

MINDING THE LIGHT

Our Collective Journal

CHAPTER 1: WHEN DID YOU FIRST RECOGNIZE THE LIGHT?

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

John Woolman

Seeing the Light

When I was quite young, I asked my Mother if I could go to Church.

She said, "Sure, if you can find a ride."

This was the beginning of my spiritual hitchhiking. My next door neighbors accommodated me, the wayward child of liberal agnostics; where they went, so went I. The first Church was Congregational with a boring Sunday School. Every week I was given the same picture of Jesus on a card or bookmark. I

probably continued to go with them for the donuts at coffee hour.

The Sunday it all changed was the Palm Sunday I was ten and it was our first visit to an Episcopal Church. It was early spring in Portland, Maine. It was still cold, there was still snow on the ground and it had been months since I had seen fresh flowers. We sat down in a pew close to the front. Pots of daffodils had been arranged along the altar, crowding around the Baptismal Font that looked to me like a large, golden, nesting bird. I looked up to large stained glass windows rising up from the altar in front of us. The sun broke through the clouds just then and the light poured through the window directly onto the bank of daffodils. The

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.


In this Issue

- Seeing the Light
- Experiencing God's Voice
- Light Within, Light Without, Light all Around
- Questioning My Way to the Light
- The Light in the Darkness
- Seeing the Light Within Darkness
- Untitled
- I Didn't See Fairies When I Was Young
- My Friend Jesus
- Untitled
- Life: More than we think
- The Color of God
- The Light

Baptismal Font gleamed. The light was golden and bright and I saw it. I really, really saw it right through my eyes, all the way down to my toes. I felt it all warm and bright inside me and it lasted a long time.

In my late teens I was baptized in a river by a Catholic priest and an Episcopal priest. That was an important day but the day I first remember believing was that Palm Sunday. Actually, I didn't just believe, I knew: God is beautiful and warm and so surprising.

I live now in the other Portland. The one in the North West where the snow never lasts long and the daffodils bloom in

March. They still speak to me every year. They remind me of my conversion experience. Conversion into, what seemed to my 10 year old self, the heart of magic. 

--- Peg Edera

Experiencing God's Voice

A little more than 20 years ago, after spending all of my adult life trying to live the best way I could without letting God into my life, things were a real mess for me. I was hurting the people I loved the most. One night it all came crashing down, and I cried out to God, telling Him that I wanted to turn my life around, but I didn't know how.

Expecting my pathetic cry to simply echo in the void, I instead received an unmistakable reply: "I am here, and have always been here. I love you, and want you to be healed. If you follow me, I will lead you to a better place."


My inner intellectual agnostic was simply overwhelmed by this mystical experience, and I could find no answers to explain this experience. Moreover, this voice kept its promise far beyond my wildest dreams, and has continued to do so for the past 20 years. As I look back at it now, I can't describe my experience any better than is already expressed in Psalm 40.

"He bent down to me and listened to my cry.

He raised me out of the miry pit, out of the mud and clay;

He set my feet on rock and gave me a firm footing.

On my lips he put a new song, a song of praise to our God."

Moreover, as I try to understand the "He" who bent down to me that night, I have yet to come with a better answer than the Word Made Flesh, the Present Teacher, this man Jesus whose life story is told in the gospels. I followed His word because, like one of the sheep in the story of the Good Shepherd, I recognized His voice that night. Why I recognized, and still recognize, this voice is sometimes a mystery to me, but this much I know is true - because I've experienced it! 

--- Greg Morgan

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Light Within, Light Without, Light all Around

Words were new to me and God had no name. Light woke me up in the morning, and during nap time, the dust motes floated down a great pyramid of light, a host of ballerina fairies. In the kindly face of the moon, light followed me home from the movies, where light had danced stories onto the screen. Light

came in from outdoors and enticed me to go see.


Out in the garden, light gathered around the ordinary gray squirrels. It settled in the brushy ends of their fur, the nearly invisible guard hairs, lit silver around the fuzzy edges. Light everywhere: gold, silver, violet, pale yellow, amber, red-orange. Holy sunrise and Holy sunset.

