

MINDING THE LIGHT

Our Collective Journal

CHAPTER 4: WHEN HAVE YOU ENCOUNTERED GOD'S PRESENCE THROUGH A STRANGER?

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

John Woolman

Mon Ange

I was eighteen years old when I met my angel.

At age seventeen I was chosen for a fledgling study/work program in Switzerland run by an American professor and his wife. I would live in a chateau full of international students, study French, English literature and European history with the professor in the mornings, and help out with a little housework and cooking in exchange for my room and board. I packed everything I thought I would need for an entire year, said goodbye to friends and family, and flew to Geneva, where I was picked up and driven to my new home in the

city of Lausanne. My room on the top floor overlooked the city and Lake Evian. It was beautiful.

First impressions of my living situation changed quickly, as I found myself living in an emotionally and psychologically abusive nightmare. This is another story for another time, but in essence I was told daily I would never amount to anything, that I was lazy and stupid and my life was a waste. While I always held a small glimmer of knowledge that they were wrong about me, after four months I was at the lowest I'd been in my life.

I was finally able to make arrangements with my parents for me to leave Switzerland to stay with another French-speaking family. On a freezing cold day in January, I was unceremoniously dumped at the huge Zurich train station with a year's worth of luggage and a ticket to a town in the south of

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France. I struggled as I tried to manage my suitcases, carrying some and pushing others with my feet, all the while fighting back tears. The daily commuters rushed past me.

All of a sudden, someone asked me in English if she could help me with my things. A girl about my age was standing next to me. She picked up half my bags and walked with me to my train, where she helped me stow them on board. When I turned around to thank her again, she was gone. I got off the train and looked all around the platform to find her but couldn't. Finally, I saw her, looking back at me and waving.

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.

She was four platforms away, more than a ten minute walk by underground tunnels, but she had been next to me less than a minute before.

I didn't know who she was, but I knew in that moment that she had been sent to comfort me. I knew, right then, that things were going to get better, that Someone was watching over me. To this day I can remember everything about her but her face. When I try to picture it all I see is light. 

– BW

How the Garbage Lady Saved Our Lives

A little over twenty years ago, we were floundering. We'd become very disenchanting with most organized religion, despite a few long and intimate involvements with a variety of churches. We'd served in administrative and lay capacities in several congregations, had close friends in the ministry, and other friends that we believed would identify themselves as devout Christians. But something was missing for us.

We identified a lot with Gandhi, admiring Christ, but rejecting Christians as so unlike the One after whom they were named. We wondered if anyone had a clue of what was truly going on in the world or saw where it was headed and, if so, whether they wanted to do anything about it. We'd pretty much lost hope. I guess you could say we'd stumbled off the path on our journey of faith and we felt a major void in our lives. We knew that we needed to do

something - anything - to turn things around.

About that time, we came across an article about a place where you could go to recycle. Recycling hadn't become popular back then, but we saw it as a very small and personal step that we could take to make a positive difference for the planet. So we packed our car and off we went, never suspecting that the opportunity to pass our garbage on to someone else would change our lives forever.

We arrived at a small building in SW Portland, where we met a young woman. She seemed genuinely happy to see us and even more than willing to answer all our questions and satisfy our growing curiosity. No, she wasn't a saint and she didn't appear to be one of those high society "do-gooders." She was just an ordinary person - a lot like us, or rather like we used to be. Obviously, she had "faith."

She spoke rationally, passionately, and knowledgeably about recycling and more. She talked about peace, saving the environment, ensuring social justice, treating all persons equally and with respect, without regard to color, nationality, religion, economic status, sexual preference, etc., all as if it was actually possible and within our grasp. In general, she wanted to make the world a better place for all its inhabitants. Alright, so maybe she was an angel sent to help us find our way back.

What started out as a planned stop and drop turned into more than two hours. We came away with a sense of having met someone who genuinely cared about two strangers (actually about all strangers and everyone everywhere). We also took away a lot of informational material. It didn't take us very long or involve too much study on our parts to realize that we had always been Quakers; we just didn't know it until we met that wonderful stranger.

Thank you, God, for leading us to West Hills Friends and thank you, Sally, for opening that door. 
– Randy Hack

El Desconocido

I leaned into the rain. It was an epic Texan downpour, the kind of sudden, intense rain the old folks call a gully-washer because it could turn Austin's creeks into floodwaters in the blink of an eye. I was on foot, soaked to the skin, no coat, a mile and a half from home... How had I gotten myself into this predicament?

