

MINDING THE LIGHT

Our Collective Journal, Chapter 14

WHEN HAS MINDING THE LIGHT TAKEN YOU "OFF THE MAP?"

I have often felt a motion of love to leave some hints in writing of my experience of the Goodness of God.

John Woolman

Casting Aside a Now-Useless Map

"And we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into His likeness, from one degree of glory to the next." 2 Cor 3:18

"... make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." 2 Pet 1:5-8

Those two verses are a good summary of the road map I was using for the first 25 years of my spiritual journey: every day in every way I was going to be getting better and better, growing in wisdom and virtue, gaining knowledge and crafting a more perfect and refined theology.

There came a day when I could no longer ignore the obvious: I really wasn't any better, wiser, or more loving. One Sunday at a church gathering called by the Elders to explain why they were taking a particular course of punitive action against one of their wayward flock (no, it wasn't me, it was a man who refused to allow an asterisk to be placed by his name in the church directory... it's a sad/funny story and you can ask me about it sometime), I looked around the room at this group of brothers

In this Chapter

- Casting Aside a Now-Useless Map
- wilderness
- Soul Collage: Upside-down in Bluebell Woods
- The Loss of Self Among Other Things
- The Difference
- A psalm for the way
- In Christ, No East, West, North or South
- No such thing as too much love
- Navigating Without a Map
- Maps
- A Walk to Remember
- Stepping Off the Map
- My Wilderness

and sisters in Christ, most of them older than me and longer-time Christians. Each of the Elders was doing his (yes, "his"; women can't be elders in this denomination) best, and it wasn't very good. Despite their years of serving the Lord, they fell short of wisdom, compassion, and love. If that was the best I could hope for, if that was the best God could do with them, if God doesn't really transform us, then what is the point? I looked at their lives as the future of mine, and I despaired.

At the same time my finely-tuned theology was falling into pieces.


My road map no longer matched the road.

MINDING THE LIGHT is a bimonthly collection of stories from the lives of members and attenders of West Hills Friends, a Quaker meeting in Portland, Oregon. Among Quakers, "minding the Light" means noticing, listening for and paying heed to the voice of our Teacher.

Early Quakers kept journals about their relationship with God to share with the community. A well-known example is John Woolman's journal, which has been continually in print for more than 200 years. Quakers believe that the Light of Christ is in everyone and that God speaks to everyone, giving us all stories to tell. We hope to carry on the tradition of sharing stories about minding the Light by publishing them for our community and making them available to others on the web.

Each issue is organized around a query about minding the Light. Our writers speak from their own experience, not going beyond the measure of Light they've been given. We hope these stories will transform our way of seeing God and each other and that they will bring comfort to those who seek news of God's presence in the world.

I guess one could say I had a choice, that I could have stayed in that church, ignored the inconsistencies in my theology. I could have stuck to the road map, even though it clearly wasn't working for me, but deep inside there was a restless need for something True.

Casting aside the now-useless map, I stepped into the wilderness. The Quakers I found out there taught me that having the Guide is better than having a guidebook. 

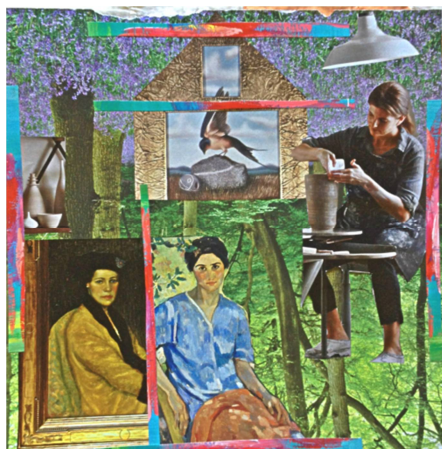
– Julie Peyton

And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?

For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food!"

Numbers 21:5 (RSV)

Soul Collage: Upside-down in bluebell woods 



– Margaret Kellermann


[See larger image at: www.mindingthelight.org]

wilderness

Thrust into the wilderness, unwilling terrified without choice
 heels dug in, bloodied as I go ahead anyhow
 landmarks lost gone
 life cracked broken stripped
 alone grieving lost.