Held up to noonday sun, my hand revealed red-pink light glowing. Big sister told me I was seeing my blood underneath my skin. There was light shining through me. What a thrill to be part of the whole lit world!

Everywhere I went I could carry this light. Some grownup people had more light; it flowed over, like honey. These people were easiest to love, and had more patience with children. Others seldom showed light, except when they laughed.

When people laughed delightedly, they launched comets, and stars. Laughter was so like the glow around the squirrels' guard-hairs. Everyone had to laugh sometimes, because people were fuzzy at the edges, too. Laughter in the cracked-open moment of helpless messiness....

I loved a good mess. Every day I rescued snails and caterpillars. Snails, you see, leave their light in shimmery silver trails. A caterpillar carried the story she'd soon be a butterfly as bright as a halo. To hold her was an astonishing privilege: to know a resurrection before ever knowing Jesus.

The intricate perfection of Creation, the depth of light in created things, made me want to create, to delight others. The creatures, the plants, the stones, even the dust motes reflected the Light Within, Without, and All Around - The Light that lived in me and everyone. 

--- Claire Germain Nail

Questioning My Way to the Light

When I was 18, I had a list of questions. Although they seem a little silly to me now, these questions routinely provoked a passionate response from the self-identified Christians at my high school. How did the sons of Adam and Eve find wives? How could a wooden boat (built with bronze-age tools) sustain two of every creature on the planet? Could God make a rock that is too heavy for God to lift? Time and time again, I encountered Christians who felt compelled to answer these questions, and to defend their answers with a vigor matched only by their disregard for logic.

At the time, I concluded that having "answers" must be at the heart of religion. All the religious people I knew seemed to have answers in abundance. Then I met a group of Quakers. Instead of answering every question, these Quakers kept saying, "That's a good question. I don't know the answer to that." It blew my mind.

I found myself asking a new set of questions. If not "answers," then what do these Quakers possess? If they're not

committing themselves to a body of information, then what are they doing? Finally, I came to realize that faith was a matter of relationship for them. These people were Friends of Jesus. Friendship isn't a collection of statistics and evidence. Friendship is a bond of love.

I was in a Quaker meeting house on Easter morning, 1982.


Upstairs and down the hall, people were gathered for worship. I wasn't with them. After helping with breakfast that day, I developed a headache. I decided to lie down in distant corner of the building. In that quiet space, I was surprised to find myself in God's presence. Apparently, it was God's turn to ask me a question: "Are you going to admit that you know me?"

I knew it was true. Even though my questions were unanswered, I knew I was in the presence of God. I had been drawn into Friendship. The question was, "Are you going to admit that you know me?"

I hesitated. I still wanted to see myself as an outsider. I enjoyed asking hard questions. If I admitted to a relationship with God, would I lose some part of myself? God was kind enough to reassure me: "You can still ask hard questions. Just do it from inside our relationship."

Still, I hesitated. And then, I felt God's challenge: "What's more important to you? The image of yourself as 'outsider?' Or the truth of my presence with you?" Over the years, I've learned that God is remarkably good at this sort of clarifying question. How

could I choose an insubstantial image over the truth of my own experience?

Looking back, I don't think this was my first encounter with God. But this was the first time I had a name for the experience. I was drawn into the Light. I was becoming a Friend. 

--- Mike Huber

The Light in the Darkness

I was 5 years old, and I didn't understand that my mother was dying. I did know that something scary was hiding in our house, and I was afraid of things I hadn't minded before, like the swans on the bathroom curtains and the gaping black hole of the closet doorway at night. I was so frightened that my mother took the swans away at bath time and closed the closet curtain at bedtime.

On this night, I work up thirsty. I started to call for my mother and froze. The closet curtain was open again, the black hole exposed. They had gotten into my room and would grab me if I called for my mother or tried to run to her. My mouth went dry from thirst and terror, and I pulled my blanket over my head to hide. I lay still, heart thudding.


