

MINDING THE LIGHT

Our Collective Journal, Chapter 18

WHEN DID AN EXPERIENCE OF THE LIGHT HELP YOU DISCOVER SOMETHING ABOUT YOURSELF??

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

John Woolman

Motherly Love

At West Hills' annual all church retreat this spring (2014), I had the extreme pleasure of sitting next to Erica and Graci Huber during our final meeting together for music and worship sharing. During the songs, I experienced a silent connection via my secret observations of Erica with her 19 year old daughter, Graci. Graci sat with her legs flung over her mother's lap. Erica held her lovingly, much in the same way that I often hold my own 7 year old daughter, Taylor.

Many times I have asked myself, "how old is too old?" I have wondered at what point it would

no longer be appropriate for Taylor to snuggle up so close while I hug her, rock her, and/or hold her tight? Am I in some way fostering an unhealthy dependence? In a sense, I was asking how much love is too much.

In those moments observing Erica with her mostly grown daughter, I had the distinct revelation that my question was absurd. I found a sense of peace with my motherly instincts to hold, nurture, and love.

I lost some of the fear around the idea that I might not be doing it right and that somehow my hugs might not foster independence. I concluded that when I grow up, I want to be like Erica and I want Taylor to be like Graci. May she never grow too old to snuggle up in my arms and absorb all of the motherly love that my heart and soul have to offer. 

—Sarah Blanchard

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I've Told This Story Before

I've told this story before (*Minding the Light*, July 2011) but I have been encouraged to tell it again from the perspective of the current query.

From around the age of 12 (or maybe younger) until the age of 61, I was frequently visited by sudden, unexpected states of altered consciousness that terrified me and played havoc on my social life and sense of well-being. From lack of any better point of reference I turned to religion for help. The well-intentioned but bland mainstream Christians offered no answers, and the evangelicals, while fervent, could not pass my intellectual scrutiny. I set out on a long journey through many esoteric disciplines, each one revealing a small piece of the puzzle, and eventually forged a tenuous and hard-earned sense of peace centered around the practice of surrender to an unnamable Benevolence.

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.

Then on midnight, May 15, 2009, everything changed. 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.

This empirical and fact-based explanation of the mystery of my life has only deepened my awe of the Mystery of life itself. I can (and do) ponder endlessly about the existence or non-existence of God, but none of this really matters. A long time ago a mere neurological phenomenon set me out on a journey through many wondrous climes and terrains, taught me many secrets and inspired me to create hundreds of songs and stories. And then at a certain point, determined by who-knows how many different factors, it revealed itself for what it really is. I choose to believe there was (and is) a purpose behind the timing. What if I had been diagnosed at the age of 12, when the experiences first began? Is it possible I would have just gotten “normal” and missed the whole

ride? It’s interesting to note that the medication that now keeps me seizure-free had not been invented in 1960, and the existing medications came with much more severe side-effects.

We shouldn’t limit ourselves to intellectual explanations. Science itself is beginning to reveal that the Universe itself is far more mysterious than science itself can reveal. The stories we tell may be truer than the facts we learn. 🔥

—Jim Nail

When the Change Came

When the change came
I felt it in my back,
in the lightening of a burden
I had forgotten I bore.

I shifted my shoulders
to re-balance my life
and gazed around me, questioning
my belonging here,

then, standing straighter, I breathed
my first breath of a new season,
and I stepped gently ahead
into the garden of my future.

Weeds were there, some I had fought
for years of my living.
I knew they had as much right
as I to this new earth.

With them were flowers beyond my knowing,
with colors, fragrance, and shimmering green.
My feet made no sound or imprint
below me.

I fit in here, with the weight
of moonlight. 🔥

—Carol Bosworth

Queries for Chapter 19

Our next Query: *"When have you experienced the Light through your senses? Tell us a story in any publishable format: narratives, poetry, songs, art, other.*

Query for Young Friends (of any age)

"When have you felt close to God because of something you saw, heard, touched, tasted, smelled or sensed in some way?"

