

# LIVING IN BLESSED COMMUNITY

Beth Schobernd Carpenter

The 2025 Jonathan Plummer Lecture

Presented for  
Illinois Yearly Meeting  
of the  
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Since 1961 it has been Illinois Yearly Meeting's tradition to honor our first clerk and driving force behind the founding of Friends General Conference, Jonathan Plummer, with this closing lecture. I do suppose it honors the man, it does keep his name alive in our midst. But what I see is this lecture has become a true gift to the yearly meeting as well as to the Friend giving the gift.

So today I am honored to introduce Beth Shobernd Carpenter as the giver of that gift. Beth is a member of Clear Creek Meeting, a retired academic librarian and a devoted wife, mother, and grandmother.

Beth personifies the old saying, still waters run deep. She does not like being the center of attention. So just imagine what went into her agreeing to do this and what she put into her talk.

Her deep love, compassion, intelligence, commitment, common sense, unceasing work and wicked sense of humor have long sustained so many of us. I think of her working to keep the actual building standing. I think of her sitting with a dying friend, being an incredible mother and a devoted wife, changing someone's mood with a smile and laughter and so much more.

So now we get to hear what sustains Beth. Let us listen with open hearts and gratefully receive her gift.

She will speak from the silence and end with silence.

Nancy Duncan

## LIVING IN BLESSED COMMUNITY

Good morning, Friends. For the past forty years, I have spent nearly all of the Sunday mornings of Annual Sessions sitting where you are now, listening to weighty Friends share the stories of their spiritual journeys. As I imagine most of us have, I listened in awe at the lives these Friends have led, the good works they have done, all while heeding the voice of the Creator.

As I have listened, I have wondered what on earth I could possibly ever have to say if I was asked to give the Plummer Lecture. I am not a person given to profound mystical experiences. I have not worked among the homeless or defended abused children. I have not been involved in national or international Quaker organizations. What could I have to say? I guess we are going to find out. Listening to these stories can be intimidating if you let it. Let me just say that preparing for the Plummer Lecture is a humbling, sometimes scary, and invigorating journey into finding out who you truly are. I recommend doing the exercise even if you are never asked to stand up here and bare your soul to our loving community.

The first thing you must understand is that I am the product of a mixed marriage. My mother came from a large, fun-loving, Irish Catholic family of Democrats. She was one of eight children. Her father was active in local politics and her brother served as a Democratic member of the US Congress for 16 years. Family gatherings were filled with grandchildren, laughter, and chaos.

My father's family was comparatively small, with two surviving children. My paternal grandfather was a substitute preacher for area Church of Christ congregations. The family was conservative both politically and in their faith and a very somber lot. I can still hear my grandfather's gentle chuckle in my head, but as a rule they did not laugh much.

With such differing world and heavenly views, politics and religion were not often discussed in our home, which was unfortunate because I think their faith was very important to both of my parents. They seemed to make it all work somehow and were happily married for nearly 65 years. Little did I know they were modeling for me how to have a successful marriage with a very different partner.

My parents had met in college and married during WWII while my dad was in the Army. After the war, Dad entered mortuary school in St. Louis so that he could join his father in the funeral home business my grandfather owned. In mortuary school, Dad and Mom met Loyal and Virginia Linthicum and became fast friends, a friendship that would last more than 60 years. When Dad completed mortuary school my parents moved into the apartment at the rear of the funeral home in Hardin, Illinois, and were soon joined there by my sister, Pat. My dad had remained in the Army Reserve, and in 1951 during the Korean War he was called back to active duty and was to be based in Japan. My grandfather hired Loyal to help with the business in my dad's absence. Loyal, Virginia, Mom, and Pat all lived together in the apartment.

When I was born in January 1952, Loyal and Virginia took my mother to the hospital and were bonus parents for me for the rest of their lives. They were a blessing to me in so many ways. They taught me the wonder of unconditional love and were loving extra grandparents to my children. Pat well remembers the day Dad returned from Japan. He was eager to meet this new baby he had only seen in pictures. Pat tells me that I took one look at him, began screaming and wanted nothing to do with him. It took several decades, but our relationship eventually improved.

My early formal religious training was slapdash at best. My sister and I regularly attended mass with our mother, but in the early years that was all Latin and while the chanting was nice to listen to, it meant nothing to me. The deal our parents seemed to have made was that we attend Catholic school through second grade when we made our first communion and then complete our schooling in the public school.