And then the darkness was gone. Light was everywhere. I peeked out and saw the Light coming from a beautiful man sitting beside my bed. The Light around him felt like love, comforting and safe. He said, "Don't be afraid, I'll stay with you," and I fell asleep.

The next night as my mother helped me dress for bed, I said, "I hope that nice man comes back tonight." I remember her hands gripping my shoulders as she asked questions. I don't remember my answers, but suddenly her hands relaxed and she was crying and smiling and hugging me. Later, as I lay in bed listening to her talk on the phone, I heard her say, "Sally saw Jesus!" And my heart said YES.

The memory of this experience has been a Light in my darkness ever since. It has shaped my life and my understanding of God. Without it, I doubt I'd be at West Hills or any other church.


And now, as I write, I realize that this story is not just about me being comforted by Jesus. It's also about a dying mother who is comforted when she discovers a priceless story that could have been lost. As her small daughter answers her questions, the mother recognizes the Light, and her sadness turns to joy. She hears a promise in Jesus' words that lifts a great burden from her heart: "*I will stay with her.*" The mother renames the story and gives it back to her daughter, salted with joyful tears that affirm its meaning. After the mother dies, the story that lights her daughter's path is wrapped in precious memories of the mother.

God Stories are like seeds that sprout up and yield fruit after lying dormant for years. And they're like the talents in Jesus' parable. When they're hidden within, their value is frozen.

When they're told, their value multiplies as others are blessed and new facets are illuminated. God Stories can grow and return to the storyteller so filled with Light that they are pillars of fire to light the way. 
--- Sally Gillette

Seeing the Light Within Darkness

When did I first know the Light, as in the Light, or Presence, of God? Though I've been Quaker all my life, it took until I was over 50 years old to understand that my inability to see - or my unknowing of God as - the Light was not due to my living in evil darkness or in some fold of the Heavens that excluded me from all those others who were able to experience the Light of God. Instead, it is just the way given to me, by God I believe now, to know God's Presence in a huge vast Darkness where nothing is. I was able to experience God "there" only after I learned to trust it, through my Quaker teachers, particularly Bill Taber, at Pendle Hill (a Center for spiritual growth and learning run by Quakers in Eastern Pennsylvania.) Only after I learned to allow myself to rest in and be held in the Darkness, and once I could trust that experience, then I began to be aware, deep in the core of that Dark Reality, that God was there, that God was aware of me, and that His/Her Love was immense, present, open, and very real. Think of it as some mystics have written: once we let go of our conceptions of what God is, let go of every scrap of story and image and knowing,

then we are face to face with nothingness, or as I shape it with my words, "No-Thing-Ness". And there is God, at the Center, or Bottom, or Core of everything - and it is awesome to feel the wash of Love from that "place" and that "Being", and to be touched by God out of the center of Nothing/Everything. That kind of Love strips me bare - but God gives each of us more Love than we know how to grasp. Thanks Be! 
--- Name Withheld

Untitled


It was terrifying. I was 12 years old. In the mountains above Death Valley, walking back to the campsite with my sisters I experienced a sudden, involuntary shift of consciousness, as if everything in my life up to that point had been a languid dream and then instantaneously, I was thrust into the unbearable realness of the present moment. I tried to tell my parents but all I could think to say was "I feel strange."

For years the experience returned to me in waves. In college I sought help from counseling services. An existentialist told me I would just have to accept the way things are. A Freudian told me I should have more sex. One autumn afternoon in 1967 I had my first of many sessions with a sweet, gentle psychologist named Royce Jones, who, upon hearing my story, said, "I think your crisis is a spiritual one," and gave me a book called *This is It* by Alan Watts.

Thus began the journey that would take me through Zen, Yoga, Sufism, Gurdjieff and Rudolf Steiner, mystical Christianity, etc. I was not looking for systems of theology. I wanted road signs, dances and songs, electrically-charged ideas, transcendent experiences, anything that would pacify the great uneasiness always waiting in the wings. I found some hard-earned peace. When the terror approached I began to learn to welcome it as an old friend, here to guide me a little further along the path.

