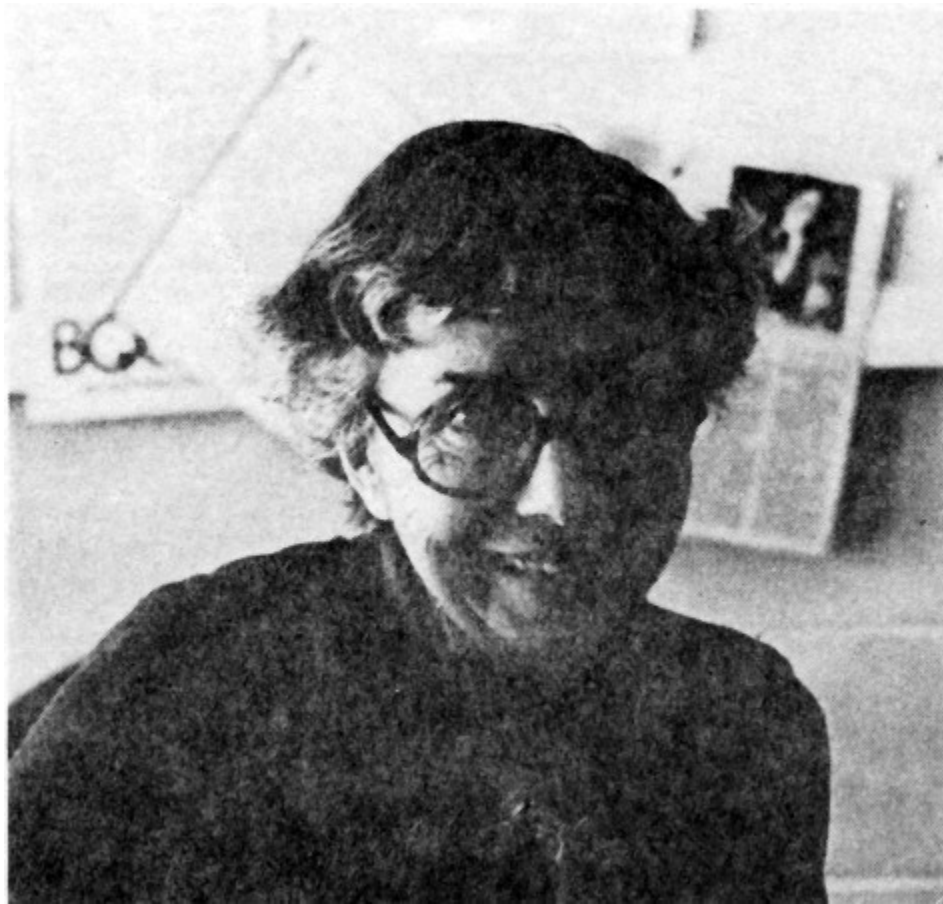


Plummer Lecture Given to Illinois Yearly  
Meeting, Eighth Month 1976  
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*Alice Walton is a loved member of Lake Forest Monthly Meeting, Illinois Yearly Meeting. Although a birthright Friend, she is also a "convinced" Friend. As an "ordinary" Friend, she has made her inspiration and activism felt in her local Meeting, Yearly Meeting and in the wider community of Friends. Some other biographical notes may be found in her address. While those who know Allie have been touched by her insights, understandings and love, this printed lecture will introduce her message to an expanding community.*

# Quaker Saints and Other Ordinary People

I am an ordinary person. I have no special claim to distinction. I am not a scholar, a teacher, a writer, an artist, a politician. But that is all right -- most of us are ordinary people with no special credentials. However, I do have one important claim. I am a Quaker, an ordinary Quaker. And that is why I am going to talk about ordinary Quaker saints.

First, I'll tell you a little about my background. I really am a Quaker by heritage. I like to think I am also a committed Quaker. The heritage part used to be rather a heavy burden, but I have learned to appreciate it and even to be proud of it. It does give me the right to make critical remarks when I observe Quakers being too sanctimonious.

Both my father and my mother had Quaker ancestors as far back as our records show. My father's records begin when four Walton brothers came to this country from England about 1680. I grew up as one of five sisters on the campus of a Quaker school near Philadelphia, playing in the nearby creek, climbing the trees, running and sledding on the open campus, skating on the pond. I was the 2nd daughter and was apparently disgusted at not having brothers. I achieved a small fame at the age of 3½ when the fourth one of us was born by commenting sharply "if this keeps up we'll all be girls." Well, it did keep up and all five of us are girls.