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

Story Deadline: 7/20/14

A Turning Point

When I arrived at WHF in 1994 my faith was in tatters. No, that's too optimistic. My faith was ground into dust. I not only didn't believe any of the Christian theology that had filled and satisfied my life, but I doubted God's very existence, or at the least God's goodness.

My husband wanted a faith community, so I went along, week after week, faithfully yet faithless. It was hard, with Friends around me singing songs of their faith – often songs that I used to sing with gladness. I envied them. I knew what it was like, and I missed it.

Once a month, Mike taught a class called A Quaker View, covering different topics of Quaker faith and practice. One month, the topic was vocal ministry, specifically how one would know when to speak, to break the silence of the meeting. He began with a question: "Who here thinks he or she will never speak in open worship?" My hand shot up. Asked why, I replied, "To speak during meeting, one must believe the Spirit is giving one a message, not just for oneself but for the whole community. Since I don't know if God exists, I can't believe any message I might hear is from God, thus I cannot speak. QED." (I am not sure I actually said QED, but it was perfectly rational and very reasonable.) No one had a response and the class moved on.

Just a few weeks later, during the silence of our open worship, I was once again pondering how much I had lost, and how bad I felt. I had recently started running, including marathons, and I was thinking how life-changing running was, how I had experienced more genuine transformation after a few years of running than I had had during 20+ years of being a Christian.

As soon as I had that thought, I heard the Voice telling me to stand up and speak.

I resisted. "I can't do that; it's too personal and it won't speak to anyone else, and besides, I'm not sure I even believe in You."

The Voice said, "Are you going to be obedient, or aren't you?"

I knew that if I remained seated and silent, my shaking would shatter the pew and my heart would explode within my chest. So, feeling like an idiot, I rose and spoke of how running had wrought more change in me, spiritually as well as physically, than my years of trying to be a Christian.

And I sat down, absolutely jolted by this insight: "I do have faith; I have a deep, living faith; I just don't have a theology."

It was years before I could or would even begin to formulate what I believed, but I knew at that moment Who I trusted. 

–Julie Peyton



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2 Samuel 12:1-7 (NIV)

The Lord sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, "There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

"Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him."

David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, "As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this must die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity."

Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man!"

We have to be braver than we think we can be, because God is constantly calling us to be more than we are.

–Madeleine L'Engle

Illumination

One morning in Meeting for Worship, I was powerfully blessed by a sudden shift in self-perception.

I'd been worrying about an encounter that I expected to have in the coming week, and as it played out in my imagination, it went badly. The encounter as I imagined it left me feeling like a failure, ashamed and inadequate.

Suddenly, I received a powerful insight: in the imaginary encounter, I had been seeing my mother, not myself! In my mind, her identity had become super-imposed over mine, and I was seeing myself as I saw her—insignificant, powerless, without substance.

With a sense of wonder, I knew with certainty that I was not a replica of my mother. I was a different person, stronger and more capable. The certainty that we were different gave me a sense of power and freedom that felt redemptive, and I cried in relief. As the tears ran down my cheeks, I found myself repeating over and over in my head, “God has given me this new joy, I am not my mother.”

The self-knowledge I received that day was a benediction that altered my sense of worth and blessed my relationships with others.

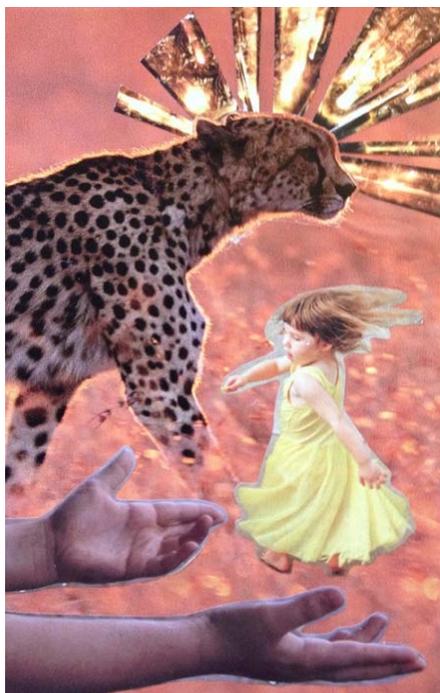
Eventually, that powerful moment of clarity opened my eyes to see that my mother herself was far more than had I had imagined her to be. 