On midnight, May 15, 2009, I felt the Old Friend approach. I got out of bed to greet him. The next thing I remember I was riding in an ambulance on the way to the hospital. Several EEGs later, I had my diagnosis. Epilepsy. I probably had it all my life. Cells in a small cluster of my left temporal lobe are pulsating to a rhythm far simpler than the rich, complex patterns of activity required for "normal" consciousness. Every now and then the nearby cells pick up the beat and move to it. If enough cells start dancing, I experience the psychic disturbance that set me out on the spiritual path. If the entire brain catches on I go into a full grand mal seizure.

The medication, Keppra, has no discernable side effects and for the past 2 years there has been almost no return of the ghosts that haunted me for over fifty years. When the occasional blip crosses the screen I can easily reason with it. Oh, that's just my epilepsy acting up. It's under control.

But the path was not in vain. The truths I learned were truths, regardless of whatever neuro-chemical incentive impelled me to learn them. The implications and insights are astounding. Just one: in order to function, the brain requires a rhythm so complex that our conventional perspective can only see it as chaos. The same is true of the universe, which means that through our consciousness we are linked with the entire cosmos. That is so incredibly cool. And that is just the beginning.... 

-- Jim Nail

I Didn't See Fairies When I Was Young

I didn't see fairies when I was little, I had to learn to see them after I was grown. As a child I played in redwood groves and mudflats, feeling the pulsing life in the land. My friends and I pretended to be raccoons, pioneers and alligators in oak groves, meadows and creeks. We were as close to the grass and sky as snakes and gulls. I didn't need fairies to know the living presences of the earth.

There comes a time, though, when we separate from that wholeness. We fall, we wake up, we walk through a doorway we didn't even know was there. We become aware of our Self and our Self's desires, needs and fears. I still walked in dark forests and open fields but I was thinking about little sisters, algebra and boys. I saw the flowers and clouds, but I didn't SEE them any longer. Asking when I first recognized the light

is like asking when I first recognized that sun is warm. I always knew it, but maybe I forgot it for a while only to relearn it again in a new way. My path back started in the same place as those earliest memories, under the giant blue sky. My early experiences in the woods and fields had laid a foundation for an interest in natural science that I pursued through high school and college. I remember coming home from 11th grade biology class, going to my favorite wooded canyon, and experiencing deep awe over the xylem and phloem system in an fir tree - it was transporting gallons of water dozens of feet with nothing more than water tension, evaporation and magic. I laid down on the forest floor and looked up at those trees, the wonderment of nature washing over me like a wave. I didn't see fairies that day, but I was beginning to feel them again.


Mail? Email? Both?

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These days I do see fairies and I feel the presence of the light all around me, all the time. My intellect and scientific mind is still a major gateway to recognizing the Ultimate Mystery but I have found other gateways, too. I can feel the light in people and trees when I think about the biological miracles they represent, but I can also see that light when I suspend, or balance my scientific mind with other forms of perceiving and thinking. A childlike, beginners mind and a rich diet of beautiful stories have opened my heart and my eyes, again, to the dancing forms of the divine all around me. 

---Alyss Broderick

My Friend, Jesus

When asked of my religious background, I often say I was raised by a pack of atheists. I do this to distract people, to divert attention away. I speak of my step-parents, who were raised as Catholics and hold residual anger from being forced to wear dogma that didn't fit. I mention my father, who says that he has heard brilliant people argue both for and against the existence of God and that both sides sound convincing. These tidbits lead to conversations about spirituality and religion but allow me to keep my heart secret.

When I was seven, Jesus came to me. His smile filled me with this incredible sense of peace, safety and courage; he filled me with God's light. When I shared this wonderful news with my mother, her response was immediate, negative and


adamant. That was the first time I stopped talking about Jesus.