I could not wait to go to school. I desperately wanted to learn to read. I was frustrated at not being able to read the comics in the newspaper, or any of the shelves of books that graced our home,

or even the words that flashed on the TV screen. There were no preschools or even kindergarten in our small rural community, so I started school in the first grade at the age of six. After a few weeks, I shocked my mother one morning by refusing to go to school. I had been told that when I went to school I would learn to read and so far, that had not happened. My poor mother finally convinced me to give school another try, and I eventually learned to read and have never stopped.

By the time I was ready to start school, my parents had built a home in the country. So another reason I was excited to go to school was that it meant I could ride one of the big yellow school buses that I had seen go past our house each morning and evening. On the bus I rode was a chubby little boy with a butch haircut, a winning smile, and infectious laugh who seemed to be a favorite of the older kids. He would eventually become a favorite of mine as well. That boy was Paul Schobernd, and fourteen years later I would marry him.

While in the parochial school, I saw firsthand the cruelty and abuse of which the nuns were capable. Even as a small child having been told to respect and obey the nuns, I knew this was not right. I could not believe that was how women of God were supposed to treat children. It was the first chink in the armor of Catholicism for me.

After leaving the Catholic school, religious education for me stopped until eight grade when I was to be confirmed. I attended about six weeks of classes with adults who were new to Catholicism, getting just enough information to answer any questions the bishop might ask. Then there was a high school class called Jr. Newman which I attended, but it was not very enlightening. The priest at the time was a dear man but an alcoholic and by Wednesday evening was not able to conduct any kind of meaningful instruction. By the time he left and was replaced by a younger, sober priest I had lost all trust in the Catholic Church.

I loved my small, rural, somewhat isolated community, but I realized many years later that being sent to serve a church in a place I considered to be heaven on Earth was not so idyllic for those in religious orders. I also realized that some were sent there because they could not be trusted elsewhere or were being punished for some infraction. Among these was a priest whose

face was posthumously splashed across TV screens as one of the primary perpetrators in the sexual abuse scandals that rocked multiple Illinois diocese years later.

While in high school, I was allowed to attend Sunday School at Loyal and Virginia's Presbyterian Church across the street from my Catholic Church. I would attend mass at the Catholic Church then join a Sunday School class across the street that included several friends from high school. I got a glimmer of what I was missing. But then the mass schedule changed, and I was no longer able to attend the Sunday School class. Mix in the Catholic Church's stance on birth control, the place of women in the church, and several other hot-button doctrinal issues, and by the time I left for college I was totally disenchanted with Catholicism and used my new freedom to church shop. I knew I wanted God in my life and was hopeful I could find a church that was a better fit. But I did not find anything to my liking and finally resorted to sleeping in on Sunday morning. In my United Church of Christ and Presbyterian-affiliated college, all students were required to take two semesters of religion. As a registered Catholic, I could have opted out—a fact I kept from my mother—and instead took one semester of Old Testament and one semester of New Testament. It was the first time I had read the entire Bible.

Paul and I had an on-again-off-again relationship that began when I was in seventh grade and he in eighth, and that continued throughout high school. By the time I graduated, we were very much in an off-again stage, and I was doubtful we would ever get back together. But the summer after my freshman year of college we resumed our relationship and by the end of the summer were engaged. We set our wedding date for August 19, 1972, a week after he would graduate from college. We met with the priest (the younger, sober one), and he agreed to marry us in the church even though Paul was Lutheran. Sometime afterwards, the priest contacted me and said he had “forgotten” to have me sign the document promising to raise any children we might have in the Catholic Church. I refused, and we began making plans to be married in the Lutheran Church. I rarely saw my mother upset, much less angry, but she went ballistic. After several weeks of in-person and long distance arguing, including a week of spring break during which I cried myself into the worst sinus infection I have ever had, I relented and signed the paper, knowing full well

it was a lie. I think the priest knew it was as well. We were married in the Catholic Church by a priest and a Lutheran minister, and it was my last day as a practicing Catholic.

Soon after our marriage, I joined the Lutheran Church. In words I did not have at the time, it did not “speak to my condition” but it was very important to me that this new family I was creating all worship together. We attended the Lutheran Church everywhere we moved in those first few years and always found good community among the young married people in the churches. For the time being, that was enough for me. During this time, we were joined by our three amazing sons—Zach, Zeb, and Zeke—who have been and are the absolute joy of my life. I made sure they attended Sunday School so that their religious education would be better than mine.

