

MINDING THE LIGHT

Our Collective Journal, Chapter 28

When have you been led to a place of healing?

The Life and Grace of Place

It was the summer of 1992. A profound ominous darkness that had hovered for months settled in, took residence and rooted deep in every cell. He had completed suicide six months earlier leaving our five children ages 3, 5, 7, 9 and 13 without a father and me adrift – not knowing if I had anything to hold on to anymore or if anyone was holding on to me.

My parents had recently moved next door with intentions gone awry. Their intended caregiving was reversed to caretaking as my father's cancer daily shortened his final journey. My twin sister, wanting to savor the final days of our father's presence in this world, had come from Texas with her four children for the summer. The mixture of love and nine children was an acrobatic challenge.

The phone call began with MaryKate saying, "How would you like to go to the Trappist Monastery for the weekend? I had reserved the weekend but

can't go." The thought of solitude and quiet was so unimaginable I managed a forced laugh, convinced she was attempting to humor me with a joke. "No, I'm serious"....

I can still call up the drive through the rolling hills of the Willamette Valley out the back roads of Newberg, turning off of Abbey road up that long narrow driveway between plowed fields to the top of the hill where the old farm house and barn now served as chapel and guest house. There was nothing outstanding as I look back at those first impressions. I was shown to a sparse room overlooking the pond and given a schedule of the day. The numbness of those months served me well....

There was a deep comfort in sinking in to the ancient monastic rhythm of that place. It was the not knowing or understanding of it that somehow reached me in contrast to the now collapsed certitude and emptiness of all those familiar "Christian" answers to the questions that had no answers.

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I sat in the last row of that chapel/barn not knowing how to "do Catholic" and wept through every office, welcoming the anonymity of being an outsider. That not knowing and the absence of words trying to fix or advise was a welcome and soothing relief. But it was the early morning and evening silent sits with the monks in Bethany House that began to break through the numbness of those months and more than anything else provided a safe place to just be with all that was a part of that time. There was something about the silence – the emptiness of no words – that was what called so deeply to me.

It was the first of what became monthly visits for me for the next 20 years. I have often said and still say today that I think that place saved my life. I really don't know if I would be alive today if it weren't for those monthly treks to take a day or two, walk the trails, journal, visit with Mark the monk, go to mass, and most of all the silent sits with the monks.

Minding the Light is a collection of stories from the lives of members and attenders of West Hills Friends, a Quaker meeting in Portland, Oregon. We publish quarterly, or as the Spirit leads. Among Quakers, "minding the Light" means noticing, listening for and paying heed to the voice of our Teacher.

Early Quakers kept journals about their relationships with God and shared them with the community. For example, John Woolman's Journal has been continually in print for more than 200 years. By publishing stories from our community, we hope to continue the Quaker tradition of disclosing God's activity in our lives.

Each issue is organized around a specific 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.

The silence that simply held me and all of the chaos and darkness of those days until that slow work of healing found its way. It was that place in particular, the Trappist Abbey of our Lady of Guadalupe, that midwived my healing and accompanied me in that journey. 

—Caryl Menkhus Creswell



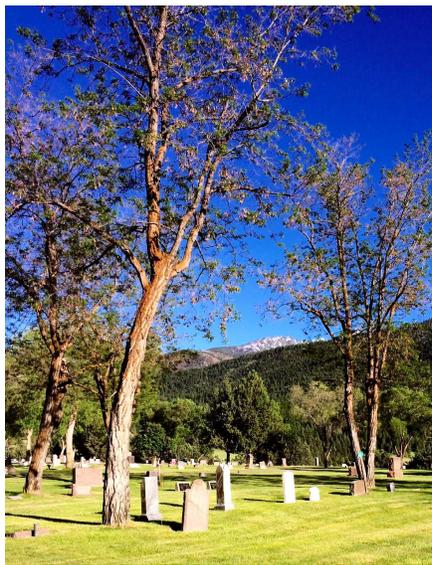
Becoming Grounded in a New Place

This year in Eastern Oregon has for me been a strange mix – of excitement in exploring with Derek a new and wild part of the world—and of intense grief at being separated from my community of faith. Long-distance connections have always felt challenging to me. Some deep part needs actual, embodied face-to-face connection with those I love. I feel acutely disoriented and unmoored much of the time.