There was no community for us to grow up with, no neighborhood, no other children. We were at that time the only "faculty brats." We had each other. We went to Meeting Sunday mornings, about a mile away, as regularly as the rising of the sun. Whether we wanted to go or not was not relevant. It was what one did. We went to Meeting. I was often bored, but it was a fact of life I accepted. There were moments of despair when I knew I could not live through the hour. There were also moments of daydreaming and fantasy and even fun. There was also a First Day School which I must have attended regularly but I remember nothing of it except being wrapped in a blanket and being told to stand there and look like a Wise Man.

There is a hot, intense, loving argument going on about Quakerism. What is Quakerism? Is it Christian? These scholars make lists of the types of Quakers, they put us into categories, conservative, liberal, evangelical, universal, programmed, unprogrammed, and so on. Most of us speak loosely about our particular brand of Quakerism and tend to be quite superior and holier-than-thou toward all the others. These scholars care a lot and the definitions are important to them. I am not going to describe these differences -- but perhaps I should speak for myself. I am certainly a "liberal" type. I am biblically illiterate. But I do believe that we are to be considered Christian because we do use the name Quaker and the name Society of Friends and we identify somewhat with the early Quakers who sought to accept the way of Jesus and the life of Jesus as an example. It might even be said that Jesus was the first Quaker.

But I avoid the use of the word "Christian" because it has become one of those sacred words. Both evil and good have been done in its name. And God has created many good and loving and saintly people who are not Christian. I do happen to believe that Jesus showed us what love really is and what liberation really is. He also told us that God is really O.K. That God has evolved from the fearful, jealous, unpredictable power of Old Testament history. Even so, I

would feel arrogant and discriminatory to claim that MY love, being Christian, is somehow superior to some other kind of love. I think the word LOVE can stand alone and does not need the word Christian tacked on as a prefix.

The early Quakers lived in the Kingdom NOW. They loved Jesus and they had a vision that all of us have the potential of being possessed with the spirit of Jesus. All of us do have a hunger and thirst to be possessed by *something* -- to achieve a meaning that reaches beyond itself. There is a longing to understand ourselves, to express ourselves, to *be*. Those early Quakers were possessed, not by a search for salvation later, but a search for living in the Kingdom NOW. We do not share their passion perhaps, but if we refer to them as our forbears and claim their glory, we are surely Christian too. And so, I celebrate these present day saints who keep reminding us of the simple truths of early Friends as we go stumbling around in our own murky swamps.

The other group of scholars that I celebrate are those who are doing steady, dogged, serious, significant research into war-peace issues. They do not just talk about peace on earth -- they are using their special skills to study, research, collect, analyze, and publish for our use a solid body of work that is desperately needed. It is a drop in the bucket when compared to the historical records of war and war strategies done by scholars all over the world. But finally -- a handful of people, some Quaker and some not, are beginning to build a library of practical information about alternatives to war, about nonviolent action, and about matters of conscience. I sometimes hear critics speak scornfully about the "ivory tower" as not being where the action really is, but that is a short sighted view. The "action" needs systematic thinking and analysis to inform the action. The "movement" needs research and study to develop the vision.

To build a new society we need research into the past, we need to discover alternatives for the future. We also need to dig into an understanding of the obstacles and impediments that the status quo places in the way of achieving peace and justice. Many of us talk too glibly about peace -- peace. The words are empty.

But my saints are really working for peace. They are building models of alternative futures, creating scenarios that imagine possible new structures. This kind of study assumes that war cannot be eliminated until injustice is eliminated. It realizes that there is more than one way in which human beings kill each other. Shooting and bombing is one way, but starvation is another. There is direct violence and there is indirect violence. My saints are these people who are doing radical, thoughtful work, trying to make changes in our way of living, our way of governing, our system of decision making, trying to help all society to evolve so that human needs are met and there is a chance of a decent life for everyone.

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There is another group of saints -- a very small, select group. They are really precious to me. They have humor. They sparkle, they make jokes, they laugh at themselves, they laugh with us. They make my inner light really glow. Of course Henry Cadbury is one of these. I am not going to be trapped into naming my current saints because I can't name them all. But it is safe to mention Henry.