I had graduated from Illinois College in 1974 with a degree in English but had realized I had no interest in teaching. I knew I needed a salable skill, had always loved to read and was intrigued by the concept of a library. You must understand that we had no public library in the community where I grew up. There were ancient classroom libraries in the elementary school and a service through the library system that brought books to the grade school cafeteria once a week during the summers. Our high school library had been heavily censored by the librarian—reading *The Scarlet Letter* was an interesting experience—so I was in college before I had access to a real library and had fallen in love. So I earned a Masters in Instructional Media (library stuff) from Illinois State University in 1978.

I spent three years as an aide in an elementary school library, then when Paul took a new position close to Macomb, Illinois, I began a series of jobs at Western Illinois University. The first was a grant-funded position converting the paper card catalog to electronic records—yes, I am that old. Just as the grant ran out, I secured a position in the Government Documents area. Let’s just say that in Gov Docs I learned everything I ever needed to know about how not to be a supervisor and was relieved when my doctor recommended that I quit the job in the final months of pregnancy with my third child.

In the spring of 1983, Paul began exploring Lutheran seminaries, feeling he was called to become a minister. I was not excited about this at all but was willing to try anything if it would

make him happy. We had visited the seminary in St. Louis, then during summer vacation planned a trip that would take us to South Bend, Indiana, and Saint Catherines, Ontario, the homes of two other Lutheran seminaries. We packed up the boys, then seven, three, and four months, and took off for Indiana. At our first stop, the admissions person Paul talked to spent the entire time scheduling basketball games for fall and talking about the architecture of the campus. By the time we got to Canada, Paul was disenchanted with the entire plan, and we turned south at Niagara Falls heading for Philadelphia to see some family friends who had been begging us to visit.

Since we had given them no advance warning, they had been unable to take off work and we were sent downtown on our own to see the sights. After visiting Independence Square, we followed the map to Betsy Ross' house. This was before a major cleanup of the tourist areas of Philadelphia, and we dragged the boys through areas of homeless camps, broken glass, and used drug paraphernalia. After touring Betsy's house, we decided to return to our car via a different route. This new route took us past Arch Street Meeting Meetinghouse, where a sign out front advertised free ice water. Since it was pushing 100 degrees, we ducked inside. Free ice water in-hand, we toured the meetinghouse, enjoying the dioramas depicting various events in Quaker history, and purchased a copy of the 1972 *Philadelphia Faith and Practice*.

That night, Paul stayed up reading *Faith and Practice*, frequently waking me with "Listen to this!" The next day as we took turns driving home, the one not driving read aloud. He was hooked; I wasn't so sure. We had seen on a map at Arch Street that the closest meetings to where we were currently living were Friends Hill in Quincy and in Peoria-Galesburg, both of which were roughly 90 minutes from us. We visited both over the next few weeks and decided that Friends Hill, with other children the ages of ours, was a better fit. I was still not so sure. Quincy Friends loaned us armloads of Quaker books to read, and I plowed into them, determined to make some sense of this new obsession of Paul's. I read everything I could get my hands on, by, and about Quakers—George Fox, John Woolman, Elizabeth Fry, Margaret Fell, Thomas Kelly, Richard Foster, Hannah Whitall Smith. Some months into this immersion in Quaker literature, I remember very clearly standing in my kitchen doing laundry, musing on my

readings, and realizing I have a personal relationship with God. There is no need for intermediaries like ministers or saints. There is a direct line between me and God. That thought was followed quickly by the concept that God loves me, that I have value as a person. I had spent so many years steeped in worm theology, the concept that we as mere humans are unworthy of God's love, that my self-esteem had taken a real hit. This revelation was life changing. I had found my spiritual home at last.

Our trips to meeting at Friends Hill were essential to my understanding of Quakerism. Friends there nourished my spirit, answered my questions, supported me as I tried to figure out how to teach children about a religion where people sit around in silence. With Friends Hill an hour and a half away, we were only able to attend worship there about once a month so we searched for somewhere locally to worship in between our trips to Quincy. As Zach so colorfully puts it, we tried out pretty much every Protestant church that did not handle snakes. Eventually we landed at a Church of the Brethren, another peace church. There I found a group of women my own age who helped sustain my spirit between Quaker infusions. We formed a book group, often reading Quaker authors, and helped each other through various trials. These women were my first experience of what could probably be called a spiritual nurture group. I have had many such communities in my life, and they are all dear to me. They have been critical to my spiritual development.