—Name Withheld

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Collage, *Underneath the Everlasting Arms* 
 Ruba Byrd. [The photographs from which these images were taken may be copyright protected]

The Unwelcome Insight

It began when my son came out as Gay during his senior year in high school. My husband quit talking to him, although living in the same house. That only increased my commitment to support him—I loved this creative, sensitive, and gifted son.

I began learning from friends, books, and movies about LGBT issues and culture. I helped where I could as my son found his new community and went off to college. I feared for his safety and future. I mourned the loss of grandchildren I would not have. And I felt much loss and grief when I slowly shared with relatives and family friends and saw relationships change.

The losses and grief expanded to include my marriage. We divorced. I ended this already broken family. I did that. I, the one who planned to be married forever. I felt strongly led to end this marriage, not be a party to anger, and do what was right. I felt God leading me to a healthy new life where I would stand on my own. I was scared, continued to sit in silent worship daily, and, for nine months, followed those leadings and nudges toward divorce.

I continued learning about gay culture and saw a movie about two women falling in love. And suddenly, I knew that I, too, was gay. I was a lesbian! Me? I'm not one of them ... don't act like them ... don't dress like them ... NO! I only agreed to divorce. I'm just supporting my son. I did not leave my marriage to become a lesbian!!!! NO! I was angry! This felt like a cruel joke. And I wanted no part of the pain I'd witnessed with my son.

But a paradigm shift has no reverse. I could not deny this new insight about myself. Looking back, I could see that I always had been lesbian. And now? What

would happen to me? What would people think? How would I talk with people? work? live? tell the relatives? friends? One morning, I awoke with the devastating awareness that I could get killed for being myself. A lesbian and also a gay man had been killed, nearby, recently. I felt alone, unsafe, disconnected and confused. I now had a secret. Who could I tell? That year was a very long one as I worked through many dilemmas. I lost friends, others became distant, and family relationships changed. Again. I worked to integrate my new self with my old self. I sought out others: I needed support, wisdom, guidance, and friendship on this new path. In the stillness of silent worship I suddenly noticed more space within, more openness. I could hear my inner voice more clearly. When I no longer blocked inner nudges, awarenesses, likes, dislikes, or preferences, then the inner voice became stronger.

Gradually joy crept in. I came into new life, unexpectedly. My world and awareness expanded. Those changes were hard. And life today is hard when inclusion in community, friendship, and family are threatened or denied: these are basic, stabilizing, and meaningful elements in my life. But I am also grateful today to have more understanding, integrity and honesty. As I learn to know myself, I become the person God created. I am not like anyone else. I am to be me. 

—Pat M

[Reprinted at editors' request, with author's permission.]

You Have Stories to Tell!

Everyone has stories, whether or not they are writers. Your stories are important to the community, and we hope that you will share yours.

Please let us know if you have a story but don't consider yourself a writer, don't have time, don't feel well, or any other reason. We would love to send a story catcher to record your story.

If you can't come to us, we will be happy to come to you :)

Dream Discoveries

I want to Serve God. Seeking validation of this goal, I've often volunteered to do whatever hard job arose, the ones nobody else would do, whatever someone else asked me—disregarding what the Light might be calling me to do.

I stayed up late making up for my lost time. When I finally got to bed, I couldn't sleep. My husband christened me The Queen of Insomnia. I'm working on losing that title. The Light shows me I need sleep even more than I thought. Two reasons come readily to mind—for my health, and dreams can be really important.

My spiritual director suggested I record my dreams years ago. I participated in a dream group for a time, becoming more aware of each dream, and archiving them in a dedicated journal. Supposedly, I was doing this for

self-awareness but God had further plans.

Someone in our meeting was grieving the loss of a beautiful son. To compel insurance to cover his care during his tortuous illness was a titanic struggle. She was exhausted and torn up with grief. Usually, she had dreamed about people she had lost. The absence of such a dream about her son left her even more bereft.