Just then a battered pickup truck pulled over to the curb and I turned to see three Latino men dressed as laborers sitting in the cab. The truck door flew open and one of the men came towards me at a run. What was happening? He thrust his hand towards me and wordlessly handed me an umbrella.

In that moment of surprise, I made a little bow of thanks. He nodded, jumped back in the truck, and was gone.

Over the years, I have forgotten many things, things you would think I could remember. But I have never forgotten that moment or that man. Yes, it is more blessed to give than to receive. But how many times do we give when it costs us nothing, give from a place of plenty, give what we don't really want or need? This man gave his umbrella to a stranger in the middle of gully-washer, and it was raining on him, too. 

– KD Burnett

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Jesus Under a Streetlight

The East Hastings area of Vancouver, British Columbia is a rough neighborhood. I have volunteered in shelters in the Old Town area of Portland and I promise you, Portland has nothing to compare to this. Throngs of homeless people live on the sidewalks and in buildings that should be demolished. Many of them are drug addicts, so it has a desperation that you can almost taste. It felt to me like everyone was unpredictable and could be violent.

Last year, as a first-year university student, I volunteered in East Hastings every Saturday

afternoon at a drop-in community kitchen for kids. Sometimes I felt very brave and most of the time I felt unsafe. I didn't know where I was going or how anyone would react to me. If I needed help, would anyone help me? The first time I tried to find my way back to the bus stop, I was followed all the way by two guys. My sense of direction is not my greatest gift, and I was scared. After that happened, my tactic was to call my Mother on my cell phone as I walked from the bus stop to the kitchen, and later, on leaving the kitchen, to talk with Mom until I got on the bus.

I loved working in the kitchen and didn't want to stop just because the six blocks from the bus stop scared me. The staff at the center reassured me that I would be ok walking around down there. I thought they were just used to it. I thought they knew how to handle it all and weren't telling me.

After a few weeks, I decided to walk to the bus again without calling anyone. It was just getting dark. I put my hood up, my eyes down. I didn't want to make eye contact. I just wanted to get to the bus. I was biting my nails, dodging people sitting on the sidewalk, trying to make it quickly from streetlight to streetlight.

Suddenly a very large man blocked me. I couldn't move. He started yelling at me and waving his arms over his head. I thought I was going to be stabbed. I thought I might pass out.

"Girl, Girl!" he yelled. "Stop it! Stop it right now! Stop biting your nails! It's really bad for you!" He ran off into the alley. I made it to the bus stop.

I realized that people do look out for each other and that the people living in such desperate situations were still like the people I grew up around – genuinely good and willing to help others, even if their ways of offering help are unstable or not what I am used to.

This man could have been Jesus. Really. 
 – Mia Edera

Occupied with God

I spent November 12th and 13th of this year in solidarity with the Occupy Portland movement in response to the Mayor's demand that the protesters leave Lowndale and Chapman parks.

Politics aside, there were many times during the day and night when I saw God's presence in the faces of strangers. I saw God's presence when I witnessed a police officer respectfully assist a disabled veteran protester out of an area in the camp that was being dismantled to a place of safety. When I saw police and protesters work together to clean the park on Saturday before the deadline.

I saw God's presence in the faces of countless people as they stood in solidarity for what they believed in. People who otherwise would not have come together. People joined in a common cause. A unified group

who will carry forever the memory of that night and the realization that just because we are different it does not mean we cannot be united.

I saw God's presence when I stood on a street corner and listened to about twenty people including members of the clergy singing, "How can anyone ever tell you you are anything less than beautiful?" Everywhere I looked the air was energized by that intangible presence we all feel at times. That sense that there is something greater than ourselves standing with us, surrounding us, a part of our lives that is always there even if we are not always consciously aware of it. The presence of God. 
— Kevin Melvin

Overshadowed by God's Presence

As I sit writing, I recall that one year ago today I was in critical condition in a twenty-five bed hospital in Jenin, occupied West Bank, Palestine. Although I was in a coma and have no memories of the almost three weeks that I spent in two Middle Eastern hospitals, friends and family have reconstructed those days that were full of God's presence and love that was shown, not by one stranger, but by many of them.