Newness comes
 the present moment breaks through
 the Now is greater than grieving the past or fearing the future
 it demands I see feel hear
 around me I find beauty life love
 and people, old and dear and new
 Spirit waits, and fills me when I trust enough to breathe again.

I become full whole grateful
 capable again to do God's will. Life beckons and I respond.

Perhaps next time could I have more faith?
 Instead of being slammed by that clay tablet
 maybe I could just read the postcard from heaven? 

– Pat Matthews

Query for Chapter 15

Our next Query: "When have you experienced the Light through a member of your family? No matter how you define family, we are looking for a story of how the Light was revealed to you by someone close to you."

Your stories can be submitted in any publishable format: narratives, poetry, songs, art, other.

We publish stories as told to the extent that they fit within our guidelines.

[Guidelines at: www.mindingthelight.org]

Story Deadline: 9/29/13

NEW! Query for Young Friends

We encourage the participation of young Friends (of any age), so please consider asking a child in your life whether this query makes them think of a story. If it does, consider helping the child tell their story in words or images, or ask us for a Story Catcher.

Query for Young Friends (or older Friends who prefer this query):

When did your family, or a neighbor, or a teacher help you see something special about yourself or the world around you?

Story Deadline: 9/29/13

The Loss of a Self Among Other Things

In the spring of 2011, I found joy throughout a rough work situation via solace and outward glow of a new life growing within. I survived my workdays by patting my stomach and thinking of the little one that would join our family. Taylor had her own glow as she ran to me, smiled, and hugged me more often than usual. She could not wait to be a big sister.

I had tried desperately for a year and a half to fix the growing problems and associated relationships at work. I thought I was advocating for kids. And I was. Yet somehow I had become both a threat and a target. And I could not undo the web of nastiness that was set in motion to spin around me. By March, the awareness of life growing within and the joy it brought to my daughter, were the only two things that made me smile and kept me sane.

Until the world crumbled.

I silently begged that the signs of miscarriage would magically disappear. I told myself it was nothing. All would be fine...
...because I...could not handle
...this loss. But the spotting did not go away and, by day three, I knew I could not ignore it any longer. I went to the doctor and eventually the ER. Ultrasound could not confirm life or death. I was told everything looked fine and to follow up with my OB soon.


The next day, the inevitable happened. I pleaded and begged for it to stop. I did not want for this to happen. But I was powerless. I was supposed to protect. But I could not. All I could do was sit and rock and cry, and plead, and apologize to my unborn baby. Apologize profusely. And without ceasing.

At home, I was powerless to save my unborn child; at work I had to leave much of my job undone and, within weeks, my co-workers had made some horrible accusations which, in part due to my miscarriage, were believable enough to warrant my resignation and completely shattered my sense of professional self.

My life was in shambles - shattered in pieces beyond my own repair.

And this had to happen. To make room for the better that my life has become.

Without these experiences, I would not be an independent contractor, a proud business owner, a wife who values herself enough to set boundaries with confidence, or a mother who recognizes the immense value of each moment with my children and understands the fragility of their young growing little lives.

Without miscarriage, I would not have had the courage or the fortitude to let my own family be - to stop pouring myself into people I would never be able to fix, and to instead focus my energy on creating a better life for myself and my children. 

— Sarah Blanchard

The Difference

When I was ten months old, we moved to Alaska and I began to live at the edge of wilderness. First we lived in tiny Skagway, surrounded by towering mountains on three sides. In Palmer, the mountains filled our living room window, and in turn pulled our gaze back out to their shimmering snowy peaks. Moose wandered in our yard on occasion and we skated clumsily on a nearby frozen pond up the street. Wilderness tempered by small town culture was the backdrop for my childhood until I turned eight. It was home.

