mother, who explained that baptism was of the Spirit and that baptism with water was not necessary. My father’s reaction was to say, “If you children want to be baptized I’ll have Father Thompson come to the house and baptize you all right here.”

I don’t recall that Quakers came to interview me or that I wrote anything to indicate my desire to join the Meeting. My mother must have applied for me. I do remember the Sunday that a Friend on the facing bench announced that I had been accepted into membership. It was a great comfort, as I continued to attend the Episcopal church and to sing in the choir. Sometimes,

though, as I sat or stood in my formal black and white choir robes, my rebellious spirit wanted to cry out, "I'm a Quaker!" But I am grateful for the Episcopal experience, as I learned not only Bible stories and the Lord's Prayer, but also the Apostles' Creed, the catechism, and the Ten Commandments.

It was a sheltered life. Until high school I was tutored for all grades except fourth through sixth, when I attended the new public school up the road. Rather disapproving of public school, my mother sent three of us as day students to the Wesley Collegiate Institute, a Methodist preparatory school. The two years I attended there, 1929-31, became increasingly difficult for my family -- the first two years of the Great Depression. My father was one of the casualties. Held responsible for a debt he had incurred jointly with two other men, he sank into a severe depression from which he never recovered. The only personal memento I have of him is a small, leather-bound Bible inscribed, "Presented to Blanche V. Anderson with much love by her father Christmas 1929."

In 1931 my mother decided to rent the house and take the whole family to Europe, where she could seek the best doctors, including Carl Jung in Zurich, for my father. Shortly after our return in 1932 my sister Ann committed suicide. My mother died of a massive stroke eleven days afterwards. I was seventeen, my youngest sister only ten.

These tragedies were stunning blows, but, somehow, with family and friends, we survived. A great-aunt in charge, we moved back temporarily to the house where I was born. After a year at Dover High School, some good angels arranged my going to George School for my senior year. Then came a scholarship to Earlham College, more good angels watching over me. I owe a deep debt of gratitude to both institutions, where I not only widened my horizons but also had a real sense of belonging and of being part of loving, caring, joyous communities. Earlham, especially, was a friendly home away from home for four years.

At Earlham there was no unprogrammed Meeting either on or off campus. I sometimes attended West Richmond Friends Church, finding it strange with a minister and choir. For a while I also attended a discussion group there. I remember a basic question posed by a perceptive leader: "Do you think Christianity would have spread if there had been no resurrection?" An honest answer would have to be, "No." But I see life, death, and resurrection all about me constantly. We are all part of this mysterious creation, death, and resurrection.

All through the maturing years I was blessed with innumerable mentors. George Walton, headmaster at George School, became a father figure. I recall his reading from the autobiography of Rufus Jones at assemblies. Sometimes we had topnotch speakers. I vividly remember George Washington Carver, the great Negro scientist and educator, who took us on a "walk with God." He showed us incredulous kids how he had created synthetic materials from peanuts and sweet potatoes.

At Earlham fellow students, teachers, books, and music nourished my spiritual journey. I think of Arthur Charles, German professor, who had led part of the German feeding program after World War I; Perry Kissick, history, who had been mistreated in prison as a conscientious

objector; Merrill Root, poet and inspiring teacher; and Martha Pick, French teacher and a strict vegetarian. I had three roommates, two of whom I still visit with sometimes.

After Earlham came a year of graduate work at Bryn Mawr College near Philadelphia. While there I could walk on Sundays over to Haverford Meeting. It was a great privilege and inspiration to hear Thomas Kelly and Rufus Jones speak on occasion.

After two years' employment at George School, first as an English intern and then as a substitute for a teacher on sabbatical, I knew I was not cut out to teach. I signed up for a Quaker summer work camp in Tennessee, organized by the American Friends Service Committee. It turned out to be a memorable experience.

As a Friends Mission project, our assignment was to build a demonstration dairy barn in one of the poorest, most eroded areas in the United States, the stony uplands of eastern Tennessee, west of the Smoky Mountain National Park. A group of 16 or so young adults met with the leaders, Wilbert and Nina Braxton, at a primitive, abandoned farm house that became our headquarters and dormitory for the women. The Braxtons occupied a shed attached to the back of the house, and the men, an old barn nearby. I thought it incredible that the Braxtons would undertake such a project with two babies ages seven weeks and seventeen months, in a remote area with neither running water nor electricity nor telephone. This was in the early days of the Tennessee Valley Authority, the summer of 1941.