In the beginning of what was eventually diagnosed as bacterial meningitis, two Palestinian doctors in that little hospital consulted with each other and began emergency treatment for meningitis even before any test

results had come in. That would have been best medical practice anywhere in the world, and it saved my life. I have come to see this not as just what doctors do, but as God's presence working through the skills and caring of two strangers.

Some Palestinian olive farmers who were Muslims in religion heard rather quickly about my illness and came to visit my bedside in a lovely showing of Palestinian hospitality. In some inexplicable way, I still feel the warmth of their presence today. Surely this was a manifestation of the God who considers "the stranger", for not only was I a stranger to the farmers, they were also strangers to me!

After being transferred to a Nazareth hospital, where a number of the doctors, caregivers and administrators are Christian Palestinians, the care and love expressed earlier in Jenin continued. It was in Nazareth that a dear retired, but still volunteering, hospital social worker named Rhadia rubbed my very dehydrated legs, feet, arms and hands with olive oil in another demonstration of God's tender ministrations. I still feel the warmth of Rhadia's gentle care even though we had never met until I was graced to be at that hospital on one of her volunteer days!

When it was time to fly home from Ben Gurion airport, a woman from Texas, another stranger, saw me on my gurney, and there in the busy milieu of a large international airport, she

kneeled down and prayed for God's healing touch. What a sight that must have been; I am sorry to have missed it!

Through a 35-hour trip in ambulances, on transatlantic and domestic flights, there were attendants who were concerned about my comfort. On the transatlantic flight, those attendants were alert to my brain's need to hear spoken words, so they made sure that I heard speech if I opened my eyes for even a few minutes.

In these and many more ways God's presence covered me through strangers. Men, women, people of various faith traditions, cultures, and varied backgrounds were the bearers of this love and light.

Note: My journey to recovery continued, thanks in great part to family, friends, neighbors, and my dear West Hills community; no strangers at all. But writing about that is not the assignment for now! 
— Lorie Wood

The Patron Saint of Impossible Causes

It was a typical Sunday afternoon at Winco; harried shoppers crowded the aisles, jostling carts and mumbling terse apologies. As usual, I stopped in the Mexican food aisle. The exotic brands, bright colors and Spanish words always entrance me...and the candles! These votives feature Our Lady of Guadalupe in her sunburst aura and other saints less familiar to Anglo Americans. This time I

gave them only a glance, in a hurry to complete a long list of errands.

Then a stranger approached; an elderly Mexican woman in a black dress and a calico tunic apron, her salt and pepper hair braided into a crown. She spoke to me in Spanish, smiling like a friend, her eyes locked on mine.

"This is the candle you need. Saint Jude, the patron of impossible causes."

She held out a votive picturing a haloed blond male in white robes. He clasped a giant gold coin at his chest; a flame hovered over his head like a red butterfly.

"He's good for mothers who worry about their children...and everything. Good for pain...for everything. He will pray to Jesus for you, so you can rest."

I'd been editing my first novel. The Mexican woman was so like one of my main characters, my mouth dropped open the moment she appeared.

Questions immediately arose. How did she know I spoke Spanish? Why was she running around a present-day super-market in 1950's kitchen apparel? How did she know I experience pain which robs my sleep? And with such a recommendation, how could I not buy that candle?

I pinched my hand - hard - to check if I was dreaming. The sensation was as real as the cold from the freezer case. Thanking her, I put the candle in my cart and we went our separate ways.

She could have been God's emissary, reminding me that my impossible causes are in God's care. My children, my book, my very life, all belong to God.

The family of God is all around me. A Mexican grandmother can appear, straight from 1959, apron tied and ready to assist my shopping. A stranger can look me in the eye and see deep down to the challenges I face.

I can trust the saints to be praying so I can rest. We are all candles waiting to give light to one another. Let us be a community of saints praying for impossible causes. 
- Claire Nail

Forget not to show love unto strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.
Hebrews 13:2 NSV

When Truth is Spoken with Love

Potluck in the Park is an organization that has been feeding the hungry every Sunday afternoon in downtown Portland, rain or shine, since 1991. Currently four to six hundred people in need show up on any given Sunday. On the second Sunday of every month, someone from West Hills Friends delivers about 200 pieces of fried chicken to Potluck in the Park. With a desire to serve God and witness the circumstances of others, I started taking chicken there in the summer of 2007.