I predict that if Quaker humor increases, the Society of Friends will flourish and grow. If humor decreases, the Society of Friends will die. Right now we are dead center -- I don't know which way it is going. By humor, of course I mean much more than the wisecrack in the back row or the funny story about St. Peter at the gate greeting the Quaker who assumes he is going to Heaven. I mean the ability not to take ourselves too seriously -- the awareness of the rich irony in so many situations -- the balancing of tragedy and comedy, the shock of recognition when Lerone Bennett said in his book *The Negro Mood* -- "those dear, mild, God-intoxicated Quakers." Humor is strength. Humor is communication. Humor is that heart-warming eye catch that can happen in a rich Meeting for Worship when a like-minded person comes to the same response and recognition to an incident or a message that you do -- and your eyes catch and acknowledge and on you go, with a wonderful sense of the wind blowing through your spirits. Some of my saints with humor are scholars, some are poets. In fact, there is quite a bit of overlapping between the humorous saints and the scholarly ones I just described. And many of them are ordinary people too. I wish there were more.

A proper juicy sense of humor is to be cultivated because it is the only way I know of to deal with the devil. That devil is quite personal, quite immediate, to me. Probably more so than the Creator who is so vast, so all pervading. The devil is right there, on my shoulder, grinning, poking, suggesting, stroking, praising, questioning. She, or he, is like C.S. Lewis' Screwtape. This devil assures us that what we *hope* is God's will is really God's will. This devil assures us that of course God's plan includes this particular circumstance that happens to be favorable to us. To put this seductive devil in its proper place we have to keep a broad perspective, a sharp eye, a keen wit, and an easy ability to laugh. One of the lovely members of my own Meeting likes to remind us of the 11th Commandment -- Thou shalt not take thyself too seriously. I do not suggest that we laugh at wars and disaster. Let's laugh at those people who start wars, and thereby disarm them. We can recognize the devil easily when war rages in a faraway land. It's not so easy to see it and deal with it when it sits on a Quaker committee or comes to Business Meeting. But if we do see that devil, we can laugh it away.

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Another group of saints who are closely related are of course the artists. The writers, the poets, the painters, the musicians, the dancers, the singers, the people who make things with their hands and their hearts and spirits. They create things of beauty. They are very important to us all and when we remember how vigorously the early Quakers stamped them out, they become even more precious. There are some aspects of that passionate Quakerism of the past that are better forgotten. Their distrust of gaiety and color, of artistic expression, of joyful sounds and movement, may be one of the reasons they did become so ingrown, so lacking in humor, so self-righteous.

When I gaze at the glorious paintings -- buildings -- sculpture that have been made, and consider the literature and music given to us through the years -- I can even be grateful the early Quakers did not succeed in converting all society to their particular stern, non-frivolous religion. We take for granted the religious freedom they struggled for and died for. Without forgetting that heritage, we can move toward a more personal wholeness.

I am glad I am alive now. Now Quakers encourage these beautiful and essential aspects of living. Quakers are realizing that the making of art is very much a part of living in the Kingdom now. A poem or a painting can be a prayer. A dance or a song can be an expression of the deep searching that enriches a Meeting for Worship. All kinds of art are part of a reaching toward our potential.

Quakers have always poured out the words -- in journals and tracts and polemics, in essays, articles, minutes of meetings. I keep looking for Quaker saints with humor who will write science fiction, the kind of writing that is part fantasy and part myth. Myths convey high truths in symbolic language -- they free the imagination -- they permit us to create -- they free us to think and feel. We need that nonsense, that impudence, that irony, that caring about the future that is possible in science fiction. It puts a focus on ultimate values when we leap into space. It may not seem very "Quakerly" in an old-time sense to go leaping about in space. And yet -- when I was swinging from a tree in the jungle long ago I had a sense of the grandeur and mystery and beauty of the force that created me. And I surely expect to have that same sense of something more than myself when I am swinging from a point of a star in some distant galaxy. I can't believe that our God, our Creator, is limited to this small planet. Surely God is personal to us but at the same time is cosmic -- is in the entire universe.

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I have another group of favorite saints. I do think many of us take them too much for granted and even bask in reflected glory because of the work they do. Some are Quaker -- quite a few are not. But it doesn't matter, they do Quaker work. Or at least, after a project is over, or when history gives the work credibility, we all claim it as Quaker. These people are the ones who work with and for the Friends Committee on National Legislation, the American Friends Service Committee, the Friends World Committee, the British Service Council, and so on. They are intelligent, resourceful, patient, and wise. They work in small offices doing routine work. They dig into facts. They try to understand. They study and research, they walk the halls of Congress, they go out and live with the people, they go anywhere in the world, modestly. They bind wounds, they feed the hungry, they teach, they dig ditches. And when it is necessary, and if they are qualified, they put down their tools, and look authority in the eye and Speak Truth to Power. I don't need to describe their work, you all know it. I do celebrate the balance in these saints. They are spoken of as naive, idealistic do-gooders and innocent doves, but I believe they also have the serpent's wisdom. They are spoken of with a touch of scorn as being "establishment" types, too concerned with hierarchy and system, but I believe the work they do and the testimony they give has the ring of truth. They live with and witness to the Quaker values in a down-to-earth practical way.