Later, when I asked my father if I could go to church, he paused and then said that he would drive me and he would introduce me to the pastor, but he would wait in the car during worship. I liked the gilt and color of the Catholics; I loved the congregations that sang with their whole bodies and the Lutherans had donuts. But in all of my explorations, I didn't find Jesus. He was there, other people were celebrating him, but I couldn't see him, couldn't feel him and it made me think that I didn't belong. Years of experience reinforced this thought and I became absolutely certain: I was not a Christian.

Years passed and I eventually became a Universalist Quaker, attending an unprogrammed meeting. At some point Jesus began to sit with me in the silence. By this time, though, Jesus rode with me in the car and walked pace with my cart at the grocery store, too. He had somehow become a very PRESENT presence. He was a dear friend, a near constant companion, but I never spoke of him. I was embarrassed. My love for Jesus embarrassed me. And when someone asked me if I were Christian, I would deny it. But Jesus kept beside me, speaking the truth: in denying my Christianity, I was turning from the light.

Over a family dinner, twenty three years after meeting Jesus, I burst out: "IMACHRISTIAN" and everyone froze. "What?" my step-father asked. "I am a

Christian," I repeated, softer, slower, "and I have been going to a church that I really like." "Christian?!? Like born-again?!?" Exclamations. "No, no, just plain Christian." Reassurances. And then my four year old niece asked: "What's a Christian?"

And that is the question that I have been struggling with ever since. What is a Christian? How can I be so certain that I am a Christian and yet be unable to define it satisfactorily to myself or to others? Why am I unable to fully defend it to people experiencing the strong negative emotions Christianity can evoke? Why am I unable to speak the words that would allow others understand my personal truth? But even as I struggle, I rest in gentle hands and know this: when it is just the two of us, I don't need words. 

--- Summer L. Cox

When Did You First Recognize the Light?

Is this a trick question? There should be a chronologically straightforward response here, right?

It might have been the time the seven year old me, seething from the clearly oppressive wrath of parental domination, ran out into the woods behind our house. Seeking any kindred spirit to pour out my woes, I was drawn to a solitary young conifer surrounded by the oak-beech-maple forest. Under that canopy I found shelter, solace, I felt accompanied. Was that the Light?

But then there was also the time when I was about twelve. On a hike in the Colorado Rockies, I looked down at the made-in-China pendant of Jesus around my neck and noticed a heart etched there, glowing. The child in me still suspects the heart was burned in precisely at that moment of kindling of divine love. The adult who knows better blames the whole event on the hot sun.

Surely it had to have been no later than my first year in college. I remember how it felt to act from a place of alignment with conscience, "speaking truth to power," while engaged in street theater with Plowshares activists on the plaza in front of the Pentagon. Or maybe it was in Atlanta, serving corn grits at 6am to day laborers, enraged at the criminalization of homelessness and race. There I learned the dance of responding to anger, tears, laughter and vulnerability of people existing on the fringes with both love and a thick skin.

Truth is, sometimes I feel like I'm still trying to pin down a rather elusive, Trickster-like Light and begging it to hold still. Just when I've thought I have the Light figured out, and where it's leading me neatly defined, it shifts, eluding my mental grasp in a game of cosmic Marco Polo.

Over here, the Light as a flicker of communion with non-human life. There, as the flame of God's love. Front and center, as mutually woven liberation for myself and others around the world. Emerging from within as

fidelity to intuition and inner guidance.

As this call and response continues to illuminate my blind understanding of the Light, I come to recognize the divine Presence showing up in unexpected time and place.

Marco! 🔥

---Jen

Life: More Than We Think

An experience at age five left me with a very clear understanding about life and the universe. At the time I was very sick and ached so much it hurt to move. Because of the polio epidemic my mother was really worried and a doctor actually came to our house. I remember my mother crying when he told her that I did not have polio. I remember that illness as different because I felt so sick and also because normal sounds were sometimes very loud and other times quite distant. And at some point I found myself flying around in our neighborhood. It was so amazing to be up in the air: I looked down on the rooftops of nearby homes so familiar to me; I saw the trees from above and looked down into the backyards. I was quite surprised to see that a couple down the street had a shiny new car. The flying was a wonderful experience but at the time did not seem extraordinary; it was just something that happened. When I told my mother about the new car she said I was dreaming. But awhile later, she returned and was furious. "The neighbors do have a new car! Why were you outside? I've

been so worried about you! You are still sick--and now you're going outside?" She was good at both guilt and anger. I still felt awful and certainly had not been out of bed! Even at five, I already knew not to argue with her.