One Sunday after delivering the chicken, I stayed to help serve at the bakery table, where guests

were offered slices of bread and a selection of desserts. Each guest chose verbally or by pointing which dessert they wanted - one per person - and I, the plastic-gloved volunteer, placed their selection on their plate. The bakery table was a wonderful place to serve. Many of the guests were excited to see food they would really enjoy eating. Even if the selection was a bit stale or damaged, to be able to choose something that they actually wanted to eat seemed to be a great gift to them, and I was pleased to be able to give it.

One man in the line spied a lone Costco-sized almond poppy seed muffin and exclaimed, "That muffin! I would love to have that muffin!" I picked it up, but it did not stay in my hand for long. I dropped it. I dropped the muffin, and it landed topside down on the dirty cement next to my foot. I stared at the muffin for a good ten seconds, then picked it up and put it on the waste table behind me. I said, "I'm sorry. Can I interest you in something else?"

"Yes, of course," he said - he was so nice. "How about those cookies?" I handed them to him, but he did not leave. He said, "May I have the muffin, too?"

Too quickly, I said, "But it fell on the ground!?" I could feel the judgment squishing up my face, and I was so ashamed to have spoken those words. But he smiled and said, "Honey." He said "honey" like my dad does - as if I was precious and he wanted to be gentle, not rob me

of my innocence. But he also wanted that muffin. "Honey," he said with a long pause, "I eat food out of the garbage."

When I think of the love Jesus gives me, it is always accompanied by being fully known and accepted. Not loved in-spite-of, but loved because-of, loved completely because-of. That is how I felt when the man spoke his Truth to me. Even as he asked me to see beyond my own circumstances, his kind and respectful manner opened my mind and heart to his message. I felt that the real gift given that day was not a selection of sweets, but a hard Truth spoken with love. 

– Summer L. Cox

The next table

Angel strolls down Southeast Hawthorne, raising his arms, making his baggy coat flare out like black wings. "Go out and buy things!" he yells to shoppers, who step a little livelier around his perimeter but are careful not to look at him. "Put them in your closet!" he urges. "Come back and buy more things!"

I'm sitting at a cafe table on the corner. Conor is at my feet, hoping for crumbs. I guess it's because I'm laughing at what the angel said that he comes over and plops down at the next table.

"Hard work, eh?" I say encouragingly.

He grunts and searches his pockets. With a meditative air, he rolls a cigarette. Conor places his

head on the angel's knee and wags his whole backside. Looking out at the street, Angel smokes and pats Conor absently.

Next to the angel's table, a woman at another table works away at her laptop. Angel stands and leans very close to her face: "Are you very busy?" he asks gently, as a father would ask a child who's coloring.

She smiles, unafraid, and says, "I have a long to-do list."

"Throw that out!" he says. "You should have a to-do list!" He steps away, spins, turns the corner and disappears. 

– Margaret Kellermann

Contributions to Minding the Light for printing and mailing costs are much appreciated. Your tax-deductible donation may be sent to:

West Hills Friends
P.O. Box 19173
Portland, Oregon, 97219

Checks should indicate the donation is for Minding the Light.

A Stranger in Istanbul

I once visited Istanbul, Turkey, on a cruise. I boarded the last tour bus, which was only half-full. I sat behind the other passengers, so that not only did I have a seat to myself, but an empty seat across from me.

I loved every part of Istanbul. The buildings, the signs, the businesses, the people, the lush greenery between the buildings and on rooftops; it all just thrilled me. I snapped pictures continuously, first from the

window next to me and then jumping across the aisle to snap one from the other side. Taking pictures of a traffic jam, I realized there was someone behind me, at the very back of the bus, about twenty years older than I and dressed as one of the crew from the ship. He seemed to immensely enjoy my enjoyment of everything I saw.

When we stopped at the Basilica Cistern, I stepped off the bus and was surrounded by men selling souvenirs. They pressed around me, refusing to let me through. My husband, several feet away bartering a few pennies off the price of postcards, was oblivious to my dilemma. I was starting to panic, when the passenger I'd noticed approached and cleared a path for me.

As I walked through the cistern, my husband off on his own adventures, my fellow traveler approached several times to offer to take my picture in front of the amazing medusa heads, or other sights. I don't think he spoke English, most of the crew was Greek, and all our communication was nonverbal. Yet I felt so connected to this stranger, as if we were in perfect sync and didn't need words. He was warm and sincere and seemed to radiate good will and integrity.