When we moved "stateside," we settled in Washington in a timber town of 20,000. Rich conifer forests, though under (invisible to me) siege, were close at hand. We often drove to the coast. I was soothed by the rhythm of the waves, the foreverness of the shoreline, and the constancy of the sea, even in all her moods. Beach and forest wilderness were my playground and more...now I also felt their comfort.

As I moved into my teen years, we camped in state parks. Here there were other teens, and all the conveniences, from showers to firewood. The parks were crowded with eager campers like us. There were stars at night, crackling campfires, the sound of the surf in the distance, and faraway treetops that our campfire smoke curled and climbed to greet in this blend of domesticated wilderness. As I grew into young adulthood, my experience of wilderness continued to be present but was often diluted.

My spiritual life was similar. I was searching lightly for God but was mostly preoccupied.

When I moved to Oregon years later with my husband, we became involved with Quakers and began to explore listening and centering and getting really quiet. I also became active with wilderness protection. Now in my hands were maps that took us off the main roads, winding back and deep and high, bumping along old narrow roads, soaking in broad vistas of vast stretches of conifers sprawling over contiguous mountainsides. Increasingly, I sought these paths less travelled, the still deep quiet of the woods, the places where cougar scat showed up on the path, the sound of the wind not accompanied by the drone of motor vehicles. In these years, as we raised our family, we also camped in state parks and were grateful for their benefits. I always appreciated them, but now I recognized the difference.

It strikes me that daily life is like a state park. It is where I spend much of my time, working, connecting with and loving others, and choosing from a buffet of options for spending my time. It is full of purpose and meaning.... and distractions. What nourishes me for daily living -matters of spirit, the place of deepest peace-can get buried in busy-ness.

The more I go off the paved road, off the map of a fully scheduled day, the more I go home to the wilderness of listening, to the quiet radiance of the inner cathedral where spirit waits for me, ready to guide my way. It is

A Psalm for the way

Every night it is the same:
no map, only a handful of trust in You.

I stand at the shore of my life each evening
while the day's light flows away from me,
all the color pulling down after it
until only a dim edge remains,
and then it is gone too.

I fall over the edge of awareness
as light pulls away
and I drift, afloat on Your arms
to disappear from myself
into darkness.

Unknowing, I hold to You in trust.


Sudden waking, jarring me out of dream,
leaves me only You in the face of darkness.

I pray for the return of sleep,
not daring to doubt You, whom I cannot see.


Nothing I know can shelter me here
but You.

There is no other way across.

At dawn, my self drifts back
out of shadows
and I pull myself together
into a world of color
and floods of possibilities.

Here I reach
for signs of You
within everything,
and I hold on. 

– Carol Bosworth

where I meet God and sit by the river in the very tall quiet forest. It is why I have loved wilderness all along. 
– Leslie Logan



This paper is 100% Post-Consumer Recycled

Light Brigade*
Sally Gillette, Clerk
Mike Huber, Recording Clerk
Carol Bosworth
Peg Edera
Pat Matthews
Julie Peyton
Cindy Stadel
mindingthelight@gmail.com

In Christ There was no East nor West, and As Far as I Knew no South or North...

As a teen I had directional dyslexia. I always carried dimes for phone calls in case I lost my way. Moving ten times before I turned sixteen may have thrown off my compass. While others might have become more competent travelers due to frequent relocation, I was hardly a trailblazer.

In 1971, I stopped for an unexpected layover in Paris with a group of twenty exchange students heading to Barcelona. All public transportation was on strike the day we arrived, so my school hired a private bus to visit Napoleon's tomb. My only day in Paris – and visiting a tomb! The Light wouldn't let me waste this opportunity. I pleaded and cajoled until the Headmaster granted me permission to go to the Louvre alone, literally without a map.

As the bus pulled away, I set out for the palace of treasures. Whenever a passerby smiled at me, I'd ask, "*Le Louvre?*" Some would shrug and turn away, others would point, or sketch a map on paper scraps. I wandered until the museum appeared before me, the first miracle of the day. Then there was the art. My dream come true!