Central to our camp life was the Meeting for Worship, held outside most days. We then planned the day's work schedule. Our group soon adjusted to the simplest of food and living arrangements, to carrying water from the spring down the hill. Quiet jokes were made about our "WPA project", the outhouse built for us before we came. Besides learning how to saw, drive nails, and care for tools, we shared the few housekeeping chores each day. Our camp dietician and a nurse, who lived in her own trailer, completed the group. One of the fellows, a civil engineer and a Quaker pastor, who came occasionally from his community several miles away, supervised the construction.

Besides building the barn, we participated in the lives of the surrounding rural people, sometimes helping at the one-room school, lending a hand at mattress-making, or learning how to can vegetables. Some of the children had sores on their legs from malnutrition.

Such fun we had! Eight of us formed a double quartet and learned hymns and songs such as "Brighten the Corner Where You Are", and sang them at every opportunity. We learned much from field trips and lectures arranged by Wilbert. And the jokes! One fellow, a divinity student, would come out with outlandish remarks like, "You, too, can have a fur-lined bathtub!"

We finished the barn and the milking stalls in the allotted time. It had been a mountaintop experience in Quaker community living, a unity of faith and works. I shall never forget the Braxtons' quiet, spiritual leadership and the loving, patient care of their two babies, most of which fell, naturally, to Nina.

After work camp came three months at Pendle Hill, interrupted first by a two weeks' trip through the South at the invitation of Naomi Binford, one of the work camp supervisors for the Service Committee. Arle Brooks, her fiance, and Larry Kirkpatrick, a friend of Arle's, completed the group. Our quest was to find a farm where Arle and Naomi could live in voluntary poverty and which they could develop into a cooperative, interracial community to improve the lot of the sharecroppers as well as to improve the land. En route we visited cooperatives and interviewed many people. We stayed overnight with Wilmer and Mildred Binns Young, who were cooperatively and interracially farming a tract of 800 acres owned by the AFSC as an experiment.

We found a 300-acre farm in Mississippi, which was purchased jointly by three individuals at \$10 an acre. Arle lived there alone for a time, Naomi having broken the engagement. It was eventually bought by a black sharecropper, who paid for it gradually by selling off a good bit of the timber.

Experiences at Pendle Hill furthered my spiritual growth. Anna and Howard Brinton shared the leadership -- Anna the practical, Howard the intellectual, and both of them the spiritual. I remember especially Howard's lectures. He had a wonderful way of simplifying abstract and complex ideas with diagrams.

Autumn 1941 was a time of ferment. A group of C.O.'s was training to go to China as ambulance drivers. A leader from the former Weimar Republic, a German refugee, interpreted current events and predicted war with Japan. On December 7 we gathered around the radio in the main building to hear President Roosevelt declare war. One of my roommates, a lovely Japanese woman, required to return to Japan, cried all night before she left Pendle Hill. Through it all our daily meetings for worship served as anchors for those who attended.

In January, I left Pendle Hill abruptly because of the illness of one of my brothers. Anna Brinton said to me, "Just remember that underneath are the everlasting arms." The Old Testament quotation has remained with me ever since.

By summer of 1942 my brother had sufficiently recovered and no longer needed me. I decided to attend a crash course in consumer cooperatives at the Rochdale Institute in New York City. From there I apprenticed at the Pittsfield, Massachusetts, Co-op and in a short time was hired as manager of the Oberlin, Ohio, Co-op. In transition from a student run co-op to one both for students and the general public, it was a difficult job, made more so in wartime.

At Oberlin I soon found a small group of Quakers, chiefly students, who met in a room on campus. I have happy memories of those Friends as well as the faculty, town, and student friends I made there and of the advantages of living in a musical college town. It was another mountaintop experience to sing in the Bach B-Minor Mass that was produced each year on Good Friday as a community event.

