

MINDING THE LIGHT



Our Collective Journal

CHAPTER 5: WHEN HAS GOD MADE YOU LAUGH?

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

John Woolman

The Freedom of Dead Clams

Over the years, I've learned how to talk like a pastor. However, it never feels like my native tongue. When I'm gathered with other pastors, I am acutely aware of the language barrier that separates us. They are a flock of unrelentingly cheerful sheep; I am an introspective goat, prone to melancholy. I feel like Woody Allen at a fundraising dinner for the All Stars of Jesus.

When I am gathered with other pastors, I routinely wander away from the crowd. I need a little quiet and solitude in order to regain my equilibrium. Happily, my pastoral cohort tends to

gather in wander-worthy locations. Sometimes we gather on the Oregon Coast. Sometimes, we gather on the Columbia River.

One day, I slipped away from the conference center which housed my fellow pastors. My feet carried me to the river's edge. The Columbia is a formidable river. It is wide and windswept, the perfect backdrop for someone who wants to feel small and alone. As I walked along the riverbank, I took pleasure in the aesthetics of place. I called upon God to bear witness. "Behold the smallness of me, O Lord. I'm a blip. I don't even know what I'm doing. Why am I here?"

The riverbank was sandy. From time to time I saw a dreary nest of beer cans and cigarette butts along the shore. These added to the forlorn atmosphere of my

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.

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environment. I also saw a smattering of clamshells. This discovery suggested a new metaphor, which I was quick to embrace. Directing God's attention to the bone-white shells I lamented, "That's just how I feel. I feel this constant pressure, like a clamshell tightly clenched." For dramatic effect, I lifted a clamshell from the sand. I was happy to see that both sides of the clamshell were still intact. What a perfect image! "I am clenched like a fist, like a clamshell..."

The clamshell fell open. There was no sign of the original occupant. Only sand was inside the shell. I tried a second clamshell, and found it was in the same condition. All the clams were dead. I caught an inkling of God's amusement, but I wasn't ready to laugh along.

How unfair of those clams to ruin my object lesson with their

untimely mortality. I insisted, "If these clams were alive, THEN they would be clenched tight. They're only like this because they're dead!"

"Dead to self," God suggested. Then I surrendered to laughter. Instead of moping about my self, I was invited to enjoy the joke. Woody Allen at a fundraising dinner for the All Stars of Jesus is FUNNY! Now, I'm laughing all the time. Sometimes, it even gets me into trouble.

— Mike Huber

What's the Most Important Thing in Telling a Joke?

Yet once again I'm sitting in the back of the meetinghouse, feeling sorry for myself, wishing not so much to get back my lost theology as wishing there was something to fill the void of that loss. Hearing everyone else happily singing the songs that once spoke of my faith, seeing others who are content with their knowledge and experience of God, feeling isolated, I find myself thinking, "I don't belong here."

Before you can understand the impact of what happened next, you need to know a bit about my previous church experience, where women were expected to be under the authority of men. This didn't just mean that women were not pastors, but were not to speak during the meetings for worship, even to read Scripture. Helping pass the communion plates was a visible

and thus "authoritative" task limited to those with a Y chromosome.

Back to poor little me, sitting by myself with my sad thoughts, rather sure that this God-person, whatever he/she/it was, had led me to West Hills Friends but not comfortable enough with myself to be comfortable anywhere, and the words, "I don't belong here" come into my head. Before my thoughts can go any further, I hear The Voice speak chidingly, "You know you belong here."

At that instant, Ron Fieldhouse walks over and whispers that he needs help with taking the collection. Getting to my feet, receiving from him one of the small baskets, walking up the left aisle, I take my place. With each pass of the basket among these rows of Friends, it takes a bit of effort not to laugh out loud. I try to handle the basket with great authority.

God's timing is perfect.

— Julie P.

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Waiting For a Sign

I've always been attuned to the natural world, particularly birds, so, not surprisingly, God often communicates with me through birds and nature. I learned long ago that when nature behaves in unnatural ways, I'm to pay attention: God is speaking and wants me to listen.

