

MINDING THE LIGHT

Our Collective Journal, Chapter 10

WHEN HAS THE LIGHT BEEN HIDDEN?

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

John Woolman

Waiting for a Child

Thinking of a time of waiting could not be easier. The Light has been on a dimmer switch for the past year and a half. In spite of our deep desires and vibrant hopes, my husband and I have been unable to conceive a child. Month after month, we have been face to face with the same disappointment. It is stunning. Both very healthy, we'd expected to become pregnant easily.

With no idea what might be wrong, we waited. And waited. I knew I was being asked to trust the Lord, but I simply didn't understand. Did God not want us to have children? Were we being challenged to elect adoption?

There is so much that is beautiful about that path, but we couldn't ignore the longing to meet a little person who would be a reflection of us. Doubts about God's faith in us as parents turned into an ongoing wrestling match between the part of my soul that doubted and feared, and the part that has always returned to faith and trust.

It dragged on. Six months became nine, became twelve, became fifteen. Hours of research, regular acupuncture, herbal medicines, doctor visits, and lab work were not part of the plan, but became our reality. My hope slowly drained from some invisible

channel in my soul. One Sunday this fall, I opened my Bible to the Psalms during open worship. I revisited Psalm 40, which was one of my early companions. In it, I found a wealth of encouragement.

*I waited patiently for the Lord;
he turned to me and heard my cry.
He lifted me out of the slimy pit,
out of the mud and mire;
he set my feet on a rock
and gave me a firm place to stand.
He put a new song in my mouth,
a hymn of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear the Lord
and put their trust in him.*

*Blessed is the one
who trusts in the Lord,
who does not look to the proud,
to those who turn aside to false gods.
Many, Lord my God,
are the wonders you have done,
the things you planned for us.
None can compare with you;
were I to speak and tell of your deeds,
they would be too many to declare.*

Psalm 40

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This was exactly where I needed to be. These simple reminders likely would have irritated me had they been offered from anyone ("Wait patiently." "You know you need to trust God." Yes, I know! I've been trying!) Fortunately, these verses surfaced as an encouragement from the Light. I was sustained.

Ten days later, we had an appointment with a different fertility specialist. She was

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.

incredible—a grace-filled blend of sensitivity and forthright advising. She affirmed us and offered a working diagnosis that could be addressed with routine surgery. We smiled at each other through the tears in our eyes. I hadn't been fully aware of how much my faith had been depleted, but as we left her office, I suddenly realized that, for the first time in many months, I believed I would become a mom.

I had surgery just before Thanksgiving. It went well. Afterwards, we found ourselves with more questions for our doctor. We are eagerly waiting for our post-op appointment. After that, we will reenter the cycle of hoping and waiting each month. I will do my best to wait patiently, with gratitude for the beautiful life I am blessed to lead, with trust that God's heart is for us, and in anticipation of the day when we will bring home our son or daughter. 

—Amanda McDermott

Please Share Your Story

Query: *What experience of the Light do you treasure?*

We're looking for stories from your experiences that inspire or comfort you, or that stand out in your memory as meaningful or significant. A story about your experience of the Light will be a blessing to the community.

We welcome stories in words, photos, art, music, video, or . . . ? We publish stories as told to the extent that they fit within our guidelines.

Story Deadline: 1/20/13

Finding Home

I've been searching for over a year, waiting expectantly to find Home.

Actually, I've been looking for home since the day I left an untenable, unsafe home and marriage five years ago. I also remember occasions as a child when home didn't fit me, or vice versa: times I feared the anger of others and ran to find safety in a hiding place indoors or out, a place I could release emotions without anyone noticing.

I have also known great homes along the way. I have lived in song-filled community with Catholic Workers. I have lived in a mountain cabin surrounded by breathtaking and challenging wild country. I have known good love. Perhaps this explains the relentless search, trying to make things even better than they are, not settling for livelihood or relationships that were good, but not great.

For two months, the visioning process for Maplewood Center for Earth & Spirit became a key expression and focus of my search for home. Although the process did not yield the hoped-for result of forming an intentional co-housing community, it did succeed in turning my vision inside out. Rather than limiting myself to defining an intentional community as people who live together in homes, the experience prompted me to re-map and see this vision evolving more broadly and organically in the context of a whole neighborhood.

Like Arachne the spider, we spin a web of community and connections that extends beyond our home, in order to catch all the

sustenance we need. The web is constantly changing: old strands break and new ones are woven. Doors open, others close. And still, we get all we need.

I am unsettled, which is also to say that I am not complacent. I have not and will not stay where I am not safe, or do not feel like I belong. But here I feel safer, in a community where my heart surges and opens further each new day, at a time and place where I am conscious of wanting to put down roots. And still a dwelling that feels like "home" eludes me.