That evening, during dinner, I had to return to my cabin for something I'd forgotten. I approached a set of double doors, which swung open, and there was my companion from the tour. I broke into a huge smile, as did he, and I knew my

face was as lit up as his was. We ran toward each other and embraced with delight, both obviously overjoyed to see each other. It was as if we were long lost friends or family members. And then, nodding and smiling, we went our separate ways.

I spent that week in Jerusalem, Egypt, Ephesus and Greece; and this was the most moving and memorable experience I had, yet I could never find the words to explain why. The best I can do is to say that it was as if the God in me and the God in him recognized each other. I like to think that while our bodies were a little more reserved, our souls spent the day together, holding hands and laughing. In my encounter with this stranger, I experienced God. And I hope that he experienced at least a little bit of God in me, too. 🔥

– Mica Coffin

Steve

In 1981 I lived in the Seattle area, and I decided to get involved in the train museum in Snoqualmie, Washington. I figured I would get out there early, while they were firing up their steam locomotive, and help somehow. There's usually plenty to do on a steam locomotive, so I figured they would have me wipe grease off the siderods or something.

By the time I finally got there, it was about an hour before they were ready to move the locomotive. I climbed up into the cab where there was a group of guys standing and making railfan conversation. I said I realized I

got there pretty late but was there anything I could do to help. One of them said "No, we did everything already."

I climbed down out of the cab and sat on a stack of ties. The locomotive was sitting there with steam coming out and with grease and dirt all over the siderods and drivers. I got tears in my eyes.

Just then, someone was moving a little diesel locomotive on a track on the other side of the stack of ties. The engineer, leaning out the window, stopped next to me and said, "Get up here!"

The engineer's name was Steve. I rode with him while he switched some cars, and got down and helped couple and uncouple. I didn't know the hand signals, but somehow that was OK. I was part of the crew.

I spent a lot of time at that railroad museum the few years after that. Steve was always kind and helpful, and was always interested in what I was up to. I was out there almost every weekend through 1985, when I moved to Portland.

Now, when I imagine hanging out with Jesus, He seems a lot like Steve. Jesus is always kind and helpful, and is always interested in what I am up to. He's always glad to see me, and He looks a whole lot like Steve. 🔥

– Charles T



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Mysticism and Magic

When I was in college, I took a class called Medieval Mysticism. I had high expectations for that class. I wanted something much more than an academic experience. I wanted something much more than a grade on my transcript. Yes! I wanted to hear the voice of God in my ears. I wanted to see a vision. I wanted to feel the presence of God in a way that would change my life forever.

I went to the University Bookstore. I bought the complete works of St. Francis. I bought the complete works of St. Clare, Julian of Norwich, Bonaventure, Hildegard of Bingen. I bought them all. And then, eager for revelation, I went to class.

Sadly, the class was a dreadful bore. Out of the entire term, I only remember one thing.

One day, several weeks into the class, a man came into the classroom from out on the street. He looked like the sort of man who would eat locusts and honeycomb out in the desert. His hair was wild. His clothes were out of style and ragged, as if appearance had no meaning to him. He came in, and he sat right next to me.

"What is this class?" he asked me.

"It's on mysticism," I whispered back.

He nodded. And then he asked, "What is the difference between mysticism and magic?"

Now, I could have just shrugged my shoulders. I could have pulled the syllabus out of my notebook and slid it across the table towards him. I could've said, "Shh! I'm trying to listen." But the question struck me as important: "What is the difference between mysticism and magic?"

I thought about it for a second, and then I said, "Mysticism is about surrender. Magic is about getting what you want." This satisfied him, I think. After sitting there for a few more minutes, he stood up and left.

This stranger appeared out of nowhere. By asking the right question, he helped me find an insight that has served me well for many years. Instead of trying to generate a Mountaintop Spiritual Experience (by reading medieval manuscripts or talking to wild-eyed strangers), I am learning to surrender. 🔥

– Mike Huber

The Raggedy Man

One day about ten years ago while I was living in California, I was driving back to my office at lunchtime when I noticed a man sitting on a bench at a bus stop. His hat and clothes looked worn; his hair was longish, his beard unkempt. He wasn't begging or even looking outward, but my heart was strangely stirred to help him. I had only a \$5 bill to offer and considered driving to an ATM for more, but I was afraid he'd be gone when I returned.

I turned my car around and pulled into the bus stop. He was either looking down or dozing and didn't look up until I lowered my window and held out the \$5. He saw me and smiled as he slowly got up with a cane that I hadn't noticed. I was sorry that I'd expected him to come to me. When he reached the car, he said, "How did you know I needed money? I was on my way to the VA hospital."