One day I had a strong leading to take a certain action, though I no longer remember what the action was. I do remember that I wasn't sure I was hearing right and that this action would have stretched me out of my comfort zone, so I actually hoped I was hearing wrong. I asked God to send me a really clear sign, *if and only if* He did indeed want me to take this action; a sign that was so clear that I couldn't possibly discount it or doubt my hearing.

As I prayed, I was on my way to pick up my daughter, Carlie, from Wilson High School. Within minutes of my request for clarity I had to stop my car in the middle of the block to keep from hitting the peacock that was crossing in front of me! I laughed out loud.

Though this would probably have been a clear sign for anyone, God knew that I knew that the peacock, to early Christians, was a symbol for Christ. So, metaphorically, I had to stop the car for Christ to cross the road!

That wasn't all, however. I'd asked for a sign I couldn't possibly discount. On the way

back from Wilson with Carlie, I had to stop the car *again*, in the *exact same spot*, for the peacock to cross *back* across the road! It looked for all the world as if the bird had been just waiting, for a full 20 minutes, mind you, for me to turn the corner so it could cross back!

(I later discovered that this peacock lived in the neighborhood. Though I saw it by the side of the road a number of times in the following years, I never again had to stop for it to cross the road.) 🔥

— Laurie Hoff Schaad

Laughter in an Oasis

Our visit to Palestine was ending and we were in a small town not far from the Ben Gurion airport. The town was named Neve Shalom ~ Wahat al-Salam, Hebrew and Arabic meaning “Oasis of Peace.” Neve Shalom ~ Wahat al-Salam is no ordinary village, rather it is an intentional community where Jewish and Arab Israelis live together, working to create a place of peace in the midst of the rancor, fears and strife of today’s Israel-Palestine.

We had come to Palestine to take part in the 100th anniversary of the Ramallah Friends meeting house. It was a grand celebration and we had reconnected with some of the friends we had made on previous visits and, of course, made new friends. We also had made time to visit Bethlehem and Haifa before returning to

Invitation to Listen and Share

We invite you to reflect on our query and share your response with the community. Your response can be a story, photo, art, music, video, or . . . ?

The query for our next chapter is, “What experience comes to mind when you hear the phrase, “Sacred Space?” (deadline 3/11/12)

Think of the query in the light of worship sharing, and be open to what experience the Spirit brings to your mind, even if it might at first seem off topic.

We will publish your stories as told to the extent that they fit within our guidelines (see Guidelines box).

Feel free to discuss your story or other response with anyone in the Light Brigade if you have concerns about its theme.

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.

If you have a query for a future issue, please share that idea with us!

Call one of us or email mindingthelight@gmail.com

Ramallah for the final few days of our visit. Two of our new friends suggested – no, insisted – that we take some time in Neve Shalom ~ Wahat al-Salam to unwind before leaping from the concerns and tensions of Palestine back into the busyness and responsibilities of home. In fact, they would drop us off as they were going past there on their way to their next stop.

Yes, Neve Shalom ~ Wahat al-Salam is an oasis of peace. The afternoon and the one full day there were restorative and both calming and energizing. The prospect of a thirty-five hour day spent mostly in airplanes and airports no longer seemed so daunting. In the late afternoon (after our naps) we took something to read and set out to sit in the “reception” until dinner. But there was no hurry so we wandered around the end of the apartment block in which we were staying and out onto a terrace looking toward the west.

Close in, down below is a Bedouin village that shares part of the property of Neve Shalom ~ Wahat al-Salam. Their sheep and goats were penned up for the night and the animals were all in good voice. Another couple came along. Uta, with her smattering of English, bridged the distance from their German, and a slow but pleasant conversation ensued. They, also, were on their way home. It was the end of a two-week tour. They had been to Mt. Sinai! As we slowly shared parts of our trips, two more of their group joined us, adding nothing to our linguistic abilities.

We conveyed that we had worshipped in Bethlehem; in the German-built Christmas Lutheran Church. On that Sunday a German tour group was there and they sang for us, in Latin, *Dona Nobis Pacem*. Our friends burst into laughter. “That was us!” And we all laughed together.