Racing through the Louvre in the tow of youthful enthusiasm, I stopped so close to the Mona Lisa that my bated breath probably added crackles to her glaze. I marveled at a peak of paint curling from a Van Gogh poppy, as if the artist had just lifted his palette knife. Too soon the afternoon ended and it was

time find my way back. Anxiety arose.

It's one thing to ask the way to the Louvre, but how does a foreigner ask her way to an obscure, unpronounceable hostel on a street just as unmemorable and unpronounceable?

Parisian pedestrians were less helpful now, impatient to get home to families and dinners. Following the Light might have left me wandering the City of Light forever! But finally – atop a platform, his gloved hands orchestrating the tangle of traffic, stood an elegantly caped policeman.

"Ask him!" the Light commanded. I approached him and asked for the hundredth time, teary-eyed. "Can you help me? I'm lost." He did not smile, but halted all four directions of traffic, and snatched my piece of paper, scowling at my scrawl. The entire intersection gridlocked as he tried to give me directions in French. Clueless, I shook my head. Like the other Parisians he then shrugged, saying, "*Venez avec moi, jeune fille!*" Assuming this meant, "Go away, kid, you bother me," I shuffled back to the sidewalk, crestfallen.

Catching up with me, the policeman tapped my shoulder. He motioned for me to follow, leading me all the way to the hostel. As he jogged away he called, "*Bon chance, mademoiselle!*" What became of all those commuter cars waiting for him, I do not know, but following the Light off the map provided a third miracle – a kindly navigator!

– Claire Nail 

No such thing as too much love


I didn't intend to be a churchgoer. A solid decade since I took on the name "non-believer," my re-acquaintance with church came via my daughter, who expressed an interest. Not wanting to repeat my parents' insistence on homogenous ideas, I played along, finding a church that would allow her to explore her theistic ideas, without instilling the bigotry and dreary doctrines of my youth. West Hills Friends offered a community of love and acceptance, without a faith requirement, or a focus on sin, hell, or discrimination. My daughter made friends, and my wife and I found a place to deal with religious ideas in a friendly setting.

For me, showing up at church is already well off the map. I stare at a cross I don't believe holds any power, listen to people sing songs about events I don't believe occurred, and read verses from a book most often used as a weapon. And yet, there is "light" here. By light, I mean a place of healing. This community embraces people while they struggle with the absurd, the cruel, and the unbelievable. While a general faith is shared by most, what is shared by all is an insistence on equality. It is simply unacceptable to treat others as less. Decent human beings don't operate that way, and if God is anything, she is more kind and more loving than a human being.

I'm having trouble synthesizing my experience at West Hills against the backdrop of Quaker history, as I understand it. While

the historical associations aren't all that important to me personally, it is upsetting and baffling to think that this this community is being singled out for being TOO loving, and TOO accepting. My understanding is that Quakers were loving when other religions were not; that they were color blind when others were not; that they were peaceful when others were not. But now, some Quakers seem to be drawing a boundary around their love and acceptance of gays that they didn't historically draw around people of color or people who supported war.

Watching is painful because it seems like people at WHF are being eaten by their own. I don't have to share their faith to appreciate what their faith means to them. I think LGBT acceptance is important to them because of their faith, not in spite of it. More important, evidently, than being included in their Yearly Meeting. And now, NWYM has started disciplinary action against West Hills, and I wonder: How can a yearly meeting within a denomination that is supposedly "non-creedal" be torn about whether or not this much love can be allowed to continue under its mantle?

If there is light to be spoken of, I see it at West Hills. I think that for non-believers like me, if there is to be reconciliation with faith, or healing from the doctrines of our youth, it will happen in places like this, where "too much love" is not a phrase that makes sense. I feel strongly that, Yearly Meeting or not, the light will shine in this place, even if it's the only light still shining. 
 – Ryan Blanchard

"Like a wild animal, the soul is tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy, and self-sufficient: it knows how to survive in hard places. I learned about these qualities during my bouts with depression. In that deadly darkness, the faculties I had always depended on collapsed. My intellect was useless; my emotions were dead; my will was impotent; my ego was shattered. But from time to time, deep in the thickets of my inner wilderness, I could sense the presence of something that knew how to stay alive even when the rest of me wanted to die. That something was my tough and tenacious soul."