How could I NOT know he needed money? I said, "You looked so sad," and unexpectedly, I started to cry. He watched me for a moment, then looked down at the sidewalk, blinking away tears. I was awash in feelings and a powerful sense of meaning, and it seemed that he was too, but neither of us spoke. I wanted to say, "Jesus loves you," but I knew those trite words wouldn't convey my sense that God was trying to reach him through me. I had no idea how to communicate what I felt, so I said only, "I'm sorry." I was still crying as I drove away.

The encounter affected me powerfully. I cried and prayed for him through the evening, and often in the days that followed. There was no conscious reason, just a recurring memory of the man's face that stirred my heart and moved me to prayer. For weeks, I looked for him whenever I was out. I wanted to tell him that I felt God's love for him, to listen to him if he wanted to talk, to give him more money, or just to sit with him in silence, but I never saw him again except in my mind's eye.

I sometimes help strangers without feeling much except a vague sense of "should." Other times, I feel compassion and a desire to help -- ordinary feelings that are soon forgotten. This experience was different. God's Presence added a dimension to the encounter that is hard to describe and impossible to forget. The compassion I felt for the raggedy man was deeper and stronger than my own, and the love that passed through me to him was so powerful that it left me reeling. 🔥

– Sally Gillette

Invitation

We would love to include your story, art, photo or other original contribution in an upcoming issue.

The query for Chapter 5 is, "When has God made you laugh?" (deadline 1/15/12)

The query for Chapter 6 is: "When has a place affected your experience of God's presence?" (deadline approximately 3/11/12)

Questions? See the Publication Guidelines on our website: www.mindingthelight.org

or send us an email at:

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Bend in Life's River

A few months ago, as I helped prepare my childhood home for market, I envisioned a new family living there, a couple with two little girls. Laughter rang through the long-empty house; children raced and tumbled over the hills and waded in the shallow stream, feasting on blackberries, apples, plums, and

pears. The family raised a garden together and gathered by the wood stove on a cold winter's evening, as we had. I was captivated!

From then on, I prepared the house for this family, and as I did, drudgery turned to excitement and pleasure.

Days after the house went on the market, we received a low-ball offer from a couple with two little girls. Though we couldn't accept their offer, I knew this was the family I'd "seen"! It had never occurred to me that I was tapping into an actual family, yet these were the people whose joy I'd felt; this was their home!

Their second offer was full price. Though multiple roadblocks to financing arose, I was untroubled. However impossible it seemed, it was in God's hands. Each obstacle fell away.

The day the house closed I went there to say goodbye. When I arrived, a car was in the driveway, a young man behind the wheel. Certain that this was the buyer, Russ, I introduced myself. He replied, "I'm Russ." I said, "I've come to say goodbye," to which he replied, "I thought you would. I wanted to meet you." He'd arrived about three minutes earlier, to meet me!

We talked for 1½ hours, non-stop. He grew up in Ashland, where my daughter Carlie attends college. His aunt lives a quarter of a mile from our house; he grew up playing in the neighborhood! When he saw the house on the Internet, he recognized it.

I told him about "seeing" his family, preparing the house with them in mind, "recognizing" them at their first offer, and that I'd never worried, despite all the challenges. He, too, had known it was their home from the beginning, and had never worried, however impossible it looked. They want us to visit and share our stories of the house and neighborhood. They want to know us!

After Russ left, I sat outside, excitedly trying to say goodbye to the house. It wasn't working. Then I noticed a single crocus, in full bloom. We'd never planted crocuses! How could this be?

Crocuses make me think of spring and new beginnings....I sat back down in wonder. When I did – I kid you not – at high noon, on a sunny September day, I was suddenly encircled by singing crickets! I laughed aloud in wonder! Is there a cheerier sound? God can be so not-subtle!

I saw then, in my mind's eye, my brother and me, sitting in that yard beside Russ and his wife, watching their little girls play. Of course I couldn't say goodbye! This wasn't goodbye! It was just a bend in the river; the river goes on. Past, present, and future are all part of one river.