One of them voiced the first note
and together we sang Dona
Nobis Pacem as the great deep
orange sun sank into the low-
lying clouds over the
Mediterranean. 🔥

– Wilbur and Lorie Wood

Playing Games

The low winter sun streams through the Douglas fir and cedar branches along the Wildwood Trail. The trail winds along a contour line out in the deep wooded heart of the park and I am alone. Well, almost alone. Around a bend in the trail comes my dog, running full out, her ears flapping and mud flying out behind her. She skids to a halt in front of me, her doggy face practically grinning as she hops up to touch my hand with her nose, spins and darts off up the trail. I can't help but laugh.

I laugh out loud, my voice muffled by the ferns and fir tree foliage all around me. I laugh at her silly antics and goofy ways. She's not a clown of a dog, but her little hop, flapping ears and flying leaps make me crow with laughter. I giggle uncontrollably

at her yipping and yowling in her sleep. Is she dreaming about giant squirrels or flying tennis balls? Goddess only knows what goes on in the mind of a dog.

My laugh softens into a chuckle and a grin as I catch sight of a flock of chickadees tumbling their way through a stand of cedar and hemlock trees. The sheer joy she gets out of living her dog life makes me laugh, too. She is never self-conscious about her pleasure at a smelly fence post, at a sunny spot in the lawn or a good chase. She is never anything but herself, without reservation or apology. The chickadees come closer, chipping and chirping at each other, completely oblivious of my presence. They, too, are fully present in their lives, not worrying or pretending. They simply are. One flits from one branch to another, doing a somersault over the new perch, hangs upside down and digs in the needles for bugs. I can't help but grin.

I recently heard an interview with Brother Guy Consolmagno, a Jesuit priest and astronomer, in which he tells a story about his

mother. When he was about 9 years old she played cards with him one rainy Saturday afternoon. They played for hours and she let him win more often than not. Of course, she could have beat him every hand but that wasn't the point. Playing the game was a way for her to say she loved him and Brother Guy sees exploring God's created universe as a similar game. He is an astronomer and a mathematician so super novas and equations explaining planetary orbits are the game God plays with him to show his love.

I am a naturalist and a dog person so God plays a slightly different game with me. She shows me how to stop worrying and just be through a muddy Labrador. She shows me how she cares for every being through a flock of chickadees. She shows me that she will light my way with a big bright moon rising over the mountain as I drive home. She shows me that she loves me by making me laugh. 🔥

– Alyss Broderick

Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son."

Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh."

But he said, "Yes, you did laugh." Genesis 18:13-15

The LORD was good to Sarah and kept his promise. Although Abraham was very old, Sarah had a son exactly at the time God had said. Abraham named his son Isaac (which means, "He Laughs").
Genesis 21:1-5

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.

Behold I Stand at the Door and Knock

KNOCK KNOCK.
 Who's there?
 God.
Really? Is it really You, at last?
 That's not the right response.
 You're supposed to say, "God who?"
Oh. Sorry. God who?
 Let's take it from the top; works better that way.

KNOCK KNOCK.
 Who's there?
 Jesus.
Wait; last time you said "God."
 Can't you follow simple instructions?
Sure, but you said...
 Never mind; let's begin again.

KNOCK KNOCK.
 Who's there?
 Banana.
{slight pause}
Banana who?
 Orange you glad I didn't say...
 Wait, I got it wrong that time.
 Sorry. My bad.

KNOCK KNOCK.
 Who's there?
 I am.
I am who?
 If you don't know your own name maybe you should see a doctor.
 Ha ha! I love that one. Gets 'em every time. Now admit it, don't you feel better?
Actually, I do. If you're done knocking would you care to come in for a while, maybe have a cup of tea?
 Lovely idea. Do have you anything decaffeinated? 
 – Julie P.

One Smooth Stone

I was appalled. I was at Yearly Meeting for the first time, and a speaker had invited people to come forward in a way that sounded just like an altar call.

The speaker had been talking about the power of words spoken in anger to wound people we love. He said that being hurt by words can be as painful as being hit with a rock and can leave lasting scars. At the end of his message, before we entered open worship, he pointed to a pile of roundish flat stones on the stage nearby and invited anyone who used hurtful words when angry to come forward, pick up a stone and kneel down to receive prayer. He then encouraged people to keep the stone to carry in their pockets as a reminder of the power of words to hurt.