Parker J. Palmer

Navigating Without a Map

On June 3, 2005, my husband Matthew Lyon was killed on his motorcycle by a young woman who pulled suddenly into his lane from a side road. He was on his way to Oregon Episcopal School, where he taught art and spiritual/philosophical courses. Matthew and I had been married 21 years.

I was in my office, waiting for a client, when the doorbell rang. I went into the waiting room and was elementally shocked to see two policemen. These officers, who had come with terrible news, turned out to be angels in uniform. Their caring presence was the first of many miracles that carried me through the memorial service a week later.

One of the miracles started badly about two weeks after Matthew's death. I was lying on the floor, trying to breathe normally in a

world where everything was different, wondering how I could keep going.

The phone rang. It was Shambala Mountain Center calling for Matthew Lyon, who still owed money for an upcoming meditation retreat. I hadn't known about it, and I stumbled verbally, very confused. Finally, I blurted, "He's been killed!" There was silence, and then the person on the line asked, "Are you Thomasa?" I said, "No, why?" The person said, "They were coming together."

At that moment, I felt that God had completely deserted me. I sobbed for what seemed an eternity, and then asked for her phone number, which they gave me. It was a Seattle number.


I lay back down on the floor, trying again to breathe. I felt like cursing God. I cried out, "Why are you breaking my heart?" There was no answer.

Later, I called the number and reached a recording: "Please leave a message for Thomasa or Matthew Lyon." When the message finished, a woman said, "Hello, this is Thomasa." I couldn't speak, and she asked, "Are you there?" She waited, and finally, I poured out the story. After a moment, she said, "You've called the right place." She assured me that her husband Matthew Lyon was not my Matthew Lyon, and then told me that she had lost her first husband after 20 years of marriage. I was amazed to be talking to this stranger who understood my grief. She said,

"I'd like to meet you." I was planning to be in Seattle the next week to visit a friend, so we made arrangements.

On Sunday afternoon when I arrived at her house, I was expectant and nervous. Thomasa greeted me with a very tender hug. After we sat down, she looked at me closely and asked, "Do you have a brother named Burman who sang in the Roger Wagner Chorale?" I felt my heart burst open. "Yes!" She said, "He and I were good friends in college. We were both soloists in the Chorale."

At that moment, Thomasa and I began to realize the sacredness of this experience; the miracle of God's mercy. We talked for several hours. I told her about Matthew, and she told me about her first husband and his death from cancer.

On the way home, I felt my heart open. I said, "Thank you God, for being so clear that I'm still welcome here." 

– Patricia Timberlake

"The wilderness stories embody a key process for the Torah story: Israel's passage from enslaved childhood to troubled adolescence, with a hopeful glance toward adulthood (the Promised Land). This process starts immediately after liberation – indeed, it is its direct result. . . It is only later on in the Torah, the book of Numbers, we will discover that the growing-up process in the wilderness could not be accomplished in a single generation."

From commentary on the wilderness story in Exodus from Five Books of Moses (Schocken Bible)

Maps

When I was a child, our breakfast nook had two maps of the world: one was from the 18th Century, the other from the mid-1950s. I was intrigued by the idea that, through the process of exploration and discovery, we could so improve our understanding of our world. I decided then that I wanted to be an explorer and discoverer.

Maps tell me about my place in the physical world. The sense of knowing deeply where I am gives me the confidence I need to head out and explore. Maps also tell me how to explore safely, and they guide me to my intended destination.


Yet maps have limitations as well, and I have had to learn when to put them away and to look elsewhere for guidance. Maps help me to direct and control my journey, but that can inhibit me from discovering destinations not of my own choosing.