This I know: I am contending with the void. It has been unsettling to sit and wait with it, yet this holy discomfort is far from empty. I feel sad, but also more attuned, trusting self and Spirit to lead me through this threshold of home and change. I notice a deeper yearning for a container that can hold all of who I am, where I can feel at peace; I also yearn for the communion with place, Genius loci, that comes with time and rootedness. I identify more strongly with Mary and all house-less mothers during Advent and beyond. And feeling the absence of settled home challenges me to also feel the presence, safety and belonging of home in ways other than the physical structure in which I dwell.

I am whole. I am accompanied. My body and my spirit are enough.

I am.
Home. 
I am Home. 
— Jen S.



Opening the Gift

The first all-church retreat that I attended with West Hills Friends featured Stan T. as our retreat speaker. This was in the early- or mid-1990s, when I was already several years into a spiritual struggle with theology and faith and changing understanding of important things once believed with great certainty. As part of our time together, Stan led us in several guided meditations.

Imagine (Stan told us) that Jesus has a gift just for you. It is wrapped up in beautiful paper with a ribbon. When you unwrap the gift there is a box with a lid. You lift the lid, and look into the box. What do you see?

In my mind I receive the present, admire the wrapping, carefully untie the bow, and pause just a second before opening the box. When I remove the lid and look inside, at first I see ...nothing. The box is empty. Then I realize that I can't see inside the box because it is dark inside, black as night,

A Nod from a Friend

We're grateful for an article about Minding the Light that appeared in the November 2012 issue of Western Friend.

The article — *Minding the Light: A Meeting's "Collective Journal"* — was featured in a column called "Let it Shine." If you'd like to read it, there are copies in our literature rack.

Western Friend is a joint publication of Pacific, North Pacific and Intermountain Yearly Meetings. You can find Western Friend here:

<http://westernfriend.org/>

lightless as a deep cave. The gift inside the box was darkness.

It wasn't what I wanted. I wanted light, clarity, understanding, a way to move forward. Instead it was comforting. It was an assurance that my spiritual condition wasn't bad or evil. 

— Julie Peyton

Something Happened

Without warning, I would feel a sudden pain inside my belly. It was always a sharp, stabbing pain. After a moment, the pain would vanish as inexplicably as it had arrived. For a couple of years, I endured this terrible sensation over and over.

Because the pain was so unpredictable, I never thought of myself as pain-free. The pain was never gone; it was only lurking. I knew it could ambush me at any time. I tried to fix the problem by changing what was within my control. I restricted myself to a very bland diet. I ate less often. But without knowing the source of my pain, I could only guess at a solution.

In many ways, it would've been easier to feel this pain in my elbow, or some clearly identifiable part of my body. "Abdomen" sounds scientifically precise, but it's just the access panel for a complicated puzzle-box of squishy bits. Was the pain coming from my spleen? My gall bladder? My small intestine? I had no idea. I couldn't even point to some exact spot on my belly and say, "The pain is always here."

The medical experts were politely mystified. Without ever dismissing my pain, my doctor

made it clear that he could discern no reason for it. I felt an unspoken accusation: I was being unreasonable.

I remember hoping that my health would deteriorate enough for some elusive diagnosis to be made at last. In other words, I wanted to see myself as someone who was still waiting. I wanted there to be a next phase, something after the status quo of inexplicable pain.

This experience helped me understand the difference between "waiting" and "enduring." Neither waiting nor enduring has any power to guarantee a happy ending. But waiting leaves open the possibility that things will change. Although I had no guarantee that change would occur, I found God's comfort in viewing my experience as "waiting."

I knew that waiting wouldn't heal me. A "change in the status quo" could mean something terrible was about to happen. I worried (perhaps foolishly) about the possibility of cancer. But I still took comfort in the reassurance of change. Something would happen. I was waiting.

Something did change. One day, when I was 30 minutes outside of Portland, the pain was so intense that I started screaming inside my car. I turned the radio to full volume, so I wouldn't have to listen to myself. A few hours later, I was in surgery to remove a kidney stone. All that tinkering with my diet had been wasted effort. So were all the scans and tests of my stomach and intestines. The problem was in between my left kidney and my bladder.

“Kidney stone” is hardly an exotic medical condition. Why was this so hard to diagnose? I thought about being angry. But God reminded me: “You waited, and something happened.” For that, I was grateful. 