They are also objected to as being too radical, too revolutionary, too pushy. They are -- for some. But not for me. I love the way that they receive brickbats from both sides and continue to Speak Truth to Power.

The Society of Friends may die -- if so, it will be an insignificant event, barely a whimper. But if this human experiment continues, if this particular experiment of God evolves into something with increasing potential for life, if we don't destroy ourselves and our splendid planet -- it will be because more and more people will gradually believe, and behave, like the very best of

Quakers; they will gradually understand and commit themselves to live with and by Quaker values. Calling ourselves Quaker is not important. What matters is how we live. And some of these "professional" Friends are showing the way.

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And, speaking of saints -- of course, the Women. Quakers are fond of saying proudly that Quaker women have always been liberated. Well, yes, some individual women have been and there are many women leaders in our Meetings. But the saints I speak of are the ones who see the women's movement as the force that will liberate all people from the dull weight of the past. Women are questioning beliefs and values that have been dominant for thousands of years. I don't think it is necessary to prove that human society was originally matriarchal -- although some studies being made are fascinating. I don't think it is necessary to think of God as a woman -- although that concept opens up new horizons. It *is* essential, though, for some movement with constructive power to get busy and change our ancient destructive ways, to make taboo some of our time-honored silly habits, and to ridicule and expose the clay feet of the war-gods we have worshipped. Women are speaking and it is time for them to be heard. Women are saying -- We will not dump trash all over the earth. We will feed the family, *all* the family. We will not send our sons to be sacrificed in war. We will live, we will not kill each other. We have been behaving in a way that is inexcusable. We will stop this waste and this plunder.

The value -- to me -- of considering a feminine deity is that the thought broadens the view. All things become possible. A closed door is open when God is not necessarily a father symbol. It is not that God is a woman -- it is that God is NOT a man. God may be a mighty force, a warm comfort, a soft breeze, a towering being -- there are infinite metaphors beyond our understanding -- but God is NOT just a man. It was in the company of women, as we talked about these feelings, that barriers in my own consciousness began to dissolve. There was an openness and a light and suddenly all things were new.

It is exciting to realize that Quaker women are interested in developing new ways of living and loving that do not require the old business of "giving-up of power" to others, or the "having power over" others. Women are building a new theology. We want to reevaluate power, to learn how to use it constructively, to find new sources of power and energy. Instead of *power over* people we want to find the *power of presence* in ourselves. Women are now exploring reality with a new perspective, trying to develop a world-view that is not limited to a one-dimensional rationality. The old patriarchal attitude has separated the spiritual, intellectual, and political sides of our natures into distinct slots. Women know that our lives must be whole, that our power and energy and spirituality come from this inner wholeness, not from some external authority.

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Perhaps you have already guessed that my most favorite saints -- the ones I saved for last -- are the activists. They are not separate or distinct -- you can find activists in all the other groups. I really applaud them -- these Quakers live their Quakerism in an active involved personal way. I am calling them Quaker whether they are actually members of the Society of Friends or not. They live the way I think good Quakers should live. They went to Selma, they marched in the

streets with Martin Luther King through screaming mobs of hostile people. They sailed in protest against nuclear testing. They stood in endless vigil lines protesting the Vietnam war. They sailed to North Vietnam with gifts and love. They picketed the White House. They patiently talked with Congressmen. They refused to join the war system. They resisted the draft. They went to jail. They confronted munition ships in canoes. They worked as mediators at Wounded Knee. These saints always swim upstream. And those who did the dramatic acts had the support of many others who were also activists, but who stayed in the background and did the absolutely essential back-up work.