I first attended Illinois Yearly Meeting Annual Sessions in 1985. Zeke was then two and had no interest in the babysitters or anything else that took him from my side. We spent hours around the sandbox in front of the Junior Yearly Meeting Meetinghouse while the rest of the adults and children were off doing scheduled activities. Several times we were joined by Friend Royal Buscombe who sat with us, watched Zeke play, got to know me, and made me feel welcome. I will never forget her kindness. I have attended every Annual Sessions since.

I returned to Western Illinois University (WIU) about two years after Zeke was born and landed my dream job in Archives and Special Collections, which combined my love for history and libraries. In the spring of 1987, my boss took a class in book conservation and shared what she learned with me, promising she would teach me more when she returned from her summer away

from the library. I was looking forward to learning new skills and was devastated when Paul was accepted into a doctoral program at Illinois State University. We left Macomb and moved to Normal, Illinois, that summer.

The one positive aspect of the move was that we would now be in a town with a monthly meeting and be within an hour of the yearly meeting campus. Shortly after the move, I began attending Women's Weekend (as it was then called). There I found another supportive community of women and formed many close friendships that continue to this day. It is difficult to describe the depth of connection that develops during these weekend retreats and those connections have strengthened over the years. The women of Illinois Yearly Meeting have seen me through the high points and the low ones in my life and I have had the privilege of doing the same for them. The programs at Women's Weekend expanded my understanding of what it is to be a Quaker and reaffirmed for me that I was in the right place. I miss those gatherings.

When we moved to Normal, I got a job in the cataloging department at the Illinois State University Library. I am not sure what my predecessor in the position had done with her time, but I finished my allotted work each day in about three hours. The Associate Dean for Technical Services (my boss' boss) had formerly been at WIU when I was there and one day casually asked how I liked my new job. I told her I was bored senseless and the next day I was reassigned to more challenging (and time consuming) duties. That Associate Dean was eventually replaced with another, and in the new one's first meeting with the staff he announced that he wanted to set up a conservation lab in the library and if anyone was interested in that work, they should let him know. I was waiting for him in his office by the time he returned from the meeting.

I spent the next six months getting training, reading everything I could get my hands on about conservation and preservation, talking with and visiting personnel in other libraries to learn about their labs, ordering equipment and setting up the space. After years in libraries, I had found my passion. Taking a broken book and returning it to usable condition is rewarding work. Creating new cases and specialized enclosures, repairing torn maps and preserving endangered documents opened up a whole new world of creativity for me that I did not know I was missing.

The library building at ISU has leaked since before it opened so the collection was constantly in danger when it rained. One of my first tasks in conservation was to create a disaster recovery plan for the library and then use it. Often. In working with the faulty building and disaster recovery issues I learned more about building stability, HVAC systems, roofing materials, and other construction matters than I ever dreamed possible.

The biggest challenge of the job was to convince the faculty that I, a paraprofessional without an American Library Association accredited library degree, knew what I was talking about when I asked them to change their storage and handling practices or to reconsider the types of bindings they were requesting for periodicals. So I went back to school at the University of Illinois to get that ALA accredited Masters in Library Science. It took me three years, one class a week, making up time missed from work, doing homework after the boys were in bed, but I did it.

When a schism in the Bloomington-Normal Friends Meeting occurred in 1992, we found ourselves in the Heartland Worship Group. The separation was unfortunate and caused great pain all around but at the time it was the best solution to a difficult situation. So that our boys could continue to have religious education, we began to attend the local Mennonite Church as well as the worship group. We were welcomed with open arms and quickly included in family and couples' activities, and again I found myself among a supportive group of women who shared their faith, their recipes, and the woes of raising children. They became precious to me. I frequently participated in their annual retreats at a Mennonite camp in Michigan. It was at one of these retreats where we were challenged to find a quiet place to write and envision where our lives would be in five to ten years. I found a bench outside, expecting to write about what life would look like as my children moved away from home, as my parents aged, or something of that nature. But as I sat in silence listening, what I was given was that I needed to prepare myself to become the primary support of my family. There was no explanation as to why I needed to do that. I just understood that I must.