What I learned is that life is more than what we think: we are not just our bodies. I became intrigued with how different things are from a new angle, even things so familiar as my house or favorite tree. And I was left full of wonder and awe, full of more questions than answers, and very curious about the world, about what we see and what is possible. Perhaps nothing is only what it seems. 🔥

--- Pat M.

The Color of God

Growing up, art was something I was clearly bad at. It wasn't just the way that the art teachers pointedly ignored my work, or my close to failing grades. It was the lost feeling I experienced in art class. In writing, English, algebra or even public speaking classes, I knew what was required and it came naturally to me. With art, I didn't understand what I was supposed to be doing, never mind how to do it. I was so afraid to fail, and reveal my unworthiness, that I just accepted that I was bad at art and avoided it.

When I was 29, I was critically injured in a car accident. The doctors didn't expect me to live and lost me twice during the first operation. Whether it was

coming so close to death or just re-examining life, something in the experience caused me to take chances, to risk life, to refuse to play it safe. As I like to think of it, I decided to live life out loud. So I took a painting class.

In a sense, my worst fears were realized – the teacher thought I was terrible. She spent most of each class period shaking her head and sighing over my incompetence. But I found that I loved it. Especially color. Color began to speak to me in a whole new way.

I started to crave yellow. I tried to buy all yellow clothes. I wanted to eat yellow foods. I bought yellow curtains and a yellow bedspread. One day while having acupuncture, the practitioner shone yellow light on the needles in my ears. He explained that certain colors are thought to heal certain areas of the body and that most of my injuries were concentrated around the chakra that yellow light worked on. I only knew that yellow felt very healing to me.

I found that while sitting in Meeting for Worship I would see color. I loved to read Hildegard of Bingen's writings about the greening of God. I felt that I was experiencing the Light through color. It was comforting for me to know that color was light. I thought of color as God and wrote this poem, exploring the relationship of God and color.

The Color of God

God is yellow
when he's brilliant,
but when he's resting,

is he coral,
when meditating,
does he become
a dusky rose?
When God's working,
is she shining
with emerald coolness,
and God pausing,
does she become
a peaceful blue?


God, when blessing,
is lavender violet,
but when teaching,
does he move in
an earthtone aura,
does he grieve in
jade green hues?

When God is creating,
she glimmers in turquoise,
when she's loving,
is she bathed in
a fine golden glow?

God speaks to me
in colors so brilliant.

He heals me
with colors so glowing.

Blesses me
with colors so gentle.

God's energy shines
through the prism of my soul,
offering numerous colors
with which she sustains me
and I am made whole. 

--- Mica Coffin

The Light



 --- by Charles Turner

See larger image at:
www.mindingthelight.org

Invitation

Will you share your story, art or music for our next issue?

The query for our net issue is, "When was your longing for God's presence unfulfilled?"

We would love to include your original story, art, music, video or other response to this query in our next issue. We're particularly interested in submissions from children, shut-ins, and people who don't feel they can effectively communicate their "God stories."

If you have a story but don't feel able to communicate it, let us know and we'll send a Story Catcher to work with you.

Call 503.246-7654 or email mindingthelight@gmail.com

Deadline for next issue: 7/17/11

Publication Guidelines

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

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

Art, music, other: Original paintings and other art can be submitted on paper or emailed in JPG format. Original music and videos should be submitted as links to safe websites such YouTube or Vimeo.

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

We regret that we cannot always publish everything we receive.



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CHAPTER 1: WHEN DID YOU FIRST RECOGNIZE THE LIGHT?

MINDING THE LIGHT
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