– Mike Huber

In the Shadows

Where the shadows live
Where the terrors of imagination
Stalk me

Till I sink under
The nightmare of dreaming

The dark specter haunts me
my daydreams taunt me
I seal the past
Hidden at last
In the dark places
That I never forget

I have faced my fear
and my fear came up short
It won't engage me
Or give me credit for winning
It merely slinks out
Like it was never an issue

I have surrendered all
I have given in
But no relief comes
No quiet I gain 
Just a prison of submission.
– JMSH

Waiting in the Silence

This story is one of many that could be told from this time of challenge and fear. As in any complex situation, multiple threads can be followed and multiple stories told.

Years ago I was in a very difficult situation and received the unvarnished message that I was to make a major change. There were

many factors to consider because it would affect other people and also change family finances. It was very clear that I was to do this but I could not imagine either how or when. I also did not know how to talk about it in my family. However, since the message had so clearly come from God, I decided to go into prayer, expecting to be led further.

I sat in the silence, waiting to be led to the first step, waiting for clarity about how to untangle from this difficult place. I waited in the silence. And I sat day after day. The practice of sitting in the silence was very deep. Life around me continued as usual. And every morning, I again sat in the silence, waiting for the leading to emerge. There was never a question about the initial message: that remained solid and unequivocal. That clarity matched the mystery about how. And over time, a third piece emerged just as strong as the first two: that I was deeply held, loved, and doing just as I should. And so the daily practice of silent waiting continued. For nine months!

Suddenly, a series of events occurred that were unimaginable. And in the midst of these changes, somehow, those around me recognized that I no longer belonged where I had been. They released me to leave, to go from this situation, and to be creative in rebuilding that part of my life. There was joy surrounding some of the most difficult parts and even acceptance where I had expected none.

This experience remained a mystery to me for years. Why did I never receive any leadings about

how to make it happen? Why had I received the initial message so many months before the changes? Why had it taken so very long? Finally now, many years later, I recognize that change was happening day by day. Over those nine months change came both within and around me. Within, I experienced the sense of being held, saw again daily that this coming change was right, and built trust. Around me, change came because of the changes within me. I was gradually, slowly, withdrawing from the situation. It was so slow and gradual that I did not see it. Nor was it seen by those around me. And yet the entire situation was transformed.

In the end, it simply unfolded. Although very difficult, it was also profound. And now I understand: it happened because I waited. And waited and waited. It happened because I waited together with Spirit, sitting in the Presence of Love and Peace. 
– Pat M.

I Am Not a Patient Woman

As a teenager, I waited for a respectable way to leave home and then I waited to find a respectable place to live when I was no longer welcome at home. Then I waited to save enough money to finish high school at night while I held down a day job to pay the rent.

A few years later I waited to qualify for enough financial aid to start college and then I waited for enough sleep when balancing work and school became more and more demanding.

Then I waited for my “real” life to begin when I married my first husband. I thought my quest for respectability and security had been accomplished. And then I waited to see how I could leave this marriage that became more and more difficult and frightening.

And those were the big “waits” of just one decade.

This May, my husband of 27 years died. Now I wait to see how this next chapter of my life will unfold and, still, I am impatient. What has changed, though, is my ability to allow change to have its own schedule.

I heard a sermon once about how God was the real author of my story. This was the hand-it-over-to-God, surrender-your-will sermon. Unfortunately, surrender did not hold a moment of peace for me; it just seemed dangerous. All my waiting had taught me to be proactive; to head off trouble before it builds into some gigantic passel of woe. If I wanted to court the dark night of the soul, denial and avoidance were excellent assistants.

Over many years, I began to see surrender and the role of faith differently. I looked back and saw that waiting, wondering, fear and uncertainty were powerful teachers. When I began to question my interpretations of words that raised my hackles, change came. I could replace the word “surrender” with “release” or “letting go.” I began to let go of my white-knuckle grip on my belief that I was alone, that I had to work everything out by myself. Waiting time became a possible invitation to grace.

One day hindsight delivered some blatant wisdom—I would never have met my husband Fred without those harsh experiences when I was a teenager. If I hadn’t left home with nowhere to go, I would never have met Fred’s sister. We became, way back then when we were 17, the best of friends. Twelve years later, I met her big brother, at last, on the night before her wedding.

Fred and I married, had a wonderful daughter and dear friends who are part of why I know God exists. My years with Fred were not always easy. Our lives were full of great adventures and some hard times. We lived with commitment, loyalty and love.

Six months after Fred’s death, I am again impatiently waiting as I allow change to arrive on its own schedule. My life now is slowly reforming with independence and solitude that I do not always welcome. When I remember that there are powerful teachers working with me and I look for grace, I can see the bright light cracking right through the dark. And I settle down to wait, with faith, awhile longer. 

— Peg Edera

When the Light was Hidden

The darkest time for me in the last year was a place where the sun shines more than 350 days a year. I went to Botswana with hopes of serving and of immersing myself in a new culture. I loved the Peace Corps, having served for two years in the late sixties. My wife harbored a dream of the Peace Corps for more than forty years. It was a gift to be given this opportunity.