After two years of hard work, I again got the call from a family member. This time it was a sister who was expecting her first child. So I resigned my job and left Ohio for Delaware in the spring of 1945.

Feeling the need to be closer to family, I found a job in the Wilmington, Delaware, cooperative that summer. Quakers served both on the board of directors and as members. I was soon attending Meeting regularly and transferred my membership from Camden to Wilmington.

That fall I met Daryl Frey at the door of the Meetinghouse. He was completing over three years of alternative service at the Delaware State Hospital. Born into a Mennonite family with centuries of Mennonite tradition behind him, he had deeply disappointed his father by joining the Wilmington Friends Meeting.

We were married at the old Wilmington Fourth Street Meeting the following April. And so began our 47 years together, practically all of it lived in the same community of Barrington, where Daryl took a teaching job after summer school at the University of Chicago.

The years spent rearing our three sons I regard as the most creative and among the happiest of my life. Even before the birth of our first son, I had joined the Barrington Child Study Group. The monthly speakers included some of the best specialists in child development in Chicagoland, and I found the fellowship and learning from the other 50 or so mothers invaluable. As we discussed our children and their activities over coffee, we discovered their behavior was not at all unique. They have taught us much. Besides testing our love and patience in the early years, they have brought both of us untold joys, both in themselves and in their families. Here is a recent example:

In May, when I was in the doldrums trying to organize this paper, along came a note in the mail. It reads:

Dear Momma! This is a note for Mother's Day. I have asked my daughter what she wants to give her mother for Mother's Day. She told me she thought a Barbie doll would be nice. You, however, are *not* getting a Barbie doll. Instead, let me just tell you what you already know anyway; that you have been a *wonderful* Mother, and have had a wonderful influence on my life. I hope to pass that along to my little one.

This little note changed a discouraged day into a bright and sunny one. Let us never underestimate what a few words of encouragement or praise can do. We are all vulnerable. Let's admit it. And let us not forget to let others hear and feel our appreciation of them.

I now want to share with you an experience and a concern that has lasted over the past twelve years.

To me, evil is epitomized by the nuclear bomb. I have been a pacifist as long as I can remember. The horror of possible nuclear warfare came full force upon me at Friends General Conference in 1981. While there I saw Helen Caldicott's film on the physical effects of nuclear radiation on people, especially on males. I took my perceptions back to our Church Women United Board that fall. Later that fall, with a dear friend from the Methodist Church, I attended an all-day ecumenical workshop on nuclear war at the Chicago Methodist Temple. There were four or five speakers, among them Harold Washington, then a congressman, and Bernard Feld,

one of the editors of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. What they had to say shook us to the core.

At the Church Women United's World Community Day celebration that November, my friend and I spoke on peace. I expressed my utter horror at the prospect of nuclear warfare, calling it the ultimate blasphemy against God and His creation. I still remember nights when I tossed and turned in torment at the thought of the death of our planet. I *had* to take action.

In January, 1982, at a forum of the Church Women United we showed the film "War Without Winners". We then voted in favor of a freeze on the testing, production, and deployment of nuclear weapons, and paid our dues to the fledgling Illinois group, mainly church people. In February a *Herald* reporter interviewed three of us from Church Women United at my house. He put my picture on the front page with a long article quoting all of us. An interview with three proper ladies on a current and frightening topic made good copy.

To make a long story short, we formed a group of ministers and church women to plan what we could do to get the message out to the community. We met several times in March. The Catholic priest offered the use of a large room that could seat 500. The Methodist associate minister volunteered to arrange the printing of thousands of flyers to distribute at churches and the train station. Funds were raised from good angels. It felt good to be doing something. And this was one occasion when my experience with Quaker business meetings served well. We took our time at decisions and took no actions without the true sense of the meeting.

On April 25, after we had distributed thousands of flyers, we held our Town Meeting. About 500 people came to hear speakers on the nature of the threat and on the medical effects of nuclear warfare. From names gathered there we formed a group to see if we could plan a way to get the "freeze" idea accepted by the Village Board of Barrington. In a highly conservative Republican community this was no small task.

All that summer we met weekly at the Catholic church center. We plied Village Board members with packets of informative articles. We interviewed key Board members. And we worked diligently getting names on petitions.