After graduation from library school, I was eventually able to secure a faculty position at the ISU library and miraculously then seemed to know what I was talking about when it came to the

conservation and preservation of library materials. Keeping in mind the message from the retreat, I worked hard at being a faculty member, doing the required publishing and service as well as excelling at my position in the library. I went up for and received early promotion and was awarded tenure on schedule. Eventually, I would move into the position of Associate Dean for Technical Services. While this was all personally and professionally rewarding, I also felt like I was positioning myself to better provide for my family. And it was not long before I found out why I had been told to do so.

In retrospect, Paul had begun showing signs of depression very early in our marriage. I had no experience with mental illness. If it was present in any of our family and friends, it was not talked about. For Paul, it started with isolated days of feeling down or sad. Then it progressed to several days, then weeks. Medication helped some; therapy did not. Other health issues began to crop up that the depression exacerbated, and the depression also kept Paul from following the necessary steps to improve his physical health. After botched neck surgery in 2001, Paul was left with chronic pain, no longer able to work and went on disability.

At the same time, my parents' health was deteriorating. My mother entered into a battle with dementia, and we watched her drift away over the next several years. My father was adamant that they did not need any help and that he—legally blind and deaf as a post—would take care of her himself. As you can imagine, disaster ensued. I was three hours away but much closer than my sister who lives in Texas, so I was the first one to be called when there was a problem. I spent at least one weekend a month with them, more often when problems arose. Watching it all unravel was stressful.

My job in administration had its joys. My work in conservation and preservation had given me an intimate familiarity with our ailing building, and I was put in charge of facilities. This meant not only dealing with problems but also overseeing remodeling projects which the dean was constantly pursuing. I loved the facilities work, finding roof leaks and new carpet selection preferable to working with people. But people were a huge part of the job.

In my work life I brought my Quaker principles to bear. I tried to listen more than I talked, to find a third way in disputes,

to see that of God in my colleagues. It would have been easier had my co-workers read the same play book. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. I spoke truth to power on several occasions and paid the price for it. I may not have been the best at my job, but I tried to do what was right and stay true to my convictions. But the infighting, lack of cooperation, and frequently having my integrity called into question took its toll on me.

It was only a matter of time before fighting stress on multiple fronts would start affecting me physically. Digestive problems, migraine headaches, weight gain, memory lapses, and structural issues became regular events. In January 2005, I returned from a library conference in Boston with pain in my neck and shoulder. Within hours of coming home, the pain had radiated down my left arm and three of my fingers were numb. The next morning, I saw my primary care physician who recommended physical therapy without running any tests. Over the rest of that day and night, the pain became unbearable and I spent the following day in the emergency room having numerous tests and finally was told I had a bulging disc in my neck and needed surgery immediately. That evening, I woke from the surgery blessedly pain free but unable to speak. The surgeon was not too concerned, said sometimes in removing the disc and replacing it with cadaver bone a vocal cord will get bruised and heal in a couple of weeks. That did not happen. On seeing an ear nose and throat specialist, I learned one vocal cord was paralyzed. I had three sessions with a speech therapist which did no good and was told there was nothing else to be done. To add insult to injury, it was about this time that the physical therapy ordered by my primary care was approved and they called to schedule.

When I healed from the surgery, I returned to work at a job where one of my primary responsibilities was conducting and attending meetings, in other words, talking. The university Office of Disability Concerns provided me with an amplifier so I could make myself heard, but I had to keep it turned off unless I needed to speak as it also amplified my breathing, sneezes, throat clearing, hiccups, and inappropriate comments that escaped my mouth. I have never been one to talk for the sake of talking, but this experience provided a very good lesson in weighing my words. I had to really consider if what I had to say was worth the effort of turning on the amplifier, waiting for the room to get quiet so I could be heard, and trying to talk.

I came to Annual Sessions that year pretty frustrated and disappointed, still unable to speak above a whisper. A Friend, who was herself a healer, insisted that there was still life in my vocal cords and that I needed to find an energy healer, so when I got home I did. Gretchen was a former Christian Scientist turned Buddhist, and we shared many beliefs and practices. I still do not understand all that she did but over the course of the next two years through energy work and vocal exercises, she brought back my voice. Our monthly healing sessions, which continued for thirteen years, not only helped me to speak again but also addressed the other stressors in my life and helped me to cope. It also was the beginning of a spiritual friendship that lasted until her untimely death in 2018. I still can't sing, an outlet I miss, and my voice tires easily particularly if I have been talking a lot. But I can make myself heard. And I try to keep up the practice of weighing my words.