Not long after the tragedy, I asked a friend how this mother was faring. She answered, "Please pray for her. She wants a dream about her son, to know he's okay."

"Of course, I'll pray." Then I remembered. "Last week I dreamt about him. He was healthy—saying he was able to help."

My friend urged me to tell her. "I'm worried—she's not been eating."

"I barely know her—" I was uneasy.

How would the mother react? What if sharing my dream abraded her raw grief? I prayed, waiting for a way to open. Finally, I felt free to send her an email with a brief synopsis of my dream.

During our email exchange I became more relaxed answering her questions. I had my dream journal for reference. My dream included obscure aspects of this woman's life, things I couldn't have known. It felt eerie for me, but this inexplicable quality validated for her that God was afoot in this.

She said that the dream felt like a dart to the heart of healing medicine. As I saw the changes in her, I too believed God was engineering her healing. She began to eat a little and there was color on her cheeks. We became fast friends. God may have used the dream to engineer that, too.

Living this experience, I learned the delicate ecology of community. Every little thing is crucial to our collective health. If it hadn't been for West Hill's Friends Meeting, my spiritual director, and my friend who asked me to pray—if not for the mother's confiding in my friend—how could there be this healing? We must be faithful in small things, so God can do the big things.

There's my part, too. It was as if God had said, "Claire, see what happens when you take care of yourself and get some sleep? My work gets done!" With Infinite Economy, God helped a heart-broken mother find some peace, and validated me. I'm being healed, too. So, I'm taking better care of my sleep, and writing down my dreams. They're important. 

—Claire Nail

Reorientation

Years ago, in a troubled time when I was blind and lost and didn't know how to navigate, God blessed me with a powerful experience that lasted for several days. During that time, I could feel Jesus' presence and his love for me. This was the first time since I was a young child that I had experienced Jesus' Presence, and it would be five years before I experienced his Presence again.

The experience began in a way that was hard for me to comprehend. I had been trying very hard to please God for a very long time, and I thought I had failed. Just before I felt Jesus' presence, I screamed at God that I would never try to please God again. It wasn't long before I became aware of Jesus' presence and heard the words, "Stop trying." The voice was gentle, and I felt loved and comforted, but I couldn't believe that Jesus would say "stop trying" to someone who had just screamed in anger at God.

For maybe an hour, I experienced an intense inner conflict that felt like a power struggle between two ways of knowing. My head was telling me that Jesus would never comfort someone in my situation, and I was afraid that something evil like Satan was trying to trick me. At the same time, my sensory system was telling me that Jesus was present and was comforting me. It was a war between theology in my head and Jesus' Presence and love in my sensory receptors. Before long, Presence prevailed, and fear was gone.

Soon after this experience, I noticed that my "faith center" had moved from my head to my body, and that I was feeling stronger. Before this experience, my head had been my faith center because it held my beliefs about God. After the experience, my faith became a "body belief"—less about concepts and more about memory and orientation, like my sense of gravity and sense of equilibrium, or like a young child's faith in her parents.

Years later, when I was seeing a psychologist-spiritual director, I told her about the experience. Both of us puzzled over why God waited so long to intervene and why Jesus told me to stop trying. Over time, as she heard the details of my exhausting efforts to please God, she realized that I had an anxiety disorder associated with religious beliefs called Scrupulosity. After reading about the disorder, I realized that God's timing had been perfect and that Jesus' words and Presence had freed me from a cycle of self-blame, guilt and misguided self-effort that had kept me focused on myself rather than the Light.

These days, I am rarely blind and lost at the same time and rarely overly scrupulous. I think this is because, in my efforts to "stop trying" and to listen instead to my Present Teacher, my focus slowly shifted from myself to the source of my faith. With this new orientation, I was able to rediscover my natural way of navigating. 

—Sally Gillette

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.

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

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There came a time when the risk to remain tight in the bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.

—Anais Nin

But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice,
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do -
determined to save
the only life you could save.

From *The Journey*, by Mary Oliver