In September we ran a full-page ad in the local weekly. A committee worked out careful wording of the resolution to be presented.

Finally the night of October 11 came. A standing-room-only crowd filled the room where the Village Board met. We were tense with excitement. When our turn came on the agenda, I remember the Village president's saying, "This may be the first time the board has had an audience who are *for* something we're going to vote on. It will be an interesting experience for us."

Marge Malo from our group electrified and stunned the Board and the audience with her brief, masterful presentation. The minister from the United Church of Christ spoke of being overwhelmed at seeing the first pictures of the Hiroshima destruction. The Catholic priest rose and quoted one of the Popes. We presented over 3,000 names on petitions. The crowning

moment came when a high school student presented 263 names of schoolmates on petitions and made a strong statement. There was little discussion by the Board after this.

We held our breaths as the Board was polled. All answered, "Aye". It was a triumphant moment, but a drop in the sea of what still needs to be done. I hope to see the day when nuclear and other methods of mass annihilation are banished from the earth.

Dante in his *Inferno* pictures pride as the greatest of the seven deadly sins. It is the sin of thinking we can do it all ourselves, when we know we cannot. We have to have faith in God as the foundation of our being and in ourselves as children of God. Let us think of ourselves as units of faith.

We cannot change the basic selves we are born with, but we can change our attitudes. To help us, we have the supreme example of Jesus to show us the way. He was the embodiment of the Christ or Holy Spirit, the Seed, the Light Within, of which we all partake to some degree.

Family and friends, large and small "f", continue to be mentors of our faith. Each one of us here can be such a mentor.

From simple living and from reading -- the Bible, Quaker journals, biographies, histories, and novels, too -- we can greatly expand our experiences and perceptions, and nurture our faith. We can be inspired and exhilarated by communing with nature, by music and art, by travel, whether actual or armchair. Life is full of choices how we may faithfully and joyfully live it.

Meeting for Worship is central: for here we experience the continuum of our faith. I cannot stress too much its importance. It is the anchor of our lives. Here are lived the basics of our faith, that we can know the will of God in our own experience, whether singly or as a group. And through the "miracle of the Monthly Meeting for Business" (8) we can experience unity and can do God's will in the conduct of our everyday affairs.

Through action we can make significant contributions to social change. You in this room are living that faith translated into action, whether in the realm of peace, of the environment, of service to others, in the arts, or in a myriad of other ways.

I thank you for giving me the opportunity to express a few ruminations on faith, the ultimate concern, the ground of our being.

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5. Mark 9:24.
6. *Dynamics of Faith*, *ibid.*, pp. 8-9.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.

8. Subject of one of George Watson's workshops at Friends General Conference.

BLANCHE V. FREY

Having been born in 1915, the fourth of seven children, Blanche Anderson grew up in Dover, Delaware. She is a graduate of George School and Earlham College, and earned an M.A. from Bryn Mawr College.

Following her marriage to Daryl Frey in 1946, the couple moved to the University of Chicago, where Daryl did graduate work and Blanche worked in the bookstore. That fall Daryl was hired to teach in School District 1 in Barrington. They have lived there ever since. After his retirement as school superintendent in 1974, they traveled widely in Europe and Mexico. They have six grandchildren to enjoy.

Though a busy mother with a growing family of three boys, Blanche found time to be active in the League of Women Voters, in which she held numerous portfolios, including president; in Child Study Group (also president); in Church Women United, where she worked with migrant families for about 15 years; and with the Experiment in International Living. The Freys have entertained many foreign student visitors.

For years a peace activist, Blanche protested against the ABM, organized in favor of fair housing, headed the Barrington Human Relations Committee for a term, and campaigned door-to-door at election times. She organized the Barrington Nuclear Freeze Campaign, and for many years was a board member of Illinois SANE/FREEZE.

Blanche has been a member of the Society of Friends since age twelve. She and Daryl remain active members of Lake Forest Monthly Meeting. For Illinois Yearly Meeting she has served as Coordinating Clerk and convener of Nominating Committee. Both she and Daryl regularly attend Quaker gatherings -- local, state, and regional.