I have learned instead to practice the "faith walk," whether navigating back roads or a major transition in life – take small steps, observe widely, listen deeply, and follow the path down which I feel led. This process is never without anxiety, but the many unexpected and delightful destinations to which it has led me have been an abundant reward for taking the risk.

During a trip to France in 2006, we were staying at a house deep in the country, surrounded by dense woods. Feeling the need

for a long walk, I looked over the vague directions provided for this purpose, then headed out. I pushed the boundaries of the walk a bit, emboldened by the guidance in the directions that "all paths to the left lead back to the house." I finally took one of those paths to the left, but after a bit, in the deep woods, my confidence waned. I muttered to myself that, upon my return, I should draw a proper map of the area and its walking paths, in order to provide better guidance to future guests.

Then I remembered a conversation earlier in the day about putting away the map and doing the faith walk, and I began to pay more attention to the details of my surroundings – the ancient stone walls buried beneath ivy, the shapes of trees and foliage, and especially the luminescence of clearings in the distance toward which I felt drawn. Finally, after traversing several of these paths toward the light, I recognized I had arrived back at the house. This faith walk had reached its destination!

My obsession with maps remains undiminished, but I also remain mindful of the need to occasionally restrain my impulse to be a mapmaker. Regardless of whether the terrain one is exploring is terrestrial or spiritual, the desire to describe what one has seen and learned must be balanced against the need for each of us to experience the uncertainty of "faith walk" and the joy of discovery awaiting all who accept the invitation to explore. 
– Greg Morgan

A Walk to Remember

Sometime after my miscarriage in April 2011, I was at Midas waiting for an oil change. I had spent at least two weeks sitting in our rocking chair staring blankly, crying, meditating, and communicating with our baby – conveying my deep love and apologizing for my inability to protect.

At the mechanic, I could sit no longer. I was completely numb and vulnerable. Everything reminded me of my loss. I did not want anyone to see me like this – all teary-eyed and ready to cry in an instant. So I began to walk – wandering aimlessly until I spotted a second-hand baby store. It was the last place I would have expected to want to go, but it beckoned to me, and I ventured in. I found nothing of interest in the store, but it was therapeutic to pretend that I was shopping for my baby like I was supposed to be doing, and as I did so, I knew what I needed to do next.

Since the miscarriage, I had read the book *Something Happened* with my daughter Taylor multiple times daily. At the end of this book, the family plants a tree for their baby so they will have a place to go and remember. I had been thinking about what I could do to honor my baby, and in this moment I found a sense of direction. I walked another mile towards my favorite second-hand store. Upon arrival, I saw Joann Fabric. I found and purchased a square memory box. Next I walked to the second-hand children's store. I found a pair of duck sandals, a little onesie that says "I wished for a


little fish," a pacifier that says "calm" and a little baby popup book. I choked down my tears to ask the cashier how much the book cost. She must have recognized my pain because she looked at it for a second and then placed it back in my hand, simply saying "it's yours."

Once home, I decorated the memory box and placed it in the now-deserted room that was supposed to have been our nursery.



This small gesture made such a huge difference in our grieving process. It gave us space to feel, and it honored our baby for who it was, including all of the dreams and hopes we had held for it and for our daughter Taylor as a big sister.

Through this small gesture, I found solace and rest in a place where I could remember, grieve, and eventually look back with sadness, a lot of love and a rested settled feeling, knowing that my baby has shaped me in ways that I could not have imagined.

And I am a better person for having known and carried this child, even if ever so briefly. 

– Sarah Blanchard

[See letter from Sarah to grieving parents on our Letters page at www.mindingthelight.org]

Stepping Off the Map


I always wanted to believe that God listens to prayers and that miracles really happen, but I'm not sure I was convinced until I stepped off the map. I mean this literally in that I had to give up some comforts, travel to very poor countries, and try to make a difference in the medical care in these places.