It was about this time that we started attending Clear Creek Monthly Meeting. I had always loved coming to Annual Sessions and having the opportunity to worship every week on the yearly meeting campus was wonderful. I found here a loving and supportive community that was just what I needed as I dealt with Paul's growing medical issues, my parents' precarious existence and work stresses. A group of women from the meeting met for a couple of years as a spiritual direction group, supporting each other through challenges presented by jobs, growing children and other frustrations, as well as helping each other on our spiritual journeys. This was yet another blessing of the Clear Creek community.

Living with a brilliant, deeply spiritual, progressively mentally ill partner is hard. It was hard to watch the jovial, quick-witted, guitar-playing, loving father and husband slowly become more withdrawn. It was hard to witness the pain as the depression deepened and the other physical infirmities took hold. It was hard to watch the person I had known and loved pretty much since childhood disappear into the ravages of mental illness. And the hardest part was not being able to do anything to fix it. I do not know where I would have been had I not had the support of Clear Creek, Women's Weekend, and individuals from throughout the yearly meeting.

In the spring of 2009 the library dean, with whom I had worked closely for over 20 years, announced to the administrative

staff of the library that she would be leaving the library at the end of the following school year and moving to campus administration. Paul and I discussed this and decided that I would retire at the same time. His health was not good, and I wanted to be able to spend as much time as possible with him. I quietly let the dean know but made no formal announcement. In August, just a few days after our 37th wedding anniversary, I woke in the night alarmed by the sound of Paul's breathing. I was unable to rouse him, called the rescue squad, followed them to the hospital where I learned that Paul was dead. His cause of death was ruled an accidental overdose of prescription pain medicine. On my good days, I believe that.

What followed was six months of numbness. I have no memory of anything that happened until roughly Thanksgiving and the following few months were saved only by the birth of my grandson. I was not in a good place spiritually before Paul's death, given his and my mother's ongoing health issues and the upheaval at work. I found I could not pray. Nothing came, no matter how hard I tried or how much I needed it or how quietly I sat. But during that time, I knew I was being held in the Light by Friends and family and that sustained me. Many of those praying for me were women who had also lost spouses, and I came to think of us as "the cruel sisterhood." Eventually, I came out of my fog enough to ask myself if retirement was still the thing to do. By then, it was clear that the dean was not being promoted but instead being put out to pasture and that the campus administration intended to hire a "mean dog" to replace her. Retirement looked better all the time.

It turned out to be a very good decision. My mother's health was rapidly deteriorating, and I was able to spend at least one long weekend a month with my parents, being with Mom, giving her caregivers (who Dad had finally agreed to hire) a break, and being company to my dad. When she passed away the following January, I continued to spend long weekends with Dad. Our relationship had always been strained, but by the time he passed away it had improved, and we were close. I am so grateful for the quality time I had with him.

Not long after Paul passed away, a group of Quaker women in Bloomington-Normal began holding monthly potluck suppers, fondly known as Meeting for Eating. Sixteen years later, we are still gathering once a month. We have seen each other through

deaths, births, new jobs, retirements, family crises, milestone birthdays, and other assorted life events. Once or twice, we tried having a program at these gatherings but found what we really need to do is listen to one another, care for one another, support one another. Other than biological family, it is one of the closest-knit groups I have ever had the privilege of participating in. These women have been my anchor, my community.

After Paul passed away, I had to figure out who I was. Having spent 37 years as “we,” I was now “I” and I was not sure who that was. I found that I was okay as an independent person. I spent more time with my children and grandchildren, finished remodeling my house, traveled with my granddaughters and alone, visited my out-of-town sons and their families, became more involved in Quaker activities, said yes to more opportunities to do things that interested me. I was able to take the facilities skills I had acquired at work and use them on the yearly meeting campus through serving on Maintenance, Planning & Envisioning and eventually as a steward. I found I liked being on my own and was pretty content to stay that way. And then I met this guy.