There is another kind of activist who seems to me to be especially Quaker and especially saint-like. These people speak out openly and with love to other Friends on difficult, sensitive matters. John Woolman of course was a prototype -- he spoke out about property, which is about as sacred as you can get in many Quaker circles. Slaves were property and John travelled around raising the question about the morality and the humanity of slave holding. He raised questions about all our possessions and whether we might find in them the seeds of war. Today, we have Friends raising the same questions about possessions, about how we use our money, about our various properties, about who has the right to own what. It is easy to honor John Woolman because he is safely in the past. Let's all listen and respond to these current Quaker saints who are saying the same things. This week, here at IYM, a group of thoughtful people are asking questions and are making good radical useful suggestions about food.

Another group of activist saints are exploring and questioning in another sacred area -- they are talking publicly about matters of sexual orientation and sexual mores. They are opening doors, they are shining lights into dark places, they are exposing injustice and freeing prisoners. They are helping society to become more mature, more open, less arrogant and less narrow. This seems to me to be a particularly Quaker kind of leadership. It is what Quakers should be doing. The early Quakers said and did what they had to say and do. Their message was clear to themselves, and they had to spread their good news whether or not they offended others. We have been living in a technologically advanced age, with all sorts of marvels at our finger tips -- but our attitudes toward each other are still primitive especially in matters of sex. In fact, the more anthropology I read the more I wonder if perhaps we haven't regressed through the long centuries in matters of human relations. Are we really so civilized? We need to become much better acquainted with our own natures.

So, I am particularly proud of these Quaker saints who are refusing to continue the prejudices of the past. They are exploring our relationships with each other, our own identities and natures, they are helping us to understand the role of sexuality in our lives, and how to liberate ourselves from confusion and ignorance and prejudice. Sexuality is such a large part of our humanity - it is surely time that we accept the responsibility to permit our attitudes to evolve toward a more loving relationship between us all.

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I said a while ago that the activist saints are my last group. That really isn't so. My last group is the most important of all, and it is huge. It is you and me -- the ordinary people. We do not consider ourselves saints. But what happens to us all in the next few years depends on us. Saints

give us inspiration - and leadership. They point a way to go, they demonstrate what can be done. But we are the people to do it.

Everyone has been so busy with technology and science. We have so many marvels, so much power, so much control. But something important has been overlooked. I can often feel it tugging, asking for attention, asking to be noticed. I can even see it from the corner of my eye, but when I look directly at it, it is gone. And yet -- it is there, a breath, a movement, it is elusive, it is there, and yet not there. But something *is* there, and we have to find it. In that strange book, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert Pirsig talks about staring at the machine to discover what is mechanically wrong. He knows something is wrong but he doesn't know what. He lives with it -- he watches it -- he stares at it. He waits for the idea to present itself. I like that sense of alert watching. Annie Dillard talks about another kind of alert watching, she watches muskrats and praying mantises and growing things. Loren Eiseley sits at the edge of a swamp and watches to catch the secret of life -- it is not a passive, idle, wait and see attitude. It is lively, alert, listening, with every pore open to see what is happening, completely receptive to the moment, to the movement, so that when the grass turns green one is there to see it happen. The moment is seized. The life force is used. One is there the split second the ice starts to melt. There is a watershed, a place to be -- Douglas Steere calls it "being present where you are."

I believe the glorious inspiration that seems to spring suddenly in certain people is not magic -- it is the result of this kind of alertness, this openness, this listening. In all the glorious order and immense chaos of this amazing world, there are forces and meanings and sounds and colors that we ordinary people can't quite recognize or grasp. But the saints are really just ordinary people too. What is their magic? Is it because they are more awake? Somehow they have created a place inside where insights like to grow, a place where growth can take place. They care.

An example of this is my favorite story about Rufus Jones. He was a visitor in a Meeting in England and it so happened that there was a long smoldering controversy that erupted during the proceedings of Business Meeting. Rufus -- although a stranger -- found just the right words, the right mediating spirit, to speak to the problem and to ease the situation for everyone. Later, friends wondered at the miracle -- how he, not knowing of the difficult situation, could have been so understanding and so inspired. Rufus replied -- this was no miracle. I have spent my entire life preparing for this moment.

I am suggesting that the right kind of awarenesses and ideas can come from any of us ordinary people if we care enough to let it happen. Let it evolve. If we listen enough, if we carry with us always the sense of the sacred value of each task, of each encounter -- if we are *THERE* -- perhaps we can find this something that has been overlooked, this missing ingredient. Then, when we have found our balance and equilibrium, we can stop that doomsday machine. The forces at work in our culture now are busy destroying the planet, the earth, the air and the sea. Our aimlessness permits this to happen -- permits these forces to flourish. As James Baldwin said recently, this aimlessness gives room for the devil. The devil finds work for idle hands. Are we going to permit this destruction to continue, or are we going to use our human ingenuity and wisdom and attentiveness to discover what is missing?