Long walks have literally grounded me and eased my grief. The physical place that comforts me the most is (ironically) the cemetery in Canyon City, a couple of miles from home. It sits high above the John Day River valley and offers a 360-degree view of mountain peaks and scudding clouds. Canyon Mountain towers over me to the west and the snow-capped Strawberry Mountains to the southeast. Other mountain ranges I can't name hover in the purple distance, reminding me to “lift my eyes to the hills” and ask God for help.

Morning, noon, and at sunset, under

falling leaves and over packed ice and snow, for ten months I have meandered the paths beneath elms and juniper trees and communed with this vast cloud of witnesses who rest here. I walk and walk, noticing the names, the birth dates and death dates of the very young and the very old, the carved doves and lilies – and even horses and cowboys. I'm most drawn to those born before 1830, because I know for sure that they traveled across the continent before reaching this resting place in the wilds of Oregon. They must have felt displaced and disoriented, as I have, yet God was here before them, preparing a place for them, offering



Canyon City Cemetery. Photo by R Byrd

them the next right step on the winding, unknowable path.

I visit one spot almost every time I walk here – the grave of Elizabeth Hill Davis (1911 – 2009). She feels like a friend, though we never met. In 1960, Elizabeth and her husband

built the the little green house on the John Day River where Derek and I now live, and she lived here until her death at age 98. She was a well-loved teacher – and I think would be happy to have a teacher in her home! As I learned more about Mrs. Davis – her love of local history, her southern accent – the connection deepened, until I was stunned to see in her obituary that she grew up in Greenwood, Mississippi, the small town where my own mother spent her childhood. They were 19 years apart in age, but I like to imagine that their paths somehow crossed. Maybe Elizabeth took piano lessons from Mrs. Prosser, my mother's next-door neighbor. Maybe she taught my mother as a preschooler in summer Sunday School at the Baptist church.

On Elizabeth's birthday in January, I placed a heart-shaped quartz stone (from the collection in our yard) in the snow next to her headstone. She planted a multitude of irises, my favorite flower, in the yard – and just yesterday we spotted the first deep purple bloom. On the anniversary of her death next week, I'll leave some on her grave as a thank-you for reminding me that in the farthest of far places, whether I know it or not, I can find, with God's help, connections to family, connections to home. 

—Ruba Byrd



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MINDING THE LIGHT

CHAP 28: When have you been led to a place of healing?

Hallowed Be Thy Name

For many years I returned to an island in Maine for a few weeks in June. It was a quiet time, still between seasons, no longer spring but not yet full summer. The ferry ride to the island was an hour long ritual of shedding my winter skin, my city skin and settling into a different rhythm. The blue wind and wide sky, the sea scattered with bright lobster buoys rolling between the islands, the harsh white gulls, the pungent, salty smell tinged with old fish – these things would work their magic on me and I would open to this small three- by- five mile island universe. My weeks-long song of praise would begin. My tattered and aching parts would mend. My relationship with the Holy would redefine itself once again as my senses woke up one more time in the ways particular to this place.

Hallowed be thy name
The stones, the shells,
The sticks, the air, the sea,
The ways we name thee.
Coming back to where I first
Learned what is holy,
Returning to where it is easiest
To see,
I arrive stunned by longing
That fills my sleep with wrecked boats,
Dead-end roads and pathless mountains.
I collect this place day by day:
The white and golden bits of shell,
Chips of pastel sea glass, dried buttercups and
Fern fronds pressed in books,
Mica crusted stones,
Small strange sticks whose omens I can't read.

Hallowed be thy name.
I hold you in the stones.
I bring you back each year
As though I am alone.

Every year on this island, parts of me that needed healing would realign themselves like broken bones being reset. I was a true pilgrim returning every year for the healing waters, and the quiet places I could hear the comforting voice of God in the shifting wind.

I haven't been back to the island for eight years. The bowl of stones and chips of mica by my front door, the jar of sea glass on my kitchen window sill, the pressed flowers that fall out of my old journals, the small grey stone circled with a vein of white that I keep in my jacket pocket, the bundle of gull feathers tied with dried grass- these are my island sacraments. These are the elements of my communion with this particular presence of God and they remind me of God's grace every day.

— Peg Edera



Stones, Shells, Sticks, Sea. Photo by Peg Edera

Weathering by Fleur Adcock

Literally thin-skinned, I suppose, my face catches the wind off the snow-line and flushes with a flush that will never wholly settle. Well: that was a metropolitan vanity, wanting to look young for ever, to pass. I was never a pre-Raphaelite beauty nor anything but pretty enough to satisfy men who need to be seen with passable women. But now that I am in love with a place which doesn't care how I look, or if I'm happy, happy is how I look, and that's all. My hair will grow grey in any case, my nails chip and flake, my waist thicken, and the years work all their usual changes. If my face is to be weather-beaten as well that's little enough lost, a fair bargain for a year among the lakes and fells, when simply to look out of my window at the high pass makes me indifferent to mirrors and to what my soul may wear over its new complexion.