Sixteen years ago, I traveled to the Peruvian Yearly Meeting with a group of five doctors from West Hills Friends. We had no idea what medicine to bring or even what diseases we would encounter. While there, I froze all night at 12,000 feet, with no heat, and found it difficult to breathe at that elevation. I rode in a helicopter with a big hole in the floor, boated to islands on Lake Titicaca, and ate pizza in downtown Puno. These experiences, so different from my life at home, opened my eyes, and by my third visit to Peru, we had handouts, medicines, and a long line coming to our clinic. I still have some beautiful handmade pottery that a family gave me when I visited their tiny home. For them, it is important to give something back. This was my first glimpse into the generosity of the human spirit and the interconnectedness we all share.

A few years later, I met Samuel Kayuni, a man from Malawi, Africa who started an orphanage after a missionary prevented him from committing suicide. I decided to visit his mission and give all his children a check-up, and it was fun. At sea level, I could breathe more comfortably,

but at night, an armed guard slept outside my window. After that, I ventured out to work in a remote village clinic. I will never forget the sadness of seeing children with AIDS. I understood why Samuel called his mission, "Children with Hope and Destiny." I have supported him every year since and am amazed at how he has educated 29 kids to become leaders in Malawi.

Now, with twelve medical mission trips behind me – most recently in Haiti – I wait expectantly for the miracles that are sometimes obvious and tangible. For instance, the optometrist who visits the clinic once a year has to round up donations of eye medication, and a single bottle of glaucoma drops costs \$200. I prayed, and six months later, the mother of one of my patients – an eye doctor herself – donated 30 bottles of drops. I tell my group we will bring 50 bags of supplies when we come, and we always do. I believe that the funds will be provided for each team member to travel, and they always are.

But the best moment for me is always the last night, when people share their most meaningful experience of the week. I hear things like "seeing the resilience and gratitude of the patients," or "realizing that we can make a difference in the lives of our brothers and sisters around the world by just giving of ourselves." It is then that I am truly the most blessed and am compelled to step out again. 
 – Mari Kay Evans Smith

My Wilderness

I first felt nudged toward pursuing a career as a mortician about three years ago. I quickly dismissed the idea and went on with my life. Every so often I would feel this thought fluttering on the fringe of my mind, as I thought about what I would do next (when my children started school full time and I planned to go back to work).


The little nudges began to occur with more and more frequency, even as I tried to ignore them. I began to think about death, about what comes after, about how our society views and handles death. I watched beautiful foreign films about other cultures and the meaningful and familiar rituals that surround the funeral process. I heard interviews with young morticians who brought light and life to their work. I was given a book about someone who made this career choice early on in her life. A friend jokingly called me to tell me that she'd just read the best job for Scorpios was mortician. All these things happened without me telling anyone what was on my mind and without me consciously pursuing them. The nudges turned into pushes.

I finally addressed God. Why me? This is too weird. This is creepy. What will people think? Why, why, why am I always the different one?! Why are you pushing me toward something that will make me even more different from everyone else? Why can't I have a normal job?! I am scared.

I dug my heels in and more forcefully pushed back. Each week I looked up jobs on craigslist. I researched nursing school, trying to convince myself that this would actually be the best route for me to take. Every time, in my mind, I clearly heard the same words: "Why are you looking at this? You know what you need to do."

After a year of this, I finally decided to share my thoughts with a few people. I told my spouse, my parents, my siblings, swearing them to secrecy, thinking someone will finally concur with me; this was a crazy idea and I should let it go. No one did. Everyone, while initially surprised, thought that this was the right path, that I would actually be right for this kind of work. I told a few close friends; all were immediately supportive.

This past spring, I finally accepted that this is indeed my path; I will apply to mortuary school this fall. West Hills Friends has become such a crucial part of my spiritual journey, so I began sharing this decision with Friends, one at a time. All have been willing to walk alongside me. Every time I include someone else I feel a sense of relief and I feel a little braver.

This is my wilderness, my uncharted territory. I am nervous, but more than that, I am excited. I am entering the unknown but I am no longer navigating it alone. 
 – BW