For several years, Paul and I had spent Easter with Zeb and his family, in part because they always lived somewhere warm and it was nice to get away from the cold. But in 2011, I had minor surgery and could not travel so was able to attend Clear Creek’s annual Easter worship and potluck. Diane Wilson, whose husband Clance had been a member of Clear Creek, had brought a couple of friends with her to meeting, including a man named Duane Carpenter, who had recently lost his wife. She introduced us. We found out we lived about a mile apart in Normal, and we chatted a bit about the loss of a spouse. A couple of weeks later he called and we met for lemonade at a restaurant. We saw each other a couple more times, but then it was June and I had two out of state weddings, annual sessions, and houseguests—so no time to see him. He called in early July and asked where I saw our relationship going. Relationship??? We hardly knew each other! He had told me early on that he wanted to get remarried and I was pretty clear that I did not. So I told him I was wasting his time. He was quiet for a few seconds then admitted that what he really wanted was companionship. I told him I could do companionship and over the next two years, in spite of our vastly different political views, we found we were very companionable.

We spent a lot of time together, traveled some, worked in each other's yards, shared meals, met each other's families. I was quite content with the arrangement. In April 2013, I attended Women's Weekend as usual. I have forgotten what the theme was that year, but one of the exercises was a "Finish this sentence" writing assignment. Now I love to write. At Women's Weekend, I have been known to sneak out of the meetinghouse and hide on the front porch when it is time for arts and crafts but give me a writing assignment and I'm all over it. So I'm sitting there with my notebook and pen ready to write and the facilitator gives us the sentence we are to finish, writing about the first thing that comes to mind. And the sentence is "If I died tomorrow, I would regret..." Out of absolutely nowhere, the first thing that came to me was "If I died tomorrow, I would regret not marrying Duane." Whoa. I did not see that coming. I tried to ignore it and went on to write about how I would miss seeing my grandchildren grow up, how I would regret not seeing more of the world, and on and on for a couple of pages. But then I could ignore it no longer as it kept coming back. I finally had to acknowledge this very clear message and write it down. I'm not sure I did any more than just write it down as I did not know what to think about it. It was several months before I shared the experience with Duane, thinking maybe it was not real and would go away. But it didn't. Like that message you get in meeting for worship that you are not sure you are supposed to give and the next thing you know you are standing up, it stayed with me until I owned it. We were married under the care of Clear Creek Monthly Meeting here in the meetinghouse in May 2014.

That fall, my dad passed away. Since I was always the closer daughter, only living three hours away instead of eighteen, I had tried to coordinate my times away from home with my sister's travel plans so that one of us was always available. Suddenly, I did not have to be on call and could travel more freely. Duane and I had both wanted to travel more, and in 2015 began to see the world. We started with a delayed honeymoon cruise in the Caribbean, then followed that summer with a European river cruise, traveling from Budapest to Amsterdam. The plan was to spend a few extra days in Amsterdam sightseeing at the end but in the wee hours of the first morning we were there, Zach and Kelly called to tell us that Zeke had been found dead in his apartment.

His death was ruled an accidental overdose of a mixture of migraine and sleep medications. I believe that because I have to.

Losing a spouse is hard. Losing parents is hard. There is no pain like losing a child. It is the vicious gift that keeps on giving for the rest of one's life. With the loss of a child, you truly have lost a part of yourself. Fortunately when Zeke died I was in a much better place spiritually than I was when Paul died. As hard as the whole ordeal was, and is, my faith community sustained me and continues to do so. And having a spouse who had also lost a child and knows my pain was, and is, a blessing.

Duane and I have continued to travel, including two trips with Habitat for Humanity building houses in other countries. We have reached every continent except Antarctica. I can't quite convince him to voluntarily go someplace cold. I always knew I wanted to travel, see places where history happened and literature was written, see different cultures, see nature's creativity. But one of the most profound lessons I have learned in my travels is that we are one huge family, all children of God. The borders between countries are invisible from space.