As we entered open worship, I bowed my head and closed my eyes, but I was too upset to pray. Altar calls were routine in churches I attended growing up, but I was a Quaker now and felt strongly that altar calls were unQuakerly. I wanted to leave the meeting and decided that I could probably do it without being noticed. People were moving up and down the aisles in response to the call, and I was seated at the back of the auditorium.

Suddenly, I felt a powerful urge to go forward, pick up a stone and kneel down to receive prayer. This was insane! The

urge felt like a leading, but it couldn't be! I tried to push the feelings away, to no avail. My eyes kept fluttering open, and I felt practically lifted up and propelled forward. For long minutes, I struggled to keep my eyes closed and stay in my seat. Finally, worship ended and I practically ran from the auditorium.

Driving home, I admitted to myself that God had urged me to get a stone and receive prayer, and I'd refused. And I had to admit that the request was fair. My son Jesse could be temperamental, and although he was only 10 years old, he sometimes seemed to think he knew more than I did. At times, I lost patience and said things that probably hurt. I told God I was sorry and asked for help.

The next day, as I was unloading the washing machine, I saw a smooth round stone at the bottom of the tub that looked a lot like the ones on the stage.

I laughed.

I knew Jesse had found the stone and put it in his pocket, and I knew it was meant for me. I asked him if I could keep it for awhile, and he said, sure, for as long as I wanted.

Later, I laughed again (ruefully) when I saw in a flash of Light that my stubborn refusal to follow God's leading was a lot like Jesse's most know-it-all behavior. And it was also unQuakerly. 

– Sally Gillette

*"If you want to make God laugh,
tell him about your plans."*

Woody Allen

Laughing at God's Plans

In my experience, following God's plans usually involves taking many small steps whose consequences are hard to see at the time; only looking back can I see the path God has been laying out, and my reaction is usually a smile or tears, not laughter. For laughter, there must be an element of surprise.

I have been blessed by a few of these occasions, but none more memorable than last summer, the day before I began a climb of Grand Teton. I was grieving the recent news of my sister's cancer, and had planned to meet another sister to hike and share much-needed time together; however, she cancelled at the last minute. Out of my disappointment, I got a clear leading, "Go by yourself, and I will keep you company." And so I did.

It was a beautiful morning and my spirits were high as I climbed steeply through forest and out into fields of flowers with sweeping views down to Jackson Hole. I stopped for water near two women who were scanning with binoculars. On the northern horizon I saw a cluster of specks and, as we passed the binoculars around, we agreed they weren't geese - too big and flying differently, swarming with flashes of bright white. I speculated they were trumpeter swans. Thrilled by the sighting,

we went our separate ways, but a few minutes later I noticed they were now due east of me and much closer, perhaps only a couple of miles away. I could now confirm they were, indeed, trumpeter swans, about 30 of them.

The words that sprang from my heart were, "Well, if you are trying to show me a sign of your love and caring, that's pretty spectacular." I think God must have said, "You think that's spectacular? I'll show you spectacular." The swans immediately turned west and headed straight for me, then swarmed and circled directly overhead for five minutes. My joy could not be contained by a

Someone Should Start Laughing

*I have a thousand brilliant lies
For the question:
How are you?*

*I have a thousand brilliant lies
For the question:
What is God?*

*If you think that the Truth can
be known
From words,*

*If you think that the Sun
and the Ocean*

*Can pass through that tiny
opening
Called the mouth,*

O someone should start laughing!

*Someone should start wildly
Laughing -
Now!*

Hafiz, poet from Iran, 1326-1389

simple smile - I burst into laughter, and I'm sure God laughed right along with me. I never doubted for another minute that God would be with me every step of the way though my sister's illness and death, with laughter and with tears - all part of God's plan for me. 🔥

- Greg Morgan

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.

Be sure to include the query you are addressing with your submission.

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

Art, photos, music, other:

Original paintings, photos, 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.