MINDING THE LIGHT

CHAP 28: When have you been led to a place of healing?

Wilderness

The small creek flowing down the incline on my left drew my attention, and I hoped there might be a good place to set up my camp out of sight of other hikers and backpackers but not too far from the main gravel road into Jawbone Flats. It wasn't a steep climb and in old-growth forests there isn't much undergrowth. I went off-road, looking for a couple trees that would support my hammock and be close to the creek for easy access to water and to that soothing sound.

I needed soothing. I'd forgotten what grief felt like.

I'd forgotten how disorienting it is. How the force of gravity seems to double. How breathing ceases to be autonomic.

The bad news had been delivered on a Friday morning; I spent the afternoon finishing up some important work, the evening packing up my camping gear and putting some food together, and Saturday morning driving to Opal Creek Wilderness, where I would spend the next 48

hours doing the simple tasks of sleeping, cooking, brewing tea, reading, walking, and remembering to breathe. I would let the solid green of ancient trees and the flowing sparkle of renewed waters be my companions. I would be alone; I fled conversation and explanations and others' words.

(I first heard of Opal Creek back in the 1980s, when environmentalists were working to save it from logging. When the sunlight hits the creek, it becomes obvious why they named it Opal. I learned that the waters had never tested positive for giardia, so it was there that I had my first taste of un-treated water, putting my Sierra cup under a trickle that came out of a rock formation and drinking deeply.)

The two days in that place got the healing and recovery process off to a good start. It felt a little uncomfortable telling David he couldn't come; it felt a little scary camping on my own. But when I walked out the weight felt a little less, and the breathing was a little easier after being among old trees and clear flowing water. 🔥

— JP



Opal Creek Photo by JP

Queries for Chapter 29

Our next Query: "When has the Light led you to say 'The Unlikely Yes?'" Tell us about an experience when saying "yes" took you in a surprising direction.

We encourage young Friends to participate, so please consider interpreting this query for young children in your life to see if it 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.

Story Deadline:

September 10, 2017

Publication Guidelines

Stories and other written responses should be 500 words or less, and written in the first person by a member or attender of West Hills Friends. Written responses should be submitted in text format in the body of an email addressed to: mindingthelight@gmail.com.

Story content should be appropriate for young Friends.

If your story needs to be edited to conform to our guidelines, one of our editors will contact you.

Please include a title and byline with your submission. We will withhold your name at your request, or use initials, etc.

Original music and videos should be submitted as links to websites like YouTube or Vimeo.

The Cathedral

My extended family owns a quarter-section of land in Wisconsin – a homestead from 1870. My deeply homesick Swedish relatives, who had been horse-keepers and hostellers in the old country, chose a piece of land that reminded them of home – unfarmable land with four lakes, the deep rubble piles of a terminal glacial moraine, the second-highest point in the state of Wisconsin, and virgin timber. (We don't so much dig holes in the earth but work with a crowbar to pry large and small rounded boulders out of the ground to produce a cavity.)

This homestead is one of my favorite places – a refuge where I have been told my face changes as it relaxes in peace. There are special places in the woods with old-growth hemlock, white pine and elm. One hemlock section we call the Cathedral. This is a place with towering dark trees and no undergrowth on the edge of a lake. Ghost flowers bloom out of the thick needle-covered forest floor and thick pillows of moss tempt naps. Midwestern virgin timber forests have nothing like the enormous trees we have here – the climate provides a natural bonsai action. We've measured temperatures below -60 F in this place.

I drove with my mother to the Homestead last summer; it was becoming increasingly clear that the forgetfulness and confusion she had been experiencing in the last year was

going to require big changes for her life. We were there for the month of July as family came and went. This was a sad, painful time that not even the healing properties of the place could ease. Angry; sad; grieving; depressed at my best friend for leaving me.

We sent my mother back to Oregon on the plane and I stayed on another three weeks seeking the peace and happiness this place usually gives me. In the end, it took total, near-crazed immersion in a carpentry project replacing rusted metal kitchen cabinets with a new set made of knotty-pine to bring me peace. 