This winter I thought I was nearing the completion of the first draft of this talk, feeling pretty good about where it was headed and satisfied that I was on schedule to finish it in plenty of time. Then in January, our lives were turned upside down. My younger son Zeb was arrested in North Carolina on a number of felony drug charges. It has been every parent's worst nightmare. Initially I was numb. I did not leave the house for several days, did not talk to anyone other than Duane. Then I began reaching out to friends I knew I could count on for support, first just a couple of people and then more. I knew I needed to be surrounded by and held in the Light by my faith community and I have not been disappointed. I am overwhelmed with gratitude for the people who have been placed in my path to help me deal with this situation, both here and in North Carolina. I feel carried and cared for at all times. I realized early on that I was, and am, unaccountably calm. I have come up against something I cannot fix and have been able to hand the whole mess over to God. While Zeb was transferred to a rehabilitation facility in mid-May, he still faces charges. The situation is far from resolved. Will I have bad days? Yes. Will I fall apart? Yes. Will I question how such a thing can happen? Yes. But I will get through it with God's help and the love of my community.

I am a Christian. I try to live my life according to the teachings of Jesus. I have explored other faith traditions and always come back to my Christian roots. That is where I find God, where I feel closest to the Divine. Being a Christian among liberal Friends is not always easy. I have been in meetings where Christian messages are discouraged, belittled, even outright attacked. It makes one leery of giving any kind of message at all. As liberal Friends, we describe ourselves as loving, welcoming, inclusive, but at times we seem to have room for any expression of faith except Christianity, which when you consider our roots makes no sense. I understand that we have become a haven for people who have been severely damaged by Christianity, particularly that version we see practiced today. But the Christian Quakers I know do not embody that aberration. Denying Christianity as a whole based on the actions of a few is throwing the baby out with the bath water. I have stayed because I know this is where I belong. However, we have driven away people who could have been an asset to our Society, and more importantly who could have found their spiritual home among us. We are better than that, Friends.

I have lived an amazing life. I have been blessed with not one but two incredible husbands. I was given three sons who have been the joy of my life, plus the women they brought to our family who are the daughters I never had. I have three delightful grandchildren, and my marriage to Duane has given me six additional grandchildren to love, plus their parents. My life is filled with love. Yes, I have had some hard times, but my faith has sustained me and carried me through. I have survived in no small part because I have been privileged to have the love and support that comes from Living in Blessed Community.

## Previous Plummer Lectures

- 2024: Grayce Haworth Mesner, *Do Unto Others*  
2023: Virginia Schelbert, *Let Your Life Speak*  
2022: Frank Young, *Listening, Learning, Loving, and Laughing*  
2021: Phyllis Reynolds, *Healing and Wholeness*  
2020: David Shiner & Nancy Wallace, *From Sleepiness to Light*  
2019: Gwen Weaver, *“What Canst Thou Say?”*  
2018: Bonni McKeown, *This Little Light*  
2017: Alice Howenstine, *Life is a Gift and a Responsibility*  
2016: Nancy Duncan, *Journeys with Bodies and Souls*  
2015: Fernando Freire, *My Family, My People, My Life*  
2014: Judy Jager, *To Listen with My Whole Heart*  
2013: Sarah Pavlovic, *With Open Eyes and Open Heart*  
2012: Mark Mattaini, *“Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself ...”*  
2011: Dick Ashdown, *Quaker Roots in Nurturing Soil*  
2010: Tom Paxson, *Opening Oneself to God*  
2009: Janice Domanik, *Anatomy and Physiology of Spirit*  
2008: Elizabeth Mertic, *Joy Like a Fountain*  
2007: Margaret Katranides, *Knowing and Not Knowing*  
2006: David Rutschman, *Honrar la Vida*  
2005: Clance Wilson, *This is My Father’s World*  
2004: Janet Means Underhill, *The Mystery Of It All: I Give Thanks*  
2003: Chris Jocius, *Friends and Strangers: A Time of Gifts*  
2002: Roxy Jacobs, *And Grace Will Lead Me Home*  
2001: Marlou Carlson, *Seek Ye First The Kingdom*  
2000: Katherine Trezevant, *Hearing and Giving Voice to the Spirit*  
1999: Paul Schobernd, *When You Dance With God, Guess Who Leads?*  
1998: Maurine Pyle, *Follow Me*  
1997: Marti Matthews, *As If We Are Perfectly Safe: on Fear, Faith and Destiny*  
1996: Tom Stabnicki, *I Saw It Shine Through All*  
1995: Judy Gottlieb, *Flow Afresh In Me*  
1994: Pat Wixom, *Awakening To The Life Within*

Title list 1961-1993 on [ilym.org/plummer-lectures](http://ilym.org/plummer-lectures)

## 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 1893 World's 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.