Let us watch, listen, meditate, observe. Cultivate the soil, keep the air moving, poke around, look under stones, look behind clouds, watch the buds open and watch the leaves fall. Stay aware. Be just a split second ahead of the moment. I believe we can discover our dormant powers, reconcile conflicting forces, achieve a unity in opposites. There IS a unity in opposites. We all have good and evil in our natures. Our morality consists in our making the choice between good and evil. This split in our natures can be a creative rather than a destructive force, and can lead to a higher plane of consciousness as we better understand the hidden side.

Now -- you may be thinking that some of these qualities I have been describing do not fit your definition of what is "Quakerly." That's all right -- we all have different ideas of what is Quakerly -- in fact we are rather proud of this. We liberal Quakers like this sense of freedom. We wander about on an open field, we politely salute each other as we wander about, we nod respectfully, but we don't get too close. We call ourselves Quakers, and we are -- to use Lewis Benson's pungent phrase -- "mildly religious and fiercely tolerant". It is not a bit surprising that quite a few good Quakers find this liberal climate entirely too mild and vague, not demanding enough, not deep enough. They are surely right -- something IS missing. Something has escaped our attention.

But -- this openness, this freedom, may be the very best place for new attitudes to grow. I believe that Quakers are uniquely qualified to develop this awareness I am talking about. Quakerism encourages the ordinary person to develop. The genius of Quakers has always been the ability to get to the roots. They have been really radical when they have been at their best. And at their best -- they have been very ordinary people. Quakers have not been smothered by structure and religious dogma that stands in the way of fresh imagining. We have a heritage of independence and caring and self-discipline that can provide the climate and the soil for personal and social transformation. The people in POWER are automatically corrupt -- just by being there. They can't help it. We have to stop leaving change up to the experts, the people in power. The mere fact that we do not have the power is the freeing element for us. We don't want to grasp the power -- we want to guide it.

It is probably not important whether Quakerism continues to be a way of living -- or a religion. It won't matter if the Society of Friends just withers away. But what does matter is that human beings continue to reach for that huge potential that is in us, and I do believe that that reaching is a very basic Quaker thrust. We do need that genius that is in Quakers, but it doesn't matter by what name it is called.

People are weary of doomsday predictions. It is that weariness I fear the most. And that is why I love my saints. They are not weary. They don't have the answers to the problems of the world, but they care intensely about what they are doing, they are not aimless, they care about other people and they are not weary or afraid. I believe that all of us ordinary Quakers, along with the saints, have the basic qualities needed to save the planet and God's human experiment. We believe in harmony and simplicity and integrity and sincerity -- all those well known virtues. We are also stubborn, tough, wise, independent, straightforward and clear thinking. Our theological differences seem unimportant when we look at what we have to do. We need to settle down in earnest and search for that something that has been missing. It will take our full attention and our full confidence that we have all the help we need.

There *is* help, there is a force, there is a power that created us. It binds us together and it keeps us apart with a magnetic, creative tension. It guides us, comforts us, inspires us, strengthens us, suffers with us. And evolves with us. I call this force God and I can only realize this God as a force and a spirit that is evolving. God is both personal and cosmic. This human experiment evolves and God is involved with us and also is involved with the spider and the garter snake and the fungus on the tree. We humans cannot measure the extent or the quality of the depth of awareness of a Creator. We may do good or evil as we choose -- God agonizes with us and suffers with us but also helps us and sustains us. But if we fall, like the bird in the forest that falls, God knows about this, God cares, but we fall even so, just as the bird falls and God notices but does not -- cannot -- interfere. That very fall is part of Creation.

The difference between us humans and the garter snake or the bird or the beetle is that we have memory. We have the advantage of knowing what mistakes we made. That is our treasure. We don't have to keep on repeating them -- if we just pay attention.

We talk a lot about "God's will." Sometimes it seems that we envision a master Plan, a course all laid out that we must follow. But I prefer to talk about God's grace -- which is something that I must learn about and know inside myself. In the midst of this swirling, chaotic, gorgeous, tragic, splendid, heaving universe, it is up to me to reach for a potential that seems beyond my grasp. And yet -- all the help that is needed is right there if I really want that help, but God can't just bestow it on me because I ask or pray. First, I have to know it is there and reach out for it -- and then I do believe God's grace is available in quantities too vast for me to comprehend.

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