Cracks began to form in that dream from the moment we set foot in Botswana in September 2011. I struggled to match the dream with reality. The cracks grew. By May, we knew things had to change. We wanted to be effective, and under the circumstances in which we found ourselves, it was impossible. I felt boxed in by bureaucracy, more constrained by the Peace Corps than by local customs and politics.

I wanted to serve, but could not be effective. Our situation became increasingly dark. We told the Peace Corps things had to change. The response was that no changes could be made. We had a few days to leave the country. The dream was over.

And yet there was grace. We had planned a vacation with our daughter Annie and her husband Nick in Spain. We had ten wonderful days with them. After that, we had no plan. On the spur of the moment, we walked a segment of the Camino de Santiago, the Way of St. James.

Fifteen days walking from village to village through spectacular countryside was a blessing. As I walked, I thought about God’s plan for me, meditated about what went right and what went wrong; considered the people I had met and friends I had made. I walked - with my wife, with friends we made along the way, with complete strangers, and sometimes alone. I prayed.

I came to realize that there was little I could have done to make my service in Botswana “work.” I released resentments toward people who made decisions I did

not like. I considered their circumstances and put my Peace Corps experience in the context of their situations. God released my anger, toward the bureaucracies of the Peace Corps, the school, and the Botswana Ministry of Education. I let go of the dream that turned out differently than I had hoped. I came to see leaving before the end of service as a blessing. I accepted the sadness.

Blame, anger, resentment are all easy for me. Yet I learned not to blame. Not myself, not the bureaucracy, not the “system.” I asked to let go of the things that were beyond my control. God did the rest. Through grace, I will always treasure friends I made with Peace Corps Volunteers, with students, teachers, villagers, with the small Quaker community. I will remember the things that went right, and put aside, in sadness and without bitterness, the things that made life dark. Out of this experience, my life is bigger. I am grateful to God for the gifts I received during this long journey. 

– John Munson

Waiting for Justice

I’d been in California for much longer than I’d anticipated. I longed to go home, but God was leading me to do something first about a work-related injustice. The health plan for the law firm where I worked was underpaying benefits, and employees and their families were being hurt.

After five months of writing and research, I submitted a documented report to the managing partner, along with a letter asking the firm to investigate

and to answer certain benefit questions. One question related to my son Jesse’s benefits. His insurance had been canceled when he turned 19, and the insurer said he didn’t qualify for continuation coverage. I thought he did.

And so began an 18-month conflict that I hoped naively would be resolved in a few months.

The general counsel asked me to work with the firm’s representative at the health plan, so I sent my questions to her. She wrote a lengthy reply – to questions I hadn’t asked. I wrote back with the same questions, and a different person replied without answering. This discouraging pattern continued for months, with occasional victories when I received checks for “recalculated” claims.

One day, poring over documents, I made an exciting discovery. Jesse’s insurance should not have been canceled! He was eligible as a disabled dependent! Hopes high, I asked the health plan to reinstate his insurance. They refused for reasons that didn’t apply, so I turned to the general counsel for help.

A settlement conference was arranged, and I was cautiously hopeful.

It’s scary to be in a conflict with the most powerful people in a large law firm; to sit alone across the table from the general counsel, two other attorneys, and the H.R. Director, all of them telling you that you’re wrong. It’s hard to trust that you’re on the right path when frowning authorities insist that you’re not. I lost confidence and left the meeting crushed.

Driving home, I cried out to God in confusion and anger. God’s comforting Presence restored my trust and gave me courage to try again.

I made a counteroffer and waited. When the response came weeks later, the offer had not changed.

Jesse was hospitalized with a dangerous infection, and I was led to go on a hunger strike for insurance.

For eight days, I went to work, picketed outside at lunchtime, and returned to my desk cold and hungry, but not alone. Friends in Portland were praying for Jesse and me, and God sent others – a consumer advocate, a TV station that ran our story, and women who walked with me as I picketed.

The general counsel offered to cover Jesse’s immediate medical expenses if I would stop picketing, and I happily agreed. His next offer was tempting – \$120,000 – but Jesse needed insurance, so I had to decline.

Communication became increasingly adversarial. I was anxious and distracted at work, often on conference calls with the consumer advocate, the general counsel or other attorneys. My boss decided to replace me, and I was transferred to another desk.

And suddenly, incredibly, it was over. The general counsel called me and said, “We’re reinstating Jesse’s insurance. His past medical bills will be paid, and he’ll be covered as your dependent going forward.” I started crying, and he said, “It’s been a long, hard road.” 

– Sally Gillette