As I released my childhood home, God showed me the breath-taking continuity of life – through a "stranger" named Russ, a family I have yet to meet, a crocus, and a lot of crickets! 
– Laurie Hoff Schaad

Strangers on a Plane

We take as an article of faith that God is present everywhere, and that there is that of God in each of us, but I am still always amazed at the places God shows up to remind us of this fact – and the people God sends to remind us. And one of the last places I expected God to show up was at the LA International Airport a few years ago when I was trying to make it home for Thanksgiving.

The United terminal was under construction, and jammed with humanity – one could have fainted and not hit the floor. I had just found a place to stand in a roped-off "holding pen" for my flight to Portland – there weren't really any gates – when a woman bumped into me and said, "I'm sorry."

I turned around and realized she was blind, with a seeing-eye dog. I asked, "Can I help you?"

She replied, "Can you help me find Gate 83? It's so crowded I can't tell where it is."

I said, "Sure. If you follow me, I can show you where you need to go."

She instructed her dog, "Follow!" and she did. In two minutes she was where she needed to be; she thanked me, and we parted.

I returned to my place in the holding pen. One of my fellow travelers, watching this, nodded appreciatively. I said, "This is a brutal place even with the gift of sight. It seemed the least I could do."

Later, as we boarded, another woman struggled on after us with a squirming toddler in one arm and a car seat and bag in the other. My fellow traveler from the holding pen, who was seated near me, sprang to help her. He took her car seat and bag from her, carried them to her seat 20 rows farther back, and helped her get settled. Our flight attendant, who had stood by unresponsive to this woman's plight when she boarded, was so moved by this stranger's kindness that she began hustling to help other passengers and proceeded to give our section of the plane great service throughout the flight.

So where was God in all this?

Everywhere! The blind woman in need, I realized shortly after leaving her at her gate, was God's messenger to pull me out of my self-preoccupation and make me aware of the possibility to serve another. God also pulled my fellow traveler out of his self-preoccupation as he watched me, a stranger, do my deed, and opened his heart to the possibility of service. My neighbor seized this opportunity and, judging from his expression upon returning, he experienced the same sense of God's presence (whether or not he would have called it

that). Similarly, God worked on the flight attendant through this stranger with the same result.

The prompting of strangers is effective in awakening our own souls and, as my story reveals, it frequently sets off a "domino effect" of many strangers giving and experiencing God. It all begins with a single decision to say "Yes" to God's promptings. 

– Greg Morgan

Experience in Haiti

Last April, I went to Haiti with a medical team from West Hills Friends to provide free medical care in a clinic, and I'd like to tell you about one of the amazing spiritual experiences I had while

working with "strangers" there.

I worked in the pharmacy, and one day the Creole translator called a 4-year-old boy to the window to take his liquid worm medicine. The boy's mother brought him forward, and his big brown eyes lighted up as he looked at me. He smiled broadly and swallowed the medication with gusto. Knowing that the medication probably had a bad taste, I smiled back thinking that this little boy will really go places in life with such a positive attitude already.

I happened to look out the pharmacy window at the sea of Haitian faces looking at me, and I suddenly saw Christ looking back at me through this little boy and all those smiling faces. At that moment, I strongly felt God's presence connecting us all.

Words from a prayer book by Hope Lyda speak to me of this experience: "To be able to see You, Lord, is a blessing. While faith can be defined as belief in something unseen, my faith in You goes beyond that. I do see You. In the beauty of the earth, in the smile of a child, and in each victory of justice, I see Your face." 

– Margie Simmons

[See photos and slide show of medical team trip to Haiti at: www.mindingthelight.org]

Awkward Awakening !

Strangers – stalking – stealthily – somberly – swiftly
Strangely and awkwardly – to me at least – smiling
Waving my way – arms out – but cumbersome me
Awkward – unknowing – "Who are you – what
Foreign space or time brought you?"

Quickly – change the lenses – filter the light
May I dance back to back – now that's not so bad –
But I cannot see your face
Look into your soul
Catch a glimpse of the "Light" within.

If He makes his home within your soul why – how can I
Reverse the course of knowing and being known?
I cannot see Him clearly if strangers – foreign
Not before known – heard or seen –
Never play in my yard or I in theirs or
Walk the path together.

So I turn and look and dance and move
Fear takes flight
Faces become full of knowing and being known
Strength steps forth and spins the reckless steps of
Blind – trusting movement dancing the May pole
Celebrating and calling out the song of the Dove.
– Toni LaCentra

MINDING THE LIGHT
CHAPTER 3: HOW HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED GOD'S PRESENCE IN NATURE?