– Jean

Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.
Matthew 7:24-25 (ESV)

Light Brigade*

Clerk (Alternating)

Mike Huber, Recording Clerk

Anne Anderson

Carol Bosworth

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Mount Angel as My Inspiration

I went to visit Mt. Angel Abbey in 2014 September. I arrived in the area around 6:30 AM when the sun was rising. It was a perfectly round red ball spreading from the upper sky to field in the horizon with some bottom portion still not above the horizon yet. The buildings in Chicago are as tall but this was wide, seeming as close as a mile away.

When I arrived for the mass I awaited to see the priest to bless the St Benedict medal I bought to wear around my neck. I was met by a priest sitting, as if waiting for me to approach, in the vestibule. I made my request and he reached out without looking at me. I never saw his face.

I held the medal as he began to recite something (I heard the words 'God's mercy') and a little light radiated around the medal. He continued. When he finished I walked away placing it on the chain with my Mother Mary medal.

I went to the retreat house and no one was staying that day. I stood for a moment and took in the cleanliness, the warmth, the orderliness and suddenly I was 12 years old again. I realized that my parents loved me and had hopes in me. They wanted me. That I loved the higher order of the mind. It would be for the glory of God that I lived. I was grateful at that moment I was born to them and given the opportunity to love God. 

– E.W.

The Magic of Lincoln, Oregon

When Beth and I returned to Pennsylvania from a tiny campus nestled in the Cascades some twenty miles from Ashland, Oregon, everyone could see we were different. During the long flight home I thought about how to explain what happened to me. I struggled to find the words, and I realize that I still don't know exactly how to explain it. I'm realizing that is a hallmark of spiritually transformative life events, they often leave us without words to describe what happened.

What I do know is that we withdrew ourselves from the world for four months. This withdrawal appears to have been divinely inspired. We arrived there disillusioned with the god sold to us in Evangelical circles. We were unsure and weary, but we were also aware of the potential for freedom from the shame, fear, and judgment that had ruled our lives until that point.

And so we let the ponderosa pines inspire us. We let the smell of sage and juniper soothe us. We sank into the wisdom and wonder of questions without answers. We wrote, we read, we played, we hiked, we experienced freedom. All of this was mixed up in the unexplainable presence of Spirit whispering affirmations and encouraging us to simply enjoy all that life there had to offer us.

Beth and I go back there every March. When we arrive all the magic of that place rushes back into our hearts and we

feel like children again. We go there every year for that reason. Our souls always arrive there in the same state, weary, unsure, but we know we will be filled again. 

—Mark Pratt-Russum



Walking Meditation

This morning I woke up to beautiful sunshine (something I crave after this year's long winter in the Northwest) as I venture out for my last walk on the Monterey Bay Coastal Recreation Trail. I planned my trek to include my favorite segment that gives the loveliest view of the ocean, but also takes me past the local coffee shop for a venti decaf (my favorite treat!). Today as I have in the past, I also try a new part of the trail finding lush greens and spring flowers in bloom. I'm feeling ecstatic, as this is the weekend of my youngest child's graduation from college.

As I reflect on the past 4 years, I realize that these walks have been a powerful source of healing for me. I remember initially the mixed awareness of both sadness in realizing my son would be so far away from home, yet excitement that he was getting a basketball scholarship to a terrific school. I had no idea the next 4 years would take me through some of my most difficult and tumultuous times of my life- the loss of my nephew, my daughter's mental illness,

my mother's worsening dementia, my son's injuries and many surgeries that would keep him from the game he loved, and multiple health issues of my own. But having the opportunity to visit him in this breathtaking place became a blessed gift.

During these early morning trail walks I prayed, I cried, I processed, I listened, I walked fast, I walked slow, and I inhaled the crisp ocean air. I would sense the Light warming my face and enveloping me in these great arms of love. I left feeling strengthened and empowered. I remember one morning as I walked I received a text photo from my sister who climbs mountains to help with the grief she experiences due to the loss of her son. I quickly took a photo of the ocean and sent it back. I thanked the Light for giving us both that moment of connection and beauty.

Today as I walk I practice my vocal exercises, treatment for my latest medical issue, and as I say "Heeee" and "Wo-wo-wo-wo," a tear falls from my eye. I hate these ridiculous exercises. I keep walking and look out at the wispy fog lifting above the ocean. The coastline trail of Monterey has become a place where I am allowed to be authentic. I don't have to pretend to be strong. The Light brings healing to my heart. 

—Mari Kay Evans-Smith